

**From War to Workplace: Class, Race and Gender
amongst White Volunteers, 1939-1953**

**By
Neil Roos**

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Supervisor: Dr. Tim Clynick

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To Dick

Abstract

Through a case study of the war and post-war experiences of those who volunteered to serve in the Second World War, the thesis explores aspects of the social and cultural history of white men in South Africa. The thesis begins from the premise that class and ethnicity, the major binary categories conventionally used to explain developments in white South African society, are unable to account for the history of white men who volunteered to serve in the Second World War. It argues that the history of these volunteers is best understood in the context of racist culture, which can be defined as an evolving consensus amongst whites in South Africa on the political, social and cultural primacy of whiteness.

It argues that, when the call to arms came in 1939, it was answered mainly by white men from those little traditions incorporated politically into the segregationist colonial order, largely through the explicit emphases of white privilege and the cultural hegemony of whiteness. Their decision to enlist was underscored by an awareness that volunteering entailed a set of rights and duties, which centred on their expectations of post-war "social justice." Chapter three examines some of the highly idealised and implicitly racialised ways in which, during wartime, white troops expanded their understanding of social justice. To this end, many joined the Springbok Legion, a type of trade union of the ranks and itself a nascent little tradition.

In chapter four, the thesis tracks white ex-servicemen's disillusionment as they were demobilised from the Union Defence Force. It argues that their "restlessness" and

disillusion embodied a set of racialised anxieties around access to jobs and housing. Such concerns help to explain their post-war abandonment of the Springbok Legion, which was beginning to articulate “non-racial” variants of social justice.

The National Party (NP) promised exactly the sort of racial order which underscored the material side of ex-servicemen’s hopes for social justice. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that veterans as a category shifted their allegiance to the NP in the watershed 1948 general election. Despite the appeal of its racial politics, the NP was yet too closely associated with fascism and Nazism, which veterans had pledged to fight on the battlefield and the home front. Veterans’ disappointment with the UP and their dislike of the NP marked the beginning of a sense of disenchantment with a party political culture which had - in one way or another - failed to acknowledge the importance of their wartime service.

The War Veterans’ Torch Commando, which appeared in 1951, provides the focus for chapter five. While ostensibly, the aim of the Torch was to protest against the government’s “rape of the constitution” when it tried to remove coloured voters from the common voters’ roll, the thesis asserts that, for rank-and-file members, the Torch was more about their place in the racial order than about the moral rights of coloured voters. By 1953, most white servicemen were integrated into civilian life, and were, as one veteran put it, “getting ahead.” However as the NP set about consolidating its hold on state and society, it discriminated against war veterans and the memory of war service in all sorts of petty ways. From this perspective, the Torch represented a challenge to the ways in which the NP set about allocating the

privileges of whiteness to the Party faithful, and so violated the particular contract of whiteness veterans had struck with the previous regime when they volunteered.

The Torch was also the last occasion when white veterans affirmed their collective identity as a category in the party political arena. In the face of an assertive Afrikaner nationalism, they subsequently evoked their service identity through veterans' organisations like the MOTH, which also helped them to establish networks that could aid them materially. Although "apolitical," the MOTH helped to mediate white veterans' relationship with the broader, racialised, social order, and so represented a series of political responses - albeit more "cultural" in form - to a party political culture that failed to acknowledge the "special" status of white veterans.

The thesis also examines the role of white radical volunteers, mainly communists, who pinned their hopes for post-war social justice on a vigorous working class movement and ultimately, a non-racial and classless society. During wartime, this cohort held out the belief that, through the Springbok Legion, they could educate white troops in a more "progressive" direction. After the war, however, the Springbok Legion lost its mass base, and only a small, radical , cadre remained in the organisation.

Chapter six explores the role of radical white veterans in elaborating a strand of radical egalitarianism in the early apartheid period, as conditions of growing state repression brought *rapprochement* between the Legion, the ANC and its Congress allies. During the course of the decade, a handful of radical white veterans from the

Legion played a disproportionately significant role in the Congress movement's accelerating tempo of anti-apartheid resistance, and chapter six ends with a challenge to the orthodoxy of liberation historiography.

Finally, the thesis charts the different way in which white ex-servicemen traded on their identity as volunteers. The majority of white veterans used the memory of service to stake their claim as white men who had served their country. A small collective of radical veterans, on the other hand, invoked traditions of anti-fascism to challenge the very precepts of racist culture, and the racialised society which it sustained.

The ways in which different groups of white veterans used the experience and memory of service to mediate contrasting relationships with the racial order makes a powerful argument for scholars to historicise studies of whiteness and race more generally. In so doing, it is possible to reclaim race as a category for historical analysis, and to challenge abstract and generic definitions of race which ultimately strengthen the hegemony of whiteness.

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Preface

I spent my childhood from the mid-1960s until the early 1980s in a small milling village on the Natal South Coast sugar belt. My father, a veteran of the Second World War, worked for the sugar company as a clerk. While his war service earned him some respect from other whites in the village, and his participation in the Comrades marathon during the 1950s, some awe, he was also the subject of mild condescension as the "poorest white in the Company."

As a youngster, it was my father's war service that interested me. All of the white men in the village who were of his age were veterans. Although I cannot recall any of them ever having told a story of their experience in battle, the war and memory of service were central to their identity. As the thesis shows, the war attracted a sundry group of white South African men to the colours. While most came from fairly poor backgrounds, they experienced vastly different fortunes after the war. Nonetheless, in the armed forces, a type of comradeship developed, where the rite of passage was expressed in the idiom of "the front." I was fascinated by the bonds between the veterans, and the rituals of the closed society which my father and his comrades entered every Thursday night when they met in the local Scout hall.

In common with other white children in the village, I was not allowed to play with the "railway children", and I grew up with a fierce dislike for Afrikaners. I shared my mother's interest in politics, and remember, from the early 1970s, her heaping scorn on the National Party - and Afrikaners more generally - for their "unreasonable" racial politics. This is not to suggest that my social world was in any way anti-racist, or even inclined towards "liberalism." It was a fortress of racial folklore as, in Fanon's

words, we “overdetermined Africans from without”¹ : Africans were stupid (the fall guy in the joke was always a “munt”); they stole (“don’t leave money lying around when the ‘girl’ is cleaning”); they were spendthrift (“like a mine kaffir with a Barclaycard”); uncouth (“stop acting like a raw kaffir”); and so on. However, similar to David Roediger’s experience growing up in the American South during the 1960s², none of this common wisdom was politically or morally problematic to me at the time, or cast in the abstract form - racist. I developed an awareness of the destructive power of Afrikaner ethnic supremacy long before I understood much about the burden of white supremacy.

As a white boy, I was registered for conscription in 1980, and called up a year later as I completed High School. Registering for a university degree, I managed to defer my conscription. However, I heard all about “national service” in the South African Defence Force (SADF) from friends, casual acquaintances, and people I hardly even knew. Indeed, what was immediately apparent about this cohort of conscripts, as opposed to the Second World War volunteers, was the way in which some endlessly boasted about their exploit in the SADF. Tales of killing “terrorists” as well as acts of aggression against civilians were elaborated with nauseating pride and glee. Other conscripts were dismayed at the ways in which the SADF’s campaign of terror was glorified and put it down to the brutalising effects of teenagers being “brainwashed” by Afrikaner instructors in the Permanent Force of the SADF. At the time, I ascribed to this view.

¹Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, (New York: Grove, 1967), 112.

²David Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 4.

As the low level civil war in South Africa intensified through the 1980s, it became difficult to sustain the argument that the racial violence displayed by the SADF and other security forces was a particularly Afrikaner social pathology. To a greater or lesser extent, English-speaking whites in my village and in Durban, where I studied, began to demonstrate increasing levels of despair, paranoia and anger, all of which were highly racialised.

As a post-graduate student in history at the University of Natal, I wanted to study the structures of apartheid and the contours of white racism in South Africa. It is difficult to account with any measure of precision for my growing academic interest, although as George Tindall wrote of his experiences as a young man in the American South, growing up in a deeply racialised society was enough to develop an interest in matters of race.³ However at that stage, in the mid-1980s, my ambitions to tackle questions of white racism lacked the analytic and empirical focus necessary to conceive a viable research project.

Then, in 1986 I attended the launch rally of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) at Currie's Fountain. At the rally, an elderly African man handed me a flyer for the South African Communist party (SACP), then still banned and underground. He was of a similar age to my father, and may even have been a Second World War veteran. The contrasting ways in which this unknown old communist and my father saw the world helped to frame the central analytic question

³George B. Tindall, "Jumping Jim Crow," in Paul A. Cimbala and Robert F. Himmelberg, eds, Historians & Race: Autobiography and the Writing of History, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 5.

for this thesis: why did some South African men chose class consciousness while others, also exploited, chose race consciousness and saw their own interests as not dissimilar to those of their bosses? What was the nature of the bonds which joined these white men together? These questions eventually enabled my intellectual and political interest in white racism to converge with my longer term fascination with the history of white ex-servicemen.

Following David Roediger⁴, the autobiographical detail has been included because the central themes for this project have been provided, not only by conscious reflection, but by my own formative experience as the product of racist social engineering and the son of a white veteran. In particular, these experiences have concentrated my attention on the pervasiveness of race in South Africa, and its role in defining not only how whites like my father look at blacks, but how they look at themselves.

Between 1990 and about 1997, the project lay dormant for all sorts of reasons. My introduction, in about 1998, to the American literature on race provided the necessary spark to re-ignite the project. Using the conceptual lens afforded by post-colonial race theory, I was able to address the racism, not of a class or an ethnic group, but of a society. It has allowed me to understand, in Dan Carter's words, how family, friends and neighbours, normally decent and compassionate people, could become cruel when facing challenges to the racialised and racist order in which they lived.⁵

⁴Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 5.

⁵Dan T. Carter, "Reflections of a Reconstructed White Southerner," in Cimbala and Himmelberg, Historians and Race, 34-50. For Carter, the study of history became the vehicle for understanding this apparent contradiction.

Thanks to my friend and supervisor Tim Clynick. He encouraged my interest in writing a radical social and cultural history of ordinary white people, and then supervised the thesis from conception to end. Thanks also to my wife Jennifer Seif, who provided the moral and emotional support necessary to sustain me through a long project. In her own right, she is a formidable scholar, who has guided me through the theoretical literature on culture, hegemony and whiteness. All errors, inconsistencies and misunderstandings, though, remain solely mine. Thanks to John Comaroff (University of Chicago) and Lewis Gordon (Brown University) who have led me through a multiplicity of theoretical perspectives on race, modernity and radical history.

Finally, thanks to the Human and Social Sciences Research Committee (University of North West), the Centre for Science Development (Humanities and Social Sciences) and USAID / South African Institute of Race Relations. Without the generous support of such funding institutions, social scientific research would be virtually impossible in South Africa. I must emphasise, however, that the views, opinions and conclusions contained in this thesis represent those of the author, and not necessarily my funders.

neil roos

Mafikeng, August 2001

Declaration

I declare that the dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of North West hereby submitted, has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other university, that it is my own work in design and execution, and that all material contained herein has been duly acknowledged.



.....
Neil Roos

Date: 20 August 2001

List of Abbreviations

AES	Army Education Scheme
ANC	African National Congress
BESL	British Empire Service League
COD	Congress of Democrats
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CP / CPSA	Communist Party of South Africa [used inter-changeably]
CPC	Coloured Peoples' Congress
DSDC	Discharged Soldiers' Demobilization Committee
HFL	Home Front League
LP	Labour Party
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe
MOTH	Memorable Order of Tin Hats
MP	Member of Parliament
NMR	Natal Mounted Rifles
NP / Nats	National Party
PAC	Pan-Africanist Congress
SACOD	South African Congress of Democrats, formed in 1953 by the amalgamation of the Springbok Legion, the Democratic League and the Congress of Democrats
SACP	South African Communist Party
SACTU	South African Congress of Trade Unions
SADF	South African Defence Force
SAIC	South African Indian Congress
SAP	South African Party
UDF	Union Defence Force
UDF	United Democratic Front, formed by the UP, the Labour Party and the Torch Commando in 1952
UP	United Party
WVAC	War Veterans' Action Committee - Predecessor to the Torch Commando
WVTC	War Veterans' Torch Commando

CHAPTER ONE

BULLSHIT AND BRASS TACKS

Popular perspectives on South African whites

This thesis is about white men in South Africa and their crises of identity. Through a case study of the war and post-war experiences of those who volunteered to serve in the Second World War, the thesis explores aspects of the social and cultural history of white men in South Africa. White veterans made a notable contribution not only to the Allied war effort, but also to the substance and trajectories of political debate in contemporary South Africa.

In particular, their history illustrates some of the gaps between the promise and the practice of whiteness in twentieth century South Africa. However, with few exceptions, white veterans have been largely ignored by academic commentators.¹ The study of servicemen has been confined mainly to regimental histories where their campaigns are

¹Notable exceptions include Jackie Cock, "Demobilisation and Democracy: The Relevance of the 1944 Soldiers' Charter to Southern Africa Today," (Paper presented to the History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, July 2994); Francois Oosthuizen, "The Demobilisation of the White Union Defence Force Soliders During and After the Second World War" (Master of Arts Dissertation, Rand Afrikaans University, 1993); and F. D. Tohill, "The Soldiers' Vote and its effect on the South African general election of 1943," *South African Historical Journal*, 21 (1989).

chronicled and photographs of their young faces prompt so many questions.² To a lesser extent, servicemen's wartime experiences are the subject of personal memoirs.³ However the content and the form of military annals and memoirs suggest that it was hardly the intent of their authors to engage with the theoretical concerns of chalky academics; in turn, these narratives have failed to attract much academic attention. Recently, the emergence of a populist current in the production of history in post-apartheid South Africa has witnessed at least one attempt to (re)claim the history of white ex-volunteers, in a quest for evidence of white radicalism or "resistance" to apartheid.⁴ Ultimately, however, such studies suffer from a range of constraints which obscure the material and symbolic features of the world of ordinary white servicemen.

An examination of the history and experience of white servicemen will deepen our understanding of broader processes of social and cultural production and reproduction in twentieth century South Africa. White servicemen played a particular, albeit unacknowledged role in reconfiguring the parameters of whiteness in South Africa after the Second World War. At the thesis will argue, the variant of whiteness articulated by returning servicemen cut across oppositions of ethnicity and class. This is significant.

²See, for example, Eric Goetzsche, The Official Natal Mounted Rifles History (Durban: Natal Mounted Rifles, 1971).

³See, for example, James Ambrose Brown, Retreat To Victory. A Springbok's Diary In North Africa: Gazala To El Alamein 1942 (Johannesburg: Ashanti Publishing, 1991).

⁴Mark Gevisser, "Not Your Average Springboks," Sunday Times, 1 November 1998.

While in society at large, differences and often bitter divisions persisted between English- and Afrikaans-speaking whites, the servicemen's history indicates a general consensus on the political, social and cultural primacy of whiteness and the colonial project it sustained - howsoever this was articulated, contested and reproduced.

Accounts of whiteness

A number of recent scholarly studies and literary works have sought to capture the experience and idiom of whiteness in twentieth century segregationist and apartheid South Africa. As the tempo of the international anti-apartheid struggle intensified during the 1980s and 1990s, two texts enjoyed particular success in the English-speaking world: Vincent Crapanzano's Waiting: The Whites of South Africa⁵, and Rian Malan's My Traitor's Heart⁶. In the United States, these books were and still are often prescribed reading for both undergraduate and graduate courses on South Africa.

However, the type of understandings which emerge from both Waiting and My Traitor's Heart tend to represent whites and the cultural essence of whiteness in a most wooden and one-dimensional fashion. In the mid-1980s American anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano did an ethnographic study of whites living in "Wyndal," a small town in the Boland. Crapanzano's book was favourably reviewed by the New York Times Book

⁵Vincent Crapanzano, Waiting: The Whites of South Africa (New York: Vintage, 1986).

⁶Rian Malan, My Traitor's Heart (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990).

Review and the Washington Post Book World, and his monograph ran to several editions. Yet, despite the tributes that it received, Crapanzano's study fails miserably as an account of popular whiteness in South Africa. Crapanzano asserts that white South Africans may be divided into two neat, ethnically distinct, camps. He accepts, rather uncritically, the stereotypic assumption that ethnic and political differences coincide. This myth, nurtured by the English language press⁷, holds that English-speaking South African whites are more "liberal" and "cosmopolitan" than their racist and socially-conservative-Afrikaans-speaking counterparts. With the essentialist bit firmly between his teeth, Crapanzano thus suggests that English-speaking sections of the white population "do not share the Afrikaners'. . . communal fear and outrage of the Blacks."⁸ As his narrative proceeds, we learn further that Afrikaner [sic] universities are "authoritarian," "ideologically-oriented" and "religious," while those for English [sic] students are "less religious, less nationalistic and less ideologically-oriented (although among liberals there is some 'play' with Marxism)."⁹ Later in his account, Crapanzo

⁷Gwendolen Carter, The Politics Of Inequality: South Africa Since 1948 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962), 37-43; Teddy Wilks, For The Love Of Natal: The Life and Times of The Natal Mercury, 1852-1977 (Durban: Natal Mercury, 1977), 161-232.

⁸Crapanzano, Waiting, 35.

⁹Ibid., 108-109.

concludes that the Second World War was of "immense symbolic importance for English-speakers" as it "re-affirmed their ties to England."¹⁰

Crapanzano might be forgiven for being something less than rigorous with his informants' testimony, and for using the social categories they themselves use. However, such reliance blinds him to nuances of class, ethnicity, region, gender and generation amongst white South Africans. Race and ethnicity provide him with his primary axis of analysis, but Crapanzano fails to subject the form, the content or the workings of either category of identity to rigorous interrogation. Hence, his bland declaration that: "Whites are . . . very much in control in South Africa."¹¹ Although Crapanzano's discussion of "the Blacks" is limited, since the focus of his study are white residents of "Wyndal," it suffers from a similar analytic reductionism. As Bundy has forcefully argued, social categories are meaningless outside of a specific political and material context.¹² This statement applies for studies of whites in general: whiteness is not a biological given, but a social construction which is the product of ideological and cultural struggle, and is profoundly political. Crapanzano's failure to consider the

¹⁰Ibid., 127.

¹¹Ibid., 329.

¹²Colin Bundy, "Vagabond Hollanders and Runaway Englishmen: White Poverty in the Cape Before Poor Whiteism," in William Beinart, Peter Delius and Stanley Trapido, eds, Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986), 123.

contexts through which “whiteness” - or for that matter categories like “Afrikaners” or “English-speakers” - emerged render his work ahistorical and hollow.

Besides analytic shortcomings of the sort outlined above, Crapanzano’s ability to understand the history and experience of his white South African informants is undermined by his lack of empathy, which develops into a powerful sense of scorn as the narrative unfolds. Noting that white South Africans are “victims of their own domination,” Crapanzano asserts that this situation is robbed of its tragic dimension by “self-indulgence, cowardice and bad faith.”¹³ Ultimately, Crapanzano’s book is more revealing of his own moral outrage at apartheid, and his dismay at the ways in which he, as a self-identified white observer, is implicated in the reproduction of white racism, than about the experience of ordinary white South Africans.

In contrast, Rian Malan, the author of the acclaimed My Traitor’s Heart, candidly recognises that he, as a white Afrikaner, is implicated in apartheid by birth and history. Although his narrative is richer and considerably more empathetic than Crapanzano’s, Malan also attributes apartheid to a particularly Afrikaner social pathology. For Malan, racist practices and relations were forged on the eastern frontier - much as liberal historians have argued. Malan recounts how his ancestor, Dawid Malan, fled eighteenth century Cape Town. For Malan, Dawid’s personal journey is a metaphor for white Afrikaners’ trek away civilisation and modernity, towards a future blighted by

¹³Crapanzano, Waiting, xiii.

traditionalism, arrogance, xenophobia and violence. Malan notes that:

Dawid Malan left the Cape a racially-enlightened man. And then he crossed the river and disappeared into Africa, where he was transformed, as all white men who went there were transformed.¹⁴

Away from the moderating influence of the Cape, Afrikaners slipped “back into barbarity, each generation growing wilder than the last.”¹⁵ The image, which essentially inverts Frederick Jackson Turner’s thesis¹⁶ on the more positive role of the frontier in American history, is poignant and powerful. However, Malan’s thesis is not entirely plausible. His argument - a type of “modernisation in reverse” proposition - emerges as something of an exercise in damage control. It casts those Afrikaners who repudiated the Age of Enlightenment when they “disappear[ed] into darkness”¹⁷ as the primary agents of the system of racial oppression that evolved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By blaming backward, anti-modern “tribal” Afrikaners for South Africa’s racial woes, Malan shifts the focus away from the possibility that institutionalised racism and the trajectory of modernity - the latter of which he apparently admires - are inextricably bound. In this fashion, Malan exonerates those white social groups in South Africa more usually associated with modernity, including English-speakers and business people.

Peter Godwin’s Mukiwa is a refreshing and compelling memoir of growing up as a white

¹⁴Ibid., 21.

¹⁵Ibid., 23.

¹⁶F. J. Turner, The Frontier in American History (n.p., 1920).

¹⁷Ibid., 24.

in Rhodesia.¹⁸ Absent from his narrative is the polemic dimension so central to Crapanzano's and, to an extent, Malan's work. Godwin is not particularly concerned to pinpoint the origins of racial segregation and oppression in Rhodesia, nor does he attempt to elucidate its structural or moral characteristics. Absent also is the outrage of Crapanzano's account and the revulsion of Malan's. Free from these constraints, Godwin is able to offer a brilliantly intense collage of the his experiences as a "white boy" in a segregated society. While his distaste for the ideology that sustained white hegemony in Rhodesia remains intact, Godwin nonetheless demonstrates considerable empathy for the white "Rhodies" who are central to his work. Ultimately, Godwin's social account of whiteness marks a refreshing departure from the ways in which whites in southern Africa tend to feature in popular and academic discourses.

The conceptual and methodological shortcomings that beset the works of Crapanzano and Malan are fairly common in English-language academic literature on white South Africans. As Dan O'Meara lamented in the early 1980s, many commentators have subordinated careful cultural analysis to a "pale, negative mirror-image of the assumptions of Afrikaner nationalist analysis."¹⁹ A decade later, O'Meara noted that inert stereotypes of this order persist, and that historians continue to ignore the influence of

¹⁸Peter Godwin, Mukiwa: A White Boy in Africa (London: Macmillan, 1996).

¹⁹Dan O'Meara, Volkskapitalisme: Class Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1934-1948 (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983), 5

ordinary Afrikaners in the "key transactions of South African politics."²⁰

The highly politicised act of observing and commenting on apartheid society helps to perpetuate a variety of assumptions about white South Africans, especially Afrikaners. D. Akenson comments on the ways in which scholars' moral assumptions refract their understanding of white Afrikaners:

One emotion runs so deeply through the English-language literature on South African history that it can be labelled a primordial belief and in essence racist, namely that Afrikaners are an irredeemably bad lot. No-one seems to like them very much, and a lot of historians dislike them a great deal.²¹

Part of the problem resides in the fact that few scholars have bothered to consult sources in Afrikaans.²² Moreover, while the history of English-speaking whites in South Africa is more accessible to English-speakers, at least from a linguistic point of view, the understanding of their role in broader South African society is similarly limited by an entrenched set of preconceived ideas. English-speaking white South Africans are usually defined in relation to Afrikaners, either as "liberals" or as racists of a jingoistic variety²³.

Despite three decades of radical history in South Africa, most accounts of white South Africans still take the presumed cultural and political difference between English- and

²⁰Dan O'Meara, Forty Lost Years: The apartheid state and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994 (Johannesburg and Athens, Ohio: Ravan, 1996), 431.

²¹D. Akenson, cited in Tim Clynick, "Afrikaner Political Mobilization in the Western Transvaal: Popular Consciousness and the State, 1920-1930" (D.Phil thesis, Queen's University, 1996), 23.

²²O'Meara, Volkskapitalisme, 5.

²³Paul Thompson, Natalians First. Separatism in South Africa, 1909-1960 (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1990), 141-176.

Afrikaans-speaking whites at face value. The assumption that Afrikaners developed a powerful racist outlook on the eastern frontier, which was carried over into the political and economic structures of the twentieth century - "new frontiers for old," as C. de Kiewiet famously commented²⁴ - continues to dominate popular as well as academic understandings of white South Africans. Such explanations, turning as they do on strands of pre-capitalist (and irrational) Afrikaner racism, miss the point. Once the stereotypic dichotomy between reactionary Afrikaners and more enlightened English-speakers is established, it is rarely questioned. This error may seriously undermine our ability to interrogate and historicise discourses and practices of whiteness.

Marxism and the white problem in South African studies

This study is consciously grounded in the historical materialist tradition of South African historiography. I agree with Roediger that, as racism developed within an evolving set of capitalist relations, there can be no answer to the "white problem" that ignores the explanatory power of historical materialism.²⁵ However, Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius have argued that class production and reproduction cannot be divorced from social divisions, including those characterised by race, religion, chiefly authority, region ,

²⁴William Beinart and Saul Dubow, eds, Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century South Africa, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 5.

²⁵David Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

ethnicity, community forms and gender.²⁶ Bozzoli and Delius accord analytic primacy to class, and indeed it does not appear possible to grasp the social dynamics of race and other categories without reference to class. As Roediger writes, race is constructed differently across time by people of the same social class, and differently at the same time by people whose class positions differ. These observations demand a *historical approach* which focuses on the racism of a class as well as that of a society.²⁷

However, the main body of Marxist literature on South African history and society has been unable to give a plausible account of the cultural matrices of whiteness. This problem requires a framework of materialist analysis that can link individuals and their actions in the world, while also transcending the limitations of historical materialism as it is formulated in South Africa, in particular the explanatory and transformatory power afforded, almost exclusively, to class. To develop such a framework, it is necessary to examine some of the dominant trends in this literature. This exercise will illuminate certain short-comings, themselves historically constituted, and help to explain why the cultural history of those not apparently part of society's underclasses, nor indisputably in opposition to the structures of power, have slipped the analytic net.

During the 1960s, the acceleration of economic growth in South Africa, accompanied as it was by the state's increasingly elaborate repressive capacity, graphically contradicted

²⁶Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius, "Radical History and South African Society," Radical History Review 46/7 (1990): 31.

²⁷Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 7.

one of the mainstays of the liberal hypothesis that capitalist economic development and investment would erode apartheid. Then in 1970, Canadian F. A. Johnstone drew heavily on underdevelopment theory to demonstrate the necessary relationship between the mining industry's need for cheap labour and the state's policies of racial segregation. In particular, Johnstone argued that segregation was specifically developed in South Africa to provide early competitive advantage to mining operations and industry.²⁸

Johnstones' critique of liberal modernisation theory as a means of understanding South African society gathered momentum as it was elaborated upon by a number of South African scholars. In addition, the rise of the new left in Europe and the United States from the mid- to late 1960s provided a number of young South African radicals with a variant of Marxism free from the taint of Stalinism. Belinda Bozzoli and Peter Delius, now both professors at the University of the Witwatersrand, were part of a group of South Africans, mostly white, studying for advanced degrees in Britain at this time. For Bozzoli, Delius and others, this "new" Marxism offered a coherent alternative not only to liberalism, intellectually and politically arid, but also to black consciousness, which excluded them.²⁹

By the early 1970s, this first wave of Marxist theorists began to make inroads into the

²⁸F.A. Johnstone, "White Prosperity and White Supremacy in South Africa Today," African Affairs, 69 (1970). See also F.A. Johnstone Class, Race and Gold: A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa, (London: Routledge, 1976).

²⁹Bozzoli and Delius, "Radical History," 22.

South African academy.³⁰ Their approach was highly structuralist,³¹ being strongly influenced by the major currents in European Marxism, especially the work of Althusser and Poulantzas.³² Also, they wrote at a time when worker organisation in South Africa was at a low point, and the bastions of bourgeois hegemony seemed impregnable. For these radicals, it was imperative to examine the precise forms of white dominance. Such scholars as Rob Davies, David Kaplan, Mike Morris and Dan O'Meara³³ were thus concerned, above all, with the nature of the state in twentieth century South Africa.

However, as O' Meara himself notes in a historiographical essay written twenty years after his earlier ventures, these early approaches, with their focus on the state, suffered from a number of theoretical deficiencies.³¹ In the first instance, this literature proffered a highly functionalist notion of apartheid as a set of policies directly serving the economic interests of capital. This literature also tended towards an instrumentalist conception of

³⁰Although that strand of radical thinking associated with the South African Communist Party had roots in the Eastern European socialism which many Jewish immigrants brought to South Africa from the early twentieth century onwards. Bozzoli and Delius, "Radical History,"14.

³¹See, for example, Frederick Johnstone, "Class Conflict and Colour Bars in the South African Gold-mining Industry, 1910-1926," (I.C.S. seminar paper, 1970); Martin Legassick, "The Making of South African 'Native Policy' 1903-1923,"(I.C.S. seminar paper, 1973); Stanley Trapido, "South Africa in a Comparative Analysis of Industrialisation," Journal of Development Studies 7, (1970-1).

³²For an elucidation of this position, see Bob Jessop, The Capitalist State,(Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983), 45-62.

³³Rob Davies, David. Kaplan, Mike Morris and Dan O'Meara "Class struggle and the Periodisation of the state in South Africa," Review of African Political Economy, 7, (1976).

³¹O'Meara, Forty Lost Years, 425.

politics; political parties were thus reduced to "simple agents of this or that class or class fraction."³⁴

Some Marxists did look at the repressive content of racist legislation, particularly the Land Acts (1913 and 1936), pass laws³⁵ and job colour bars. For most, the matter of white racism was formatted as one of class domination. As Paul Maylam writes, they

view[ed] racial oppression as an essentially modern phenomenon, integrally bound up with the development of industrial capitalism in South Africa. . . [T]hey questioned the view that boers/Afrikaners had been the most virulent racists in South African history and the main culprits responsible for segregation and apartheid. The racial order was not an outgrowth of Afrikaner ethnicity, but rather the product of material forces.³⁶

Some scholars of this school focused their attention upon white workers. However, consistent with their paradigmatic concerns and top-down approach, they were mainly concerned with the ways in which white workers helped to consolidate the racially-defined bourgeois state. For example, Davies *et al* argued that, after 1924, white workers constituted a supporting class in alliance with "national " capital.³⁷ For these

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵See for example Martin Legassick, "South Africa: Forced Labour, Industrialisation and Racial Differentiation," in R. Harris, ed, The Political Economy of Africa, (Cambridge, Mass, 1975); Davies, Kaplan, Morris and O'Meara, "Class Struggle and the Periodisation of the state."

³⁶Paul Maylam, "Unravelling South Africa's Racial Order: The History Of Racism, Segregation And Apartheid," (Paper presented to the African Studies Association, Chicago, 29 October-1 November 1998), 19.

³⁷10. Davies et al , 6.

theorists, the critical question was which fraction of capital was able to exercise its domination; the dispositions of its lesser class allies were not seen as especially problematic. Harold Wolpe contributed to the historiographical marginalisation of white workers when he suggested that, with every advance of national capital and Afrikaner nationalism, white workers were progressively transformed into a "new middle class."³⁸ Davies completed the task of writing off the white working class as a militant social and political force with the publication of his monograph Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa, 1900-1960.³⁹ He argued that, with the advent of the Pact government in 1924, the state incorporated the white trade union movement into its industrial relations apparatuses, while simultaneously engaging in a number of strategies to address the poor white problem.⁴⁰ For Davies, these factors combined to further disorganise the white wage-earning classes as a progressive force, and consolidated their isolation from black workers.⁴¹

This literature argues that by the end of the Pact period, the party political alliance between national capital and white wage-earners was effectively at an end. Still, this political alliance, however temporary, created the conditions whereby the overwhelming

³⁸Harold Wolpe, "The 'white working class' in South Africa," Economy and Society 5, (1976).

³⁹Rob Davies, Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa, 1900-1960 : An Historical Materialist Analysis of Class Formation and Class Relations, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979).

⁴⁰Ibid., 179.

⁴¹Ibid., 180.

majority of white wage-earners would continue to support the racially defined state.⁴²

This political neutralisation of white workers continued until at least 1960, supported by changes to the labour process that progressively transformed white workers into petty-bourgeois supervisors, auxiliary managers and foremen.⁴³ Such arguments find an echo in the work of other South African theoreticians of the labour process.⁴⁴

For South African Marxists writing in the mid-1970s, white racism was seen as an "effect" of capitalist development, rather than a cause - although as Bozzoli and Delius write, few went as far as the Non-European Unity Movement's virtual denial of its presence.⁴⁵ As such, these radical scholars concentrated on the material origins of racial inequality and oppression. Significantly, the way in which this literature theorised the arrangement of class forces in South Africa would have important implications for the political and intellectual project of radical South African historians and other social scientists during the next decade.

This generation of scholars was influenced not only by the intellectual milieu in which they were immersed, but also by the political realities that occupied them so. In a review of South African labour historiography, Jon Lewis acknowledges this hermeneutic.⁴⁶

⁴²Ibid., 231-232.

⁴³Ibid., 331-354.

⁴⁴See, for example, Eddie Webster, Cast in a Racial Mould : Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985).

⁴⁵Bozzoli and Delius, "Radical History," 20.

⁴⁶Jon Lewis, "South African Labour History: A Historiographical Assessment," Radical History Review 46/7 (1990).

Citing Eric Hobsbawm, Lewis notes that historians of labour often “accept a framework of chronological narrative, and a pattern of interpretation which [is] itself the product of the movement’s history as much as of research into it.”⁴⁷ Lewis’ observation is astute, and has relevance for our understanding of the radical tradition of South African scholarship. From the early 1970s, many of this coterie were in exile, and some were activists in the ANC, SACTU, SACP or MK⁴⁸ - organisations concentrating on the politics of national liberation, rather than on class struggle. The dialectic between political and academic concerns is not difficult to recognise, and, as Rowley Arenstein, former organising secretary of the Durban and District branch of the CPSA commented, the radical intelligentsia had in any event “written off white workers” after the 1948 Nationalist election victory.⁴⁹ In sum, there was little political necessity to explore the political and cultural landscape of whiteness.

The next generation of radical South Africanists, writing from the mid 1980s, also tended to ignore questions of whiteness, despite a certain interest in white workers and “poor whites.”⁵⁰ Whereas the earlier school employed the theoretical matrices of Althusser

⁴⁷Ibid., 216.

⁴⁸Besides their scholarly activities, Harold Wolpe, Martin Legassick, Rob Davies and Dan O’Meara, for example, were all involved in the liberation struggle.

⁴⁹Rowley Arentstein, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 24 June, 1986.

⁵⁰See, for example, Tim Clynick, “Community Politics on the Lichtenburg Alluvial Diamond Fields, 1926-1929,” in B. Bozzoli, ed., Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives, (Johannesburg: Raven, 1987); William Freund, “The Poor Whites: A Social Force and a Social Problem in South Africa,” in R. Morrell, ed., White but Poor: Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa, 1880-1940, (Pretoria:

and Poulantzas, this group of radical social historians drew their inspiration from British and North American historical materialists like E.P. Thompson, Hobsbawm and Eugene Genovese.⁵¹

As O'Meara observes, this trend towards social history really took off from the mid-1980s with the turn towards post-modernism and post-structuralism by many of the European left intelligentsia who had given theoretical vision to earlier South African Marxists like Davies and Morris.⁵² In South Africa itself, some historians - for instance, Charles van Onselen⁵³ - reacted against "top-down" explanations, in favour of an empirically-oriented "history from below." For O'Meara, this shift was inspired by the "British cult of the 'Poverty of Theory'."⁵⁴ As Albert Grundlingh notes, this shift engendered:

An empirically-oriented social history. . . a reaction against what was viewed as sterile structuralism; mechanical grating and grinding of classes and fractions of capital, devoid of human agency, consciousness, experience and at times, of regional and chronological specificities.⁵⁵

This school of social history focused mainly on "marginal" and "marginalised" groupings, which had hitherto not been noticed or deemed worthy of investigation by the academy.

University of South Africa, 1992).

⁵¹ Albert Grundlingh, "Transcending Transitions? The Social History Tradition of Historical Writing in South Africa in the 1990's," (Inaugural lecture, University of South Africa, 20 February, 1997), 4.

⁵² O'Meara, Forty Lost Years , 425.

⁵³ Charles van Onselen, Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwaterarand, 1886-1914, vols.1 & 2, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1982).

⁵⁴O'Meara Forty Lost Years, 425.

⁵⁵Grundlingh, "Transcending Transitions," 4.

While the new social historians were aware of the elusive links between economy and culture, experience and consciousness,⁵⁶ they did little to prise open the debate, or broaden our understanding of popular white identity or whiteness. Moreover, as much as the social historians kicked against the macro analyses and the determinism of their more structurally-oriented predecessors, they tended still to accept implicitly earlier arguments about the form of the regime and the arrangements of class forces on the "oppressor" / "oppressed" continuum. On the basis of this theoretical foundation, the social historians of the 1980s and 1990s tended to disregard the history of ordinary whites as legitimate subjects of enquiry. Indeed, radical South Africanists have not been much interested in the history and culture of ordinary whites. After all, they were interested in "popular" (viz. revolutionary / potentially revolutionary) classes; and in any event had Harold Wolpe, Rob Davies and others not shown that white workers had been drawn into the "new middle class"?

The History Workshop, convened more or less biennially at the University of the Witwatersrand since 1976, has been the major forum for radical social historians in South Africa. Bozzoli has played a leading role in the Workshop. She compiled edited collections of the papers presented at the first three Workshops,⁵⁷ and her introductory essays provide important perspectives on the prospects for radical scholarship in South

⁵⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁷ Belinda Bozzoli, ed, Labour, Townships and Protest, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1978); idem, Town and Countryside in the Transvaal, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983); idem, Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives.

Africa.

The theme for the 1984 History Workshop was "Class, Community and Conflict." As Bozzoli indicates in her introduction to the published collection of conference papers, the theme was intended to elicit response on the relationship between class, on the one hand, and "race, culture and community," on the other.⁵⁸ However, the way in which Bozzoli and other participants at the Workshop theorised this nexus represents the Achilles' heel of radical studies in South Africa - as elsewhere - and was a major constraint on their ability to understand something like whiteness (or, for that matter, religion or ethnicity) as a set of theoretical and empirical problems. Nevertheless, Bozzoli's essay arguably represents, still, the most significant statement on the way in which radical South African historians framed the dialectic between class and other forms of identity, organisation and activism. Moreover, as Paul Maylam notes, such questions have since faded from the forefront of South African intellectual enquiry, rendering Bozzoli's 1984 essay a necessary and important marker for contemporary students of cultural history and historiography.⁵⁹

The 1984 Workshop set out to ask how historical analysis could illuminate the prevailing

⁵⁸Bozzoli, Class, Community and Conflict, 1.

⁵⁹Maylam, "Unravelling South Africa's Racial Order," 1. This trend presaged John Wright's comment at the 1999 meeting of the SAHA that the advent of the "new South Africa" had seen the "decommissioning" of history, to be replaced by heritage. John Lambert, "Probing the predicaments of academic history in contemporary South Africa," (paper presented to the South African Historical Association Conference, University of the Western Cape, 11-14 July, 1999).

dichotomy between class and culture. Bozzoli argues that class, culture and community can only be understood as historical and social categories, rather than reified universals:

At some historical moments social groups may well appear to be driven by ideological forces, or cultural ones, which have come to gain a certain relative autonomy; and at others, the crude realities of economic necessity and process seem to prevail. And at all times we need to be alert to the interplay between these dimensions rather than regarding them as polar opposites.⁶⁰

Bozzoli then asserts that it is social history, with its emphasis on the “view from below,” which animates the “mass of inhabitants” with agency, and is thus able to elucidate the relationship between class and non-class factors in historically-specific ways.⁶¹ Bozzoli’s appeal for a flexible and non-deterministic understanding of the relationship between class formation, identity and social action was quite bold at the time, suggesting an attempt to shift away from mechanistic class analysis. However, Bozzoli remains constrained by her attachment to the working classes, her assumptions about class dynamics and her Marxist understanding of the social process. The salience that Bozzoli assigns to class, and especially her fidelity to the working class, is everywhere apparent. She exposes herself in her understanding of “community,” which she more precisely posits as “working class community.” Also illustrative is her discussion on “Middle Class Intellectuals: Wasp Hegemony and Cultural Challenge,” where she again demonstrates her confidence in class as a category, and class formation as a process. Bozzoli notes that middle class Zionist immigrants to South Africa undermined socialism,

⁶⁰Bozzoli, Class, Community and Conflict, 2.

⁶¹Ibid., 2-3.

which was the “inherent” ideology of many poor East European immigrants, in order to forge middle class Jewishness as the primary category of identification.⁶² Bozzoli’s description of socialism as the immigrants’ “inherent” ideology is evocative of notions of “real” and “false” consciousness, with the implication that material, class-based consciousness is more “real.” This in turn suggests that Bozzoli’s cultural historical framework is flawed by her model of class analysis.

Bozzoli’s concern for class, and perhaps even her fascination with working class organisation, ideology and culture, is to be expected of South African historical materialist analysis. However, what limits her objective of reconfiguring the relationship between class, race and culture, is the rather simple base / superstructure model that she employs. Bozzoli begins by observing that enquiry needs to be informed by theoretical assumptions about the nature of consciousness among “ordinary people.”⁶³ This is a significant observation, but ultimately Bozzoli’s allegiance to a certain set of theoretical assumptions constrains her ability to push the argument beyond the existing parameters of class analysis. She comments that, at a local level, ideologies may well be textured by a mass of historical forces and explanations. She then suggests that it might be useful to think of the philosophies of the poor as consisting of “motifs” of thought and action. Such small traditions of belief exist in a complex set of patterns, and people of “similar societal and cultural experiences” will tend to adhere to an

⁶²Ibid., 34.

⁶³Ibid., 3.

identifiable set of motifs. It is these motifs which cohere in particular ways, and might constitute an ideology at certain points.⁶⁴ She further acknowledges that there are class and non-class ideologies, but argues that it is difficult to sustain this dichotomy. All class consciousness is also some form of non-class consciousness, and *vice versa*:

Trade unions may, because of our intellectual training, seem to us to be good examples of class consciousness. But to the Zulu-speaking migrant workers, the single Afrikaner woman, the Jewish East European immigrants, and many other kinds of people who join them, trade unions may represent something more or something different. Perhaps they represent a combination of complex social, ideological and economic meanings too intricate to reduce to simple polarities or ideal types of class/ethnicity or class/community. To one group the union may represent powerful macho, Zuluness; to another dedicated, respectable, idealistic Afrikaner womanhood. . . Non-class elements can be, and often are, part of class consciousness, and are often the force which gives it its appeal, its ability to move social groups.⁶⁵

However, Bozzoli equates consciousness with ideology, thus restricting her ability to grasp the relationship between class and culture. In particular, her concentration on ideology leaves her analysis over determined, and constrains her understanding of culture. As Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff observe, ideology is just one way in which power enters culture, and it refers to power in its agentive mode - the command wielded by humans in specific historical contexts.⁶⁶ Ideology, then, is the expression,

⁶⁴Ibid., 12.

⁶⁵Ibid., 36-39.

⁶⁶Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa, vol. 1, (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1991).

and ultimately the possession, of a particular group. Power also enters culture through hegemony, a concept first elucidated by Marx in his essay on the fetishism of commodities.⁶⁷ Hegemony is non-agentive power, present in the forms of everyday life, and proliferates outside the realms of institutional politics, "saturating things such as aesthetics and ethics. . . and mundane usage."⁶⁸ Unlike ideology, which is confined to a particular group like "workers," hegemony consists of conventions which might be shared and naturalised throughout a whole political community⁶⁹ - such as the assumptions and language and practices of whiteness. Absent from hegemony is class determinism or the "crushing calculus of class domination."⁷⁰ Bozzoli's failure to address questions of hegemony means that the framework she elaborates is conceptually unable to account for the politics of whiteness and the matrices of anti-black racism which are rooted deep in culture and defy the logic of a simple base / superstructure model, even one as elegantly stated as Bozzoli's. For the purposes of this thesis, it is the concept of hegemony which provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the social and cultural history of white volunteers.

⁶⁷Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," in J. Dolgin, et al., eds, Symbolic Anthropology: A Reader in the Study of Symbols and Meanings, (New York, 1977), 245-253.

⁶⁸Comaroff and Comaroff, Of Revelation and Revolution, vol. 1, 22.

⁶⁹Ibid., 22.

⁷⁰Ibid., 20.

Class, culture and the “deterministic fix”

In a recent essay, British labour historian Gareth Stedman Jones offers a trenchant critique of the totalising discourses of Marxist as well as Foucauldian approaches to the past. The sorts of issue that he raises are fairly representative of the post-modernist unease about more structuralist ways of understanding the past. He is particularly suspicious of what he identifies as persisting strands of functionalism and reductionism within the radical tradition.⁷¹ Stedman Jones' argument might help to sidestep some of the conundrums that have burdened South African radical studies. Most importantly, Stedman Jones' suggestions promise to break the gloomy bonds of an inflexible base / superstructure model, and so allow us to dynamically explore such aspects of South African history and culture as whiteness and masculinity.

In his essay, Stedman Jones asserts that Marxist social theory went into a period of decline from the late 1970s, due to a series of unresolved philosophical problems and empirical studies that challenged its theoretical foundations.⁷² For Stedman Jones, it seemed that the emergence of an alternative theoretical framework, derived originally from linguistics, would drive the final nail in the historical materialist coffin. The significance of this linguistic framework lay in its insistence upon language as a self-contained system of signs, the meanings of which were determined by their relationship

⁷¹Gareth Stedman Jones, “The Deterministic Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990's,” History Workshop Journal 42, (1996).

⁷²*Ibid.*, 19-20.

with each other rather than to some “primordial extra-linguistic terrain” - in other words, class. Linguistics potentially represented a serious challenge to the core historical materialist assumption that thought and language are determined by social being.⁷³

While linguistic approaches succeeded in dislodging a particular narrative - for instance, that connected to the trajectories of the modern industrial working class - they failed to temper a set of basic Marxist reflexes in relation to social causation, the functioning of the state and the role of ideology :

Indeed, in many versions the new discursive approach retained a conception of social and political thought, of law, of religion and the state, no less reductionist than that which preceded it. In other words - a deterministic fix.⁷⁴

For Stedman Jones, responsibility for this situation rests with the legacy of Michel Foucault, and more especially the ways in which English-speaking historians have arbitrarily assumed one Foucauldian position or another, unaware of its proximity to the variant of Marxism that preceded it.⁷⁵

Stedman Jones acknowledges that we do indeed owe a debt to some of Foucault's theoretical insights, such as his assertion that historical conjunctures appear in a random fashion.⁷⁶ However this should not imply an endorsement of Foucault's position

⁷³Ibid., 20.

⁷⁴Ibid., 21.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

as a whole. Foucault criticised Marxism as an archaic method of understanding, located intellectually in the *episteme* of the nineteenth century and anchored to a crude economic determinism.⁷⁷ Yet, as Stedman Jones argues, some of Foucault's assumptions are paradoxically close to the structuralist versions of Marxism elaborated by Althusser and others in France at the time. These difficulties are in no way resolved by Foucault's denunciation of all historical narratives and his proclamation of an "archaeology" which simply facilitated the "whimsical. . . magnification of certain forms of evidence, and. . . wilful disregard of others"⁷⁸

For Stedman Jones, the way out of this theoretical *cul-de-sac* lies in a discursive approach free from the residues of reductionism, functionalism and a structuralist reading of *mentalité*.⁷⁹ In the first instance, such an approach requires that sharp disciplinary boundaries are blurred; once this is effected, the procedures developed for the study of intellectual and cultural history can be extended to encompass the whole spectrum of historical enquiry. In other words, techniques hitherto devoted to the analysis of the "traditional realms of literary or philosophical high culture" should be applied across the board: "There is no reason why the "intellective" elements of popular politics should not be analysed as rigorously and scrupulously as is customary in studies

⁷⁷Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, cited in Stedman Jones, "The Deterministic Fix," 23.

⁷⁸Stedman Jones, "The Deterministic Fix," 25.

⁷⁹Ibid., 28.

of the history of ideas."⁸⁰

At this point, some scholars would retreat to an "extra-or pre-discursive reality" -class interests - to account for the subject matter and meanings of particular political discourses.⁸¹ However, Stedman Jones reminds us that "interests" are only created and articulated through discourse, making it illusory to search for "real" or "objective" interests.⁸² The recognition that the political process happens in dialogical form permits the possibility of arriving at an historically-grounded sense of place, (un)consciousness, culture and so forth, without reducing these to mere functions of class.

There is, however, a caveat to Stedman Jones' ideas. In common with many post-modernists, Stedman Jones gives only token recognition to the findings of Marxist analysis. Paul Maylam highlighted the sort of contradictions that this position admits. In a recent essay on post-modernism in South African studies,⁸³ Maylam observes that, like Stedman Jones, Aletta Norval in Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse maintains that it is not possible to "recover the extra-discursive domain."⁸⁴ Norval attributes the production of apartheid discourse to a series of upheavals experienced by Afrikaners in

⁸⁰Ibid., 29.

⁸¹Ibid., 30.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Paul Maylam, "Dead horses, the baby and the bathwater: 'Post-theory' and the historian's practice," (Paper presented to the biennial conference of the South African Historical Society, University of the Western Cape, 11-14 July, 1999).

⁸⁴Ibid., 9.

the 1930s and 1940s. Yet, she then links the production of apartheid discourse to material forces, which are treated as realities, not discursive constructs.⁸⁵ As Maylam wryly comments, post-style writing such as that attempted by Norval is highly vulnerable to its own critique, and ends up “reading for much of the time like orthodox history.”⁸⁶ Maylam concludes his essay with the warning that a repudiation of Marxist social theory should not imply a rejection of materialist analysis; in other words, we should be careful not to throw out the “baby” with the “bathwater”:

It is one thing to be critical of the reductionism, determinism, essentialism and the totalisation of some historical materialist writing, but it is quite another to remove material forces from historical analysis. It is noticeable that some writers who distance themselves from the materialist tradition do actually bring material factors into their explanations.⁸⁷

Nonetheless, Stedman Jones’ rejection of the analytic primacy of class provides the critical space in which to explore forms and actions in ways that are neither functionalist nor reductionist. His argument thus suggests a way out of the deterministic fix. The task of spinning out a theoretical framework for a materialist history that also looks at aspects of culture, is made simpler by the utility of Stedman Jones’ thesis that class is but one aspect of the production of consciousness and culture.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Ibid., 16.

⁸⁷Ibid., 13.

The white problem in American studies and the legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois

Recent American literature, located within the genre of “new labour history,” presents a model of how questions of whiteness can be framed within the Marxist tradition.

Roediger’s monograph The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class is just one such example of this approach. As he explores the cultural and political trajectories of whiteness amongst white workers in the United States, Roediger moves away from the blind alley of determinism into which even the best examples of radical South African social history lead studies of race, and of culture more generally. His study offers a comparative example and a theoretical model that illustrate the operation of such aspects of culture as whiteness, masculinity and the memory of war service.

Roediger disagrees with Stedman Jones about the fundamental value of historical materialism. While Stedman Jones holds that Marxism is fatally flawed by epistemological errors, Roediger is rather less pessimistic. For him, no answer to the “white problem” can ignore the explanatory power of historical materialism.⁸⁸ In short, for Roediger, modern racism developed within an evolving set of capitalist relations, and Marxism is best furnished to examine these. However, as presently theorised, Marxism does not press for answers to the problem of why so many workers in the United States define themselves as “white.” Marxists - most of whom are white - writing in the United

⁸⁸Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 6.

States have widely disregarded Coco Fusco's admonition that "racial identities are not only Black, Latino, Asian, Native American and so on, but they are also white."⁸⁹ Any study seeking to insert race as an analytic category in the social process, needs to problematise race as socially, historically and ideologically constructed, rather than accept it as a biological or physical fact. By ignoring white ethnicity, American Marxists have naturalised it and so redoubled its hegemony.⁹⁰ Part of the problem, Roediger believes, is that, as an analytic category class connotes a certain "objective" dimension absent from race.⁹¹ Not least of all, this has led to the consistent privilege of the explanatory and transformatory power of class over race.

To illustrate his point, Roediger cites the African-American sociologist Oliver Cromwell Cox who maintained that "economic relations form the basis of modern race relations," and that the solution to white racism lay in class-based revolution, incorporating black and white workers in a commodious working class alliance.⁹² As Cox writes: "There will be no more 'crackers' or 'niggers' after a socialist revolution because the social necessity for these types will have been removed."⁹³ This rosy view of racism, which is premised on the aspirations of early twentieth century revolutionary politics, is largely gone. In particular, the correlation between white racism and "social necessity" has

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ibid., 7.

⁹²Cox, cited in Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 7.

⁹³Ibid.

been undermined by readings of colonial and post-colonial history which indicate the depth to which discourses about race are rooted in the social formation.

Roediger's own approach to understanding questions of white racism is unashamedly eclectic. While he locates his work within the Marxist tradition, Roediger draws freely on Weberian notions of race and status. This approach allows him a flexible understanding of the interpenetration of categories, and leads him to his founding premise:

Proletarianisation and the systematic development of a sense of whiteness went hand-in-hand for the development of an emphatically and self-conscious white working class.⁹⁴

For Roediger, then, "the most pressing task for historians of race and class is not to draw precise lines separating race and class, but to draw lines connecting race and class."⁹⁵

Roediger attributes the most original statement to address these "connecting lines" to African-American sociologist and activist W. E. B. Du Bois. In Roediger's words, Du Bois is "unrivaled for an understanding of the dialectics of race and class in the United States."⁹⁶ The especial strength of Du Bois' positions are that they permit an appreciation of whiteness in the wider social and cultural context of class formation, and not simply in the narrower confines of job competition.

⁹⁴Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 8.

⁹⁵Ibid., 11.

⁹⁶Ibid.

Du Bois wrote as a Marxist. However his experience as part of the black nationalist tradition in the United States, which left him cynical of oversimplified class analysis, also furnished him with additional perspectives on the study of race and class in America. For Du Bois, racism was not natural; it was real and problematic in intellectual, moral and political terms. As he wrote

It was bad enough to have the consequences of [racist] thought fall upon colored people the world over; but in the end it was even worse when one considers what this attitude did to the [white] worker. His aim and ideal was distorted. . . He began to want, not comfort for all men but power over all men. . . he did not love humanity and he hated niggers.⁹⁷

Du Bois argued that the key to understanding the social power of white racism lay in the special dialectics pertaining between race and class in the United States. Even when white workers were subject to the same sort of exploitative relationships as blacks, and received low wages, they were "compensated in part by a . . . public and psychological wage."⁹⁸ Borrowing from Weber, Du Bois contends that the pleasures of "whiteness" constituted a part of white workers' social wage. For Du Bois, the status and privilege conferred by whiteness were able substitutes for an alienating set of class relationships. Du Bois thus connected racism with a determination by white workers to seek satisfaction off the job, and to evade rather than confront exploitation.⁹⁹

Roediger agrees with the thrust of Du Bois' argument that race is historically-constituted.

⁹⁷Du Bois, cited in Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 6.

⁹⁸Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 12-13.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 13.

Roediger would also concur with George Frederickson, who believes that in the United States, the industrialising northern states, juxtaposed to the more agrarian south with its tradition of slave-holding, provide a useful model to illustrate persisting racism in that country.¹⁰⁰ In the north, blacks retained *de jure* civil rights, including the right to vote and to hold office, yet they were a “segregated pariah class without. . . ‘rights white men were bound to respect’.”¹⁰¹ Roediger observes that “white” and “worker” only became meaningfully paired in the nineteenth century as the matrix of capitalist social relations became more tightly knit.¹⁰² And while he remains sensitive to the need for race to be set in the social formation, Roediger argues that it is rather tenuous, both analytically and politically, to reduce race - or indeed any other focus of identity - to a thing of class. On this point, Roediger agrees theoretically with Stedman Jones that the ways in which interests, ideologies and of course identities are articulated does not accord simply with class. At the same time, Roediger remains mindful of the dialectic, elaborated by du Bois, which pertains between these and other “extra-discursive” structures, for example class.

As Roediger develops his major thesis - that proletarianisation and the systematic

¹⁰⁰George Frederickson, “Black-White Relations Since Emancipation: The Search For a Comparative Perspective,” in Kees Gispén, ed, What Made The South Different?, (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 131. Roediger would, however, most likely take issue with Frederickson’s simplistic formulation that “whatever the oppression. . . minorities can gain equality with their former overlords” as it ignores the hegemonic power ¹⁰⁰of whiteness.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 131-132.

¹⁰²Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 20..

development of a sense of whiteness went hand in hand in the making of the American white working class - he emphasises the historicity of both race and class.

Contemporary whiteness developed as white workers responded to the fear of dependency on wage labour and to the necessities of capitalist work discipline.¹⁰³ In the pivotal nineteenth century, one of robust republicanism in America, whites were taught to expect economic and political independence. Yet, as they faced the march of capitalism, most became dependent on wage labour and capitalist work discipline.¹⁰⁴

The bondage of free blacks thus became a touchstone for degradation and dependence: "white" and "free" were constructed and contested through otherness.¹⁰⁵

While this form of white racism, aggravated by the pressures of proletarianisation, was particular to industrial capitalism, its content drew on a range of antecedents - in Roediger's words, "pre-industrial strands of racial folklore" - deriving from the colonial encounter and the slave experience.¹⁰⁶ And just as fears of class exploitation invested some archaic racist currents with a new potency, they also revived other forms of knowledge. In Roediger's study, for example, such fears motivated a new sense of masculinity. He suggests that, in the face of growing dependency on wage labour, the revolutionary clarion of rugged independence developed as an important strut of the white American masculine ideal.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 21.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 14.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 13.

Taking a cue from E.P. Thompson's seminal study of the English working class,¹⁰⁸ Roediger declares his intent to listen to the voices of white workers. He criticises structuralist Marxists and the legacy they have left for radical scholars in the 1980s and 1990s: all too often, structuralists have focused on the role of the ruling classes in nurturing ideologies of race and racism.¹⁰⁹ Roediger faults radical scholars who describe themselves as "labour historians" or "social historians interested in labour" for not adequately probing working class racism and whiteness as creations of the white working class itself.

Roediger's work provides invaluable insights for this thesis. For example, the contours of white service identity had their source in racial and other "folklore," not so very distant, of the white men who provide the focus for this study. However, there are a number of issues that Roediger does not adequately address. Firstly, while his explanation of why white American workers identify themselves as white is convincing, Roediger does little to elaborate on what he means by the "working class." This is not uncommon: most "know" what the working class is, but would meet some difficulty in actually defining it. Nevertheless, such terminological inexactitude is worrying. Roediger demonstrates that becoming part of the working class - a term which he uses in a fairly universal sense - was a critical element in the elaboration of historical forms of whiteness, which he then

¹⁰⁸Edward Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class, (London: Pelican, 1963).

¹⁰⁹Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 9.

deftly dissects. However, he does not fully interrogate the changing content of whiteness during proletarianisation.

Thus Roediger's argument should not be applied uncritically to twentieth century South Africa. From the end of the Great Depression to the early 1950s, the labour and productive processes in South Africa changed more dramatically than at any other period during the twentieth century. Not only the types of jobs, but also hierarchies of work and workplace relations were transformed. South African scholars of the labour process have seized upon the way in which mechanisation was accompanied by a decidedly racist re-organisation to the relations of production. Can we then legitimately talk of a "white working class" in the period under review? If, as Wolpe has suggested, white workers were transformed into a "new middle class," does Roediger's argument still apply?

In his study of the working classes under conditions of monopoly capitalism,¹¹⁰ Harry Braverman suggests that despite changes to the labour process and the apparent upward mobility of workers, the majority of the working class were not transformed into a "new middle class." While Braverman acknowledges the existence of a new middle class, he rejects the arbitrary way in which it is often defined.¹¹¹ This misconception, he

¹¹⁰Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The degradation of work in the twentieth century, (London and New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

¹¹¹Ibid., 25; 404-405.

holds, is consequent upon some of the peculiarities of monopoly capitalism which has created a range of jobs that defy easy description or classification. Moreover, nearly all of the workforce are transformed into employees of capital and therefore correspond to a "formal" definition of the working class.¹¹² To name but a few, the "new middle class" is often taken to include engineers, scientists, "professionals" in marketing and finance, supervisors and managers of the lower ranks, as well as those working outside of capitalist production "proper" in hospitals, schools and the organs of state.¹¹³

Many types of employment that have emerged and expanded under conditions of monopoly capitalism are - erroneously, in Braverman's view - described as the "new middle class." He reminds us of E.P. Thompson's famous dictum that "class is not a thing but a relationship." Returning to the question of the new occupations that derive largely from monopoly capitalism, Braverman then asks rhetorically why, as in the case of janitor / porter and engineer (occupations that have grown equally in twentieth century America), the latter is considered "new middle class" while the former is not. For Braverman and other theorists, the procedure of naming the new middle class is saved from being completely arbitrary, through the use of "new" in a double sense. On the one hand, "new" refers to occupations that have recently been created or enlarged. On the other hand, "new" refers to these occupations' gloss and presumed superiority to the

¹¹²Ibid., 403.

¹¹³Ibid.

"old."¹¹⁴ In other words, the conceptual division between the working class and the new middle class is beguiled by the education and "superiority" of workers engaged in the new occupations. Applied to twentieth century South Africa, this argument is particularly alluring since it coincides with the racial division of the workforce.

Following Braverman, all white wage earners, whether blue- or white-collar, fall within the definition of the South African working class. Undeniably, the form of the state in twentieth century South Africa compelled white workers into a type of symbiosis with capital.¹¹⁵ This relationship between the state and white wage earners in general was central to the ways in which they identified themselves as "white." However, there were simultaneously relations of a fundamentally antagonistic nature between white workers and their white bosses, rooted in struggles over the labour process. Paradoxically, these antagonisms also gave form to the types of racism articulated by white workers.¹¹⁶ Moreover, even as some white workers assumed supervisory roles, their elevation to such positions was contingent upon their status as whites. Thus, while during the course of the twentieth century the labour process as a whole became characterised by a growth in the number of supervisory - new middle class - occupations, the older social relations of production remained intact.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 26.

¹¹⁵David Yudelman, The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital and the Incorporation of Organised Labour on the South African Gold Fields, 1902-1939, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1984).

¹¹⁶See Jeremy Krikler, "White Working Class Identity and the Rand Revolt," (Paper presented to "The Burden of Race? 'Whiteness' and 'Blackness' in Modern South Africa," Conference hosted by the History Workshop and Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research, Johannesburg, 5 July - 8 July, 2001).

The second issue that Roediger's thesis does not adequately address concerns his limited grasp of the very burden of white racism - although in all fairness, he developed his model for the United States, where the arithmetic of demography meant that the boundaries of whiteness were very different from a colonial society like South Africa. This is not to disagree with his insistence that race is more than a "social necessity" which serves more pertinent class interests. Neither does it challenge his contention that race formation and class formation penetrate each other at "every turn." Indeed, Roediger's argument is perfectly valid and comprehensive for those classes whose interests were advanced - in one way or another - by defining themselves as "white." However, notwithstanding his gesture to the persistence of "pre-industrial strands of racial folklore,"¹¹⁷ Roediger does not fully explain why or how racism is reproduced by those whose material and cultural interests it does not directly serve.

In South Africa, it is the hegemonic character of whiteness that accounts for the pervasiveness of white racism, and also helps to define the limits of political debate amongst whites. Although a variety of sharply contrasting social and political traditions were elaborated and contested within the white political community, a set of fundamental assumptions relating to the value of white culture was held by most white South Africans, and the rules of whiteness shaped their everyday lives. These assumptions cut across more obvious lines of social division like class, ethnicity, gender, generation and region,

¹¹⁷Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness, 106.

and prescribed a grammar of racist wisdom and racist practice.

In positioning whiteness as the central characteristic of the hegemonic practice he describes, David Goldberg makes the case for a racist culture, as opposed to a culture which is racist. The idea of a culture which is racist suggests that racism is a conscious, agentive phenomenon which exists at the level of ideology. This framework reduces race and racism to functions of social and political necessity. Racist culture, Goldberg argues, is something very different. Racist culture is deeply ingrained in discourse, cultural practice and meaning. As Goldberg writes:

Included in racist culture, as in culture generally, are ideas, attitudes and dispositions, norms and rules, linguistic, literary and artistic expressions, architectural forms and media representations, practices and institutions. . . [Racist culture is] both a signifying system and a system of material production. It involves a set of rules or conventions, a logic/grammar of their relations, and a vocabulary of expression.¹¹⁸

For Goldberg, race is one of the central conceptual inventions of modernity.¹¹⁹ Race assumes different forms as modernity develops over time and space, dialectically refining social relations as its own contours are mapped out. As Z. Bauman has noted, order lies at the heart of modernity; yet at the same time, modernity has fostered a self-conception that is "abstract and atomistic."¹²⁰ It is race, more than anything, which offers

¹¹⁸David T. Goldberg, Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning, (Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993), 8.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*, 3.

¹²⁰Cited in Goldberg, Racist Culture, 4.

itself as a category capable of providing a semblance of social cohesion, and so resolving this contradiction.

The reason, then, why race is such an effective conceptual tool is that it is broad, yet almost empty of content.¹²¹ There is no generic racism, and the “dominant modes of racialization”¹²² are historically and culturally constituted, stretching across a range of “discursive orders” and acquiring new interpretations and emphases as they assume the values inherent in each. The adaptability of racist thinking and practice means that race has become increasingly normalised and naturalised through modernity, but in ways which are not simply determined by social conditions at any particular time. For Goldberg, racisms have different purposes which need to be explained “empirically and archaeologically.”¹²³

Goldberg’s argument for a racist culture has implications for this thesis. Particularly, the suggestion that racism is shaped, but not simply determined, by prevailing social conditions frees analysis from the strictures of class reductionism, and a simple base / superstructure model. More particularly, by focusing on ways in which the hegemony of whiteness was and is negotiated, this thesis seeks to transcend some of the analytic dead-ends created by the binary categories (e.g. working class / new middle class;

¹²¹Goldberg, Racist Culture, 4.

¹²²Ibid., 1

¹²³Ibid., 90.

English-speaking / Afrikaans-speaking) that have tended to dominate the historiographies of South Africa.

Methodological notes

As John Comaroff writes, “methodologies” are determined not by the intrinsic nature of academic disciplines - if any such thing exists - but by prior theoretical considerations.¹²⁴ Thus, to assert that history should be more “anthropological” (or anthropology more “historical”) may be well-intentioned, but “the assertion remains vacuous without further theoretical specification.”¹²⁵

This thesis employs theoretical and methodological approaches that address the social and cultural history of white servicemen, by following Roediger’s direction to take seriously their agency. The thesis attempts, following Robert Darnton, “to do history in the ethnographic grain.”¹²⁶ The study incorporates archival materials as well as interviews with 36 ex-servicemen, and these two types of sources obviously complement one another. However, rather than pursuing an “event” history or an analysis of various institutions, this research will attempt to unravel the textures of everyday service and ex-service life. For instance, I consulted archival sources not only for evidence of policy-

¹²⁴ John Comaroff, “Dialectical Systems, History and Anthropology: Units of Study and Questions of Theory,” Journal of Southern African Studies, 8 (1982): 143 ff.

¹²⁵ John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1992).

¹²⁶ Cited in Comaroff and Comaroff, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination, 11.

making and institution-building, but also for evidence of cultural production and reproduction. This latter strategy will illuminate, *inter alia*, dominant and contested constructions of race, class, citizenship and gender, as well as the ways in which the war and wartime experiences were presented as a text to ordinary white South Africans. In this regard, I have found pamphlet literature and other material intended for consumption by white volunteers to be a particularly useful source.

Personal narratives are central to the aims and methodologies of the thesis.

In addition to semi-structured interviews with 36 white ex-servicemen, conducted over a ten year period, I relied upon participant-observation to elucidate social meanings and cultural values. Throughout the duration of this project, I was able to gain access to, and spend time with, various networks of white ex-servicemen (and to a lesser extent, white ex-servicewomen) largely through my father, himself a veteran, and his ties to the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTH), a veterans' organisation.

For some, the reliance on personal narratives raises questions about the representivity of my sample. A number of my South African colleagues, in particular, have frequently expressed skepticism about the extent to which generalisations may validly be drawn from a limited number of interviews. My response to this concern has taken two avenues. On the one hand, it is important to note that my informants were drawn from a range of localities, regiments, MOTH shellholes, generations and social backgrounds. In this regard, my sample was by no means homogeneous. On the other hand, and more importantly, the task of the historian (or the ethnographer for that matter) is to take

particular experiences, facts, narratives, images, events and so forth, and elucidate their more general meanings. As the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss so poignantly observes in his classic Structural Anthropology:

All that the historian or ethnographer can do, and all that we can expect of them, is to *enlarge a specific experience to the dimensions of a more general one*.¹²⁷ [author's emphasis]

Thus, while the present study cannot imaginatively or empirically "capture" the full reality of the white (ex-) service experience, the thesis can draw upon white veterans' experience to speak *about* this history. To this end, the veterans whom I interviewed led me to social and cultural networks along which lines of opinion moved and congealed.

The theoretical and methodological requirements of "history in the ethnographic grain" call for us to ground subjective, culturally configured action in society and history - and *vice versa*.¹²⁸ This dialectic, more than any other, constitutes the increasingly shared narrative space of ethnography and social and cultural history; and it applies equally to the grounding of discourse, language and direct speech. In other words, in contrast to Crapanzano's handling of his "Wyndal" informants' testimonies, this thesis does not take white ex-servicemen's stories at face value. For many of my informants, race and white racism provided a grammar to explain and describe and even contest their social world as well as their place within it. This particular discourse, in turn, can be called upon to illuminate social processes more generally, provided that its elements and underlying

¹²⁷Ibid.

¹²⁸Comaroff and Comaroff, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination, 11.

relations are taken as historically and culturally specific. As Paul Gilroy has cautioned, race cannot be abstracted from other social relations, or reduced to an “effect” of these relations.¹²⁹ In anchoring race to its social and historical context, this thesis is able to illuminate some of the ways in which white South Africa volunteers - and ordinary white South Africans more generally - were bound in (and to) the shaping and re-shaping of racist culture during and after the Second World War.

The shape of things to come

In chapter two, whiteness is positioned at the very core of this analysis. White servicemen were products of the 1930s, and the next chapter of the thesis examines the social context out of which they emerged. The secondary literature on this period of South African history is characterised by studies of white poverty, white political protest and the political re-organisation engendered by Coalition and Fusion. From the standpoint of racist culture, this literature provides a useful window on the reproduction of white social, cultural, economic and political dominance.

Chapter two will show how, in the context of proletarianisation from the early part of the twentieth century, newly urbanised whites were threatened by *verkaffering*. A variety of politically unstable “little” traditions of white men’s protest emerged on the margins of the capitalist political economy. Collectively, such traditions demanded full economic rights

¹²⁹Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 14.

for white men. The condition of white poverty also evoked a series of responses from clergymen, politicians and the state, all expressing concern with the ways in which the white poor blurred the boundaries of racialised South African society.

A range of localised social and political battles erupted between poorer whites and the authorities over strategies to "rescue" such whites. While impoverished whites themselves appealed for a variety of petty entrepreneurial opportunities, politicians, state functionaries and their intellectual allies favoured a programme of enforced modernisation supported by rigid discipline. Accelerating poverty and social crises through the 1920s swung the balance in favour of the state, and by the advent of Coalition and Fusion in the early 1930s, most - but not all - white little traditions were incorporated politically into the bourgeois colonial order. Their incorporation represented a new social contract, still brokered around the hegemony of whiteness.

When the call to arms came in 1939, it was mainly men of the (by now incorporated) little traditions who responded - often the sons of those who had suffered the worst effects of poverty and the sometimes brutal effects of incorporation. The act of volunteering added layers of duty and entitlement to the social contract of whiteness - partly negotiated, partly imposed - experienced by them or their fathers. Some men from more resilient little traditions - diggers on the banks of the Vaal river, for example - volunteered out of sheer poverty. For them, volunteering marked their moment of their incorporation into the political order represented by Coalition and Fusion.

Whatever reasons troops gave for volunteering, their decision to enlist was underscored by an awareness that volunteering entailed a set of rights and duties. The act of enlisting embodied their duty as white citizens. Their rights were associated with expectations of post-war "social justice." Chapter three will examine some of the ways in which, during wartime, white troops expanded their understanding of social justice in highly idealised and implicitly racialised ways.

While servicemen demonstrated great affection and respect for General Smuts, the *Oubaas*, they were suspicious of military and civilian bureaucrats - perhaps a remnant of their experience or memory of coercion and discipline at the hands of state officials. To this end, many servicemen joined the Springbok Legion, a type of trade union of the ranks and itself a nascent little tradition, to win a "square deal" for white veterans after the war.

As the war drew to a close, a sense of suspicion set in amongst white servicemen that the UP government was insensitive to their concerns, and unable to maintain its end of the social contract of whiteness. At the same time, servicemen began to abandon the Springbok Legion. More than anything else, returned troops' hopes for social justice were concentrated around obtaining the sort of jobs that would permit them to enjoy their status as returned heroes and white men. However, as a servicemen's trade union, the Legion had virtually no bargaining power in the civilian job market. Although the Legion did provide aid and assistance to veterans on an individual basis - including finding jobs for some - its power as a pressure group was drawn, and its membership fell as troops

were demobilised.

In chapter four, the thesis tracks white ex-servicemen's disillusionment as they were demobilised from the Union Defence Force. As they battled to adapt to the rigours of civilian life, veterans were beset by what many of my informants described as "restlessness." The thesis argues that restlessness and disillusion embodied a set of racialised anxieties around access to jobs and housing, which were, for most troops, the major aspects of post-war social justice. The requirements of wartime industrial expansion and production effected changes to the technical, gender and racial composition of the industrial workforce. The great majority of returning white servicemen were underskilled and ill-equipped to secure "white" jobs. There was also a shortage of housing - especially cheaper, rented accommodation - in urban areas, which threatened white ex-servicemen's ability to reproduce "white" homes.

Thus, for the majority of white veterans, post-war social justice was premised on rigid lines of racial demarcation in the workplace, as well as more effective measures of urban segregation. In short, social justice required that the boundaries of the racial order be re-drawn with greater definition. However in the early post-war years the United Party (UP), tentatively and timidly engaging with "liberalism," was politically unable to ensure the conditions for the reproduction of racist culture in ways that would meet the expectations of white veterans. On the other hand, the National Party (NP) promised exactly the sort of racial order which underscored the material side of ex-servicemen's hopes for social justice. Nonetheless, while disillusioned with the UP, it appears that

veterans did not as a category shift their allegiance to the NP in the watershed 1948 general election. Despite the appeal of its racial politics, the NP was yet too closely associated with fascism and Nazism, which veterans had pledged to fight on the battlefield and the home front. Veterans' disappointment with the UP and their dislike of the NP marked the beginning of a sense of disenchantment with a party political culture which had - in one way or another - failed to acknowledge the importance of their wartime service.

The War Veterans' Torch Commando, an ex-servicemen's movement which appeared in 1951, provides the focus for chapter five. Ostensibly, the aim of the Torch was to protest against the government's "rape of the constitution" when it tried to remove coloured voters from the common voters' roll. As an organisation, the Torch carefully nurtured the myth that it was a spontaneous outburst of ex-service indignation at the NP government's disregard for the rule of law. However, as the thesis suggests, the Torch's appearance on the political scene was a more calculated affair.

In spite of its contrived origins, white veterans took to the Torch with great enthusiasm. The exclusion of coloured veterans from the Torch, along with the way it shifted its attention away from the "rape of the constitution" towards returning the UP to power in 1953, suggest that for rank-and-file members, the Torch was more about their place in the racial order than about the moral rights of coloured voters. By 1953, most white servicemen were integrated into civilian life, and were, as one veteran put it, "getting ahead." However as the NP set about consolidating its hold on state and society, it

discriminated against war veterans and the memory of war service in all sorts of petty ways. A number of popular wartime military commanders, for example, were removed from their posts. There was also a perception amongst white veterans that advancement in the civil service was closed to those who had volunteered. From this perspective, the Torch represented a challenge to the ways in which the NP was allocating the privileges of whiteness to the Party faithful - although there is little evidence to indicate that veterans were opposed to the ways in which the NP drew the parameters of race in society more generally. The NP thus diminished the importance of white veterans' war service, and violated the particular contract of whiteness they had struck with the previous regime when they volunteered.

The Torch Commando failed to oust the NP in the 1953 general election. The Torch was also the last occasion when white veterans asserted their collective identity as a category in the party political arena. Although their visceral dislike of the NP remained, white ex-servicemen increasingly profited from the benefits of whiteness as they were allocated by the NP government. Subsequently, white veterans evoked their service identity through veterans' organisations like the MOTH, which also helped them to establish networks that could aid them materially.

After the German army attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, a group of white South African communists hastened to enlist in the UDF. Many gravitated towards leadership positions in the Springbok Legion. Their hopes for post-war social justice were pinned on a vigorous working class movement and ultimately, a non-racial and classless

society. In a climate of wartime optimism, this cohort held out the belief that, through the Springbok Legion, they could educate white troops in a more “progressive” direction. After the war, however, the Springbok Legion lost its mass base, not only as a result of its impotence as a soldiers’ trade union in civilian life, but also due to the dramatically divergent notions of social justice that pertained between the rank-and-file and the Legion’s radical leaders.

Caught in the liberal dilemma of the day, the radical core who remained in the Legion supported the UP in the 1948 general election. Chapter six explores their role in elaborating a strand of radical egalitarianism in the early apartheid period. The advent of NP rule demanded that the Legion, by then a small core of radical ex-servicemen and women, re-evaluate its political orientation. Some believed that the Legion should persist with its endeavours to mobilise white veterans and convince them of the value of non-racial political organisation in the fight against “home front fascism.” Others, more aware of the extent to which most white veterans’ identity was wedded to race, advocated that the Legion should seek alliance with the black movements for national liberation, for example the African National Congress (ANC). However, between 1948 and 1950, the Africanist faction of the ANC was extremely suspicious of overtures from radical white veterans in the Legion, on account of both their whiteness and their adherence to the “foreign” ideology of communism.

Conditions of growing state repression in the early 1950s brought *rapprochement* between the Legion, the ANC and its Congress allies. During the course of the decade, a handful of radical white veterans from the Legion played a disproportionately significant

role in the Congress movement's accelerating tempo of anti-apartheid resistance.

Chapter six ends with a challenge to the orthodoxy of liberation historiography, as the thesis teases out the role of white veterans in the strategic and tactical steps taken by the Congress movement on the path to armed resistance.

By way of conclusion, the thesis interrogates the extent to which we can talk of white ex-service "exceptionalism," or whether the history of white veterans is in fact emblematic of broader trends in the reorganisation of racist culture in South Africa after the Second World War. The conclusion argues that, in addition to social integration measures aimed particularly at veterans, the privileges of whiteness, operating on a broader social spectrum, prevented the emergence of a distinctive movement of white ex-service discontent or protest. Nevertheless, white veterans' heightened sense of social expectation brings into sharp relief the concerns of working class white men in post-war South Africa more generally. At least in a material sense, it is therefore difficult to talk in terms of white ex-service "exceptionalism."

However, to conclude the argument at this point would leave us with a flattened and over determined understanding of veterans' social and cultural history, and also deny the importance of their war service. On an empirical level, the experience of wartime service was a highly significant component of veterans' identity. Unable to exercise much influence in the party political arena, the majority of white veterans retreated to the MOTH order. Although emphatically distant from party politics, the MOTH helped to mediate white veterans' relationship with the broader, racialised, social order. As such,

the MOTH represented a series of political responses - albeit more "cultural" in form - to a party political culture that failed to acknowledge the "special" status of white veterans.

Finally, the thesis contrasts the history of the majority of white veterans, with the few who remained in the Legion and ultimately participated in the Congress movement's struggle against apartheid. It suggests that, while the political and cultural burden of race was heavy on white volunteers, the logic of social justice and "anti-fascism" in a colonial society did not necessarily feed into the praxis of racist culture.

CHAPTER TWO

WHITE VOLUNTEERS: POPULISM, POPULAR POLITICS AND THE RACE QUESTION TO THE 1930s

The outbreak of war

During the 1920s and 1930s, a climate of pacificism, which Samuel Hynes calls the “long hangover,”¹ took root amongst the war weary victors of the Great War. Nowhere did this sentiment find plainer expression than in a motion passed by the Oxford Union in 1933: “That this house would not fight for its King and Country.”² The students’ bluff pacificism found its foreign policy expression in Anglo-French appeasement.³ Although the League of Nations was founded during the inter-war years to tackle international tensions, the “long hangover” was accompanied by an overarching concern with domestic issues in post-Versailles Europe.⁴ Such concerns with domestic politics took root not only in those European nations most horribly ravaged by the Great War, but also in the more distant reaches of Europe’s empire. In South Africa, attentions were concentrated on South Africa’s sovereign status, white poverty and unemployment and,

¹Samuel Hynes, The Soldier’s Tale: Bearing Witness To Modern War, (London: Pimlico, 1998, 108-109.

²Peter Young, World War Two, (London: Hamlyn, 1980), 14.

³R.O. Paxton, Europe in the 20th Century, (Orlando: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1985, 2nd edition), 427-430.

⁴*Ibid.*, 223-245.

could only "agree to differ" on the vexatious question of South African participation in an "imperial war."⁷ When the war broke out in Europe, the Union parliament, normally in recess during the second half of the year, had been summoned fortuitously for a special session to extend the term of the Senate, which was due to expire on 5 September 1939. A fissure emerged in the UP, as one bloc represented by Hertzog favoured partial neutrality, while those who lined up behind Deputy Prime Minister Smuts believed that South Africa ought to declare its intentions in favour of the Allied cause. A weekend of caucusing and intrigue ensued, after which the war issue was put to the vote. Smuts' motion proposing a declaration of war narrowly won the day. Prime Minister Hertzog approached the Governor-General Sir Patrick Duncan with a request, declined, for a special general election. Instead, Duncan summoned Smuts, who formed a government from what remained of the UP along with the support of the Labour and Dominion Parties. On Wednesday 6 September 1939, South Africa declared war on Germany.⁸

To war: Big Words and little stories

There were, of course, a multiplicity of narratives designed to explain the political and

⁷Newell M. Stultz, The Nationalists in Opposition, 1934 - 1948, (Cape Town and Pretoria: Human & Rousseau, 1974), 60. The UP was formed in the face of economic and political crises, and the principles of agreement between Smuts and Hertzog were extremely vague. See Dan O'Meara, Volkskapitalisme. Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1934-1948, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983), 44-45.

⁸Lesley A. Reeves, "The War Issue and the Demise of the Fusion Government in 1939" (Master of Arts dissertation, University of Natal, Durban, 1984), 97-184.

moral objectives of the Allied war effort. For those at the hub of imperial power, these markers were fairly unambiguous. In a speech on 2 September 1939, shortly after German rejection of the Anglo-French ultimatum to withdraw from Poland, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced that "this country is at war with Germany. . .it is evil things we shall be fighting against - brute force, bad faith, injustice, oppression and persecution."⁹ On the occasion of his 1939 Christmas broadcast to the Commonwealth, King George V appropriated God for the Allied cause. In a poetic, if not entirely original vein, he declared :

Go out into the darkness
And put your hand into the hand of God.
That shall be to you better than a light
And safer than a known way.¹⁰

In June 1940, after the fall of France, the new British Prime Minister Churchill summoned the leitmotifs of progress and reason when he extolled: "If we fail, the whole world. . . will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age, made more sinister and perhaps more protracted by the lights of perverted science."¹¹

With a little less of Churchill's thundering rhetoric, Jan Smuts - philosopher, scientist and one-time president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science¹² - directed

⁹Cited in Margot Bryant, As We Were. South Africa 1939-1945, (Johannesburg: Keartland Publishers, 1974), 6.

¹⁰Ibid., 23.

¹¹Ibid., 26.

¹²Kate Fletcher, "'The Culture of the Personality': Jan Smuts, Philosophy and Education," South African Historical Journal, 34 (May 1996): 107.

his argument for South African participation to the ethical and moral problems associated with Germany upsetting the post-Versailles world order.¹³ Ultimately, neither this panoramic view, nor the assumptions upon which it rested carried much appeal for South African voters, and both problems would come back to haunt Smuts. Addressing the House of Assembly in September 1939, Smuts warned that “German [foreign] policy is not a mere affair of Danzig and the Corridor, but is part and parcel of this whole course on which Germany has set out to dominate the world by force.”¹⁴

Smuts was acutely aware that participation in “Britain’s war” would open up deep divisions amongst South Africans. Black opinion, for example, ranged from outright opposition to lukewarm support.¹⁵ However, the hostility issuing from sections of white Afrikanerdom posed a far more significant political (and military) threat to Smuts. The magnitude of discord generated by South Africa’s declaration of war was evident when a crowd of 70,000 white Afrikaners attended an anti-war rally organised by the *Herenigde* (Re-united) National Party at Monumentkoppie near Pretoria.¹⁶ Sensitive to the polemic and political limits of his Appeal to Moral Force, Smuts thus decided against

¹³Reeves, “The War Issue,” 166-168.

¹⁴Hansard vol.36, cols. 26-28. Cited in Reeves, 168.

¹⁵The Non-European unity Front was initially opposed to the war, but after 1941, made its support conditional upon the extension of democratic rights to all South Africans. The ANC supported the war effort, despite misgivings about the non-combatant role accorded to blacks. See John Pampallis, Foundations of the New South Africa, (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1991), 155-160.

¹⁶Dougie Oakes, ed, Illustrated History Of South Africa, (New York: The Reader’s Digest Association, 1988), 348.

conscription, and chose instead to rely on volunteers to fill the ranks of the Union Defence Force (UDF).

Such sentiments as those articulated by Churchill and Smuts, which emphasised the Right and the Good of the fight against Hitler, both encapsulated the popular outrage that the war elicited in most Allied countries, and inflamed anti-German bellicosity. However, official meta-objectives of this order, framed in the language of geopolitics and international ethics, existed only at the most abstract level and carried little legitimacy amongst those ex-servicemen interviewed for this study as they reflected on their decision to volunteer. Other studies support this view. Samuel Hynes, an American professor of literary studies and himself a veteran of the Second World War, suggests that international morality, along with "Honor and Glory and Heroism," represented the Big Words of war - full of high idealism and patriotism, and remote from the expectations and experiences of the civilian soldiers who fought in the Second World War.¹⁷

While Big Words peppered newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, recruiting posters and politician's speeches, they did not necessarily explain why civilians volunteered for armed service. In the research conducted for this thesis, not one veteran interviewed, nor any veteran autobiography consulted, acknowledged the role of any of the Big Words in his own personal journey to war. Writing in 1991, James Ambrose Brown, a South African infantryman in the 8th Army in North Africa, reflected with some wonder

¹⁷Hynes, The Soldier's Tale, 40; 44.

that he and his comrades enlisted on a wave of naivete and lightheartedness, "without the vaguest inkling"¹⁸ about the significance of either the war or their decision to volunteer. Michael de Lisle's memories of volunteering for the Second Anti-Aircraft Brigade - mustered in Cape Town and then captured at Tobruk in 1942 - are filled with a mood of schoolboy adventure. In the regiment, he wrote, "we found ourselves among friends from school and university," and "everyone was young and eager for war service against Hitler and the Nazi aggressors."¹⁹ Author Doris Lessing, who lived in Rhodesia at the outbreak of hostilities, observed that "every young man in the country. . . thought only of how to get into the army."²⁰ Her husband Frank's attempts to volunteer were unsuccessful, and Lessing suspects that, for him, acceptance as a soldier represented a trope of masculinity and youth and vitality. She sketches his distress at not being able to enlist with particular poignancy:

War loves twenty year olds. Frank was thirty and had bad feet. . . The town seemed full of bitter men, knowing that life was passing them by, because the army would not have them. Frank was miserable. This was when he really knew that his youth was over: only the 'old' men would be left in town. . . The men who had been rejected spent time together, drinking: they needed to be understood.²¹

Willie Grobler, an infantryman with the Natal Mounted Rifles, joined because he "didn't

¹⁸James Ambrose Brown, Retreat To Victory. A Springbok's Diary In North Africa: Gazala To El Alamein 1942, (Johannesburg: Ashanti, 1991), xiii; 1.

¹⁹Michael De Lisle, Over The Hills And Far Away: My Twenties In The Forties, (Cape Town: by the author, 1999), 2-3.

²⁰Doris Lessing, Under My Skin. Volume One Of My Autobiography. To 1949, (London: Flamingo, 1994), 209.

²¹Ibid., 227.

want to be left behind”; recounting his decision to enlist nearly sixty years after the fact, he was scornful of the Big Words of War, emphatic that his reasons for volunteering had nothing to do with “king and country and all that shit.”²² Similarly, while P. Levings did feel “bound to join,” he maintained that his decision was “not patriotic.”²³

As this thesis will argue, while Levings’ notion of duty might not have been patriotic in the overtly “political” and nationalistic sense, it derived from and underscored his status as a white South African man. White South African veterans largely avoided the “reality” of their own pre-enlistment material conditions or the appeal of “political” ideologies when reflecting on the act of volunteering. That the veterans interviewed for the purposes of this research tended to by-pass the Big Words of War as well as more pecuniary reasons for enlisting is not without salience, nor is this phenomenon unique to South African volunteers. In his study of war narratives by twentieth century veterans, Hynes observes that decisions to enlist tend to confound myths of idealism and patriotism. According to Hynes, veterans’ narratives are generally characterised by a similarly vague, almost banal, quality. For instance, in reflecting on his decision to volunteer during the Great War, poet Robert Graves wrote:

I was at Harlegh when the war was declared. I decided to enlist a day or two later. . . though only a short war was expected-two or three months at the very outside - I thought it might last just long enough to delay my going to Oxford in

²²Willie Grobler, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 3 June, 1997.

²³P. Levings, interview by author, transcript, Johannesburg, 16 July, 1997.

October, which I dreaded.²⁴

Other British soldiers volunteered “because there was a war,” or “because it was there.”²⁵

My informants’ narratives are no different. But what is significant for the purposes of this thesis is not so much the personal, individual reasons for joining - although such “little stories” are certainly important markers of individual experience and identity. The significance lies rather in the fact that so many veterans, from different times and places, tend to explain their actions in similarly imprecise terms. Combined, these little stories provide an alternative to Big Words, for understanding what motivated white South African men to serve in a foreign war.

To understand why white South African men joined, and to do justice to their stories, we need to look behind volunteers’ own explanations. While for some, the Big Words did have some resonance, their more intimate stories about joining are embedded in a set of material, cultural and ideological conditions, as well as in everyday practices of social and cultural reproduction. To avoid the substance of these conditions, which brought men to the actual point of volunteering, would confine us to a naive empiricism and an explanatory dead-end that ultimately trivialises the stories that the men tell. Rather, this thesis will propose a reading of the politics of volunteering amongst disparate groups of

²⁴Hynes, The Soldier’s Tale, 45.

²⁵Ibid., 45-46.

white men from the perspective of critical post-colonial race theory, which does not rely exclusively on either Big Words or little stories. Such a reading, which takes as its central focus the production and reproduction of white racist culture, will move the present study beyond shallow description to a deeper analytic level, wherein the explicitly colonial background of all white South African volunteers will feature prominently.

In South Africa's colonial order, whites were outnumbered, yet they dominated the political and economic environments. This arrangement nurtured a set of racialised and highly gendered ideals amongst whites. Although the advent of Union in 1910 ended colonialism in South Africa in the conventional, imperial sense, the benefits which issued from the Act of Union were largely limited to white male voters. According to Harold Wolpe, the legal framework of segregation and apartheid, and the social relations that this framework sustained, constituted a system of internal colonialism whereby whites were the colonisers, and blacks the colonial subjects.²⁶ The broader dialectics of the colonial project, which turned on evolving matrices of race, constitute a meta-narrative that undergirds both the Big Words of War and the little stories told by the white ex-servicemen themselves. As the matrices of racist culture changed, this process helped to transform notions of whiteness, masculinity, progress, honour and citizenship. White South African soldiers were also products of their times. To further understand why they volunteered, and also to unpack their later history, we need to examine the

²⁶Harold Wolpe, "The Theory of Internal Colonialism - The South African Case," Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists, (Autumn 1974).

material conditions, social trends and ideology as well as some of the concerns and constraints that ordered the lives of ordinary white men in the decade preceding the outbreak of war. In particular, we need to acknowledge the social traumas of poverty for white men in a colonial society.

The traumatic experience of poverty is pre-figured in both the liberal and Afrikaner nationalist literature. However, the conceptual lens afforded by race theory suggests a need to re-interpret poor white men's responses to extreme poverty, differently to the ways in which they are conventionally presented in these literatures. Impoverished white men did not seek to defy the advance of capitalist relations - at least not in the 1920s and 1930s. Rather, they used their racial knowledge to mediate their place within the urban political economy. This chapter constitutes an exploration of the secondary literature dealing with whites in South Africa up to the late 1930s, from the perspective of critical race theory. The aim is to identify themes in the historiography which, despite the disjuncture of World War, provide continuity between the Depression and post-Depression world of white South African men.

Race and the colonial contract

In his recent study of Afrikaner political mobilisation on the western highveld, Tim Clynick - one of those scholars who helped to chart the Wits History Workshop's theoretical thrust in the 1980s - elucidates an alternative model for the study of white political culture. Clynick asserts that it is through a radical, empirical social history that

concentrates on popular culture that we can most effectively trace the “voice of the people” and the “contours of popular Afrikaner ideology and consciousness,” and thus “rescue rural political culture from the blender of nationalistic and class analysis.”²⁷

Clynick observes that despite rapid and irreversible white rural impoverishment in the 1920s, proletarian class consciousness amongst whites failed to accrete around proletarian class issues. Rather, on the *platteland*, the reality of poor whiteism translated to political and social demands for the restoration of a *boerestand*²⁸—roughly translated, that set of early capitalist social relations dominated by white Afrikaner farmers which had pertained in the South African Republic. Clynick goes on to argue that, faced by a social order which was increasingly class-based, *boere* clung to a “vital egalitarian and radical democratic essence that they associated with the republican tradition.”²⁹ *Boer* republicanism, along with other modes of white rural identity during the 1930s, can best be understood through the lens of popular culture. For Clynick, this constitutes a rich blend of class and non-class ideologies - similar to Gramsci’s understanding of the “popular” aspects of ideology.

Clynick elaborates and qualifies his notion of ideology, and demonstrates how particular ideologies are peddled and contested beyond the group whose interests they ultimately

²⁷Tim Clynick, “Afrikaner Political Mobilization in the Western Transvaal: Popular Consciousness and the State, 1920-1930,” (D.Phil. thesis, Queen’s University, 1996), 37.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 16.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 34.

serve. However he, like Bozzoli, does not go beyond ideology as an agentive / conscious form of power. In South Africa, as in other colonial societies, a range of hegemonic discourses collectively legitimated white power. If we accept that power is expressed not only in ideology and ideological transformation, but also in modes of hegemony, a major part of the analytic task is then to identify such expressions and examine their role in the exercise and reproduction of power. At the same time though, we need to explain the material conditions which historically gave rise to, and modified such discourses and ensured that in the struggle for hegemony, some dominated others.

Thus, while I agree entirely with Clynick's appeal for the need to study popular politics, I propose to use a different set of analytic tools to explore this space. I will argue therefore that the re-invention, reproduction and refinement of a set of discourses about race - which were part of a potent racist culture already firmly in place - were a major and underlying theme in white politics and society for the period covered by this chapter and beyond. Racist culture is an especially useful concept to think with, as it goes beyond and behind an elucidation of conscious ideology, and is free from some of the constraints of class determinism. Racist culture, then, defines the whole colonial order.

White volunteers were, without exception, children of the Great Depression. Although not all were reduced to the straits of poverty later described by the Carnegie Commission, every white serviceman's household suffered hardship, or at least some sort of economic reverse during the Depression. Poverty was a powerful motif in the memory of all those individuals interviewed for this thesis. In South Africa's colonial

order, white fears that poverty was a harbinger of *verkaffering* cannot be overestimated. I will argue that it was the racial anxieties fuelled by poverty, more than anything else, which determined the shape of social, economic, political and cultural debate and action amongst whites throughout the decade of the 1930s. In particular, these social anxieties contributed to strident popular white demands for the state to secure the economic status of white men in an industrial society. These dynamic concerns about race occasioned the emergence of a new language and grammar of formal party politics. From this vantage point, the ideological struggles that dominated the party political landscape in the 1930s - whether employing the rhetoric of class or nationalism or republicanism or South Africa First or the imperial connection - all manifested a fierce national debate on how best to define the character of whiteness, and how to interpret and distribute white privilege. The dual pressures of poverty and *verkaffering* also set the outer limits to political debate amongst whites.

Poor whites, the Great Depression and the politics of race

Both the Carnegie Commission and a number of contemporary commentators were alert to the spiritual and social weight of poor whiteism, as well as to the political implications raised by white poverty. Most especially, they were concerned that, in the absence of support from the "more privileged European," the white poor might associate with "non-Europeans" and so blur the lines of race.³⁰

³⁰J.R. Albertyn, *The Poor White and Society*, (Stellenbosch: n.p., 1932), 106. See also A. Coetzee, *Die Opkoms van die Afrikaanse Kultuurgedagte aan die Rand, 1886-*

Noticeably, later accounts of poor whiteism lack the acuity of earlier versions. A common shortcoming is their failure to interrogate adequately the implications of white poverty for the colonial order as a whole, especially in the years around the Depression. John Bottomley, for example, conducted a deep empirical study of poor whiteism, and managed to apply considerable empathy and sensitivity to his task.³¹ However, in his quest for the cohesive force of some organic ethnic identity, Bottomley is blinded to the shifting character of white poverty, and to the social, cultural, economic and political choices that these changing conditions entailed. Others, such as Dan O'Meara, tried to locate poor whiteism within the matrix of capitalist relations. For O'Meara, the major significance of poor whiteism is that it heralded a crisis of accumulation.³² The relationship between white poverty and segregation is therefore re-stated as a matter of social necessity. Segregation did, of course, provide massive advantage to whites as they battled their way out of the lumpenproletariat and the lower reaches of the working class. And, as O'Meara and others have demonstrated, the pressures issuing from poor whites themselves helped to determine the content of segregationist practices in South Africa at particular historical junctures.

1936, (Johannesburg: n.p., 1937; Cape Town: n.p., 1938); Die Stadwaartse Trek van die Afrikanernasie, (Johannesburg: Federale Armsorgraad van die Gefedereede NGK, 1947); G.D. Scholtz, Het die Afrikaanse Volk 'n Toekoms, (Johannesburg: Voortrekkerpers, 1954).

³¹John Bottomley, "Public Policy and White Rural Poverty in South Africa, 1881-1924," (D.Phil thesis, Queen's University, 1990).

³²Dan O'Meara, Volkskapitalisme: Class, capital and ideology in the development of Afrikaner nationalism, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983), 54-55.

However, we should not take too many shortcuts in connecting the lines between poor whiteism and the consolidation of white control of the social order. Over an extended period the state did respond to white poverty with a set of racist policies and legislation. This begs a number of questions: Why did poor whiteism emerge as a problem when it did? Were popular anxieties and state intervention about something more than the material well-being of the white poor - who happened to be enfranchised? If they did represent concerns more complex than the provision of politically expedient poverty relief measures, then what were these concerns? This thesis suggests that processes of proletarianisation, urbanisation and impoverishment, all of which were exacerbated by the Depression, fuelled a conflagration of racial fears. We need then to ask how such fears featured in the collective memory of poorer white families - the families in which many of those who later volunteered to serve, grew up.

Significantly, poor whiteism has consistently attracted attention from white academics, although much of this literature suffers from conceptual shortcomings of the sort outlined above.³³ As Bundy reminds us, the social prism through which we view white poverty changes. He has shown that, despite the presence of a large stratum of poor and proletarianised whites in the Cape from the 1860s, poor whiteism was only "discovered" as a problem in the 1890s. The term "poor white" is therefore meaningless outside of a

³³See, for example, Rob Morrell, ed, White But Poor: Essays on the History of Poor Whites in Southern Africa, (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1992).

specific political and material context.³⁴ For Clynick, the stereotypes about poor whites that are bandied about do violence to the complex and multi-faceted social experience of impoverishment, and its impact on social behaviour.³⁵ In his case study, Clynick elucidates a range of local responses to poverty. He shows how, for example, in the face of rapid and irreversible rural impoverishment during the 1920s, *boere* on the western highveld used the language of radical republicanism to re-invigorate the ideal of a *boerestand* - an ideal which connoted a rural order where all *boere* were equal.

From the early 1860s, whites began to be dispossessed of their land, particularly in the Cape and Transvaal. This dispossession resulted largely from sudden cycles of poverty deriving from the concentration and commercialisation of farming. White farmers - both landowners and *bywoners* - resisted wage labour as long as possible, eking out a living through activities like selling firewood, providing transport and gardening. Those whites who were compelled into wage labour managed a lifestyle similar to that of African wage labourers. In the late 1870s, for example, a visitor to a wealthy farm near Middelburg in the Cape noted: "All the servants, black as well as white, are provided with little square built rooms which are furnished with table, chair, box, etc, grouped together like a small hamlet."³⁶ The social proximity between black and white labourers did not seem to

³⁴Colin Bundy, "Vagabond Hollanders and Runaway Englishmen: White Poverty in the Cape Before Poor Whiteism" in William Beinart, Peter Delius and Stanley Trapido, eds, Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa, 1850-1930, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1986), 120.

³⁵Clynick, "Afrikaner Political Mobilization," 9.

³⁶Cited in Oakes, Illustrated History of South Africa, 329.

trouble this visitor, who was more taken by the picture of agrarian modernity presented by the farm. However as racial integration began to emerge as an urban phenomenon, it attracted attention and concern from contemporary commentators. In Grahamstown, for example, someone wrote that "miscellaneous herds of whites and blacks lived together in the most promiscuous manner imaginable"; and in 1893, a labour commission in the Cape reported that whites were increasingly "mixing with coloureds, marrying coloured women and assimilating more to the black race."³⁷

Similar processes of dispossession took place in the Boer republics, where war and natural disaster left many whites destitute. David Oakes *et al* capture something of the relentless downward social mobility imposed on whites by proletarianisation:

. . . despondent farmers, who had never learnt a trade, were forced off the land to drift towards the towns to join the ranks of the unemployed or, if they were lucky, the unskilled workers.³⁸

Thus, historian C.W. de Kiewiet commented that, by the turn of the century, white society had developed within itself some "disturbing inequalities":

At the base of white society had gathered, like a sediment a race of men so abject in their poverty, so wanting in their resourcefulness, that they stood dangerously close to the natives themselves. . . If the economic historian could adopt the classification of the botanist or the biologist, he would say that poor blacks and poor whites belonged to the same

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 331.

species.³⁹

From around the 1890s, as communities of poor whites began to collect around Vrededorp in Johannesburg and so became more visible, the townward migration of whites became a matter of public fear and debate in the Transvaal.⁴⁰ Even such early examples of impoverished whites congregating in the towns excited official concern, as a Commission of the *Volksraad* moved that it would be better "if they [poor whites] moved back to the land in order to obtain a better means of livelihood and where their children are not exposed to the many temptations of the town."⁴¹ Official discomfort with a mass of dislocated whites in the town would be a recurring refrain in discourses about white poverty and the "rescue" of poor whites.

In 1932, the Carnegie Commission reported that 90% of the 300,000 whites found to be "very poor" were Afrikaans-speakers.⁴² J.S. Albertyn, an Afrikaner academic, wrote about those poor Afrikaners who found their way into the towns and cities. He argued that Afrikaner urbanisation was unique in a number of respects: it was rapid; it represented a "world of upheaval"; and it was followed closely by a process of African

³⁹C.W. De Kiewiet, A History Of South Africa Social & Economic, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), 181-182.

⁴⁰David Welsh, "The Growth Of Towns," in Wilson and Thompson, Oxford History Of South Africa, Vol.2, 176.

⁴¹Cited in Welsh, "The Growth Of Towns," 176.

⁴²*Ibid.*

urbanisation.⁴³ The character of Afrikaner urbanisation was self-evidently alarming to people of Albertyn's social background. However, the most striking feature of Afrikaner urbanisation was perhaps the way in which the passage from rural dispossession to urban poverty was invested with a grim sense of inevitability by contemporary Afrikaner cultural and racial sensitivities. De Kiewiet, for example, described the structural and cultural dilemma that inhibited white Afrikaner success in adapting to the urban political economy. While Afrikaners took it for granted that they were entitled to the material and social privileges of whiteness, they were unable to meet the cash needs which a "white" lifestyle in the towns presupposed:

By their race the poor whites belonged to the upper ranks. Their standard of living and industrial efficiency were at odds with one another, for the wage warranted by their standard of living was higher than the wage warranted by their lack of skill. They had therefore little bargaining advantage.⁴⁴

Thus, Afrikaner migrants had neither the economic nor the cultural capital needed to get ahead in the urban capitalist economy. Historian David Welsh writes that white Afrikaner immigrants to the towns had difficulty in adapting themselves to urban life because they were unskilled workers. Under the system of apprenticeship then in force in South Africa, a skilled trade could only be learnt by going through indenture begun at an early age. First generation white Afrikaner urban migrants thus remained as unskilled workers.⁴⁵ Commenting on the migration of poor whites to Cape Town in the

⁴³Albertyn, The Poor White and Society, Introduction.

⁴⁴ De Kiewiet, A History Of South Africa, 221.

⁴⁵Welsh, "The Growth Of Towns," 206.

years preceding the Second World War, contemporary observer S. Pauw captured something of the pattern and pathos of white Afrikaner proletarianisation. His observations have wider application:

Most of them were too old to make a promising start in urban professions. They spent their youth on the *platteland* in fruitless efforts to begin a career. There was no help, no vocational or technical training; they had to try and fight their way in an environment where there was no future for people like them.⁴⁶

Only unskilled jobs were available to Afrikaners lacking in industrial skills. African labour was cheaper to employ and politically, was more docile. Moreover, for the white poor, unskilled work was synonymous with “kaffir work”:

Their race was their title of superiority over the natives, and to do manual labour conflicted with the dignity conferred upon them by their race. To be hirelings was bad enough. To have to do work commonly done by natives was offensive. Such an aversion degenerated in those who were most demoralized, into a claim to charity as a right.⁴⁷

The spectre of *verkaffering* was thus omnipresent for newly proletarianised, poor Afrikaners, and it helped to alter nineteenth century social and political divisions amongst whites in South Africa. Most significantly, the fear of *verkaffering* began to blur the distinction between urban English-speakers and rural Afrikaners, as a growing percentage of the Afrikaner population moved to the towns. It was thus the urban environment that opened up another popular “race question” beyond the hoary

⁴⁶S. Pauw, cited in Welsh, “The Growth Of Towns,” 206.

⁴⁷De Kiewiet, A History Of South Africa, 216.

antagonism between "Boer "and "Brit" deriving from the fault lines of the South African War. Historian Eric Walker writes that, by the early 1920s,

men of British and Afrikaner stock stood shoulder to shoulder. . . The old racial lines were cut clean across by the economic. . . the two sections of the European had realised that the issues on which they had hitherto divided were as nothing to the issues raised by the contact with non-Europeans.⁴⁸

The pressures that shaped the social contours of white poverty were hastened by the onset of the Great Depression which, following a decade of economic drift and ecological crisis, rendered "back to the land" ideals unrealistic. Of course it was not only white Afrikaners who were dispossessed and set adrift to end up ultimately in an alien(ating) urban world. As numerous authors have shown, such pressures were experienced with especial virulence by Africans, who lacked access to the resources of state.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, what is important for the purposes of this thesis is that the collective weight of proletarianisation and urbanisation during the Depression left poor whites at the juncture of every major political relationship: white and black; Boer and Brit; landed and dispossessed; employed and unemployed.⁵⁰ The social impact of white poverty was mediated through various permutations of these relations. Already the

⁴⁸Eric Walker, cited in D. Hobart Houghton, "Economic Development, 1865-1965," in Wilson and Thompson, Oxford History Of South Africa, Vol. 2, 28.

⁴⁹For reviews of the historiography of dispossession in the South African countryside, see Beinart, Delius and Trapido, Putting a Plough to the Ground: Accumulation and Dispossession in Rural South Africa, 1850-1930 ; William Beinart and Colin Bundy, Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa: Politics and Popular Movements in the Transkei and Eastern Cape 1890-1930, (Braamfontein: Ravan, 1987).

⁵⁰Clynick, "Afrikaner Political Mobilization," 17.

presumptions of racist culture meant that the employment problem was a race problem.⁵¹ Social pressures were exacerbated by the Depression, thus incubating new strands of racial nervousness amongst those whites whose status in the capitalist economy was not yet secured. Under the material, cultural and emotional pressures of proletarianisation, and in competition with cheap, politically constrained African labour, whiteness became an increasingly important pole of identity for these dislocated whites, particularly in the workplace. Newly proletarianised, newly urbanised and just on the good side of the racial divide, they used race as a potent social boundary, just as their *platteland* brethren invoked radical republicanism in the name of the small white man.

The symbolic, social, cultural and political implications of poverty amongst newly proletarianised whites were not lost on the white elite - those classes and social categories of whites who dominated state and politics in South Africa. In particular, the elite were concerned that poor whites would form alliances with poor blacks. De Kiewiet was alert to the ways in which this process might undermine the foundations of the colonial order: "The poor whites were on the frontier between the Europeans and the native. Through their weakness might pour a debasing stream of uncivilized blood."⁵² Contemporary commentators believed that special efforts were needed to rescue poor whites; otherwise the "frontier" between black and white might shift and so shatter the colonial social framework. In 1932 Albertyn warned:

⁵¹Welsh, "The Growth Of Towns," 183.

⁵²De Kiewiet, A History Of South Africa, 221.

If the more privileged European grudges and refuses the poor his patronage, the latter will associate with non-Europeans if he finds no member of his own race to consort with.⁵³

G.D. Scholtz was more blunt, and hinted at later policy orientations when he wrote that the development of “multi-racial slums” would “*foster social intimacy and eventually limit race consciousness* [author’s emphasis].⁵⁴

In her analysis of the making of a South African Jewish community, Riva Krut has shown how popular radicalism amongst Jews in Johannesburg was bridled, and a “national” Jewish identity kept intact. She argues that, beginning with the creation of the Jewish Board of Deputies in 1913, a social compact was effected whereby the Jewish poor abandoned socialism in exchange for middle class “respectability and upliftment.”⁵⁵ Although we need to be cautious in proposing too functional a relationship, Krut’s argument for co-option is instructive for the ways in which we account for state involvement in addressing white poverty. Particularly after the advent of the Pact government in 1924, the state was especially generous in maintaining and strengthening its end of the social contract with poorer whites, already implicit in the colonial order.⁵⁶

⁵³Albertyn, The Poor White and Society, 106.

⁵⁴Scholtz, Het die Afrikaanse Volk ‘n Toekoms, 116.

⁵⁵Riva Krut, “The Making of a South African Jewish Community in Johannesburg, 1886 - 1914,” in Belinda Bozzoli, ed, Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987), 144-148.

⁵⁶Rob Davies, David Kaplan, Mike Morris and Dan O’Meara, “Class Struggle and the Periodisation of the South African State,” Review of African Political Economy 7 (1977).

While it was acutely conscious of the plight of poor whites on the *platteland* and in the towns, and concerned with maintaining the boundaries of whiteness, the state paid comparatively little attention to the poverty of other races.

From the advent of Union in 1910, a series of political battles had erupted over the policy choices available to deal with the crises of poor whiteism. While "back to the land" was a popular motif, its romantic appeal was countered by a demand for urban economic expansion and the provision of industrial jobs.⁵⁷ The first Union government favoured the option of keeping as many whites on the land as possible.⁵⁸ In its early years, the Pact government vacillated on the question of rural rehabilitation. However in 1932, the Carnegie Commission presented an unromantic and highly modernist report on white poverty⁵⁹ which, in light of the visible and politically-damaging effects of the Depression, proved compelling to the government. The Commission reported that:

. . . the development of a number of industries resulting from a policy of import protection has provided thousands of poor from rural areas with industrial work in the cities and elsewhere, and that this [was] one of the most potent means of bringing about their economic rehabilitation.⁶⁰

The Carnegie Commission's pronouncement on the effectiveness of industrial expansion to address white poverty provided what Adam Ashforth calls the "scheme of

⁵⁷Clynick, "Afrikaner Political Mobilization," 17-18.

⁵⁸Welsh, "The Growth Of Towns," 182-183.

⁵⁹For a cogent argument detailing the modernist character of the Carnegie Commission, see Clynick, "Afrikaner Political Mobilization," 283-325.

⁶⁰Cited in Welsh, "The Growth Of Towns," 185.

legitimation”⁶¹ for government policy from the early 1930s on. On the one hand, the state vigorously pursued its civilised labour policy, in terms of which black workers were replaced, as far as possible, with poor whites. On the other hand, the state sought to assist poor whites and to encourage the development of secondary industry through the expedient of heavy tariff protection for industry.⁶²

Collectively these measures, along with growing stability in the global economy, enabled steady industrial expansion from about 1933. The abandonment of the gold standard in 1933 initiated a long period of uninterrupted prosperity, and between 1932 and 1937 the Gross National Product rose from £217 million to £370 million per annum. There was relatively little increase in the cost of living, so the real gain was substantial.⁶³ Between 1932 and 1939, well over 100,000 whites found employment. As liberal economist Hobart Houghton wrote, the “‘poor white problem’ disappeared in seven years of rapid growth.”⁶⁴ We should add, though, that the exercise of “capturing” poor whites was not uncontested: amongst other drastic measures, the state was obliged to discipline unemployable peasants / proletarians in huge state settlements; send social workers into their homes; and enrol their children in new schools.⁶⁵

⁶¹For a summary of Ashforth’s argument, see O’Meara, Forty Lost Years, 441-445.

⁶²Welsh, “The Growth Of Towns,” 185.

⁶³Hobart Houghton, “Economic Development,” 32.

⁶⁴Ibid., 34.

⁶⁵Clynick, “Afrikaner Political Mobilization,” 283-325.

The introduction of particular forms of civilised labour in the 1920s and 1930s helped to ameliorate white unemployment and poverty, and so helped to confirm the social contract between the ruling classes and the white poor. However, the precise ways in which the arrangement was cast would not hold after the Second World War, as changes to the labour process and, in particular, evolving patterns of consumption helped to fashion new models of whiteness.

In their study of European domesticity in South Africa, Comaroff and Comaroff provide a fascinating insight into the cultural politics of poor white urbanisation, and the response that this phenomenon attracted from the state, the churches and other institutions. They argue that the colonial project of transforming African domesticity was somehow implicated in the making of modern English society, and *vice versa*. Black South Africa and the English countryside, they write, were conceptually linked by the motifs of domesticity, modernity and colonialism.⁶⁶ This dialectical model is suggestive of the ways in which racist culture travels across discursive orders. Indeed it would seem that the whole process of rehabilitating poor whites in the cities, underpinned as it was by a broad consensus on the rules of race, was framed by a similar dialectic - one which grafted the fundamentals of a idealised pre-industrial, agrarian social order⁶⁷ onto an

⁶⁶John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Homemade Hegemony," in John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, Ethnography and the Historical Imagination, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 265.

⁶⁷Bradford, in challenging Morris's suggestion that Afrikaner nationalist politics was all about creating the conditions for capitalist accumulation, has argued that the process of bourgeoisie class formation was tentative and reluctant on the *platteland*. Cited in Clynick, "Afrikaner Political Mobilization," 9-10.

urban, industrial, capitalist one. At first blush, this is not all that different from the “new frontiers for old” thesis first elucidated by De Kiewiet. However as Comaroff and Comaroff caution us in their case study, we should not assume that a full-grown, stable model of “home life” was taken from Europe to the colonies. Nor can we assume that “the domestic” can be conceptually freed from its historical, cultural and political context.⁶⁸ Similarly, the form and content of *baaskap* changed as newly proletarianised whites adapted to the new, profit-oriented social environment.

Crises of whiteness and party political co-option

In two richly empirical case studies, Clynick and Lewis have examined the political and social challenges raised by white poverty, albeit in very different contexts. Both Clynick and Lewis avoid the pitfalls of seeking to score polemic points about either ethnicity or class in the history of the white poor, and are able to illustrate the changing context of white poverty in the 1920s and 1930s.

In his doctoral thesis, Clynick illustrates some of the broad historical processes referred to above. He begins his study with an examination of producer politics amongst whites on the western highveld, from the end of the First World War until the advent of the Pact government in 1924. Clynick shows how, in the face of growing poverty, Lichtenburg *boere* established a local defensive formation, the Vigilance Committee, which swore to

⁶⁸Comaroff and Comaroff, “Homemade Hegemony,” 267.

resist the “exploitation, extortion and selling out” of *boere* by *die meneere*.⁶⁹ Their example prompted the emergence amongst Afrikaner producers across the highveld of similar Vigilance Committees which were subsequently organised in the *Suid Afrikaanse Boere Ekonomiese Verbond*. While it claimed to be “apolitical,” the *Verbond* was severely critical of *laissez-faire* economic policies, as well as of perceived deficiencies of state aid to struggling white farmers. Both ideologically and politically, the National Party benefitted from the *Verbond*’s agitation. Tielman Roos, Lichtenburg’s Member of Parliament from 1915 and chairman of the Transvaal NP, called for a new, revolutionary, populist alliance in Transvaal politics which would unite *boere* and white working class men. His campaign played on radical “small-r” republicanism, and caused some consternation not only in the Smut’s South African Party (SAP) and the Labour Party (LP), but also in the ranks of the NP itself. For Clynick, the significance of the rural outrage that congealed around the *Verbond* is indicative of the appeal which republicanism, more populist and radical than any of the mainstream political parties was prepared to concede, held for Transvaal’s *boere*.⁷⁰

This “little tradition” of white radicalism, which challenged the premises of accumulation in the countryside, featured prominently on the Lichtenburg diamond diggings. During the 1920s, alluvial diggings were opened up in the Lichtenburg area, and the exploitation of diamonds promised material relief to local *boere*. However, the diamond discoveries

⁶⁹Clynick, “Afrikaner Political Mobilization,” 42-43.

⁷⁰*Ibid*, 44; 61-134.

were on privately owned farms, where landlords maximised their own rights. Clynick shows how, in light of this set of relations on the digging estates, lines of class formation rapidly developed, posing a fundamental threat to the state's administration of the fields as well as to the ability of urban businessmen and local *landheeren* to exploit the mineral wealth on their properties.⁷¹ *Boere* mobilised around a radical "egalitarian"⁷² discourse that contrasted their "natural" rights to the wealth of the diggings, to "unnatural" capitalist ownership, which was alien not only to the *platteland*, but to South Africa.⁷³ From his focus on the *platteland*, Clynick extends the argument that it was rural social crisis, rather than the onset of the Great Depression, which fostered a little tradition of protest amongst whites. It is likely that, at least for some of those at the centre of political power, the emergence of such little traditions of protest raised the spectre that, disaffected, poor *platteland* whites might seek alliance with Africans and so threaten the stability of the colonial political order.

Progressively, the force of "little men's" protest was neutralised on the western highveld. On the diggings themselves, diamond magnates manipulated white populist sentiment to pressurise the Pact government to advance the interests of capital. According to Clynick, there is strong circumstantial evidence to suggest that leading magnates Ernest

⁷¹Ibid, 46.

⁷²The *boere* understanding of "egalitarian" fell within the discursive limits of their racist culture - they meant equality amongst whites.

⁷³Clynick, "Afrikaner Political Mobilization," 332-333.

Oppenheimer and Solomon Joel "bought off" elements within the digging community.⁷⁴ Moreover, the Pact's accommodation of monopoly capital marginalised the small man on the Lichtenburg diggings, and popular dissent grew as Afrikaner diggers began to question the legitimacy of the NP. Afrikaner diggers organised themselves into the Farmers and Diggers Union of South Africa, which initially demanded that the Pact "protect the small man" from a "rapacious capitalist class."⁷⁵ Diggers's pleas fell on deaf ears, and they rose in open political revolt and nominated local Diggers Union president A.J. Swanepoel to run against incumbent MP Tielman Roos, Transvaal chair of the NP. The diggers threatened to support Swanepoel as an "independent Nationalist" and eventually, in the face of party schism, Roos and the NP admitted defeat. Roos stood down and Swanepoel was nominated as Lichtenburg's official candidate for the 1929 general election. Clynick notes that this *platteland* political spat illustrates the vitality of "small-r" republicanism throughout the 1920s. His case study is also suggestive of the importance which the NP attached to placating and thence incorporating the little tradition of white social and political protest.

However it was on the state settlements that the voice of little men was most effectively silenced. Throughout the 1920s, state officials increasingly maintained that rural rehabilitation would more effectively take place on highly supervised irrigation schemes

⁷⁴Ibid., 46-47.

⁷⁵Ibid., 47.

such as that near Hartebeestpoort Dam.⁷⁶ In most cases *boere*, determined to maintain their independence and leery of state control, were reluctant to relocate to the land settlement schemes, where they would be subjected to bureaucratic authority. Clynick suggests that *boere* who settled on state lands remained hopeful that they would eventually return to the own land.⁷⁷ Especially during the Pact period, poor white families at the Hartebeestpoort Dam and other white labour schemes were subject to harsh bureaucratic control and surveillance. The type of "independence" cherished by the *boere* and so central to their little tradition, was dramatically undercut as *boere* were coerced to bureaucratic ideals of "progressive" farming and "enlightenment." Especially towards the end of the 1920s, the Pact's social engineers and moral reformers took the state in new and intrusive directions which succeeded in "rescuing," disciplining and controlling the white rural poor, whose proliferating numbers - along with the demoralisation and degradation that they evoked - seemed to threaten Afrikanerdom and the foundations of white rule itself.⁷⁸

While Clynick's case study concentrates on the *platteland*, labour historian Jon Lewis has demonstrated a little tradition of similar vitality in the Witwatersrand towns.⁷⁹

⁷⁶Ibid., 48.

⁷⁷Ibid., 49.

⁷⁸Ibid., 333.

⁷⁹Jon Lewis, "The Germiston By-Election of 1932: The State and the White Working Class During the Depression," in Phil Bonner, ed, Working Papers in Southern African Studies, vol.2, (1981).

Germiston on the East Rand was a major railway junction and distribution centre, where by the 1920s secondary industry had also developed. The majority of the white population worked in these sectors, and most were Afrikaans-speaking. Following the 1924 Pact between the NP and the LP, the Germiston seat was held by the LP. In 1932, the death of sitting MP George Brown occasioned a by-election which the NP was confident it would win. However, despite the NP's predictions, five parties entered the fray, while four more candidates proposed to stand independently at one time or another. Eventually J.G.N. Strauss of the SAP won the election, followed by the NP candidate, with Labour a very distant third.⁸⁰

Lewis suggests that the by-election points to profound white dissatisfaction with the dominant parties, and he conducts a sectoral analysis to show how changes to the labour process bred popular discontent with the Pact amongst white working men in Germiston. In particular, Lewis shows how wage reduction and unemployment were central issues in the campaign for the by-election.⁸¹ Such conditions of wage reduction and unemployment allowed employers to re-organise the labour process in their favour, and increase the pace of deskilling. Lewis notes that it was no coincidence that 1931 and 1932 witnessed the greatest number of industrial disputes since 1922. For example, Lewis describes how, in August 1932, clothing workers went on strike after employers cut wages by 25% and began to replace white male labour with females at

⁸⁰Ibid., 101.

⁸¹Ibid.

lower rates. The strike was broken after scabs escorted by mounted police crossed the picket lines. The Garment Workers' Union immediately called for workers to oppose government candidates in the by-election.⁸² The sector that suffered the heaviest retrenchments in Germiston was the Railways, and artisans bore the brunt of wage cuts which were seen as "a direct lead from the Government to other employers. . . What affected the Railwaymen today would affect the other sections tomorrow."⁸³ Moreover, in a period of fairly intense conflict between the state and sections of the white working class, the state made increasing use of the repressive apparatuses at its disposal, in particular the Riotous Assemblies Act. This was met by the withdrawal of political support by white Railwaymen from the government.⁸⁴ According to Lewis, Coalition and Fusion were, to no small extent, a response to white working class disaffection such as that demonstrated by his Germiston case study. Coalition and Fusion together constituted a re-organisation of party political representation for the purpose of marshalling the electoral and political support of white workers, and therefore preventing any possible alliance between them and the emerging black proletariat.⁸⁵

These two case studies suggest that by 1933-34, the state was able to co-opt and crush

⁸²Ibid., 103.

⁸³Ibid., 104.

⁸⁴Ibid., 108.

⁸⁵Ibid., 110. Coalition and Fusion did indeed ensure the continued support of white workers for the state. However Lewis' assertion that the party political re-organisation which they entailed cut off any possible alliance with black workers represents something of a triumph of wishful thinking over colonial racial realities.

many little traditions of white protest. Moreover, at a party political level, the process of *smelting* softened the division between “English” and “Afrikaners.” Lesley Reeves has gone so far as to suggest, not without irony, that the convoluted politics of Coalition and Fusion helped to dilute the “race” question within white South African society.⁸⁶ Fusion, in particular, was the political manifestation of the new sense of cultural unity that had emerged amongst South African whites after the Depression. Fusion formalised the ideological and political arrangements of white hegemony whereby access to the state was defined by white male status, and racial segregation maintained by explicit reference to the paternalistic idiom of trusteeship ideology.⁸⁷ We should note, however, that Fusion did not “fix” white hegemony. As subsequent chapters of this thesis will argue, the cultural and political arrangements of Fusion would not hold up under the conditions that emerged in South Africa after the Second World War.

In the general election of 1933, the Coalition between the NP and the SAP swept 136 of the 150 seats in the House of Assembly. As O’Meara has observed, the idea of Coalition was particularly appealing on the Transvaal and Orange Free State *platteland*, where there was considerable agitation for *hereniging* (re-union) of the rural interests.⁸⁸ However, while Coalition in 1933 and Fusion a year later represented a potent new

⁸⁶Reeves, “The War Issue,” 8.

⁸⁷Saul Dubow, “The Elaboration Of Segregationist Ideology” in William Beinart and Saul Dubow, eds, Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century South Africa, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 153-167.

⁸⁸ O’Meara, Volkskapitalisme, 42.

version of white unity, white political reconciliation was by no means complete. From the outset, the Cape NP was opposed to Coalition, which it grudgingly accepted as something of a *fait accompli* engineered by party leader Hertzog. Leader of the Cape NP, Dr. D.F. Malan declared that Coalition would “throw together in the same camp people whose inner convictions differ.”⁸⁹ At a meeting of the NP’s Federal Council called in mid-1934 to approve Fusion of the NP and the SAP, Malan led a group of seven who voted against the thirteen in favour of Fusion. This marked the end of the old NP as it split into *smelters* (fusionists) who followed Hertzog into the new United Party, and *gesuiwerdes* (purifieds), who stayed with Malan as leader of the “*gesuiwerde*” NP. The major strength of the *gesuiwerdes* lay in the Cape, although there were also significant pockets of *gesuiwerde* support in the Transvaal and Orange Free State.⁹⁰

The new UP was also contested by whites in Natal, where a powerful separatist movement had gained popularity from about 1931. These separatists advocated a bewildering variety of positions, ranging from outright secession to federalism, although they were united in their wish to maintain the imperial link. Natal secessionists were ultimately unable to reach consensus on the contradictions arising from Natal “re-negotiating its contract” with the Union, leading to the formation of a number of splinter groups: the Devolution League, the Federal League and the Home Rule Party, to name but a few. Not surprisingly, the byzantine politics of Natal secession failed to ignite the

⁸⁹Ibid., 44.

⁹⁰Ibid., 45-48.

enthusiasm of the Natal electorate on the occasion of the 1933 general election. Nonetheless, after the election, most Natal proponents of secession - barring, of course, those who opportunistically "jumped ship" back to the Coalition and thence the United Party - re-grouped under Transvaaler Colonel Stallard in the Dominion Party which was unabashedly imperialist and English-speaking.⁹¹ Although the Dominionites did not for a moment question the propriety of white privilege, they were unreconciled to the emerging political arrangements of white unity.

In sum, the Dominionites and the *gesuiwerde* NP represented opposite ends of the white political spectrum, each opposed to the consolidation of white political interests at the centre, albeit for different reasons. The Dominionites resisted this amalgamation of white interests because they feared that it would weaken the imperial connection. More significantly for the purposes of this thesis, the *gesuiwerdes* emerged as a response to fears that political *smelting* would dilute the cultural heart of white Afrikanerdom, and the material interests of some influential Afrikaners.

To war: volunteering

A text box in the Illustrated History of South Africa presents its readers with a cameo of white South Africans going to war in 1939. It notes that September 1939 was a time of "posters, patriotism, propaganda and long queues outside hastily-erected recruiting

⁹¹Paul S. Thompson, Natalians First: Separatism in South Africa, 1909-1961, (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1990), 64-122.

depots.”⁹² When South Africa declared war on Germany, the Permanent Force was made up of 3,350 officers and men. There were 14,600 part-time soldiers in the Active Citizen Force, while the Seaward Defence Force had 70 officers and 900 men.⁹³ Such numbers were clearly inadequate to the tasks that lay ahead, and instead of conscription Prime Minister Smuts chose to rely on volunteers to swell the ranks of the Union Defence Force. “Every day hundreds of South Africans were taking the first steps of a journey which would eventually take them to the battlefields of North Africa and Europe,” and by the end of 1939, 137,000 men were under arms.⁹⁴

Who were the volunteers? We know that the majority were white men. As during the Great War, the opportunity to perform armed service was restricted to white men, and of the 570,000 white men eligible for military service, between 190,000 and 250,000 enlisted during the course of the war.⁹⁵ Approximately 110,000 white women and 80,000 black men also volunteered, although neither group was permitted to carry arms.⁹⁶ Although the thesis confines itself to the study of white servicemen, it goes

⁹²Oakes, Illustrated History of South Africa, 347.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵The Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa, (Pretoria: Government Printers, 1946), 20, gives the estimation of 190 000 while Cock goes for the higher figure. See Jacklyn Cock, “Demobilization and Democracy: The relevance of the 1944 ‘Soldiers’ Charter’ in Southern Africa today,” (Paper presented to University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, July 1994), 2.

⁹⁶See Neil Roos, “Homes fit for (white) heroes: Servicemen, social justice and the making of Apartheid, 1939-1948,” Journal of the Georgia Association of Historians

without saying that other categories of volunteers played an important role not only in the war effort, but also in the social and political processes under discussion.

Who precisely were the white men who volunteered? Director of Military Intelligence, E.G. Malherbe, estimated that between 50% and 70% of white male volunteers were Afrikaans-speakers.⁹⁷ Significantly, the Union Defence Force itself did not differentiate on the basis of language, in accordance with the "South Africanist" stance of the ruling UP, which sought to minimise ethnic tensions in the white community.⁹⁸ Indeed, the UDF generated very little in the way of socio-economic data about the volunteers, especially during the early part of the war - perhaps the pressures of mobilisation and war precluded this.

Another document prepared by Malherbe's department suggested that white soldiers were drawn primarily from the poorer sections of white society.⁹⁹ Despite the easing of the Depression and the South African government's civilised labour policy, many white men possessed limited skills and struggled to make a living. Many volunteers were not animated wholly by idealistic concerns and the Big Words of imperialism and empire.

(Forthcoming, fall 1999).

⁹⁷Official Yearbook (1946).

⁹⁸Albert Grundlingh, "The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity In The Union of South Africa's Defence Force During The Second World War, 1939-1945," (Unpublished paper, 1998), 3.

⁹⁹Wat Die Soldaat Dink, (Pretoria: Hoofstafkwatier, 1945), 4-18; 31-35. My interviews confirm this observation.

Nor were they the "King's Afrikaners," a claim often levelled against Afrikaans-speaking volunteers by Afrikaner nationalists at the time of the war and after. To the contrary, "more prosaic pecuniary considerations propelled many. . . into the armed forces."¹⁰⁰ Small-scale farmers, for instance, enlisted to avoid creditors. Destitute whites who approached welfare and aid societies were often told to enlist rather than beg for assistance. And when the alluvial diamond diggings at Barkly West - themselves a metaphor for poles of poverty and fortune¹⁰¹ - were flooded by the Vaal River, many diggers were quick to exchange the uncertainty of prospecting for the greater financial security of armed service.¹⁰² Thus, it was mainly poor white men who volunteered; processes of capitalisation and class formation, especially in the countryside, meant that amongst the poorest of whites, Afrikaners were simply in the majority.¹⁰³

The outbreak of war prompted a vigorous recruiting campaign. This campaign was pitched unambiguously towards Afrikaans-speakers, and so strengthens the argument that UDF planners themselves expected Afrikaners to represent the most significant pool of recruits.¹⁰⁴ The military authorities were well aware that a generalised appeal to

¹⁰⁰Grundlingh, "The King's Afrikaners," 11.

¹⁰¹See for example, Tim Clynick, "Romance and Reality on the Vaal River Diggings: Race and Class in a South African Rural Community, 1905-1914," Canadian Papers in Rural History 9, (1994), 401-418.

¹⁰²Grundlingh, "The King's Afrikaners," 11.

¹⁰³See Clynick, Afrikaner Political Mobilization."

¹⁰⁴Grundlingh, "The King's Afrikaners," 4.

fight Nazism abroad would not have raised many white South African volunteers, especially Afrikaners.¹⁰⁵ An appeal for white men to fight in the interests of the British Commonwealth would have been even less effective. Rather, in the light of Afrikaners' history, and their experience and memory of colonialism, imperialism and the South African war, a successful recruiting campaign would have to take into account local sensibilities. As Grundlingh observes: "Ideally the call to arms had to be presented in such a way that it could be constructed, not as oppositional, but as complementary to Afrikaner political and cultural interests."¹⁰⁶ The recruiting campaign attempted to tap into the upsurge of Afrikaner nationalist sentiments as refracted through the commemorative celebration of the Great Trek in 1938, thereby fueling the ongoing struggle to appropriate the history, traditions and doxology of Afrikanerdom.

Bearing in mind the success of the 1938 Commemorative Trek, UDF recruiting officials set out to stage a similar spectacular, albeit with a different aim and content. The "Steel Commando," a unit consisting of a bugle band, military vehicles and a mobile recruiting van, visited towns on the *platteland* to raise awareness of South Africa's participation in the war. In larger towns, military parades and formal recruiting meetings were held, using local speakers as far as possible. An "Air Commando" was organised along similar lines. Both the Steel Commando and the Air Commando were dramatic, attracting large crowds and generating considerable interest in the war where very little

¹⁰⁵Ibid.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

had existed previously. An intelligence officer who accompanied the Air Commando to Upington wrote that the marvel of an air show attracted "bearded *ooms* and *kappie*-clad women, sturdy farmers and their wives and families, thousands of whom had never seen an aircraft in their lives."¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the decision to style the recruiting campaign a "Commando" cut deep into the core of Afrikaner martial and social tradition. Not only was the term "Commando" (*Kommando*) current in Afrikaner cultural and social mythology at the time, but, as Sandra Swart has pointed out, *Kommando* was part of the social machinery in the construction of Afrikaner manhood, carrying a wealth of symbols and a strong republican ideology.¹⁰⁸

Other aspects of the national recruiting campaign were also unambiguous in the way they invoked Afrikaner history and tradition. The popular propaganda film Noordwaarts, for example, which was seen by 200,000 people in a year, compared the war against Hitler with nineteenth century Boer struggles against "deceitful" and "autocratic" African leaders. In the film, a maternal figure reminds her sons that "Voortrekkers never surrendered meekly," and that it was "better for a Potgieter to die in battle than to stay at home and safely preach neutrality to old women."¹⁰⁹ In another effort to tap into the fount of Afrikaner popular culture, General Smuts' wife Issy - *Ouma* Smuts - was presented as a caring grandmother, anxious for the welfare of "her" troops. As Elsabé

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 5.

¹⁰⁸Sandra Swart, "'You were men in war time'- the manipulation of gender identity in war and peace," (Unpublished paper, 1998), 1.

¹⁰⁹Grundlingh, "The King's Afrikaners," 7.

Brink has noted, the idea of a self-sacrificing *volksmoeder* was a central part of Afrikaner nationalist gender politics in the 1930s.¹¹⁰

Thus, while various anti-war movements, including acts of sabotage and plots to overthrow the UP government, took hold amongst some Afrikaners,¹¹¹ Malherbe's guess that most white servicemen, especially those who joined in the early part of the war, were fairly poor - in the lower bands of wage work, or struggling small-scale producers - and Afrikaans-speaking is thus plausible.¹¹² This impression is substantiated on an anecdotal level: amongst the ex-servicemen interviewed for this thesis were a debt-bonded farmer, a ganger on the South African Railways, a message "boy," a commerce undergraduate on a state bursary and the son of a struggling shopkeeper. Those who joined later in the war, from around 1943, when the 6th South African Division was mobilised, tended to come from more affluent backgrounds. In a special edition dedicated to the 6th Division, then on active service in Italy, the armed services magazine Libertas published thumb portraits of a number of volunteers. In contrast to those who had volunteered earlier and fought in East Africa and the desert, those men of the 6th Division featured in Libertas included a motor assembler, a compositor from

¹¹⁰Elsabé Brink, "Man-made women: Gender, class and the ideology of the *volksmoeder*," in Cheryl Walker, ed, Women and Gender in South Africa, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991),.288.

¹¹¹Furlong, P. Between Crown and Swastika: The Impact Of The Radical Right On The Afrikaner Nationalist Movements In The Fascist Era, (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1991),138-160.

¹¹²The effects of a brilliantly conceived recruitment campaign should not be discounted. See below.

the Cape Times, a factory production manager, a bank clerk, an electrician and a chemist.¹¹³

However, we should not be too hasty to assign the volunteers to a class, or an ethnic group, or any other circumscribed social category. For example, it is not particularly useful to pigeonhole the volunteers as either "English-speakers" or "Afrikaans-speakers." My research suggests that, to a large degree, ethnic identification was eclipsed as a significant number of volunteers identified with the UP's broad South Africanism, neither uniquely English- or Afrikaans-speaking.¹¹⁴ All of my informants, for example, spoke both languages; they sometimes married outside of their ethnic group; and they took wartime service as a bedrock of a "true" national identity that superceded ethnicity. While servicemen recognised differences between "Boer" and "Brit," they tended to take these differences lightheartedly. Fun sports days for servicemen, for example, were often styled the "Boer War."

Considering the ways in which white volunteers as a social category challenged accepted lines of class and ethnicity, it is more accurate and helpful to suggest that the white volunteer corps came largely from those little traditions which had been

¹¹³Libertas, vol.5, no.4 (March, 1945), special edition entitled "Salute to the 6th Division." See also, "Obituary: Gavin Relly, A courageous business leader of exceptional fibre" Sunday Times (17 January 1999)

¹¹⁴Although Dubow and others have looked at the bigger ideologies which sustained South Africanism, there has been little scholarly attention to the form and content of popular South Africanism.

incorporated into the broader dominant white political culture associated with Coalition and Fusion. Some white volunteers might have identified pecuniary need as their main reason for joining, others patriotism, and others yet, peer pressure. However what was common for all white volunteers was that the act of volunteering created additional guarantees to the social contract which they and their fathers were busy negotiating with the state. Volunteers' sense of expectation and entitlement is suggested by the ways in which, so soon after enlisting, their attention turned to matters of a "square deal" and "social justice," discussed in chapter three.

Chapter two has demonstrated that in the 1930s, the social contract between white men of the little traditions and the state was re-negotiated in response to urbanisation and industrialisation. In particular, it was poverty and the attendant racial nervousness which obliged both men of the little tradition and state functionaries to seek accommodation during this period. This re-negotiated social contract did not reject the primacy of whiteness, but rather modernised the arrangements of racist culture.

In addition, the experience of growing up in 1920s and 1930s South Africa had a profound impact on the white volunteers who form the focus of this thesis. The overwhelming majority of white servicemen grew up in poor, if not extremely poor, conditions. Although by the outbreak of war few were subject to the grinding poverty which their fathers had experienced, the spectre of poverty, poor whiteism and *verkaffering* continued to loom large as a set of powerful motifs on the memory and consciousness of those volunteers whom I interviewed. Willie Grobler, for example,

recalled that after wool prices crashed in the late 1920s, sheep were left to die on his father's farm in Newcastle, and that his father, like many other local farmers without any source of cash income, was reduced to subsistence.¹¹⁵ "Van" van Rensburg was left in the Catholic orphanage in Kimberley after his parents, indigent diamond prospectors along the Vaal, both died.¹¹⁶ My father Dick Roos' family of five moved from town to town, finally settling in Durban, as his father drifted from one casual job to another - sometimes as a menial clerk, sometimes as a *togt* (day) labourer and eventually as a supervisor at a municipal sewage plant.

In her article on popular memory of the Stalinist purges in Russia, C. Merridale argues that social trauma leaves destructive memories which are often insufficiently explored. Such memories scar not only the immediate victims, but also the children who learn "to understand without words."¹¹⁷ Thus, social trauma, or at least the memory of it, passes down through the generations. The trauma of extreme and sometimes sudden poverty undoubtedly helped to shape the re-organisation of white political culture that took place in South Africa during the 1930s. This observation suggests that the little men who were at least nominally incorporated into the dominant white culture, and who would increasingly benefit from this re-alignment, would go to considerable lengths to sustain

¹¹⁵Grobler interview.

¹¹⁶"Van" Van Rensburg, interview by author, tape recording and transcript, Durban, 15 July, 1998.

¹¹⁷C. Merridale, "Death and Memory in Modern Russia," History Workshop Journal 42, (Autumn 1996), 1-2.

their social contract with the state. This included answering Smuts' call for volunteers. As we have noted, while white men were not the only category called on to volunteer, the right to bear arms was restricted to white men. Armed service thus coincided with a powerful Afrikaner masculine ideal,¹¹⁸ and symbolically reinforced the status of white volunteers in the colonial order of things. Armed service thus added further layers of duty, obligation and privilege to the social contract between General Smuts / the UP / the state and those white men who volunteered to serve in the UDF.

This chapter has argued that a range of narratives - Big Words and little stories - account for the Allied war aims and the reasons why ordinary white men volunteered. Once such narratives, apparently disparate, are historicised and placed within the parameters of racist culture, the connections between them become clearer.

Collectively, this body of narratives entertains a dialogue about questions of citizenship and patriotism in the colonial order. The Big Words set out the duties expected of white men. The little stories hinted at the ways in which ordinary white men understood these duties and the rights they expected in return. Such stories - where men simply felt "bound to join" - are symbolically loaded. While white volunteers' stories about enlisting might appear banal, their meaning and significance must be interrogated with reference to the experience and concerns of poorer whites in the 1920s and 1930s. The act of volunteering was a political moment which marked the meeting of Big Words and little stories. For white volunteers, their decision to enlist sealed their contract with the state.

¹¹⁸Swart, "You were men in war time," 2-3.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONJUNCTURE OF DISJUNCTURE: WHITE SERVICEMEN, THE SPRINGBOK LEGION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Interrogating social justice

As this thesis argued in chapter two, the social contract between poorer whites and the state was re-negotiated in the 1920s and 1930s. Conditions of urbanisation, white poverty and competition for jobs led to a convergence of fears around racial mixing, resulting in the tenuous incorporation of a variety of white little traditions into the dominant political order. This process required party political re-organisation, and was more or less completed with the advent of the United Party in 1934. Most white servicemen were drawn from the little traditions, and volunteering was a symbolic act which contributed another layer of obligation and entitlement to the social contract that underpinned and sustained the colonial order.

During wartime, white servicemen spoke about the social contract in the language of "social justice," which was a common feature of white political discourses in South Africa from the time of Union until the 1940s, and was usually summoned in the name of poorer whites. Oswald Pirow, for example, observes that the concept of social justice gained some currency as early as 1914, when striking white workers, particularly Afrikaners, expressed their opposition to Smuts and the SAP in the idiom

of social justice.¹ Clynick notes that such terms as “social justice” and “democracy” were also employed by struggling white prospectors on the Lichtenburg diamond diggings between 1926 and 1929.² In the 1930s, “social justice” was also part of the Fusion government’s lexicon for the “rescue” of whites.

However, beyond identifying something of its modernist genealogy in popular white discourses, we should be cautious about assigning a set of universal meanings to “social justice.” Social justice is an ethnographic rather than a theoretical term, and is best defined empirically, along a continuum that runs from a sense of socio-economic entitlement to the right not to be excluded. Moreover, social justice is highly polyvalent with capacity to embody contradictory meanings and to manage these contradictions - up to a point.

This chapter explores some of the competing meanings embodied in the concept of social justice during and after the Second World War, and the ways in which notions of social justice were contested, ideologically, culturally and politically. The Army Education Scheme (AES), for example, under the authority of Director of Military Intelligence E.G. Malherbe, tried to school white troops as citizens in the tradition of liberal paternalism, which interpreted the rights of individual liberty and social justice within a paradigm of civic responsibility. The Springbok Legion, a type of soldiers’ trade union which is examined in this chapter, also championed itself as a fighter for

¹Oswald Pirow, James Barry Munnik Hertzog, (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1957), 65-67.

²Tim Clynick, “Afrikaner Political Mobilization in the Western Transvaal: Popular Consciousness and the State, 1920-1930,” (D.Phil thesis, Queen’s University, 1996), 218-282.

social justice. Particularly towards the end of the war, the Legion's understanding of social justice took on a more radical, non-racial and sometimes, egalitarian, hue.

Neither the AES blueprint for social justice, nor the egalitarian variant elaborated towards the end of the war by the Springbok Legion, held much appeal for the majority of white volunteers. As this chapter will demonstrate, white volunteers attached decidedly racist meanings to social justice, deriving from the social imperatives of the little traditions and racist culture of the world in which they lived. For the better part of the war, the tensions surrounding competing hopes for social justice were kept largely in check.

Roley Arentstein, a communist who volunteered to serve in the UDF and who later joined the Springbok Legion, told me that, from 1942, there was some hope in Communist Party (CPSA) circles that white servicemen might be won over to the principle of a united and non-racial working class.³ While the Arentstein's hope was, of course, sadly misplaced, it is nonetheless evocative. Of all the organisations - official and other - competing for white servicemen's support during wartime, the Springbok Legion was the only one which attracted anything like a mass membership. This observation raises a number of pertinent questions. What was it that attracted white volunteers to the Legion? What prompted white communists to assume that white servicemen might chose class-based, rather than race-based, strategies to pursue their objectives of social justice? When and why did contested and competing notions of social justice become too much for the Legion to contain?

³Roley Arentstein, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 24 August 1986.

This chapter will draw largely on the history of the Springbok Legion to probe some of the debates and contradictions around social justice in a colonial society. The chapter will also explore how white servicemen resolved these contradictions for themselves, thereby helping to transform some of the boundaries of racist culture.

Hurry up and wait

On 22 September 1939, Active Citizen Force units in South Africa were authorised to accept volunteers for the duration of the war, and part-time training was intensified. Floods of white volunteers responded to Smuts' call to arms, and queues formed at recruiting stations across the country. James Ambrose Brown, himself a volunteer, wrote that at Roberts' Heights near Pretoria, huge numbers who hoped to join the Air Force arrived by every train. With blankets and suitcases they waited for days before their applications were processed. Similar scenes were repeated at recruiting depots all over the country.⁴

After enlisting, men were usually sent home to await call-up when arms and uniforms were available. On 16 February 1940, owing to concerns that the Defence Act did not require UDF troops to serve except in the defence of South Africa, coupled with the difficulty in defining areas of military involvement, the Active Citizen Force was re-organised on the basis of volunteers who undertook to serve anywhere in Africa. Volunteers received an orange shoulder tab to signify their willingness to serve

⁴James Ambrose Brown, Retreat To Victory: A Springbok's Diary In North Africa: Gazala to El Alamein, (Johannesburg: Ashanti, 1991), 20.

outside of South Africa. While Italy was not yet at war with South Africa, Smuts, as commander-in-chief of the UDF, held that the new army's primary task would be to protect the northern frontiers of Kenya and Uganda from the expected Italian attack.⁵

During the early months of 1940, the new UDF took shape. Urban volunteers joined town-based regiments, while *plattelanders* signed up for commandos.⁶ However, a shortage of equipment impeded training and preparation. An officer of the Natal Mounted Rifles (NMR) wrote that:

. . . an initial difficulty in the training programme was the shortage of transport and equipment. Instructions were received from Defence headquarters to earmark any public transport available up to the necessary strength to man a brigade. This proved a troublesome matter and required the closest co-operation between the Brigade Commander and his staff, officials of various local authorities. . . the Provincial Roads Administration, the Public Works Department and private transport companies.⁷

Inaction and equipment shortages in the training camps adversely affected troop morale, as frustration and boredom set in. For example, a long waiting period at the Zonderwater training camp dashed hopes amongst soldiers of the NMR that they would soon be placed on active service. Regimental historian and wartime officer in the NMR, Eric Goetzshe writes:

. . . disappointment was so great that both morale and *esprit-de-corps* of the Unit declined and never again

⁵Ibid., 21.

⁶Harry Klein, ed, Springbok Record, (Johannesburg: South African Legion of the British Empire Service League, 1946), 24. Unless volunteers wished to join a specialised branch of the UDF, they enlisted in their local unit.

⁷Eric Goetzshe, The Official Natal Mounted Rifles History, (Durban: Natal Mounted Rifles, 1971), 180.

reached the high standard which was in evidence [during training] at Oribi and the first month at Louis Trichardt.⁸

Besides the anti-climax of waiting, conditions in the training camps no doubt affected morale. Goetzsche reports that in July 1940, the NMR suffered from outbreaks of measles, mumps, meningitis and influenza while encamped at Ladysmith. So many troops fell ill that the regimental authorities were obliged to call upon the civic authorities, the town sanitarium and local residents to help care for the sick.⁹ It is likely that overcrowding and poor health control measures contributed to the spread of illness and disease. While the NMR's experience is just one example of an unhealthy and unhygienic training camp, it is likely that such conditions were not uncommon at other training camps.

On 10 June 1940, the Italian Foreign Ministry gave notice to the British ambassador in Rome that, at one minute past midnight, Italy would be at war with Britain and her allies. In South Africa, the First Brigade, made up of the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles, the Royal Natal Carbineers and the 1st Transvaal Scottish, were completing basic training at Premier Mine in Johannesburg. On 15 June 1940, the Brigade embarked by ship for Kenya and British Somaliland as the first contingent to leave for active service outside of South Africa.

⁸Ibid., 162.

⁹Ibid., 181.

Bored soldiers, part-time politicians and competing notions of social justice

The act of volunteering had created a special, albeit precarious, relationship of obligation and entitlement between white servicemen and the state. As early as 1940, white troops - frustrated, bored by inactivity and subject to the vagaries of military training camp routine - began to articulate a set of hopes and fears which centred on their future place as white men in post-war South African society. Despite the implicit contract between white volunteers and the state, white troops were fearful that the state would not honour its debts to them. Their anxieties about the arrangements of post-war society and social justice were not unprecedented. In Britain and other allied countries, it was a common belief amongst civilian soldiers that upon demobilisation, their sacrifices would be "forgotten."¹⁰

Besides the fear of being forgotten, many civilian soldiers developed a strong sense of entitlement. Author Doris Lessing captures such sentiments when she wrote that her war-crippled father believed that when he settled in Southern Rhodesia after the First World War, he was entitled to special assistance on account of his service and sacrifice:

My father said his real capital had been the trenches and his lost leg: the small amount of capital, £1000, he brought with him would not have lasted long. But 'they' would think twice, he said, before making a cripple from the war bankrupt.¹¹

¹⁰Charles Evenden, Old Soldiers Never Die. The Story of MOTH O. Durban: Memorable Order of Tin Hats, 1975, 5th impression), 32.

¹¹Doris Lessing, Under My Skin. Volume One Of My Autobiography. To 1949, (London: Flamingo, 1994), 129.

White South African volunteers shared similar concerns about their future in post-war society, particularly in light of the tenuous social contract, underwritten by whiteness, which pertained between white servicemen and the state.

Volunteers' fears did not go unnoticed by UDF authorities. The Army Education Scheme (AES) provided the most significant state response to white troops' expectations for social justice after the war. Malherbe believed that education was the most effective bulwark against the development of extremist political tendencies amongst white troops. His fears centred on the emergence of a Nazi-inspired fifth column in the UDF, as well as the possibility of a post-war fascist or Soldiers' Party. Consequently, he along with leading liberals R. F. A. Hoernlé and L. Marquard produced a memorandum which set out the parameters for a proposed education scheme for soldiers.¹² In 1942 the UDF established a training programme for prospective Army Education Officers (sometimes known as Information Officers or I-Officers) at Roberts' Heights, the UDF headquarters near Pretoria. After receiving instruction from some of the doyens of South African liberalism (Professor I. D. MacCrone on Human Relations; Dr. Z. K. Matthews and J. D. Rheinallt-Jones on Race Relations), I-officers were posted to selected units where their "first and most important work [was] to stimulate discussion on matters affecting the troops as citizens rather than as soldiers."¹³ Talks ranged from liberal debates of the day (Will it pay us to pay the native more?; Will segregation work?), to topics aimed more

¹²E.G. Malherbe, Never a Dull Moment, (Cape Town: n.p., 1981), 215; Notes for I-Officers, UP Central Head Office, Army Education Scheme Correspondence and Reports, 1940-1942, UNISA.

¹³The Army Education Scheme for the Union Defence Force, (Pretoria: Directorate of Military Intelligence, 1942).

specifically at ex-servicemen (The absorption of our soldiers into civilian life).¹⁴ In addition, the training and education programmes directed at white servicemen incorporated prevailing notions of work, the family, leisure, consumption and so forth, and converged around Post-Depression notions of white prosperity and respectability.¹⁵

It is interesting to observe that, while the recruiting campaign drew heavily on the heroic nostalgia of the *platteland* and the little traditions, the AES was a testament to the type of liberal modernity favoured by the UP. The AES' liberal impulses were, however, constrained by the contradictions between liberal humanism and colonial racism which beset most liberal thinking in pre-war South Africa. The AES Handbook for Information Officers captures this contradiction. On the one hand, the Handbook is quite firm that I-Officers and troops should avoid the assumption that after the war, the fruits of victory belonged exclusively to whites:

When we say 'the people' we mean the whole people. It is much easier to put forward attractive plans for the post-war world if you think only in terms of Europeans, but there can be no social justice in South Africa when the aim is merely to hold a just balance between Europeans.¹⁶

Yet the Handbook was unable to explore the limits of this claim and its implications for the very structures of the colonial order, and the volume concluded with the unconvincing observation that "each member of our South African commonwealth of

¹⁴Notes for I-Officers.

¹⁵Notes for I-officers

¹⁶Handbook for I-officers, (Pretoria: Directorate of Military Intelligence, 1942),

racism has a contribution to make.”¹⁷ Needless to say, the AES was not designed to promote any universalist notions of liberalism; but rather to maintain white troops’ commitment to a particular brand of (white) South Africanism and its attendant duties of citizenship. The AES therefore left the management of such contradictions to I-officers in the field, whom it advised to “use their discretion” when it came to such thorny issues as race.¹⁸

Although the AES was careful not to make any “cut-and-dried promises. . . of the ‘homes-for-heroes’ type,” which it insisted did “untold damage” after the First World War,¹⁹ the form and content of the AES explicitly acknowledged the challenges of the post-war world while re-affirming the place of white men within it. White servicemen undoubtedly saw the AES as confirmation of their tacit contract with the state, whereby in return for volunteering, they were guaranteed a certain status as white men. In sum, the AES served to legitimise white volunteers’ expectations of peace. Cultural assumptions, dominant ideologies, legislation and the history of state welfare intervention meant that as far as white servicemen were concerned, such expectations would undoubtedly be realised in a segregationist framework of some sort.

A number of CP members including Roley Arentstein, Brian Bunting, Roy du Preez

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Doing our job, UP Central Head Office, Army Education Scheme Correspondence and Reports, 1940-1942, UNISA. [Pamphlet].

¹⁹“Our New Order After the War,” in Handbook for I-officers, 253.

and Guy Routh sought posts as I-Officers.²⁰ Certainly, the presence of communists in the Education Corps provided cause for alarm. An editorial in The Natal Mercury, for example, was severely critical of “compulsory political lectures” where soldiers were “drilled in political and semi-political theses in much the same way as Nazism drilled its Brown shirt recruits.”²¹ From early on in the war, Malherbe was sensitive to such concerns, and to the possible influence of communists, basking as they were in the reflected glory of the Soviet Union.²² In a Bulletin, Malherbe sternly warned his staff to steer clear of politics and to ensure that servicemen and women became “informed and thinking persons who won’t run away with hare-brained schemes.”²³

We should, however, be cautious when evaluating the impact of the AES’ brand of liberal paternalism on ordinary white volunteers. In fact, the AES’ emphasis on the post-war world led some troops to believe that its major function involved career guidance. In light of the latitude which the Scheme permitted I-Officers, this appears to be what they often actually discussed in their sessions with troops. Thus Scott Gibson stated that he never attended any AES lectures as he “already had a job to

²⁰Roley Arentstein, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 24 June 1986.

²¹The Natal Mercury, 25 June, 1945.

²²Harold Strachan, a veteran and communist, recalled the sense of euphoria about the Soviet Union during wartime. Troops were interested in its achievements and were intrigued by South African communists. He added that during the war, CP members were extremely proud of their Party membership. Harold Strachan, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 4 November, 1986.

²³Bulletin, Malherbe to Information Officers, 1942, UP Central Head Office, Army Education Scheme Correspondence and Reports, 1940-1942, UNISA.

go to after the war.”²⁴ Wally Stewart²⁵, Ronnie Stockwell²⁶, “Van” Van Rensburg²⁷ and my father Dick Roos, all of them veterans of fighting units in North Africa, were all bemused when I asked them about the AES: none were able to remember much about it.

They did, however, recall the Soldiers’ Parliament. The Soldiers’ Parliament was the generic name for a popular type of debating union where political issues of the post-war world were discussed²⁸ - not unlike the debates facilitated by the AES. Soldiers’ Parliaments were established by troops in many camps in North Africa and Italy. In contrast to the AES, Soldiers’ Parliaments featured prominently in veterans’ recounts of their wartime experiences. In particular, white veterans reflected with pleasure on the “direct democracy” afforded by the Parliament.²⁹ Their preference is consistent with the ways in which white men of the little traditions were suspicious of authority and social institutions imposed from above.

²⁴Scott Gibson, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Durban, 15 July, 1998.

²⁵Wally Stewart, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Kimberley, 28 June 2000.

²⁶Ronnie Stockwell, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Kimberley, 28 June 2000.

²⁷“Van” Van Rensburg, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Durban, 15 July 1998.

²⁸The Sable, Official Organ of the 6th South African Armoured Division, (December, 1944).

²⁹Ibid.

The Springbok Legion, a type of soldiers' trade union, was by far the most important wartime forum for white troops' discussion of social justice. The Legion was formed in 1941 with the aim of "getting a square deal for soldiers," and it attracted a fairly substantial following amongst white servicemen. As Vic Clapham, a founding member of the Springbok Legion stated, the "concept spread like wildfire."³⁰ Just two years after its formation, the Legion could boast a membership of 44,000³¹; by the end of 1944 this figure had swelled to 55,200.³² The war years were the high point of the Legion's history as a mass movement, after which its support base began to wane. The Legion limped along until 1953, when it amalgamated with the Democratic League and the Congress of Democrats (COD) to become part of the South African Congress of Democrats (SACOD).³³

Sadly, the history of the Legion, as with the history of white servicemen more generally, has been largely ignored by scholars. In addition to my Master of Arts

³⁰Vic Clapham, interview by author, transcript, Botha's Hill, 29 December 1986.

³¹Minutes of the Round Table Conference held between Delegates of the South African Legion of the BESL and Delegates from the Springbok Legion, 5 June 1943, Home Front League, 1942/43, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

³²Secretary's Report Presented to the Second National Conference of the Springbok Legion, 10th & 11th February 1945.

³³Neil Roos, "A History of the Springbok Legion, 1941 - 1951" (Master of Arts thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 1990), 116 -165. See also chapter six herein.

thesis³⁴, a book by Henry Pike³⁵, and a more recent article by Barry White³⁶ devote some attention to the Springbok Legion. However, neither study sheds much light on the social and cultural history of ordinary white volunteers. The studies by Pike and White are both fixated on the role of communists in the Legion. In the case of Pike, this reduces his work to little more than an exercise in McCarthy-style witch-finding. White's article is considerably more sophisticated than Pike's book, but, in its focus on communists' alleged attempts to align the Legion's policy with that of the CPUSA, he altogether ignores the politics - and indeed, the presence - of those ordinary white men who joined the Legion. In a more recent newspaper article entitled "Not your average Springboks," journalist Mark Gevisser labels the Legion as a "mass movement which was also part of the broad liberation movement."³⁷ As I subsequently replied, the Springbok Legion was a mass movement, and it was part of the broad liberation movement. However, these two moments in the Legion's history did not coincide, and the numerically large wartime Legion bore little resemblance to the post-war Legion. By 1946, the Legion's membership was reduced to about 100 active legionnaires, and it was these who formed the radical core described by Gevisser.³⁸

³⁴Ibid. See also idem, "Servicemen and Honour: The Springbok Legion, 1941-1947," (Paper presented to the South African Historical Society Conference, Rhodes University, July 1995).

³⁵Henry Pike, A History of Communism in South Africa, (Johannesburg: n.p., 1985).

³⁶Barry White, "The Role of the Springbok Legion in the Communist Party of South Africa's Common Front Strategy, 1941-1950," Kleio, xxv (1993): 95 - 99.

³⁷Mark Gevisser, "Not your average Springboks," Sunday Times, (Johannesburg), 1 November, 1998.

³⁸Neil Roos, "Politics of the Legion's leaders not those of rank and file," Sunday Times, (Johannesburg), 22 November, 1998.

A brief methodological note

Part of the reason why the Springbok Legion has been largely ignored by academic commentators lies in the ambiguity, missed by Gevisser, deriving from its position on the fringes of mainstream historiographical concerns. While the Legion did attract a considerable mass membership amongst soldiers *during* the war, this fact has failed to ignite much scholarly interest, for much the same reason that the history of ordinary white men has been neglected. From the late 1940s, rank-and-file members *fled* the Legion, reducing its scholarly appeal as a mass movement. And while a number of radical white activists remained in the Legion, and increasingly threw their weight behind the Congress movement, students of the liberation movement have tended to concentrate their attention on the major protagonists in the developing struggle against apartheid, particularly the ANC.³⁹

The lack of scholarly interest in the Legion can also be attributed to the paucity of the type of public, official source material upon which so many South African historians have traditionally relied. While some institutions⁴⁰ and individuals⁴¹ have in their possession a miscellany of minutes, reports and pamphlets, the William Cullen Library of the University of the Witwatersrand houses the only substantial

³⁹See Roos, "A History of the Springbok Legion," 116-165; Rusty Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics, 1938-1964, (London: Viking, 1999), 129-236.

⁴⁰Such as the Johannesburg Public Library and the Don Africana Library in Durban.

⁴¹For example Professor W. Kleynhans, formerly head of the Department of Political Studies, University of South Africa.

concentration of Legion material - and even this is not a substantial collection.

Moreover, those sources housed in the Cullen are copies of documents presented to the 1956 Treason Trial, a situation which in itself suggests that they might form part of a particular, only partial narrative about the Legion.

Especially for the period after 1950, it has proven well nigh impossible to gain access to documentary sources, for in late 1952, the security police raided the Legion's Johannesburg office - effectively the head office - and seized minute books and other records for the preceding two years.⁴² Consequently, for the three final years of the Legion's history until 1953, Fighting Talk, a journal published by the Legion, is one of the few textual sources available. However for the type of analysis attempted by this thesis, the language employed by Fighting Talk - as it tried to tap into popular sentiments amongst white ex-servicemen - is a far more valuable source than minutes, reports or any other "true" record of the Legion's history.

When I first began working on the Springbok Legion in 1986, I imagined that the oral testimony of legionnaires who occupied leadership positions in the organisation would be a particularly rich field of enquiry. While some former legionnaires - most notably Roley Arentstein, Vic Clapham and Guy Routh - were veritable mines of information, this source group failed to live up to my expectations, largely due to the political climate in South Africa at the time. During the early apartheid years, the Legion was subject to official harassment, and many of the last group of legionnaires were subsequently driven into exile. At the time when I conducted the research, the

⁴²Chairman's Report to the National Conference, April 1953, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

Communist Party, along with a plethora of other organisations which were part of the broad liberation movement - however tangentially - were still banned, as were many members and former members of such organisations. A State of Emergency was in place in South Africa. Amongst those former legionnaires still in the country, this climate of repression induced something of a reluctance to relate their experiences in the Legion.

When I re-commenced this research in the mid-1990s, the political climate in South Africa had changed dramatically. I interviewed a number of white ex-servicemen who were once members of the Springbok Legion, and for the most part they were willing to discuss their memories and impressions of the Legion. However, with the exception of Rusty Bernstein's recently published autobiography,⁴³ I have uncovered no new published sources giving an account of the Legion's history.

Formation of the Springbok Legion

In an attempt to alleviate their boredom, men of the Tank Corps based at the Kaffirskraal training camp near Klerksdorp decided in 1941 to form a debating society. In light of the popular belief that white troops had suffered grievous neglect at the hands of the state after the First World War, the volunteers based at Kaffirskraal debated the topic of social justice and the problem of post-war rehabilitation of ex-servicemen. Vic Clapham, formerly cartoonist at the Guardian newspaper, also suggested that soldiers contact the Memorable Order of Tin Hats

⁴³Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting.

(MOTH), an ex-service organisation founded in Durban in 1927, to determine if the MOTH would represent the interests of serving soldiers. However MOTH leader Charles Evenden curtly replied that, since the MOTH was an organisation for "frontline soldiers," those still in base camps were ineligible for MOTH membership. Clapham proposed instead that soldiers establish their own organisation, whose primary aim should be a sound rehabilitation programme for volunteers after the war.⁴⁴ In mid-1941, two additional soldiers' groups, not unlike the Kaffirskraal debating society, were founded by troops based in Egypt (the Soldiers' Interest Committee) and Abyssinia (the Union of Soldiers).⁴⁵ Representatives of the three groups established contact and a series of meetings ensued. The three organisations subsequently amalgamated to form the Springbok Legion of Soldiers in Johannesburg in December 1941.⁴⁶

Besides the MOTH, another, older ex-service organisation in the field was the British Empire Service League (BESL). According to the Springbok Legion's analysis, both the MOTH and the BESL were partly responsible for the "shameful state of affairs" that arose after the First World War when the government reneged on its promises to ex-servicemen. In particular, MOTH and BESL acceptance of the principle of charity, coupled with their surrender of political pressure were severely criticised by the

⁴⁴Most of the above account draws on information gleaned during my interviews with Clapham. Vic Clapham, interviews by author, transcript, Botha's Hill, 29 December, 1986, 17 January 1987, 28 January 1987 and 12 March, 1987. See also Simons and Simons, Class and Colour, 540.

⁴⁵Springbok Legion: The History and Policy, (Johannesburg: Springbok Legion, 1944), 2. [Pamphlet]

⁴⁶The Springbok Legion: Who We Are, What We Believe, How We Teach, (Johannesburg: Springbok Legion, n.d.), 1. [Pamphlet]

Legion.⁴⁷ The failure of the MOTH and the BESL to recognise the importance of political action rendered them impotent: the BESL little more than a "patriotic society," and the MOTH a "convivial organisation."⁴⁸ For the Legion, the safeguarding of ex-servicemen's interests necessitated the abandonment of the "apolitical" idiosyncrasies of existing ex-service organisations, and recognition of the importance of political pressure.

Accordingly, the centrality of political action was acknowledged at the Springbok Legion's inaugural conference in 1941, where a set of aims and objectives for the new organisation were drawn up and later ratified into its constitution. The first three points emphasised the Legion's commitment to safeguarding the material interests of ex-servicemen and women. These aims were:

1. To ensure decent work, pay and adequate living conditions for life for all ex-servicemen and women.
2. To gain economic security for the dependents of fallen soldiers, sailors and airmen.
3. To protect returned soldiers, sailors and airmen from exploitation in any shape or form, and to guard their interests and those of their dependents.⁴⁹

⁴⁷History and Policy, 3.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid., 16.

These three points recognised the precarious condition of First World War veterans, while emphasising the Legion's commitment to safeguarding the interests of Second World War volunteers. The Legion's constitution pledged the fledgling organisation to a policy of vigorous intervention. The Legion's aims were not all that different from those of the MOTH and the BESL. What differentiated the Legion from these other soldiers' organisations was the realisation that the provision of adequate work, rather than charity, lay at the heart of a sound post-war rehabilitation programme.

The remaining three Aims and Objectives of the Legion's constitution acknowledged the political character of rehabilitating ex-servicemen, and reserved the right to take political action as necessary. This right to political action further set the Legion apart from the older ex-service organisations. These Aims and Objectives were:

4. To carry over into civilian life the unity and co-operation among races which was achieved on the battlefield.
5. To oppose any individual, group, party or movement which attempts to undermine the principle or practice of democracy.
6. To give active support to any individual, group, party or movement working for a society based on the principles of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.⁵⁰

These articles sketched, in very broad terms, the type of political order necessary to attain "social justice" in post-war South Africa. In a colonial context, these Aims and

⁵⁰Ibid. "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity' were later replaced by "The Four Freedoms enshrined in the United Nations Charter."

Objectives were loaded with ambiguity, particularly in light of the evolving discourses about race and the “race question” from the late 1920s. For ordinary legionnaires, these articles had vastly different meanings than they did for some of the Legion’s leadership. These competing interpretations not only of the Legion’s Aims and Objectives, but of social justice itself, would provide the site for ideological struggle amongst legionnaires, and ultimately break the organisation.

Several of the Legion’s founding members gravitated towards the leadership of the new organisation, which was tasked with ensuring the establishment of a sound post-war rehabilitation programme for servicemen and women. Some, like Vic Clapham and Rev. G. du Manoir, sought to develop an organisation that could cater specifically for the “modern” South African volunteer who would return to civilian life after the war. Thus, the Legion positioned itself as an alternative to the MOTH and the BESL, which were widely associated with older veterans of the First World War. The Legion’s emphasis on the needs of contemporary soldiers resonated strongly with ordinary white volunteers.

In addition, the Legion’s potential to mobilise large numbers of white volunteers sparked the interest of certain members of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). Recalling the occasion of the Legion’s inaugural conference, former legionnaire and Durban District Secretary of the CPSA, Roley Arentstein commented:

I was at the inauguration of the Springbok Legion in Johannesburg. This organisation was started by the [Communist] Party, and communists played a prominent role in its leadership, organisation and development.⁵¹

⁵¹Arentstein interview.

In a similar vein, political commentator and one time CPSA stalwart Eddie Roux wrote in his autobiography: "The communists hoped to capitalise on the sentiments of soldiers returning from the war, and took over the ex-servicemen's organisation called the Springbok Legion."⁵²

Arentstein and Roux do perhaps overstate the case for the CPSA "starting" the Springbok Legion or "taking it over." Nonetheless, their assertions, unambiguous as they are, raise the question of why members of the CPSA were so interested in the Legion. An analysis of the CPSA's interest in the Springbok Legion needs to be rooted in an understanding of how the CPSA's ideology and policy changed over time.

In 1921, the International Socialist League fused with other Marxist groups in Johannesburg to form the CPSA, and the new party was accepted as the South African affiliate of the Third International. From the outset, the CPSA was beset by ideological and doctrinal problems arising from the complexities of applying Marxism-Leninism to South Africa, and of reconciling the Party's commitment to both black and white workers.⁵³ While the CPSA's energies were initially directed towards organising militant white workers, this strategy ended in disillusionment for communists with the 1924 Pact between the National and Labour Parties. The CPSA's attention then shifted towards African politics, and the party developed close ties with the Industrial and Commercial Union (1924-1926) and the African National Congress (1927-

⁵²Eddie Roux, and Win Roux Rebel Pity, (Johannesburg, n.p., 1971), .228.

⁵³Sheridan Johns, " The birth of the Communist Party of South Africa," International Journal of African Historical Studies IX, 3: 399.

1930).⁵⁴ In 1928, the Comintern decided to Bolshevise (to subject them to the theoretical discipline of the Comintern) its affiliates⁵⁵. As a consequence, the CPSA's tradition of empirical "trial and error" was subordinated to the rigours of theoretical clarity, as the Party was compelled to adopt the slogan of "an independent Native Republic as a stage towards a workers' and peasants' government."⁵⁶ Excessive interference from the Comintern caused the resignation of many CPSA stalwarts. The drift away from the CPSA was compounded by a purge of "right wing opportunists" which, at the admission of Eddie Roux, "succeeded not only in crushing the 'Right Danger', but in smashing the Party."⁵⁷ Responding to the growing danger of Nazism and other forms of totalitarianism in Europe, the CPSA dropped its "independent Native Republic" slogan in 1937, endorsing a programme of reformism and calling for an anti-Nazi popular front of all democratic, liberal minded people.⁵⁸

Still two more ideological *volte-faces* were to follow. With the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in 1939, the CPSA moved leftwards once more. Thus, even when the war between the western allies and Nazi Germany broke out in September 1939, South African communists refused to support the Allied war effort. A statement published in Inkululeko, the CPSA journal, declared that "in the war

⁵⁴Eddie Roux, S.P. Bunting: A Political Biography, (Johannesburg: n.p., 1944), 60; Simons and Simons, Class and Colour p.350.

⁵⁵Roux, S.P. Bunting, 124.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 144.

⁵⁸Eddie Roux, Time Longer than Rope: The Black Man's Struggle for Freedom in South Africa, (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1964, 2nd ed.), 308.

against Germany, we have not war against oppression. In fact it is a war to retain oppression."⁵⁹ More than a decade of convoluted politics and purges had robbed the CPISA of much of numerical support. By 1940, membership was down to an abysmal 250, 180 of whom were based in Johannesburg.⁶⁰ Then on 22 June 1941, and in breach of the Non-Aggression Pact concluded three years previously, the German army invaded the Soviet Union. The CPISA unhesitatingly dropped its neutralist line and committed what remained of its ideological and organisational support to the Allied war effort. Acknowledging the need to protect the Soviet Union and to smash the fascist menace, the CPISA's assessment of the war was immediately transformed. A communique' issued on 26 June 1941 by the CPISA Central Committee declared that:

Soviet Russia has been attacked by the Fascist Axis without the slightest justifiable reason. The Soviet Union is today not only defending the home of Socialism, but is also fighting for the cause of freedom of all other nations and peoples.⁶¹

The new set of conditions occasioned by the USSR's entry into the war meant that once again, the CPISA - as with other communist parties - moved away from the Bolshevik position towards a more pragmatic reformism. In accordance with this new ethos, the notion of a popular front against fascism gained currency within the CPISA

⁵⁹"Money for War," in Inkululeko, cited in South African Communists Speak, (London: n.p., 1981), 137.

⁶⁰Alan Brooks, "From Class Struggle to National Liberation: The Communist Party of South Africa, 1940-1950," (Master of Arts thesis, University of Sussex, 1967), 25; See also Brian Bunting, Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary, (London: n.p., 1964), 76.

⁶¹ "All support for the Soviet Union," Statement issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of South Africa and published in The Guardian, 26 June 1941. Cited in South African Communists Speak, 162

hierarchy. The statement issued on 26 June 1941 acknowledged the need for a more pragmatic strategy, in order to overcome the forces of fascism: "The CPSA calls upon the working class and freedom loving peoples to give their unqualified support to the Soviet Union in its struggles against the Nazi aggressors."⁶²

In spite of its commitment to the war effort and a patriotic front, the CPSA's fundamental policy orientation did not change. It remained a party of the working class. At the same time, and especially in the wake of the Soviet Union's heroic defence of Stalingrad in 1942-1943, both the Soviet Union and communism gained a unheard of measure of respectability amongst white South Africans.⁶³ Changing political conditions and a more accommodating political environment combined to invest the CPSA hierarchy with a new vitality, prompting a re-evaluation of the CPSA's strategy towards the white working class in South Africa. While CPSA rhetoric had never ceased to pay lip service to the goal of non-racial working class solidarity, the CPSA had by all intents and purposes written off the white working class following the 1924 Pact between the NP and the LP. But now, the CPSA resurrected its commitment to the praxis of an undivided and non-racial working class. Its renewed interest in white workers was evident in a resolution passed at the Party's 1944 National Conference, whereby the CPSA "pledge[d] itself to strive for the creation of a firm workers' alliance based upon the Communist Party, the Labour

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³A measure of this respectability was that Party Chairman Bill Andrews was invited to present a speech, and a choir from the Jewish Workers' Club sang the *Internationale* on SABC radio. In interviews, both Arentstein and Strachan commented on the CP's wartime respectability and even popularity.

Party and the trade unions.”⁶⁴

A mass movement of white soldiers like the Springbok Legion coincided with the CPISA’s “rediscovery” of the white working class, as well as with its nascent ideological re-orientation towards a non-racial working class. The Legion was widely popular amongst white troops, and the CPISA assumed that legionnaires were a progressive section of the white working class.⁶⁵ As Arentstein commented, communists believed that through the Springbok Legion, they could “capture intact the more progressive elements of the white working class.”⁶⁶ In other words, communists hoped to use the Legion as a means of re-organising white political culture. Suggestively, it was once again poorer whites - men of the little tradition - who were assigned a pivotal role in determining the overall shape of the colonial order. As an added advantage, the Legion was free from the “apolitical” tradition of other service and veterans’ organisations, and was therefore not implicitly bound to the prevailing political order, or dependent on its charity.

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, many white South African communists volunteered to serve in the UDF. Most subsequently joined the Springbok Legion, as Bernstein writes, in the hope that radical political activity would

⁶⁴Resolutions adopted at the National Conference of the CPISA, Johannesburg, 14-16 January, 1944, cited in Brooks, “From Class Struggle to National Liberation,” 57.

⁶⁵Roley Arentstein, interview by author, transcript, 24 June, 1986.

⁶⁶Ibid.

be possible.⁶⁷ Some communists were soon elected to office in the Legion, perhaps in recognition of the reputation for hard work which communists learned while serving the Party.⁶⁸ At the Legion's first national Conference in 1942, for example, communists Jock Isacowitz and Jack Hodgson were elected National Chairman and National Secretary respectively, while John O'Meara and Joe Podbrey were also elected to the Legion executive.⁶⁹ Other Party members including Roley Arentstein and Roy du Preez were active in subordinate units of the Legion, most notably the Johannesburg Branch Committee.

A trade union of the ranks

The Springbok Legion proved immensely popular amongst white troops. What was immediately appealing to white volunteers was the Legion's style, which was very different from the bluff patriotism of other ex-service organisations. The Springbok Legion was conceived self-consciously as a trade union of the ranks, designed to act in the interests of its service and ex-service members. The Legion promoted itself as the militant champion of soldiers' and ex-service rights, and promised to fight for a "square deal for soldiers." Meek acceptance of the state's benevolence, which was popularly held to have resulted in such grievous neglect of veterans after the First World War, was not part of the Legion's lexicon. During wartime, the Legion's claims

⁶⁷For an account of how Rusty Bernstein, as a Party functionary, found his way into the Union Defence Force, see Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting, 66-72.

⁶⁸Ibid., 45-49.

⁶⁹Fighting Talk, May 1942. (A monthly journal published by the Springbok Legion).

were, for the most part, supported by action; as one former rank-and-file legionnaire commented, what attracted him to the Legion was "that it got things done."⁷⁰

A variety of well-presented publications and pamphlets sustained the Legion's image as a militant trade union for soldiers, and so contributed to the organisation's growth. Fighting Talk, a lively journal published monthly by the Legion from September 1942, carried articles on such topics as citizenship, current affairs, economics, education, entertainment and race relations. Fighting Talk also clearly articulated the Legion's pro-active approach to dealing with the UDF. Besides Fighting Talk, Barbwire Bulletin and Reef Barb were also monthly news sheets published by the Springbok Legion, although both were short-lived.⁷¹ Occasional pamphlets and booklets were also published and distributed by the Legion. Like Fighting Talk, these were bright and well-conceived to convey the Legion's stance on particular issues. Although the tempo of pamphleteering picked up from about 1946 - perhaps paper shortages restrained high-volume printing during the war - the Legion did circulate an evocative series shortly before the 1943 general election, warning soldiers of the dangers they might face should the UP not secure a sound majority.⁷² The Springbok Legion's militancy, its disavowal of charity, the assertive distance it maintained from the state

⁷⁰Interview with Eddie W__, 24 April, 1987. The informant wished to remain anonymous. The Springbok Legion was amongst the many organisations in South Africa branded "communist" by the apartheid government. In 1987, communism was still illegal and the hint of any association - even 40 years distant - with a "communist" organisation could bring heavy social implications. This accounts for the informant's reluctance to allow his name to be published as a member of the Springbok Legion.

⁷¹Roos, "A History of the Springbok Legion," 17-18.

⁷²ibid.

and its willingness to take on the military authorities all tapped into a language of politics which, as Clynick⁷³ and others have shown, was familiar to the majority of troops, who were drawn from the little traditions in white South African society.

The Legion's militant style was complemented by a fairly democratic organisational structure. In his work on popular political culture amongst Afrikaners, Clynick has argued that strands of "democracy," which traced their origins back to pre-capitalist Boer egalitarianism, featured centrally in radical Afrikaner republicanism during the 1920s and 1930s.⁷⁴ It would be fair to suggest that this aspect of the Legion also resonated with the experience of many white volunteers, especially Afrikaners. As early as March 1942, the lines of a fairly democratic organisational structure for the Legion were laid. At the lowest tier was the camp committee in the UDF, and the ex-servicemen's branch for those who had already been demobilised. Attempts were made to establish branches in all UDF bases and towns in South Africa, and the function of such branches was to recruit new members into the Legion and to distribute its literature.⁷⁵ Next up the hierarchy were the area committees which supervised the activities of subordinate units and sent delegates to the National Council. The Council determined Legion policy for the forthcoming year and also elected the National Executive tasked with the implementation of policy.⁷⁶ A structure of this sort should have offered potential for a fairly responsive organisation,

⁷³Clynick, "Afrikaner Political Mobilization," 61-134.

⁷⁴Ibid., 31-34.

⁷⁵History and Policy, 6.

⁷⁶Who We Are, What We Believe, How We Teach, 1.

sensitive to the concerns of rank-and-file members. However, the Legion was not as pro-active as its formal organisation would suggest, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the transient nature of active military service made it difficult for serving members of the Legion to attend to the myriad clerical and administrative tasks associated with the everyday running of the organisation. Secondly, the Military Disciplinary Code frowned upon the extra -military organisation of servicemen and women, and there was a common fear amongst the Legion's leadership that military authorities might undermine their efforts at building the organisation.⁷⁷ They therefore established a body which could oversee the work of the Legion during wartime, and serve as a "second line of defence" should the Legion be suppressed by the military authorities⁷⁸: the Home Front League (HFL), made up of "dependents of soldiers and sympathetic civilians" was established and given a mandate to conduct the Legion's affairs until sufficient numbers of soldiers had been released from their military obligations.⁷⁹

The establishment of the HFL effectively amounted to a lateral shift in executive power from the Legion proper, to the HFL. The role of the HFL partially undermined the Legion's ability to act as the "trade union of the ranks," by negating the democratic conventions that might have kept the leadership so keenly in touch with the rank-and-file. Serving soldiers were not responsible for the conception and implementation of policy; these undertakings had shifted to "dependents of soldiers

⁷⁷Minutes of the Round Table Conference, 5 June 1943; Clapham interviews

⁷⁸ History and Policy, 4

⁷⁹Ibid.

and sympathetic civilians.” Moreover, ordinary soldiers tended to be suspicious of the HFL, in part because it included communists but more importantly because it was made up of civilians. In November 1942, Barbwire Bulletin reported that “many soldiers seem to want the Springbok Legion to be a purely soldiers’ organisation and look with some suspicion on the activities of the Home Front League.”⁸⁰ Guy Routh, a former National Chairman of the Springbok Legion, recalled that soldiers were generally suspicious of civilians.⁸¹

Such suspicion was both encapsulated and articulated by the cartoon concept of the “two types.” Developed by Vic Clapham during his tenure as head of the first Field Propaganda Unit in North Africa,⁸² the cartoon showed the loyal, honest, enthusiastic and hard-working “type” who volunteered to fight for his country. His antithesis was the sneaky, lazy, self-centred “type” of dubious loyalty, who preferred not to serve his country. These “two types” captured and articulated soldiers’ sense of identity, and their sentiments about those who were not in uniform - ranging from “keymen” in industry who were not permitted to enlist, to out-and-out Nazi supporters. The simple “us and them” dichotomy represented by the “two types” was popular amongst troops, and was reproduced in an array of cartoons.⁸³ And despite the enthusiasm that members of the HFL brought to their task of supporting the Legion, they

⁸⁰Barbwire Bulletin, November 1942. (Official monthly newsletter of the Home Front League of the Springbok Legion of Ex-Servicemen and Women).

⁸¹Guy Routh, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 16 March, 1987.

⁸²Clapham interviews.

⁸³For example, see Fighting Talk, May 1943; The Sable, December 1944. (Official monthly newsletter of the 6th South African Division).

remained civilians - the "them" type.

In addition, communists were fairly prominent in the HFL. Their ranks included Vernon Berrange, Ruth First, Bram Fischer, Ivor Glyn Thomas⁸⁴, Solly Sachs and Joe Slovo.⁸⁵ Communists' involvement in servicemen's affairs alarmed some troops. In 1943, for example, the Johannesburg Area Committee of the Springbok Legion received a letter from a Corporal Botha who wished to tender his resignation from the Legion on account of the "Communist element in the Home Front League."⁸⁶ From time to time, Fighting Talk published letters expressing similar concerns.⁸⁷ There were of course communists in the Legion proper. Jock Isacowitz, for example, was National Chair, and he as well as other communists such as Jack Hodgson and Joe Podbrey commanded popularity and respect amongst troops. It is likely that communists who were serving members of the Legion were accepted by ordinary troops due to their status as volunteers. Communists in the HFL were, however, civilians. They were thus subject to an interlocking set of suspicions on the part of white troops, on account of their left-wing politics as well as their civilian status.

It is ironic that, in spite of the distrust with which soldiers generally regarded the HFL,

⁸⁴At the 1995 South African Historical Society conference, Bruce Murray, historian of the University of the Witwatersrand, challenged my claim that Glyn Thomas, onetime University Registrar, was a communist. In his autobiography, Bernstein asserts that Glyn Thomas was a member of the CPSA. See Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting, 17.

⁸⁵Fighting Talk, June/July, 1942. Glyn Thomas was chair of the HFL.

⁸⁶Springbok Legion Johannesburg Area Committee Minutes, 1943, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

⁸⁷See, for example, Fighting Talk, February 1943.

it was able to win more substantive gains for serving troops than the Legion proper. Perhaps its ability to organise and agitate, free from the constraints of the military, worked in its favour. In early 1942, the HFL issued a call for higher pay for soldiers and improved pension benefits for dependents of the fallen. The HFL's appeal was followed up by a series of public gatherings culminating in a mass meeting of soldiers encamped at Pietermaritzburg that "awakened South Africa to the demand until it became a national demand."⁸⁸ What is interesting is that the HFL demanded "equal salaries for all ranks," an objective that was popularly supported by serving troops and civilians alike.⁸⁹ By early 1943, when it seemed that the HFL's campaign might engender dissent throughout the UDF, the government agreed to meet a joint Springbok Legion / HFL delegation to discuss the soldiers' wages and benefits, and a small across-the-board improvement in salaries, gratuities and pensions was negotiated.⁹⁰

Apart from the successful wage negotiations led by the HFL, the Springbok Legion's ability to intervene on behalf of the rank-and-file was highly constrained, at least during wartime and until sufficient legionnaires had been demobilised to take over the affairs of the organisation. Working within the bounded channels afforded by the military, the Legion proper could hope to achieve only a general amelioration of the

⁸⁸Fighting Talk, September 1942

⁸⁹Home Front League, Chairman's Report, 17 April, 1943, Home Front League, 1942/43, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

⁹⁰Ibid.; Springbok Legion Action Committee Report, 30 June 1943, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

working conditions experienced by soldiers. The Legion succeeded in negotiating benefits like subsidised canteens, lifts for soldiers in army vehicles and ground sheets for all soldiers.⁹¹ The importance of such benefits to soldiers on active service should not be underestimated. In addition, for soldiers drawn from the poorer sectors of white society - for whom the military guaranteed at least the dignity of employment and a wage as well as the promise of a "square deal" after the war - even the limited gains won by the Legion during wartime stood in stark contrast to the complacency of other service and veterans organisations.

Winning white soldiers' hearts and minds

From the outset, the Springbok Legion emphasised the political character of its Aims and Objectives, and acknowledged the need for action in the more obvious domain of "politics." During the early, more desperate years of the war, when an Allied victory was by no means certain, the Legion highlighted the urgent need to defeat the fascist menace, not only on the battlefield but also back home. In 1942, with Rommel's armies threatening Alexandria in Egypt, the 6th Division of the UDF launched a frantic recruitment drive. Frustrated at the 6th Division's dull attempts, the HFL launched its own recruitment drive with the blessing of Colonel Werdmuller, head of the 6th Division Recruiting Team. HFL members along with available legionnaires campaigned across the Union, holding meetings and distributing pamphlets.⁹² It is difficult to gauge the success of this recruitment drive in numerical terms.

⁹¹ History and Policy, 12

⁹² *Ibid.*, 11.

Nevertheless, members of the HFL and the Legion undertook their campaign with characteristic militancy and verve: rejecting Smuts' hesitant views on enlistment, as well as his cautious approach to Afrikaner nationalists opposed to the war effort, HFL and Legion recruiters demanded selective conscription of all able-bodied white men.

In 1943, on the eve of a general election, the Legion anticipated its role in contributing to a UP victory, through the delivery of the service vote. Accordingly, a handful of Legion representatives met with Dr. Colin Steyn, Minister of Justice, at the Union Buildings in Pretoria. The Legion was able to secure Steyn's promise of official recognition for the Legion and a "decent rehabilitation programme," in return for assisting the UP to win the election.⁹³ In the run-up to the election the Legion conducted an extensive campaign on the UP's behalf amongst servicemen, both in the Union and Up North.⁹⁴ Vic Clapham claims - fairly plausibly, given his career before, during and after the war - that he was responsible for much of the propaganda and organisation during the 1943 election campaign.⁹⁵ Soldiers were urged to support the pro-war candidates and not to "allow their grievances to sway them in their realisation of the issues at stake."⁹⁶ Only a pro-war government would "guarantee peace through victory."⁹⁷ The Legion's efforts amongst white servicemen

⁹³Clapham interviews.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Rand Daily Mail, 14 June 1943, cited in Union Unity Truth Services Press Digest, no. 346. (Compiled by the Jewish Board of Deputies, Johannesburg).

⁹⁷Cape Times, 12 June 1943, cited in Union Unity Truth Services Press Digest, no. 346.

undoubtedly contributed to the UP's overwhelming majority, while the UP was also able to capitalise on a wave of growing pro-war sentiment as South Africa's role in the war became increasingly successful following the Allied victory in the Battle of El Alamein in October 1942.

The Legion constantly alerted its members to the dangers of "home front fascism." Such dangers, the Legion warned, issued not only from the militant pro-Nazi wing of the Afrikaner nationalist movement - such as Pirow's New Order and the *Ossewa Brandwag* - but also from the National Party itself. The Legion suggested that if the NP came to power, it might not honour the state's social, economic and moral obligations to soldiers.⁹⁸ During the war years, the Springbok Legion's politics, which aimed to sustain the war effort at home and beyond, coincided neatly with white soldiers' wartime concerns and expectations of peace. As Brian Bunting - communist, veteran and legionnaire - recalled, white servicemen's hopes extended beyond securing a "square deal" for themselves.⁹⁹ They wanted to end fascism and Nazism, not only on the battlefield, but at home. This ideal was captured by the service magazine *Libertas* when it described volunteers as "The true Builders of the Better World."¹⁰⁰ In its "political" role, the Springbok Legion supported the UP's war effort and questioned the loyalty of whites who were either opposed to South Africa's participation in the war, or supported the war less than unenthusiastically.

⁹⁸History and Policy, 31; see also most wartime issues of Fighting Talk.

⁹⁹Brian Bunting, interview by author, transcript, Cape Town, 11 January, 2001.

¹⁰⁰Libertas, vol.5, no.4 (March, 1945), special edition entitled "Salute to the 6th Division."

Periodically, the Legion's leadership asserted the type of non-racialism, suggested by its Aims and Objectives and favoured by its more left-inclined members. The booklet History and Policy, for example, declared that the Legion was "unalterably opposed to racial hatred or intolerance of any kind and considers one of its major tasks to be the preservation of the racial harmony that exists in the Army."¹⁰¹ Similar sentiments were echoed in a pamphlet called Rasse Samewerking in Suid Afrika.¹⁰² However, at least during the war, the Legion's efforts in the "political" realm were most tentative. After declaring the Legion's rejection of "racial hatred," the very next sentence in History and Policy extolled the virtues of racial friendliness and comradeship existing "between English and Afrikaans speaking soldiers in our present Army."¹⁰³ By diluting its appeals for racial harmony, the Legion allowed troops to interpret this ideal from the perspective of their own racist culture, in much the same way as they interpreted the AES's vague liberal appeals. The Legion's failure to take an unequivocal stance on "racial friendliness" therefore contained some of the contradictions inherent in notions of non-racialism in a colonial society. "Social justice," as a unifying concept, therefore remained intact, at least for the time being.

Despite the Legion's tentative wartime politics, mainstream South African media, concerned about the Legion's militancy and its left-wing tendencies, tried to warn servicemen away from the Legion. In 1942, for example, the Natal Witness issued a

¹⁰¹History and Policy, 18.

¹⁰²Rasse Samewerking in Suid Afrika, (Johannesburg: Springbok Legion, 1945). [Pamphlet, translated as "Racial Cooperation in South Africa"]

¹⁰³History and Policy, 18.

veiled warning to soldiers, to steer clear of the Legion and find "legitimate channels" for the redress of their grievances. The Witness went on to urge servicemen to be wary of:

. . . political exploitation . . . and the wiles of Communist Party groups and Trade Unions for these organisations were eager to capture the political interests of soldiers and to use the considerable political value attached to soldiers.¹⁰⁴

Die Transvaler, mouthpiece of the National Party in the Transvaal, described the Legion with its customary lack of equivocation when it wrote that: "The body of the Springbok Legion wears a uniform, but its voice is that of Comrade Joe Stalin."¹⁰⁵ Despite such accusations, the Legion continued to speak the language of little men, and during the war years its popularity amongst white volunteers remained unchallenged.

Bring the boys home! Repatriation and the Helwan riot

On 13 May 1943, the last remaining Axis troops on African soil surrendered. While a small number of South Africans, mainly airmen and engineers, volunteered for extended service in the Italian theatre, most declined to take the new oath, preferring repatriation to the Union.¹⁰⁶ To cope with the anticipated rush of applications for repatriation and demobilisation, a statutory Directorate of Demobilization was established to "place before the nation a comprehensive and general scheme for the

¹⁰⁴ Natal Witness, n.d., cited in Union Unity Truth Service Press Digest, no.332, 24 December 1942.

¹⁰⁵ Die Transvaler, 30 January 1943, cited in Union Unity Truth Services Press Digest, no.328, 4 February 1943.

¹⁰⁶ J.G. 29/1945: First Annual Report of the Directorate of Demobilization, 1

reabsorption of its ex-volunteers into civilian life.”¹⁰⁷ The Directorate appointed a Discharged Soldiers' Demobilization Committee (DSDC) which included representatives of the Legion, the BESL and the MOTH, in an advisory capacity.¹⁰⁸ In April 1944, a full eleven months after the guns had fallen silent in North Africa, Minister of the Interior Harry Lawrence presented to the House of Assembly the Soldiers' Charter, which promised swift demobilisation and a wholesome package of benefits for veterans.¹⁰⁹ However, despite the fanfare that accompanied Lawrence's manifesto, it failed to speed up the rate of repatriation, or to infuse the process of social integration with either cohesion or urgency. As late as November 1944, the Director of Demobilization complained to his subordinates that the rate of repatriation and demobilisation was unsatisfactorily slow.¹¹⁰

By March 1945, the German Reich was tottering on its last legs, and on 2 May 1945, the Berlin garrison surrendered. Yet South African soldiers were kept hanging about in transit camps in Egypt and the Union: “To say that the maladministration of the demobilisation scheme at this end [Egypt] is the usual UDF balls-up is an

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁹ White veterans were to receive a more substantial package than their black counterparts. Jacklyn Cock, “Demobilization and Democracy: The relevance of the 1944 ‘Soldiers’ Charter’ in Southern Africa today,” (Paper presented to University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, July 1994), 1.

¹¹⁰ Director of Demobilization to Regional Demobilization officers, Demob Contact Letter, 19 November 1944, UPCHO, World War II Demobilization 1944-1946, Correspondence, publications and circulars, UNISA.

understatement," is how one army captain summed up the situation.¹¹¹ Besides the frustration which such delays in repatriation and demobilisation bred, the transit camps were frequently overcrowded and lacking in essential facilities.¹¹² The most notorious were Hay Paddock near Pietermaritzburg, and Helwan, situated about 90 kilometres from Cairo. Despite its strong pro-government bias, The Natal Mercury reported that: "There was considerable discontent about the conditions of Hay Paddock, and an investigation by The Natal Mercury showed that there were good grounds for complaint."¹¹³ The Natal Mercury's assessment of Helwan was far more scathing:

'Helwan Camp.' Mention those two words to any South African soldier who has been away from the Union for any length of time and involuntarily he will shudder and groan. To the Springbok in uniform the name "Helwan" conjures up memories of dust storms, of sweltering heat, of blistering white sand, of acute discomfort and the worst type of military base camp red tape.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹Cited in Francois Oosthuizen, "The Demobilisation of the White Union Defence Force Soldiers During and After the Second World War," (Master of Arts thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, 1993), 107.

¹¹²The Natal Mercury, 9 August 1945.

¹¹³*Ibid.*, 12 April 1945.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*, 9 August 1945.

In August 1945, white South African troops stationed at Helwan rioted. On the evening of 17 August 1945, soldiers began to demonstrate at two open air cinemas. P. Levings, who was in the audience that night, claims that someone stood up during the film and shouted "why do we have such crappy bioscope?"¹¹⁵ A soldier then "shouted that there would be a meeting on the Dooley Briscoe Memorial Parade Ground one hour later."¹¹⁶ He was largely ignored, but soon afterwards the film show was again disrupted when "a few soldiers outside started throwing empty bottles and stones against the wooden polings enclosing the cinema and smashed open the doors."¹¹⁷ The audience then streamed out of the cinema and events took a more violent turn. It seems that some looting took place: Reg Style, who was wounded on the last day of the war and arrived at Helwan on the afternoon of the riot, recalls passing the canteen, where South African troops were handing out free beer.¹¹⁸ A row of Egyptian-owned shops in the camp were burned, and while the "actual fire-raising seemed to be carried out by less than a score of men. . . they obviously had the sympathy of thousands looking on."¹¹⁹ In the adjacent camp, which housed South African servicewomen, news of the rioting prompted a rape scare.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵P. Levings, interview by author, transcript, Johannesburg, 19 July, 1997.

¹¹⁶The Natal Mercury, 24 August, 1945.

¹¹⁷Ibid.

¹¹⁸Reg Style, interview by author, transcript, Durban North, 18 June, 1997.

¹¹⁹The Natal Mercury, 24 August, 1945.

¹²⁰Thelma Velleman, interview by author, transcript, Mafikeng, 8 April, 1998.

Realising the extent of popular anger amongst troops, the military authorities at Helwan did not try to stop the riot - a wise decision. Instead they tried to control the damage. Troops of the Second Echelon, which held the personnel records of all South African soldiers on active service in North Africa and Italy, were ordered to their posts and issued with tommy guns. They were instructed to shoot rioting soldiers in the event that the records were threatened.¹²¹ In addition, a New Zealand fire brigade was summoned, but when they arrived at Helwan, their hoses were slashed by South Africans. After being informed about the South African troops' grievances, the New Zealanders refused to participate in any fire fighting activities.

Later in the evening, as the force and fury of the riot subsided, troops gathered for a meeting on the parade ground. Private R. Levin stood up and, to the applause and acclaim of the 9,000 white troops present, declared:

We are tired of broken promises. The government which persecuted the war with such energy must understand that we expect the same efforts to be made in the comparatively small task of getting us home. Promises have been made which we expect and demand should be kept. Shipping must be found, and when we get home, we want houses to live in. The government has talked about them for two years. They must stop talking and do some building¹²²

Needless to say, Levin's comments touched raw nerves of white service frustration and expectation.

Levin's angry statement, located in a broader account of the riot including its

¹²¹Levings interview.

¹²²Fighting Talk, September 1945.

antecedents as well as its consequences, raises a number of interesting questions. Firstly, why did troops riot? Secondly, does the riot provide commentary on white troops' relations with the state? with the Springbok Legion? Finally, did the riot in any way indicate a re-configuration of the cultural politics of whiteness amongst white volunteers?

A military Court of Enquiry placed the blame for the riot squarely on the shoulders of the Legion. Moreover, the Court of Enquiry declared that "Springbok Legion propaganda and presence in North Africa was not conducive to military discipline."¹²³ In light of official military prejudice against the Springbok Legion, as well as a series of events which seemed to connect the Legion to the riot, it is not difficult to imagine the context within which the Court made its findings. In the first place, Private Levin, the main speaker at the meeting which took place after the riot, was a Springbok Legion organiser. In addition, the Legion had been active for some time in articulating service grievances against faltering strategies to repatriate and demobilise troops.

The Legion was, however, aware that its advisory role on the DSDC severely constrained its capacity to hasten repatriation and demobilisation through official channels. As early as 1943, T.H. Hudson, Chairman of the Legion's Johannesburg Branch, voiced his frustration with the Legion's inability to invigorate the torpid official campaign when he grumbled that: "Although [demobilisation] is a large section of our

¹²³Fighting Talk, December 1945.

work, we are unable to do very much for ex-servicemen."¹²⁴ Consequently, the Legion decided to institute its own repatriation and demobilisation campaigns. Organised under the slogan "Bring the Boys Home!"¹²⁵ the Springbok Legion's campaign followed in the Legion tradition of militancy and firebrand oratory. The campaign focussed "public attention on the slow rate of repatriation (and) the evil conditions of Helwan through a series of meetings in the Union and the demobilization camps."¹²⁶ These included well-attended public meetings on the Johannesburg City Hall steps, where Legion speakers, including returned servicemen, emphasised the "inadequacies of the Government's obligation to ex-volunteers" and especially, the slow rate of repatriation.¹²⁷

Then in August 1945 a delegation from the Springbok Legion made up of National Chairman J. Isacowitz and R. Levin visited the camps in North Africa.¹²⁸ Upon arriving at Helwan, Isacowitz and Levin were immediately struck by the low morale amongst the troops arising from their dissatisfaction over the repatriation issue. Isacowitz and Levin twice requested permission from the commanding officer to hold a public meeting to discuss the soldiers' grievances "because it was felt that the men

¹²⁴ Springbok Legion - Johannesburg Branch PRO Report for the year ended 31 December 1943, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

¹²⁵Routh interview.

¹²⁶Springbok Legion - Johannesburg Branch PRO Report , 31 December 1943, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

¹²⁷Johannesburg Branch - Springbok Legion. Chairman's report, year ended 31/12/45, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

¹²⁸Springbok Legion National Executive Committee Minutes, 22 September 1945. Report on the Helwan Riots. A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

required some outlet for their pent-up feelings."¹²⁹ Both requests were turned down, and on 17 August 1945, while the Legion delegation was still at Helwan, the riot took place.

The evidence before us suggests that the Legion was not, at least directly, answerable for this show of military indiscipline. For one, the activities of both Isacowitz and Levin at the camp were circumscribed: military intelligence kept a file on their activities.¹³⁰ Secondly, the Springbok Legion itself called for a high-level Commission of Enquiry into the events at Helwan as well as a review of the findings of the earlier Court of Enquiry¹³¹ - such requests were unlikely if the Legion was culpable for the riot. Eventually a compromise, brokered on the basis of the Legion's implied association with the riot, was tacitly effected between military and the Springbok Legion. The military agreed not to press the Legion's role in the rioting any further, and the Legion for its part quietly dropped its repatriation and demobilisation campaign.¹³² In the UDF, this arrangement won the military authorities some space to streamline government repatriation and demobilisation programmes, whilst the Legion continued with its campaign on the home front. In September 1945, Reef Barb carried an article that provocatively declared, in bold type: "Strange, isn't it, that it is easy to bring luxury goods back to the Union, but difficult to bring our men back."¹³³

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰Chief of the General Staff (Intelligence - restricted), GP2, CGS 122 vol.1, SANDF archives.

¹³¹ Fighting Talk, December 1945.

¹³²Report on the Helwan Riots.

¹³³Reef Barb, September 1945.

We can only speculate whether the presence of Isacowitz and Levin, leaders of an organisation acknowledged at least for the militancy of its rhetoric, might have set a spark to the tinderbox of discontent at Helwan. However, attempting to either acquit or apportion blame to the Springbok Legion tends to fudge the issue of more widespread frustration amongst white soldiers. In his speech on the evening of the riot, Levin captured the essence of discontent amongst soldiers: The war was several months over; troops were tired and angry; military authorities and the government were insensitive to their plight. Given troops' understanding of social justice and the social contract implicit in the act of volunteering, they demanded nothing short of a sound rehabilitation programme, the first steps of which were expeditious repatriation back to the Union and demobilisation.

Despite the military's concerted attempts to implicate the Legion, the riot was more likely a spontaneous affair sparked by the utter frustration of white servicemen stranded at Helwan while awaiting repatriation. Conditions at the camp were quite simply appalling. Even The Natal Mercury conceded that the slow rate of repatriation and poor conditions in the camp were the root causes of the riot.¹³⁴ Not surprisingly, then, recollections of the "Hell of Helwan" - as the Legion called it - feature prominently in the testimony of veterans whom I interviewed. Helwan, which was built for the British in 1916 and had not been improved since, was overcrowded and ill-equipped to handle the vast numbers of South African troops awaiting repatriation. Queueing was the common memory, although there was a thriving black market.¹³⁵

¹³⁴The Natal Mercury, 24 August, 1945.

¹³⁵Gibson interview.

Style spent "most of the time queueing in food queues."¹³⁶ Levings remembers that, on the few occasions that supplies of Castle Lager beer were available, "you stood in a queue of 1,000 or more, only to be told when you got to the front that the beer was finished."¹³⁷ The boredom which troops experienced was another powerful motif. The only patch of green in the whole camp was the rugby field, and troops would sit vacantly staring at it for hours, "grass happy."¹³⁸ Style remarked that there was "nothing to do," and that troops had to spend "most of their time sitting on blankets in rows in tents."¹³⁹ Discipline was poor, yet punishment for transgressions was severe. "Van" Van Rensburg told me that troops were sometimes issued day passes to visit Cairo, but were warned that if they were seen drunk or in the vicinity of a brothel, they would lose their place on the waiting list to go home.¹⁴⁰ If servicemen contracted a venereal disease, they were consigned to a "canary clinic" and treated with a medical device known as a "dreadnaught"; again, servicemen in question would lose their place in the repatriation queue.¹⁴¹

Despite accusing the Legion of instigating the Helwan riot, the military authorities implicitly acknowledged that poor conditions at Helwan and the slow rate of repatriation ignited troops' anger. After the riot, efforts were made to improve

¹³⁶Style interview.

¹³⁷Levings interview.

¹³⁸Ibid.

¹³⁹Style interview.

¹⁴⁰Van Rensburg interview.

¹⁴¹Ibid. See also Gibson interview.

conditions at Helwan and the efficiency of repatriation procedures. Within a week of the riot, Prime Minister Smuts himself visited Helwan to conduct an inspection tour. Following his inspection, conditions improved slightly. More mobile kitchens were provided, mobile cinemas visited the camp, and sporting equipment - such as rugby balls, cricket bats and balls - as well as beer were shipped to Helwan from the Union.¹⁴² Speeding up the rate of repatriation was an altogether more difficult task. Shipping was the most effective means of "Bringing the Boys Home." However, so soon after the end of the war, shipping was in short supply, and world requirements for the transport of goods and soldiers, massive. Rumours that they were to be shipped back to South Africa raised and then dashed servicemen's hopes. In a special feature on repatriation, Reef Barb lamented the proliferation of "confirmed reports" about ships which "may" or "it is hoped will" or "are verbally reported to be about to" be used to bring men down from Helwan.¹⁴³ What the Legion resented about such reports and

what made them most harmful to the men up North was their vagueness. There is no longer a submarine menace or any other justification for shrouding the movement of ships in secrecy.¹⁴⁴

Besides trying to ship soldiers home, the military authorities also instituted a flying shuttle service.¹⁴⁵ However, the South African Air Force was not able to mount

¹⁴²Willie Grobler, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 5 June, 1997. Also, interviews with Style and Levings.

¹⁴³Reef Barb, September 1945.

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

¹⁴⁵Shuttle Service for Springboks going home, (Cairo: The Printing and Stationery Services, M.E.F., 1945) [Pamphlet].

anything near the required - and promised - number of flights. After the riot, troops were assured that 200 flights a day would leave Egypt for the Union.¹⁴⁶ Yet, in its article on repatriation, Reef Barb noted that the shuttle service was proving “terribly slow” and that the daily number of flights had dropped as low as 38.¹⁴⁷ An article in Fighting Talk recommended that the Air Force extend the shuttle service by establishing overnight stops *en route* from Egypt to South Africa. Eventually, most of the “Boys” were eventually brought home by ship, as the shuttle service was discontinued. To increase the volume of flights from Egypt to South Africa, a decision had been taken to employ all available Air Force pilots. Although fighter and bomber pilots complained that they lacked the navigational skills and operational skills to fly safely long-distance transport aircraft, their concerns were overlooked. However a number of aircraft on the shuttle service crashed.¹⁴⁸ Following an accident near Kathu in the northern Cape when the pilot became disoriented in a dust storm and flew his Ventura bomber - converted into a transport aircraft - into the ground, killing all servicemen aboard, Smuts put an immediate end to air shuttles.¹⁴⁹

The beginning of (ex)service disillusionment

Despite state efforts to ameliorate conditions at Helwan and to streamline the repatriation exercise, the anger and frustration demonstrated by troops during the riot

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹Dave Dent, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Kimberley, 28 June, 2000.

marked the beginning of a profound sense of disillusion with Smuts and the UP government. Fighting Talk warned that

men are now of the opinion that they are being left to rot in Helwan because nobody is particularly interested in bringing them home . . . The air is full of rumours that the men are deliberately being kept up North on account of the housing shortage and the inability of the demobilization corps to handle them if they came back in large numbers.¹⁵⁰

The troops rioted because they felt the state had failed them. The state's tardiness in repatriating troops began to undermine the social contract that troops, as white men and volunteers, struck the moment they enlisted. As events in the immediate post-war world would show, troops turned away from the essentially decent, but bungling, UP. In the words of Major Len Manson, a Demobilization Officer, the troops wanted a "more efficient government - technocrats with doctorates. Perhaps the Nats wouldn't be so bad."¹⁵¹

In the immediate aftermath of the riot, Fighting Talk proudly reported a "recruiting blitz at Helwan," as more than 3,000 men joined the Springbok Legion.¹⁵² It is likely that the Legion's willingness to stand up to the military authorities, the state and even *Oubaas* Smuts drew these troops to the Legion. Indeed, it is plausible that service disaffection with the government as the war drew to a close, expressed so coherently by the Legion, suggested the emergence of another little tradition. The riot marked

¹⁵⁰Fighting Talk, September, 1945.

¹⁵¹Len Manson, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Johannesburg, 8 July, 1998.

¹⁵²Fighting Talk, October, 1945.

the watermark of such protest, however, as the Springbok Legion was unable to articulate soldiers' interests in post-war civilian life, and 1946 witnessed a steady decline in Legion membership.¹⁵³

Upon demobilisation, the types of pressure that returned servicemen experienced as underqualified white men meant that they never again engaged in the type of protest represented by the Helwan riot. Servicemen's little tradition of protest was muted as veterans took an uneasy and contradictory turn towards the type of racial order promised by the National Party, as discussed in chapter four.

¹⁵³Springbok Legion - Johannesburg Area Committee Chairman's Report, 1946-1946, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

CHAPTER FOUR

DEMOBILISATION AND THE DEATH OF “JANNIE PROMISES”

The stresses of civilian life

From late 1943, troops began to be demobilised from the UDF, although the exercise would extend well after the conclusion of hostilities - for some, up until 1948.¹ For the majority of white South African volunteers, the exhilaration of victory, or imminent victory for those demobilised before the war's end, was accompanied by a powerful concern, even apprehension, about the civilian world they were about to re-enter. During the war, the intensity of such concerns was evident in their support for the Springbok Legion, as demonstrated in chapter three.

The act of volunteering had contributed another layer of entitlement to the contract of whiteness that pertained between the state and the white men who volunteered. However, by the end of the war, white troops were increasingly frustrated at the state's apparent inability to honour its obligations to them. The Helwan riot, discussed at the close of chapter three, was indicative of such frustration and marked the onset of white volunteers' disillusionment with the UP.

As white troops were demobilised, they faced a world very different from the one they had left several years earlier. They also felt let down by the United Party (UP) and

¹Francois Oosthuizen, "The Demobilisation of the White Union Defence Force Soldiers During and After the Second World War" (Master of Arts thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, 1993), 142.

the *Oubaas*, Field Marshal Jan Smuts. The thesis suggests that collectively, these sentiments prompted a particular set of racial anxieties. White troops' concerns about jobs, housing, social readjustment and so on were not all that different from those experienced by troops in other parts of the Commonwealth and Allied world. However in South Africa, it can be argued that they were exacerbated and overlaid by tensions issuing from the subordinate position of most white troops within the colonial master class.

As chapter two has shown, with the advent of Coalition and then Fusion in the 1930s, men of the little traditions had been effectively co-opted by the UP. The reality of their incorporation was played out when so many volunteered during the course of the war. Yet by the end of the war, these political bonds were under stress. In the 1948 general election, NP came to power despite most predictions.² While few troops supported the NP, especially in light of its wartime record, its racial policies had a certain appeal for white ex-servicemen in light of the changing status of white men in South Africa in the post-war world.

This chapter examines the theme of white servicemen's disillusionment with the UP, a passage which was not without its contradictions. Although implied in the literature,³ this particular line of enquiry has not been followed previously. The chapter will suggest that white veterans' disenchantment must be located within a broader shift in

²See for example, Gwendolen Carter, *The Politics of Inequality: South Africa since 1948*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 3rd ed, 1962), 36; Dan O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years. The apartheid state and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*, (Johannesburg: Ravan; Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996), 23.

³See, for example, O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, 31.

the boundaries of racist culture. This shift was occasioned by wartime changes to race, gender and class relations within South Africa, as well as by an emerging international moral economy underscored by the Atlantic Charter and its correlative discourse on democracy and human rights.

The chapter draws on open-ended interviews with thirty-odd veterans. The majority were white and male, although I also interviewed white women as well as black and coloured veterans. The chapter relies primarily on the testimony of about ten white ex-servicemen whose narratives are particularly helpful in illustrating some of the post-war imperatives of white men, and how these cut across conventionally-accepted lines of class and ethnicity. The narratives of these ten key informants are largely representative of the concerns and recollections expressed by the group as a whole.

White men back to work and the struggle for “social justice”

As noted in chapter two, processes of capitalisation and class formation, especially in the countryside, meant that it was Afrikaans-speakers who were amongst the poorest of whites.⁴ While various anti-war movements, including acts of sabotage and plots to overthrow the government, took hold amongst many Afrikaners,⁵ Malherbe's guess

⁴Tim Clynick, "Afrikaner Political Mobilisation in the Western Transvaal: Popular Consciousness and the State, 1920-1930," (D.Phil. thesis, Queen's University, 1996), 12-22.

⁵Patrick Furlong, Between Crown And Swastika: The Impact Of The Radical Right On The Afrikaner Nationalist Movements In The Fascist Era, (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1991), 138-160.

that most white servicemen were poor and Afrikaans-speaking is thus plausible.⁶ Some volunteers, of course, did come from fairly affluent backgrounds,⁷ but such men seem to have been the exception rather than the rule. As this thesis has argued in chapters two and three, the socio-economic backgrounds of white volunteers provide a cryptic key to understanding not only their reasons for enlisting, but also their wartime objectives and hopes for the peace.

According to a survey conducted towards the end of the war by the Civil Re-Employment Board, about 60% of white servicemen had some form of pre-enlistment income.⁸ A good many of these volunteers were drawn from small, commodity-producing households. These homes, which existed on the margins of the capitalist political economy and were usually poor, were dominated by gendered ideals of an independent, self-employed white man. A spurt of Post-Depression industrialisation rendered this ideal - what Clynick calls the little tradition - increasingly untenable from the mid-1930s on.⁹

The comprehensive data collected by the Board provide useful insight into the post-war employment expectations of white servicemen. Out of a sample of 55,000

⁶The effects of a brilliantly conceived recruitment campaign should not be discounted. See Albert Grundlingh, "The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity In The Union of South Africa's Defence Force During The Second World War, 1939-1945," (Unpublished paper, 1998), 11-13.

⁷See, for example, "Obituary: Gavin Relly, A courageous business leader of exceptional fibre," Sunday Times, (Johannesburg), 17 January, 1999.

⁸Report Of The South African National Conference On The Post-War Planning Of Social Welfare Work, (Pretoria: Government Printer, September, 1944), 105-106.

⁹Clynick, "Afrikaner Political Mobilization," 1-8.

servicemen, roughly 4,000 (7%) indicated that they would seek employment in agriculture; 2,500 (5%) in mining; 23,000 (42%) in industry; 5,000 (9%) in transport; 6,000 (11%) in commerce; 1,000 (2%) in the professions; 2,000 (4%) in the public service; 6,000-7,000 (11-13%) in the defence force or police; 2,000 (4%) as students; and the remainder (about 3%) in "other" fields of employment.¹⁰ These figures were notably silent on precisely what manner of employment white servicemen expected within each sector. However, the widespread lack of previous employment, coupled with the relative scarcity of post-school training at the time,¹¹ made it probable that the majority foresaw entry into wage labour of some kind or another.

Under the conditions of South Africa's racial order, there is no doubt that the volunteers expected to find jobs in the better paid part of the wage sector. Moreover, such jobs were associated with evolving patterns of gender relations and notions of "respectability" and the "ideal" white family which crystallised as South Africa emerged from the Depression. In her study of consciousness and political organisation amongst white Afrikaner women in the garment industry, Brink has identified several prevailing models of domesticity amongst newly urbanised whites on the Witwatersrand during the late 1920s and early 1930s. She writes that, for those white families dispossessed of their land and forced to the cities in the early part of the twentieth century, it was necessary for the whole family to function as an economic

¹⁰Conference On The Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work, 106.

¹¹In 1930-31, the number of whites receiving industrial and vocational training was less than 1% of those receiving primary and secondary education. Educationist E.G. Malherbe noted that industrial and vocational training bore a stigma amongst whites. See David Welsh, "The Growth of Towns," in Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, eds, The Oxford History Of South Africa, Vol.2 South Africa 1870-1966, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 223.

unit to carve its niche in the urban economy.¹² Older generations of white men tended to suffer from a lack of skills appropriate to the industrializing capitalist economy. These circumstance compelled their wives and sisters to seek work, mainly in factories. Womenfolk of miners, clerical workers and other men in higher paying occupations, were spared the necessity of seeking wage work.¹³

In its analysis of the types of employment sought by whites in cities, the Carnegie Commission noted that a high proportion of sons of poor white immigrants to the cities gravitated towards more specialized trades requiring apprenticeship, such as mechanics, printers and tailors.¹⁴ As South Africa recovered from the Depression, more and more white men were able to gain access to better paid wage labour, and it is likely that such jobs provided a model for the type of work that white servicemen anticipated upon their return to civilian life. Better paid work had implications for gender relations and the construction of the ideal white family. It implied, above all, that as the wage earning role returned to men, so too would authority in the family. The father, patriarchal head on the land, could once more aspire to become *pater familias*, with his wife and children existing in dependent and subordinate relationship with him.¹⁵ For returning volunteers, women's role was (with few exceptions) in the home.

¹²Elsabe' Brink, "'Maar 'n klomp'factory" meide': Afrikaner family and Community on the Witwatersrand during the 1920's," in Belinda Bozzoli, ed, Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1987), 183.

¹³Ibid., 184.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., 189.

Demobilisation: What homes for white heroes?

White servicemen carried their expectations about work and domestic life with them from the moment they enlisted. However, upon demobilisation, they faced a world which was very different from the one that they had left several years earlier. The workplace, the city and housing were all sites of bitter disappointment for white servicemen, and symbols of the state's failure to provide for them as returned white heroes. The ways in which they responded to changes at home helped to determine how they defined the character of "whiteness" after the war.

The 1944 Civil Re-Employment Board Survey indicated that surprisingly few white ex-servicemen envisaged a future on the land.¹⁶ Most volunteers returned to the cities where they sought jobs in industry. The exigencies of wartime production had, however, reconfigured the labour process and the place of white men within it. The war accelerated struggles to deskill production in mining and industry, which dated to the early part of the century. Mass production during the war led to the rise of semi-skilled work, thereby altering the racial and gender composition of the industrial workforce. As Eddie Webster notes, the expansion of semi-skilled work took place mainly at the expense of white male workers.¹⁷ Those who, like the majority of white servicemen, lacked artisan skills were particularly vulnerable since it was far cheaper to employ black men and white women.

¹⁶Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work, 106.

¹⁷Eddie Webster, Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985), 16.

For Nancy Clark, the critical factor in the battle for deskilling was the practice of employing white women in factories for the purposes of wartime production.¹⁸ She argues that women were depicted as “home bound,” and their work therefore temporary, for the duration of the war. Deskilling transformed jobs in industry into “women’s work,” which was poorly paid on the assumption that it was merely a war measure, and that in any case women were neither the sole nor primary breadwinners in white families.¹⁹

Changes to the racial and gendered arrangements of work had implications far beyond the factory floor. As women cast off the confines of the home to join the war effort, servicemen were confronted with a powerful image of possible shifts to the balance of domestic power. Thousands of white women - South Africa’s collective “Rosie the Rivetter,” the well-known symbol of working women during the war years²⁰ - joined engineering firms, especially on the Rand, as semi-skilled operatives. Like the white men who volunteered, most of these women were propelled into industry “not from patriotism, but from necessity.”²¹ These were not the only women who became involved in the war effort. Recruiting posters declared that whatever a woman’s occupation or talents

¹⁸Nancy Clark, “Regendering Production: White women and black men in World War Two,” (Paper presented to the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, July 1994).

¹⁹Ibid., 1.

²⁰Lynn Weiner, From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820-1980, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 110-111.

²¹Clark, 15.

. . . there's a job in the Women's Services for you. Thousands of women are urgently needed to do jobs from shorthand and typing to operating searchlights and anti-aircraft batteries, from cooking to photographic work.²²

The response was overwhelming. More than 45,000 white women volunteered for the various branches of the Women's Defence Corps.²³ An additional 65,000 joined the South African Women's Auxiliary Services. Known affectionately, if patronisingly so, as "South Africa's universal aunts," they worked in clubs and recreation centres, and also ran post offices and recruiting campaigns.²⁴ White women's role in the war effort also received special attention from the media: for instance, African Mirror, a current affairs newsreel shown in most South African cinemas as a prelude to the main film, often ran features on the wartime contributions of white women.²⁵

White women were not the only category of workers with newfound mobility. As the requirements for black workers in industry grew, manufacturing interests demanded that the state relax influx control for the duration of hostilities.²⁶ During the war years the urban black population increased by about half a million, to 1,689,000 - although this, a state estimate, was most probably on the low side.²⁷ In the cities, the state sought to segregate black workers and their families. Near Johannesburg, for

²²Margot Bryant, As We Were. South Africa, 1939-1945, (Johannesburg: Kearsland Publishers, 1974), 10.

²³Ibid., 59-62.

²⁴Ibid., 59.

²⁵Ibid., 98.

²⁶Alf Stadler, The political economy of Modern South Africa, (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip; London: Croon Helm, 1987), 91.

²⁷Ibid., p. 59.

example, they were restricted to locations like Alexandra, Sophiatown and parts of Doornfontein. Despite attempts to control black movement and settlement, the in-migration of blacks gave cause for considerable disquiet, issuing mainly from the local state which expressed its opposition in the idiom of slum clearance, health and hygiene.²⁸

David Goldberg argues that power in the city reflects and refines the spacial relations of its inhabitants. In turn, urban power is a microcosm of the strengths and weaknesses of the state.²⁹ One's place, as well as the place of others in the city, is therefore not just a matter of locational coordinates, but may also be taken as a "trope. . . in terms of which identity is fashioned."³⁰ With the twentieth century urbanisation of racial "others," the idea of urban segregation was elaborated in terms of which the colonised urbanised were required to occupy space apart from their European(ised) masters.³¹ In a recent exhibition of South African architecture and urban planning, Henry Judin develops this theme when he comments that in South Africa "invasion is the dominant metaphor for the white experience of urban

²⁸D. van Tonder, "First Win the War and then Clear the Slums: The Genesis of the Western Areas Removal Scheme, 1942-1949," in Phil Bonner, Peter Delius and Debbie Posel, eds, Apartheid's Genesis, 1939-1962, (Braamfontein and Johannesburg: Ravan and Wits University Press, 1993), 322. See also Maynard Swanson, "The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909," in William Beinart and Saul Dubow, eds, Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 25-42.

²⁹David T. Goldberg, "'Polluting the Body Politic': Racist Discourses and Urban Location," in Malcolm Cross and Michael Keith, eds, Racism, the City and the State, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 45.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

integration, defining it as hostile and contaminating.”³² For returning white servicemen, anxious about their status in the post-war world, black urbanisation undoubtedly registered as an invasion - or *oorstroming* (inundation) - of the city, which was itself a strange and alienating social landscape for many newly urbanised white veterans. Ex-serviceman Willie Grobler commented, for example, that “Durban was full of blacks after the War. Blacks were all over the show, more than before the War.”³³ Despite state efforts to regulate and control the wartime urbanisation of blacks, this urban influx provided a dismal metaphor for the weakness of the state and its inability to protect white veterans’ interests.

Such images and experiences of home unsettled white servicemen, fostering a widespread sense of “restlessness” as the war drew to a close.³⁴ In the words of Willie Grobler, “you didn’t know what to do with yourself.”³⁵ The narratives of white ex-servicemen suggest that many appeased their discomfort and sense of loss through conspicuous acts of consumption, which were often and deliberately inappropriate to their means. One veteran regaled me with tales of renting a mansion on the shores of Lake Como in Italy with the proceeds of blackmarketed petrol and

³²Henry Judin, “blank: Architecture, Apartheid and After,” Mail and Guardian, (Johannesburg), 8-14 January 1999, Friday supplement.

³³Willie Grobler, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 5 June 1997.

³⁴Each and every one of my thirty-odd informants used this term to describe their sense of disjuncture and displacement after the war.

³⁵Willie Grobler, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 3 June 1997.

cigarettes.³⁶ Another bought a watch and a 1938 Chevrolet.³⁷ Yet another, who suffered a damaged left ear after an explosion, promptly spent all £150 of his disability grant on a new set of golf clubs.³⁸

Writing about post-war Britain, David Hughes notes a powerful desire to enjoy some of the good things of civilian life. He has observed that the British public expected:

. . . not perhaps the lap of luxury, but at least bananas, a few more cigarettes, a range of clothes. . . the odd bottle of whisky to celebrate the expanding horizons that had already started closing.³⁹

Although South Africa suffered far less from the ravages of war than Britain, the 1944 Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work predicted a similar demand for the products and amenities of peacetime:

It is practically certain that we shall be anxious to return to our pre-war habits of consumption. Modern man does not live by bread alone, but by visits to the cinema and the races, and his partner by visits to the beauty parlour. . . It is doubtful if habits of consumption will change appreciably, or at any rate in the absence of compulsion.⁴⁰

This view is supported by a casual glance through the pages of the September 1944 issue of Fighting Talk. The advertisements, which take up more than half of the edition, testify to a formidable post-war will to consume: Gloria fashions; the

³⁶Gerry Yates, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 18 June 1997.

³⁷P. Levings, interview by author, transcript, Johannesburg, 16 July 1997.

³⁸Glynn B. Hobbs, Recollections of Italy: The Memoirs of a Trooper in Prince Alfred's Guard, (Port Elizabeth: by the author, 1996), 87.

³⁹David Hughes, "The Spivs," in Michael Sissons and Philip French, eds, Age of Austerity, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), 92.

⁴⁰Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work, 43-44.

Butterworth Hotel; "Buy your plot now at South Africa's Inland Sea: Denysville"; Standard Furnishing; Frederick Motors; the list of goods and services on offer goes on and on.⁴¹ Consumption of goods such as these symbolically testified to veterans' status as white men: they had the wherewithal to buy goods and services which, to borrow a phrase from Ann Stoler, helped to "define the distinctions of a white, western bourgeois self."⁴² Yet for poorer white soldiers, the spoils of peace were simply beyond their reach. One ex-servicemen, Bernie Stamper, recounted that when he resumed his apprenticeship with the Railways after the war, he was obliged to contribute monthly towards the purchase of his tools, and to pay hostel fees. This left him with 3s.6d. - enough for one visit to the bioscope per month.⁴³ Dick Roos earned £10 a month, but two-thirds of this went to the upkeep of his parents' household.

White ex-servicemen were frustrated by their powerlessness in a world which was seen to be profiting at their expense. Their view of the post-war world was captured in a Fighting Talk cartoon, portraying a plump merchant from the "Get-Rich-Quick" Clothing Industry raising his prices in anticipation of a rush of ex-service customers. The caption says starkly that "soldiers complain that clothing prices are exorbitant and that they cannot dress themselves."⁴⁴

⁴¹Fighting Talk, September 1944. (A monthly journal published by the Springbok Legion).

⁴²Ann Laura Stoler, Race And The Education Of Desire. Foucault's History Of Sexuality And The Colonial Order Of Things, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), 11.

⁴³Bernie Stamper, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 17 September 1996.

⁴⁴Fighting Talk, September 1945.

The ruling UP was most certainly aware of the hazards inherent in this discord. The spectre of poor whiteism and its attendant social, economic, moral and political problems remained. And although with hindsight the parallels are not so simple, Prime Minister Smuts surely remembered the lessons of 1924. In that year, the occasion of the second general election after the Great War, Smuts and his SAP government were ignominiously ousted from office by a coalition of Afrikaner nationalists, disgruntled white workers and the white poor. From around 1944, there was evidence of considerable state concern to ensure that the wartime support of white soldiers was carried over into the altogether more demanding peace.

A Soldiers' Charter, which aimed to provide a framework for the social integration of soldiers, and to ensure that "there will be no forgotten men"⁴⁵ was announced in April 1944. The Soldiers' Charter acknowledged that the state was responsible for assisting white ex-servicemen in readjusting to civilian life. Towards this end, a Ministry of Welfare and Demobilization was established in mid-1944, to fulfill the following mandate:

Besides monetary benefits such as war gratuities and civilian clothing grants, the government plans include provision for post-discharge employment for all classes of [white] ex-soldier, financial assistance to re-establish the soldier in civilian life, such as by sending him to a university or technical college for technical training; training for the disabled soldier; the provision of temporary housing. . . [and] the cost of transporting families and effects.⁴⁶

⁴⁵A phrase frequently used by Minister of Welfare and Demobilization Harry Lawrence when referring to the Soldier's Charter. Cited in Oosthuizen, "The Demobilisation of the White Union Defence Force Soldiers," 30.

⁴⁶House of Assembly Debates, Vol. 49 (1944), Cols. 6048-6081.

While the Soldiers' Charter intended to restore each volunteer "in the quickest possible time, to the position and status that he would have enjoyed had he not gone away," its aim was not to enrich individual servicemen.⁴⁷ All servicemen and women were paid a modest gratuity. According to the provisions of the Soldiers' Charter, these disbursements were differentiated on the basis of length of service, as well as by race and gender; military rank or type of military activity did not enter into this calculus. For white males, the gratuity was figured at the rate of 30s. per month for each month of active service, and was payable as a Union Loan Certificate which the soldier could invest or encash. This gratuity was described by the 1944 Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work as "reward for service that is universal to the good soldier."⁴⁸

The cornerstone of the whole demobilisation scheme was the recognition of the white male volunteer's right to employment. As the 1944 Conference commented:

Many of the soldiers have lost five years of their civilian careers by the service they are rendering to the country, and the purpose of any demobilization plan must be to bring them back and restore to them as far as possible those five years or less, which they have lost from their normal careers.⁴⁹

To this end, the 1944 Soldiers and War Workers Employment Act compelled "employers to re-employ men to whom they [had] granted permission to join the forces provided they notified their employer."⁵⁰ At the same time, the state needed to

⁴⁷Conference On The Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work, 83.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

control demobilisation in order to minimise disruption to the labour market, and to prevent rampant unemployment amongst white ex-servicemen.

The Directorate of Demobilization was tasked with administering this process. Major Len Manson, a Demobilization Officer based at Hector Norris Park in Johannesburg, was responsible for interviewing white soldiers awaiting release from the armed services. Before authorising their discharge, the army would establish whether the individual had pre-war employment; whether he wished to return to his job; whether he intended going into business; and so on.⁵¹ According to Manson, servicemen without jobs or any other means of income were "kept on strength" - in other words, they were paid the appropriate scale of military pay until they found suitable employment.⁵² Additionally, the Directorate of Demobilization operated as something of a labour bureau for white ex-servicemen: businesses would inform the Directorate of their labour requirements, and Demobilization Officers would then select a short list of suitable candidates. Altogether, 155,330 white veterans were placed in jobs in this fashion, most going to industry or commerce.⁵³

White soldiers were also assisted in acquiring access to both housing and agricultural land. Presenting the Soldiers' Charter to Parliament in 1944, Minister of Welfare and Demobilization Harry Lawrence emphasised the importance of ensuring that when

⁵¹Len Manson, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Johannesburg, 8 July 1998.

⁵²Ibid. See also Jacklyn Cock, "Demobilization and Democracy: The relevance of the 1944 'Soldiers' Charter' in Southern Africa today," (Paper presented to University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, July 1994), 4.

⁵³Manson interview.

“our men return from war service. . . they and their families will not be harassed by housing needs, and that suitable accommodation is available for them.”⁵⁴ Later that year, however, the Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work was obligated to qualify the Minister’s confident assurances. Apparently, there was a fairly common belief amongst returned soldiers that they were entitled to some sort of grant for the purpose of buying a house, and the Conference hastened to add that this was not the case. Instead, the Conference recommended that the state assist white ex-servicemen to rent a house at a “reasonable” rate, which would allow them the flexibility to “settle down and look around.”⁵⁵ This rather ambiguous promise of assistance undoubtedly contributed to the sense of “restlessness” described by so many white ex-servicemen.

⁵⁴House of Assembly Debates, Vol. 49 (1944), Col. 6072.

⁵⁵Conference On the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work, 83-84.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, the Soldiers' Charter was more accurately a charter for white male soldiers. Louis Grundlingh notes that the apparatus of demobilisation did little for black ex-servicemen, many of whom were destined to "live in abject conditions after they had been discharged."⁵⁶ The conditions under which women volunteers were demobilised are equally revealing of the limits of state concerns. Until at least 1945 - by which time many men had already been discharged - "compassionate reasons" were the only grounds upon which members of the Women's Army Defence Corps were able to request demobilisation. If granted, the woman veteran forfeited all benefits.⁵⁷

Social (in)justice: Disappointment and the imperatives of whiteness

By 1949, noted the Sunday Times, £60 million had been spent on South Africa's demobilisation programme, which the editor lauded as "probably the best in the world."⁵⁸ Yet, despite the aims of the Soldiers' Charter, and the expenses involved, its implementation was greeted with something less than enthusiasm by white working class veterans.⁵⁹ In the candid words of ex-serviceman "Van" van Rensburg,

⁵⁶Louis Grundlingh, "The participation of South African blacks in the Second World War," (D. Litt.et Phil thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, 1986).

⁵⁷Fighting Talk, September 1945.

⁵⁸Cock, "Demobilization and Democracy," 1.

⁵⁹Oosthuizen comments that the plan itself won the approval of the majority of white servicemen. Oosthuizen, "The Demobilisation of the White Union Defence Force Soldiers," 47-48.

who worked as a petrol attendant in Durban, the Charter was a "lot of crap."⁶⁰ Dick Roos, who fought at El Alamein, was adamant that he had never heard of it. In any event, the liberal paternalism⁶¹ of the Soldiers' Charter fell far short of white servicemen's expectations for "social justice." This was most glaringly obvious in the state's inability to provide suitable work and housing for returning white servicemen.

In most cases, those who were employed before the war chose to return to their jobs.⁶² Dick Roos, for instance, went back to his clerical position at Randle Brothers & Hudson, a Durban wholesaler. Gerry Yates resumed his position as a sales representative for Stewart & Lloyds, a manufacturer of windmills and pumps.⁶³ Some ex-servicemen were even promoted during their absence. In 1944, the government announced that it would give white veterans returning to the civil service salary and seniority rights in respect of their full period of military service.⁶⁴ For ex-servicemen like Willie Grobler, this provided an unexpected boon: upon his return to the *Spoorweg* (Railways), Grobler found that he had been promoted from messenger boy to a graded clerical position.⁶⁵ This practice was not limited to the civil service. In

⁶⁰Van van Rensburg, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Durban, 15 July 1998.

⁶¹For an elaboration of how this liberal paternalism meshed with the variant of liberalism which had found a home in the then ruling United Party, see Paul Rich, White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial Segregation and South African Liberalism, (Manchester: n.p.1984).

⁶²Manson interview.

⁶³Yates interview.

⁶⁴Conference On the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work, 106.

⁶⁵Grobler interview.

early 1945, the National Union of Distributive Workers concluded an agreement with the Commercial Employers Organisation on the Rand, whereby military service of those in the commercial distributive sector would "be reckoned as experience for the purpose of computing wages, upon their return to civilian employment in the trade."⁶⁶

P. Levings, a representative for Mosenthal Wholesalers in Johannesburg, commented that this agreement nearly doubled his salary, to about £25 per month.⁶⁷

Both the state and soldiers' organisations tried to help volunteers who had no previous employment experience, or who did not wish to return to their former jobs, to find work. The civil service, a "traditional avenue of employment for whites," reserved thousands of posts for ex-soldiers (for example, 2,000 to 3,000 jobs for white servicemen on the Railways) while the post office devised a job scheme for disabled veterans.⁶⁸ Again, as Jacklyn Cock notes, it was only white men who benefitted from this preferential employment policy.⁶⁹

The Springbok Legion also tried to secure jobs for its members. In the first half of 1945, the Legion handled 1,143 employment cases, and managed to place 642 white men in jobs.⁷⁰ Over the course of the following year, it registered 4,302 appeals and

⁶⁶Fighting Talk, January 1946.

⁶⁷Levings interview.

⁶⁸Conference On the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work, 106.

⁶⁹Cock, *Demobilization and Democracy*, 4.

⁷⁰Fighting Talk, August 1945.

found jobs for 1,607.⁷¹ Where the Legion was successful, this usually involved approaching small enterprises - often those owned or managed by veterans, particularly of the First World War - with requests that they employ white servicemen.⁷²

The efforts of the demobilisation bureaucracy and organisations like the Springbok Legion, coupled with the stipulations of the 1944 Soldiers and War Workers Employment Act, ensured that there was no major unemployment problem amongst white ex-servicemen after the war. The exercise of (re)incorporating returned white servicemen into the labour market was, however, flawed in several respects. A comment made at the 1944 Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work, that the state "must provide for the boy who went away, coming back to us as a grown man"⁷³ offers insight into some of the limitations of the demobilisation process. In the first instance, the state failed to acknowledge the liminality of war, which had transformed white servicemen in every way imaginable. Secondly, whether it was new work or a return to pre-war employment, the jobs available to ex-servicemen failed to provide them with the means to enjoy their new status as both returned heroes and grown men.

White ex-service dissatisfaction with their own prospects in the labour market, and in society more generally, was fanned by a popular myth that "keymen" and "traitors"

⁷¹Ibid., April 1946.

⁷²Guy Routh, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 16 March 1987.

⁷³Conference On the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work, 83.

had prospered during the war, at veterans' expense. Keymen were skilled artisans who had volunteered, but were prohibited from enlisting on account of their importance for wartime production or essential services. Keymen were allowed to wear uniforms or small badges to indicate their status. A vitriolic pamphlet signed by "Springbok" (a fond nickname for South African servicemen) and circulated towards the end of the war amongst troops at Crown Mines Demobilization Depot, denounced keymen - "skunks in uniform" - for their unpatriotic jockeying for position and promotion. The pamphlet went on to demand that "keymen should be sent to the front instead of enriching themselves at the cost of our blood."⁷⁴ Of course, not all servicemen felt as strongly about keymen as the anonymous Springbok.

Nonetheless, there was a fairly widespread sense of unhappiness amongst troops that "men" who had stayed behind seemed to have benefitted the most, without ever having seen combat. In a similar vein, Fighting Talk expressed outrage at Smuts' decision to reinstate civil servants who had been interned for pro-Nazi activities. Something of the magnitude of white ex-service enmity towards "traitors" and "Malanazis"⁷⁵ can be gauged from their response to a political rally organised by the NP in 1946. Ten thousand ex-servicemen joined in protest under the banner of the Springbok Legion, and an evening of street brawling ensued.

White working class veterans saw themselves at a relative disadvantage to those who had stayed at home, or worse still, had betrayed the war effort. Expensive to employ

⁷⁴Skunks in Uniform, United Party Central Head Office: Grievances, 1943-1945, UNISA. [Pamphlet]

⁷⁵"Malanazi" was a play on the name of D. F. Malan, leader of the National Party. It referred to the belief that he had supported the Nazis during the war.

and inappropriately skilled, white ex-servicemen's lack of occupational mobility made them vulnerable to a variety of pressures; indeed they provide a trenchant criticism against those who argue that the white working class was transformed into a "new middle class." Although many had acquired special technical skills during the war, closed shop union practices back at home rendered them unable to put their newly acquired skills to work. Vic Roos, for instance, was trained as an aircraft mechanic during the war, but his lack of formal apprenticeship⁷⁶ excluded him from any of the engineering sectors. Instead, he remained underemployed throughout his life, working mostly as a barman and later a clerk.⁷⁷

Similar arguments apply to the provision of housing for white ex-servicemen. Along with jobs, the provision of housing was a major concern for veterans as they contemplated the return to civilian life.⁷⁸ However, access to housing was severely limited by a massive backlog deriving from the imperatives of wartime industrialisation and attendant urbanisation. It was estimated that by 1945, 130,000 houses were needed for whites alone.⁷⁹ This situation became something of a national scandal, leading to the passage of the 1945 Housing (Emergency Powers) Act, which permitted public authorities to expropriate land and materials, conscript workers and build houses. Yet, by the end of that year, less than one thousand houses for whites had been built.⁸⁰

⁷⁶The 1922 Apprenticeship Act stipulated strict conditions for entry into the skilled trades.

⁷⁷Vic Roos, interview by author, transcript, Scottburgh, 19 April 1995.

⁷⁸See Oosthuizen, "The Demobilisation of the White Union Defence Force Soldiers," 124. My informants corroborate this observation.

⁷⁹H.J. Simons and R. Simons, Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950, (Lusaka: IDAF, 1983), 561.

⁸⁰Reef Barb, February 1946.

The state's failure to provide mass housing for white veterans compelled its retreat to a less ambitious and less costly strategy. This involved facilitating the provision of land to white ex-servicemen who could then build their own houses. In late 1944, the Johannesburg City Council announced its decision to make building sites available to ex-servicemen by lottery.⁸¹ This scheme did not discriminate on the basis of marital status or rank. Land was provided at cost price, about £120 per stand in 1945, although within five years this price had increased to £300.⁸² The government further guaranteed a building society loan of £2,500 at a fixed interest rate of 4.5% (the going rate was 9%). For Levings, this translated in 1950 to a deposit of £300 and a monthly installment of £15.⁸³ Significantly, the costs involved in this buy/build scheme were beyond the means of poorer white ex-servicemen. In addition, some municipalities, for instance NP-controlled Bloemfontein, were not prepared to give white ex-servicemen special dispensation of any sort.⁸⁴

As a temporary solution to the housing needs of white ex-servicemen, the National Housing Board proposed to convert unused military camps in the Union into "model townships."⁸⁵ Although a number of these camps were subsequently used as university residences, the notion that they should substitute for more suitable housing

⁸¹Ibid., October 1944.

⁸²Ibid.; Levings interview.

⁸³Levings interview.

⁸⁴Fighting Talk, August 1945.

⁸⁵Ibid., October 1944.

was universally unpopular amongst veterans.⁸⁶ Cheaper accommodation - for white ex-servicemen, about £10 per month all inclusive⁸⁷ - could be had at the boarding houses ("residential hotels") which dotted the cities. Ex-servicemen, usually single, were allocated a room with the use of a communal bathroom. A landlady would provide meals and, with greater or lesser vigilance, supervise the lounge and other shared space.⁸⁸

For white ex-servicemen, the importance of housing extended far beyond the provision of land, brick and mortar. Until they married, most lived with their parents or, if this was not possible, in boarding houses or hostels. Once married, however, a man was expected to establish his own home.⁸⁹ A house or a flat with a wife to tend it - this was the prevailing, gendered model of the white home.⁹⁰ Levings, for instance, took the keys to his new home in Roosevelt Park, Johannesburg, on the very morning of his wedding. Similarly, when Gerry Yates and his wife decided to marry in 1950, they chose their wedding day to coincide with the completion of their

⁸⁶Dennis Lantz, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Durban, 15 July 1998.

⁸⁷Fighting Talk, June 1946; van Rensburg and Lantz agree with this estimate.

⁸⁸A number of my informants were familiar with such establishments, and testified to the way in which they were usually organised.

⁸⁹In their interviews, Levings, Grobler and Yates as well as Scott Gibson (Scott Gibson, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Durban, 15 July 1997) all raised this point.

⁹⁰Bradford makes a similar point in her discussion of Afrikaner homesteads during the South African War. See Helen Bradford, "Gentlemen and Boers: Afrikaner Nationalism, Gender and Colonial Warfare in the South African War," (Paper presented to Conference on Rethinking the South African War, UNISA, August 1998).

new house in Durban. Dick Roos lived with his parents until the day of his marriage in 1951, when he and his wife moved into a small flat in Durban. All of these examples poignantly illustrate how, for white ex-servicemen, a wife enabled the establishment of a home.

While few white ex-servicemen were left without a roof over their heads, the conditions of their accommodation were often far from favourable. In July 1945, Forum magazine published reports of ex-soldiers and their families living in passages or bathrooms in Johannesburg.⁹¹ An ex-soldier stated that it was commonplace to find white veterans living in people's garages in Johannesburg's southern suburbs.⁹² In this context, an urban squatter movement took root in the immediate post-war years. At the end of 1945, Fighting Talk reported that twenty-three white ex-volunteers and their families had "expropriated" empty houses in Johannesburg, Krugersdorp and Randfontein.⁹³ By the middle of 1946, houses and flats had been "commandeered" by white ex-servicemen in Durban, Bloemfontein, Pretoria and the West Rand.⁹⁴ Gendered notions of the home, and of the ways in which domestic space ought to be controlled, underlie the sense of desperation that characterised this protest. Notably, this post-war squatter movement was undertaken at a time when the majority of white ex-servicemen were of the age at which they were beginning to sow the seeds of domesticity.

⁹¹Forum, 7 July, 1945.

⁹²Cited in Oosthuizen, "The Demobilisation of the White Union Defence Force Soldiers," 99.

⁹³Fighting Talk, December 1945.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, June 1946.

The 1948 general election

For a variety of reasons, then, poorer white servicemen did not return to homes fit for heroes. Their disappointments helped to create a social category which was bound not only by class, race and gender, but also by generation and the shared experience of war. In the 1948 general election, the first post-war test of white public confidence, Smuts' UP suffered a surprise defeat at the hands of an Afrikaner nationalist coalition made up of the National and Afrikaner Parties. Despite winning a comfortable majority of all votes cast, the UP lost 36 seats to the Nationalist coalition, which won a slim parliamentary majority of 5 seats. Smuts himself lost his seat. Set against the backdrop of white ex-service distress and disillusion, Smuts's ouster in the election raises questions about the veterans' role in political transformation. In light of examples from other Allied countries such as Britain, where Churchill, the symbol of Britain's wartime image, suffered the ignominy of political defeat in 1945, the defeat of the UP also invites some interesting comparative questions about social transformation after the Second World War.

In his account of the consolidation of Afrikaner nationalism written for the Oxford History of South Africa, René de Villiers asserts that the NP owed its victory, more than anything else, to the policy of apartheid which succeeded in uniting Afrikaners against the "torrent of blackness."⁹⁵ In 1947, D.F. Malan - the "man of national unity,"

⁹⁵René de Villiers, "Afrikaner Nationalism," in Monica Wilson and Leonard Thompson, eds, Oxford History of South Africa, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 374.

as he became known - entered into an electoral pact with the Afrikaner party, primarily in an effort to unite Afrikanerdom before the general election. Besides appealing to Afrikaners' racial fears, Malan pushed for Afrikaner unity, as reflected in his rallying call: "Bring together all who, from inner conviction, belong together." Malan's campaign proved potent and irresistible for Afrikaners after the disunity and frustration of the war and pre-war years. Although many thousands of Afrikaners continued to support Smuts, the 1948 election result demonstrated that Malan had succeeded in "shepherding approximately two thirds of Afrikaners. . . back into the kraal of Afrikaner Nationalism."⁹⁶ In his analysis of the radical right, Patrick Furlong presents a similar type of argument. He attributes the NP's political victory to Malan's ability to cobble together an Afrikaner nationalist coalition.⁹⁷

Dan O'Meara, in his Marxist account of the watershed 1948 general election, observes that liberals like de Villiers tend to explain the NP's surprise victory by stressing three common elements: (1) rural interests as the key to the NP victory; (2) the appeal of apartheid policies for white voters; and (3) the appeal of Afrikaner nationalism.⁹⁸

O'Meara then inverts the contention that it was the NP's political dexterity that swung the poll its way. He writes that:

⁹⁶Ibid., 385-387.

⁹⁷Furlong, Between Crown And Swastika, 237-238.

⁹⁸O'Meara, Forty Lost Years, 23.

... it should be noted that 1948 was more than just an NP victory. It represented a defeat - not only for Smuts' UP, but for a broader array of key power-brokers in the state and capitalist economy.⁹⁹

By shifting the focus of his analysis away from the domain of election politics and party campaigns, O'Meara is free to explore the social conflicts that caused defeat for Smuts, the UP and other "key power brokers."

Thus, O'Meara contends that the key to understanding the political and social crises which came to a head in 1948, lies in examination of the social changes wrought by wartime economic growth. In particular, pressures for sustained wartime economic growth precipitated widespread breaches of the colour bar and a massive influx of black rural migrants to the cities, and so changed the racial topography of South Africa's industrial centres. Additionally, the massive influx of African migrants generated escalating urban conflict. Although strikes were outlawed by war measure #145, there were at least 60 illegal strikes by African workers between 1942 and 1944.¹⁰⁰ These illegal strikes peaked in August 1946, when 70,000 African mineworkers went on strike. Significantly, the growing militancy of African labour reinvigorated formal black nationalist opposition, and for the first time since its founding in 1912, the ANC demanded full citizenship rights for all Africans.

Burgeoning social, economic and political demands issuing from most strata of the African population led to growing conflict amongst whites over "Native Policy." Such struggles shattered the UP's "South Africanist" discourse, which defined the interests

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Ibid, 25.

of white society. Consequently, the UP's major bases of support were in increasingly vigorous conflict with each other by the beginning of 1948.¹⁰¹ Although the Labour Party (LP) had withdrawn from the government at the end of the war, it was increasingly unable to hold onto white workers. O'Meara describes white workers' path towards Afrikaner nationalism in the following terms:

Unable to provide a viable programme to white workers who felt threatened by the large-scale movement of black workers into semi-skilled work, and unable to resolve the perennial conflicts within the ever more corrupt leadership of many of the white trade unions, the Labour Party was increasingly deserted by the (largely Afrikaner) workers who voted for it in 1943."¹⁰²

The UP was unable to recast effectively its "South Africanist" project of bi-lingual white nationalism, due to divided class interests. The UP's major problems centred around the question of "Native Policy." During the war, the UP government had hinted that it might reconsider the character of its segregationist policies. Indeed, after the 1946 mineworkers' strike, Smuts himself said that "our native policy would have to be liberalised at a moderate pace, but public opinion has to be carried with us."¹⁰³ To this end he convened a Commission of Inquiry into Native Laws (the Fagan Commission) which presented a set of mildly reformist, but ambiguous proposals that comprised the UP's "Native Policy " for the 1948 general election. The Fagan Report was hardly the stuff of which populist campaigns are made. As s O'Meara notes, the UP was totally unable to answer white concerns on this matter:

Despite its heroic efforts to be all things to all (white) people, the Fagan Report('s). . . complex proposals could

¹⁰¹Ibid., 27.

¹⁰²Ibid., 31.

¹⁰³Ibid., 32.

not be distilled into a single powerful slogan - like 'apartheid'. . . which echoed with the gut racial feelings of most whites.¹⁰⁴

In contrast to the UP's ambiguous attitude towards segregation, the NP hammered the theme of black *oorstroming* of the cities and workplaces, presenting apartheid as the only solution to the "Native Problem." Although apartheid was yet still a vague concept, the NP promised that it would resolve the social crises experienced by a range of white interests. O'Meara explains something of apartheid's appeal:

It had the double advantage of proposing a simple idea, easily understood by the electorate, and one which found deep resonance with the ingrained racism of most Afrikaners (and other whites). Moreover. . . apartheid['s]. . . very simplicity operated to condense. . . competing interests into one apparently unified 'Afrikaner' whole.¹⁰⁵

None of the existing scholarly interpretations of the 1948 general election explicitly interrogate the role of white ex-servicemen in forcing the party political realignment in 1948. In light of white ex-servicemen's racialised anxieties, it would make a neat argument - with an ironic twist - to suggest that in their disillusionment, white veterans abandoned Smuts and the UP in favour of the Nats, their wartime adversaries. However the evidence does not lend itself to such easy symmetry, and in any event this thesis does not attempt to develop a critique of the existing analyses of the 1948 general election.

What the evidence does indicate is that during the 1940s and well into the 1950s, white veterans maintained a highly ambiguous relationship with both the UP and the

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 34.

NP. As they re-entered civilian life, poorer white veterans - the majority - who were most reliant on the state, were dismayed at the post-war paralyses of the ruling UP. Many became extremely bitter towards the UP for failing to honour its obligations to them, a sentiment evident in their nickname for wartime icon and Prime Minister J.C. Smuts: "Jannie Promises." As Manson observed with some acuity, white troops whom he encountered during his term as a Demobilization Officer were weary of the type of order represented by the UP. He burlesqued white veteran's sentiments towards the ruling party:

They [the UP government] represent authority, something that's been over you for 'X' number of years. When peace comes, those chaps should go out, and we'll get new people, smart ministers with doctorates. . . Smuts is a good fellow, but lets give the new boys a chance. A new broom sweeps clean and that sort of thing¹⁰⁶

Thus, at least some ex-servicemen were looking for a "competent alternative"¹⁰⁷ to the UP. However, veterans' disillusionment with the UP did not necessarily translate into electoral support for the NP. Troops' ties with the UP were deep. There was also Smuts' personal following, stretching back to his days as a Boer general in the South African War of 1899-1902. Throughout his public life in the twentieth century, Smuts made a special point of acknowledging veterans of the South African War. In turn, many Afrikaner families extended a type of personal political loyalty to Smuts. They were known as *bloedsappe* (those for whom the SAP "ran in the blood"; later the term was used to describe unwavering UP supporters). The political culture of *bloedsap* lasted for generations, and loyalty to Smuts (*Oubaas*) was a matter of family preference and pride. *Bloedsap* was no doubt sustained by the patriarchal

¹⁰⁶Manson interview.

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

structure of Afrikaner families. At the time of the Second World War, this *bloedsap* lineage meant that a core of Afrikaner support for Smuts existed, and was evident in instances of two generations of the same family enlisting in the UDF.¹⁰⁸ In the case of the Roos family, for example, Dick Roos - my father - volunteered, along with his only brother and only sister, as well as their father, once a *bywoner* and later a labourer on the Railways.

In addition to their deep ties to the UP and to Smuts the man, white troops also harboured a deep dislike for Afrikaner nationalism which they associated with Nazism and fascism. In light of the neutral, or even pro-German sentiments of many Afrikaner nationalists, the links that some maintained with the Nazis, as well as the sabotage activities of the *Ossewabrandwag* and other fringe groups of the Afrikaner right,¹⁰⁹ Afrikaner nationalism during the war carried the taint of a potential fifth column, bent on subverting the war effort. That troops conflated their military struggle against Nazi Germany with their struggle against a disloyal or subversive Afrikaner nationalism at home is suggested in a letter received by Fighting Talk from fifty men in "what is described as a depleted company in the front lines." These men were "anxious about the situation in South Africa" and called upon the government to take "any drastic steps necessary" to curb the "seditious activities of all subversive nationalist organisations."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸Grunlingh, "The King's Afrikaners," 10.

¹⁰⁹See Furlong, Between Crown And Swastika, 138-160; Also Hans Strydom, For Volk and Fuhrer: Robey Leibbrandt and Operation Weissdorn, (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1982).

¹¹⁰Fighting Talk, September 1944.

In addition, several of my informants spoke of street fights and other aggressive exchanges between troops and Afrikaner nationalists, particularly students and members of the *Ossewabrandwag*. Willie Grobler recalled an incident when, waiting in uniform at the railway station at Jacobs near Durban, a Railwayman by the name of Coetzee called out to him the "the allies are getting fucked up in Abyssinia." Willie interpreted Coetzee's remark as meaning "the allies are being chased and so will you" (however he did not take the comments too seriously, and attributed them to the fact that he was "poking Coetzees's sister").¹¹¹ Clyde Terry, a schoolboy member of the Potchefstroom local defence unit during the war, recalls witnessing regular weekend streetfights between troops who were undergoing training at the town's military bases and students from Potchefstroom University.¹¹² William Langton, who did his training at Roberts' Heights outside of Pretoria, and Dick Roos, who was based at Ladysmith in Natal and later Pretoria, related similar stories.¹¹³ While some of these anecdotes have the ring of urban legend, they nevertheless convey certain rhetoric and symbolic value in the way they position Afrikaner nationalists in relation to white servicemen.

My informants' testimonies also reflect the very real clashes that took place between returning veterans and Afrikaner nationalists. In 1946, for example, the NP decided to hold something of a mock "Victory Procession" through the streets of Johannesburg. Although press reports of the events are clouded by party political

¹¹¹Grobler interview.

¹¹²Clyde Terry, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Kimberley, 29 June, 2000.

¹¹³W. Langton, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 29 January, 1987.

loyalties, it appears that there was considerable anger amongst non-Nationalist whites in the city towards the NP's aggressive and insensitive provocation of those who had served in the war. In a counter-protest, the Springbok Legion called a meeting in the Johannesburg library gardens.¹¹⁴ Events snowballed as 10,000 white veterans took to the streets to stop the NP "Victory Procession." Violent clashes ensued, followed by an evening of street fighting in the city centre.¹¹⁵ White ex-servicemen's spirited response to the Legion's appeal, as well as the violence of their protest, can only be attributed to their outrage at the NP's attempt to parody not only wartime victory parades, but also veterans and their fallen comrades.

Moreover, veterans' distress at the UP's apparent failure to meet its obligations to white ex-servicemen became diluted as the worst crises of post-war social integration passed. Although white troops experienced dislocation and anxiety in the immediate aftermath of the war, the Springbok Legion was aware of the extent to which, by the late 1940s, white veterans' fortunes had improved. In analysing the reasons for the Legion's diminishing membership after the war, the Legion Executive noted a "general contentment amongst European volunteers" which it attributed to full employment and veterans' "mild acceptance of housing conditions."¹¹⁶ To all accounts, by 1948 a type of post-war weariness had settled in, and despite their earlier disappointment, most veterans were adjusting to civilian life, had obtained

¹¹⁴Star, 20 September 1946.

¹¹⁵Reef Barb, October 1946. See also Fighting Talk, October 1946.

¹¹⁶Springbok Legion. National Executive Committee, 8 January, 1947, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

jobs and housing, and many were starting families. As veteran Ronnie Stockton told me, "we were damn busy getting on with our lives."¹¹⁷

Nevertheless, apartheid, as it was elaborated over time, appealed to the material and cultural concerns of those white veterans who were underskilled yet fairly well paid, stuck in dead-end jobs with little to distinguish them from more upwardly-mobile members of the black working class besides the colour of their skin. As Goldberg reminds us, racist culture involves both a signifying system of embedded meaning and a system of material production.¹¹⁸ And indeed, the NP gave the workplace, or at least the better paid part of it, back to white men and tried to reverse the wartime "invasion" of the cities. In short, the NP laid the ideological, legal and institutional foundations for whites to enjoy privileged employment. This was augmented by a considerable social wage in the form of well-funded public amenities like schools and hospitals, as well as opportunities for accumulation - what Roediger calls the "privileges of whiteness."¹¹⁹

Yet, just as they were entitled to share in the privileges of whiteness, ex-servicemen were made to suffer a range of vindictive barbs from the Nats on account of their war service. Amongst white ex-servicemen, for instance, it was believed that the NP closed channels for promotion in the civil service to those who had volunteered. Wally Stewart claimed that during a lifetime of work on the Railways, he was often

¹¹⁷Ronnie Stockton, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Kimberley, 28 June, 2000.

¹¹⁸David T. Goldberg, Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning, (Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993), 8.

¹¹⁹David Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 12.

overlooked for promotion, largely on account of his war service, and had to "take what jobs he was given." Veterans employed on the Railways even organised themselves into a SAR & H War Services Union - interestingly, while the UP was still in office - to fight incidences of possible discrimination against ex-servicemen.¹²⁰

White ex-servicemen also commonly believed that after 1948, NP supporters were given preferential treatment in the allocation of state farm land. Dave Dent, a Kimberley war veteran and supplier of farm hardware, claims that in the early years of NP rule, blocks of land on the Vaal-Harts irrigation scheme were released for settlement by white farmers, but "Nats" got those closest to Kimberley - and markets - while ex-servicemen tended to be allocated plots in the vicinity of distant Taung.¹²¹

Moreover, the new government put a stop to a variety of benevolent grants and rebates that had assisted ex-service organisations, including the MOTH, in charitable work.¹²² P. Levings, a Johannesburg veteran, recalled how his MOTH shellhole (unit) used to invite the local MP, a Nat, to formal dinners. However, to maintain the MP's goodwill, Levings and his colleagues felt obliged to remove all traces of Allied war memorabilia from their clubhouse on such occasions - especially the Union Jack flag.¹²³

Such action, along with the NP's wartime politics, meant that many white volunteers were never able to reconcile themselves wholly to the NP. At the same time, the UP

¹²⁰Wally Stewart, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Kimberley, 28 June, 2000.

¹²¹Dave Dent, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Kimberley, 28 June, 2000.

¹²²Grobler and Levings interviews.

¹²³Levings interview.

was becoming increasingly dissolute, and unable to articulate any clear political alternative to the NP - as one contemporary commentator observed wryly, the UP's politics amounted to little more than "apartheid enunciated with honey in the voice."¹²⁴ Alienated from both major parties, white veterans sought alternate strategies to mediate their relationship with the power-brokers of apartheid South Africa. During their involvement in the Torch Commando, discussed in chapter five, white ex-servicemen evoked the moral authority which came from their having served their country in time of war. When the Torch failed, white veterans turned towards the MOTH, which kept alive the social relations of the regiment, provided a variety of social networks, and represented a type of resistance to a party political culture perceived to be bent on belittling soldiers' contribution and sacrifice. The appeal of the MOTH for white ex-servicemen is discussed in the final chapters of this thesis.

White veterans and whiteness in the apartheid state

With the exception of 1970 when it lost 8 seats to the UP, the NP increased its share of the vote at every general election until at least 1977.¹²⁵ With some insight, an Afrikaner nationalist newspaper editorialised in 1965 that:

¹²⁴This phrase, used in a slightly different context, is attributed to Gillie Ford, a leader of the Torch Commando in Natal. See Neil Roos, "The Torch Commando, the 'Natal Stand' and the Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion," in Paul Thompson, ed, Natal in the Union Period, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1988), 12.

¹²⁵Davies, Rob, Dan O'Meara and Siphon Dlamini, The Struggle for South Africa: A reference guide to movements, organisations and institutions, (London: Zed, 1984), 158.

Nationalism no longer belongs only to the Afrikaans-speaking, and this assurance that other groups accept the Nationalist [sic] Party conditions for co-operation, creates for the first time since 1910 the genuine basis for white unity growth.¹²⁶

It is likely that white ex-servicemen were part of this new "Nationalism," built steadily around white prosperity, and its undersides - black poverty and repression. However, the politics of the new regime persistently ignored a central feature of white veterans' identity, namely the memory of armed service. Besides conveying enormous emotional and psychological meaning, war service also legitimated white veterans' claims to special access to the material and political resources of the state. It would have required an immense leap of political faith for veterans to vote for the NP, which most were simply not prepared to do. Yet it could well be argued that white ex-servicemen's relative quiescence in the face of imagined or real indignities wrought by the NP is in itself testimony to the power of race for white men, and the benefits offered by whiteness.

¹²⁶de Villiers, "Afrikaner Nationalism," 375.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CHALLENGE OF THE TORCH COMMANDO

The rise and fall of the Torch

In 1951, the War Veterans' Torch Commando (WVTC) entered the South African political arena in response to the NP government's attempts to remove coloured voters from the common voters' roll. The Torch was headed by Battle of Britain air ace A.G. "Sailor" Malan, and over the next two years it attracted around 250,000 white ex-service supporters.¹ This figure is not much different from the total number of white volunteers in the Second World War, making the Torch Commando possibly the biggest mass political movement to have emerged in South Africa to that date.

The Torch Commando protested in cities and towns across the Union against the government's "rape of the constitution." Torch rallies were dramatic affairs, and heavily laden with symbolism. Each marching with a lighted Torch (a paraffin-soaked rag in an empty jam tin) held aloft on a staff, Torchmen or "Tortsies" would converge on a central public place, often the local war memorial or cenotaph. They would listen to a speech delivered by a veteran - sometimes of the Great War, occasionally of the South African War - who reminded them of their obligations to their fallen comrades. Rallies would end with a denouncement of the government's bad faith. Despite its mass appeal, the Torch Commando's role on the South African political

¹The Natal Mercury, 18 May 1953. Another figure cited was 234 000. See Oliver Walker, Sailor Malan. A Biography, (London: Cassell and Co., 1953), 177.

stage was short-lived. After the 1953 general election, the Torch dissipated, its exit as sudden as its appearance in 1951.

For the purposes of this thesis, the Torch raises a number of questions concerning its appeal to ordinary white ex-servicemen. The Torch emerged a full six years after white service identity had peaked around the end of the war. The Torch also came three years after veterans' relative acquiescence to the onset of Nat rule. As demonstrated in chapter four, by the early 1950s, most white ex-servicemen had obtained jobs and housing and were beginning to establish families. Although such institutions as the MOTH, as well as the everyday exigencies and pressures of "getting on with their lives" helped to manage and dampen the contradictions of Nationalist rule, the NP government failed to win much legitimacy in the eyes of most white servicemen. Instead, the majority of white ex-servicemen continued to regard the new regime with some cynicism.

In light of such ambivalence, this chapter will examine whether the role of ordinary white servicemen in the Torch Commando in any way comments on their relationship as a category to the white body politic. Moreover, the chapter will examine whether the very scale of the Torch Commando's protest reflects on the ways in which white racist culture was being transformed, or on the struggles over who should benefit most from the politics of whiteness. The chapter will argue that, in light of the "disrespect" paid by the NP to servicemen and the memory of war service, the removal of the coloured vote from the common roll was just one of a number of cumulative issues indicating the NP's disregard for the interests of those other than

the Party faithful. This chapter will demonstrate that, for the marching masses of the Torch Commando, the movement was more about their frustrations as white veterans - low in the social hierarchy of whiteness and particularly dependent on the state to protect their tenuous social position - than about their concerns for racial equality and protection of the "liberal" tradition.

After the 1953 general election, the Torch disappeared from the political and social arena. To understand the Torch Commando's implosion, we need to understand something of its flamboyant emergence. While the Torch certainly captured the imagination of white veterans, its origins did not lie entirely or exclusively in popular discontent amongst white ex-servicemen. Rather, its emergence was something of a contrived affair, and the empirical and circumstantial evidence suggests that its origins can likely be attributed, alternatively, to UP initiative, to the Springbok Legion, or to a group of leading English-speaking businessmen spearheaded by Anglo-American's Harry Oppenheimer. A series of social, political and ideological crises, occasioned by the consolidation of Nat rule, renders plausible the involvement of each group in the formation of the Torch.

UP involvement in the early history of the Torch indicates something of the stunned disbelief with which the UP greeted the NP's unlikely triumph in 1948. The UP's role was predicated on the assumption that the effective mobilisation of white veterans would help to dislodge the NP from office in any future election. The influence of Oppenheimer and Anglo-American, representing big English-speaking capitalist interests, is murky, speculative and difficult to pin down, based as it is on

circumstantial arguments and shards of empirical evidence gathered from disparate sources. However their possible involvement does suggest that the captains of industry were threatened by the NP's efforts to promote *Volkskapitalisme*, which might be inimical to the well-being of their own enterprises. The participation of radicals from the Springbok Legion is a less contentious issue, although the historical record is less clear as to the objectives of their involvement. Chapter three of this thesis has already touched on the role of white political radicals in the Springbok Legion during wartime. Their participation in the Torch Commando invites further commentary on a hitherto unexplored region of the history of radical politics in South Africa. In particular, the radical legionnaires involvement in the Torch raises questions about the ideological and political crises which beset the white left in the early years of apartheid.

The collapse of the Torch Commando in 1953 represented a huge victory for the NP, and a major blow to the UP. The demise of the Torch was perhaps even more decisive than the 1948 general election in terms of consolidating the NP's ability to spell out the internal politics of whiteness. As O'Meara has shown,² at a structural level, the NP's consolidation of power after 1953 fundamentally altered the apartheid regime's relationships with Anglo and other large corporations. At a more socio-cultural level, following the collapse of the Torch in 1953, white ex-servicemen would never again feature as a political category capable of challenging the state's allocation of the privileges of whiteness.

²Dan O'Meara, Forty Lost Years. The apartheid state and the politics of the National Party, 1948-1994, (Johannesburg: Ravan, and Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996), 81-82.

Of those who were most involved in the Torch, it was left to a few white radicals from the Springbok Legion to continue the fight against the Nats and the apartheid state. After the failure of the Torch, white radicals were increasingly aligned with the movements for national liberation. As chapter six will argue, although white radicals shared a fundamental belief in the significance of challenging race rather than being organised by it, their alliance with black anti-apartheid activists was often more strategic than ideological.

Chapter five draws from oral testimony, newspaper accounts and those documentary sources produced by the Torch Commando which found their way into the UP collection, housed at UNISA. No discrete collection on the Torch Commando exists: terrified that the organisation and its leading members would be listed under the Suppression of Communism Act, the Executive of the Torch took a decision to burn all documents shortly after the 1953 general election. The purpose of this observation is not only to account for the types of evidence I have employed, or to offer a pre-emptive extenuation for such errors and omissions that I might commit in discussing the Torch. It is also intended to illustrate something of the terror and violence, often forgotten or negated in more recent texts, which existed beneath the surface of white political culture. In the years before a new hegemonic discourse took root amongst whites, cemented by the inherent and multi-tiered “dangers” of communism and the *swart gevaar*, the NP showed itself willing to act ruthlessly against even those whites who, while never questioning the foundations of white supremacy, were mildly opposed to NP rule.

The NP, the coloured vote and the concerns of civil society

From the time the NP came to power in 1948, it signalled its intention to remove coloureds from the common voters' roll. This move not only coincided with the NP's evolving politics of race, but also with its fear that, in the tenuous balance of party political power, coloured voters in the Cape might tip the scales in favour of the UP in the general election scheduled for 1953.³ However, in terms of the South Africa Act, any change to the constitutional status of coloured voters required a two-thirds majority in both Houses of Parliament. During its first two years of office, the NP was frustrated by N.C. Havenga, an important member of the NP / Afrikaner party coalition. Havenga had been J.B.M. Hertzog's chief lieutenant, and Hertzog was a strict constitutionalist. Not surprisingly, Havenga refused to support any steps to remove coloureds from the common roll without the requisite majority, and he successfully restrained Prime Minister D.F. Malan from any action on this issue until late 1950.⁴ However, Havenga finally bowed to the Prime Minister's will and agreed that the entrenched clauses were inapplicable, since the provisions of a Bill to transfer coloureds to a separate roll did not necessarily imply a diminution of their political rights.⁵ Malan announced that his proposed legislation, the Separate Representation of Voters Bill, would be introduced during the 1951 session of Parliament.

³Gwendolen Carter, The Politics of Inequality: South Africa since 1948, (London: Thames and Hudson, 3rd edition, 1962), 121.

⁴Ibid., 122.

⁵Ibid.

Immediately, a Civil Rights was established by white "constitutional" liberals in Johannesburg, to channel agitation against the Bill. Although, coloureds were the Bill's obvious victims, the Civil Rights League emphasised to white voters that the government's "rape of the constitution" was a threat to them too. The Civil Rights League observed that other freedoms, directly affecting white voters, had also been undermined by the NP government. For example, the right to own and sell property and the right of domicile were restricted by the Group Areas Act. In addition, the Act granting University status to Potchefstroom University also undermined the freedom of conscience by permitting the University to discriminate between applicants for jobs on the grounds of religious faith. The Transvaal Language Ordinance and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act also encroached upon freedom of conscience. The "dignity of the individual," the Civil Rights League averred, was denied by the Population Registration Act. Finally, the most compelling argument advanced by the Civil Rights League was that, if the government was willing to tamper with the

entrenched position of Coloured voters, it might also be prepared to attack the other provision entrenched in the constitution, namely the equality in the state of the English and Afrikaans languages.⁶

Similar appeals issued from other quarters of the white liberal establishment. In a letter to Forum, a magazine representing the views of mainstream white liberalism, academic Julius Lewin cautioned that the South African constitution was fast becoming the instrument of the political party in office.⁷ UP Member of Parliament J.R. Sullivan wrote a similar letter to Colony, another liberal mouthpiece. Sullivan

⁶Government By The People? For The People?, (Johannesburg: Civil Rights League, 1951) [Pamphlet]. See also Forum, 2 November 1950.

⁷Forum, 10 November 1950.

asserted that the government's intention to change one of the entrenched clauses of the Constitution raised the question of "moral laws in politics and parliament." In particular, the proposed changes to the coloured franchise deprived "the present law of its distinctive moral content and degrades it to an alterable technicality."⁸ In Durban, an organisation called the Defenders of the Constitution - headed ironically enough by G. Heaton Nicholls, Zululand sugar farmer and staunch segregationist - was established. In a pamphlet published shortly before the 1953 general election by the Defenders outlined their principal concerns that the proposed change to the status of coloured voters broke historical pledges to safeguard the existing rights of "non-European" voters. The Defenders pamphlet concluded by thundering that, while "compromise on economics, administrative problems of government and other political issues was possible. . . compromise on issues affecting our honour is unthinkable."⁹ In notes that he prepared for a speech, E.G. Malherbe, wartime Director of Military Intelligence, drew a comparison between the effects of communist rule in Eastern Europe, and Nat rule in South Africa, when he observed that South Africa was fast becoming the "land of the corrugated iron curtain."¹⁰ The *Boerenasie*, he argued, sought isolation from outside influences in a quest to dominate the country.

⁸J.R. Sullivan, MP, "The Moral Law and Politics," in Colony, May 1951.

⁹R. Feetham, Political Apartheid And The Entrenched Clauses Of The South Africa Act: Dr. Malan's "Historical Facts", (Durban: The Defenders of the Constitution, 1953) [Pamphlet].

¹⁰E.G. Malherbe, "The Land of the Corrugated Iron Curtain" (unpublished speaking notes), E.G. Malherbe papers, File 717, KCM, 56 988 (1227).

Around 1950, the Springbok Legion also expressed a range of moral and political concerns against the Nationalist plan to tamper with the coloured franchise. The Legion's objections may be summarised as fourfold: (1) the common roll was a vested right of the coloured people; (2) coloureds themselves regarded the proposals as a form of unjust and unprovoked discrimination; (3) South Africans should be working towards greater racial co-operation; (4) if the Government, in violation of the Constitution, was allowed to remove one group of voters from the common roll by a simple majority, there "will be no safeguard at all for the rights of any other group or groups of voters."¹¹

Although there is a paucity of documentary evidence covering this area of Legion activity, articles carried by Fighting Talk suggest that the Legion's leadership saw the NP's assault on the Constitution as an issue which might rally white ex-servicemen - well before the concept for the Torch Commando saw the light of day. During the war, white volunteers had been subject to a barrage of propaganda that they were fighting in defence of democracy. For the Legion, the NP's proposed change to the voters' roll - spearheaded by men whose wartime allegiance was dubious - flouted the very ideals that underpinned South Africa's participation in the war. If the Springbok Legion could provide effective leadership in again mobilising former soldiers and channelling their opposition to the *veraaiers* (traitors) who now commanded the government, the Legion's flagging fortunes might be revived. Thus, legionnaires were urged to

be prepared to take the initiative in forming. . . ad hoc committees of responsible people to run the campaign

¹¹Fighting Talk, December 1950.

[against the removal of the coloured voters from the common roll] in every town or village.¹²

The Springbok Legion was however unable to exploit the situation during the last months of 1950 and the first quarter of 1951, for several reasons. Firstly, for many white ex-servicemen, the Legion had been tainted by its association with "communists." Since the formation of the Legion in 1941, the NP had labelled the organisation as little more than an appendage of the CPSA.¹³ The intensity of such attacks had increased since the Nats assumed power in 1948, and the 1950 Suppression of Communism Act subsequently provided the NP government with a convenient instrument for attacking individuals and organisations suspected of association with communism. Secondly, the UP had by 1950 also found it expedient to distance itself from the legion, as it attempted to regain the electoral support of conservative whites. Thirdly, the Legion was chronically short of the financial resources needed to conduct a major campaign. As a former full-time employee of the Legion put it: "We spent our time raising money for the Springbok Legion and only got enough to pay our own salaries."¹⁴

Complex moral and constitutional arguments of the sort published by Forum and Colony, and articulated by such liberal organs of civil society as the Civil Rights League, the Defenders of the Constitution and the Legion failed to find much resonance with white voters in 1948, 1949 or 1950. During those years, most whites,

¹²Fighting Talk, December 1950. Appeals in a similar vein also appeared in the November 1950 and January 1951 issues of Fighting Talk.

¹³See chapter three, above.

¹⁴Interview conducted by author. The interviewee wishes to remain anonymous.

including veterans, who would consider themselves as opponents of the Nats were busy negotiating their own status as whites under the new regime. Few ordinary whites responded to the connections drawn by "constitutional" liberals, between coloureds' rights and their own.

Then on 8 March 1951, the Separate Representation of Voters (Coloured Franchise) Bill was introduced to the House of Assembly by the NP government. The UP responded by submitting the Bill for ruling by the Speaker, confident that he would not allow it to be put to the vote as the NP was unlikely to muster the required two-thirds majority.¹⁵ However, on 11 April, the Speaker ruled that the Bill could be introduced to the House, with the implication that it could be passed by a simple majority. The UP's belief that it could still command political and constitutional power in Parliament was shattered.

The origins of the Torch

In 1948, when the NP was swept to power on a minority vote, it was widely held in white opposition circles that should an election be called - the sooner the better - the Nats would be ousted. This assumption, along with the sense of growing alarm in white opposition circles over the implications of the Speaker's ruling on the Separate Representation of Voters Bill, provides the context out of which the War Veterans' Torch Commando emerged.

¹⁵Carter, The Politics of Inequality, 123.

The sequence of events, from the time the Torch was conceived until its metamorphosis as a mass movement, are somewhat confused. The question of precisely who authored the idea of mobilising white ex-servicemen is especially open to speculation. In a paper which sought to uncover the origins of the Torch Commando, Michael Fridjhon suggests that the Torch was a Springbok Legion initiative.¹⁶ Having also experienced problems uncovering documentary evidence relating to the formative period of the movement's history, he bases much of his account on oral testimony. Fridjhon contends that a Springbok Legion delegation consisting of Cecil Williams and Jack Hodgson met with Vic Clapham, Deputy Director of the UP's Division of Information, sometime toward the middle of April 1951. The legionnaires put it to Clapham that, if a new organisation - free from the Legion's tarnished image and unattached to any political party - could effectively rally white ex-servicemen against the Coloured Franchise Bill, this movement would then be able to emerge as a popular focus of anti-Nationalist sentiment.¹⁷ Clapham agreed with the legionnaire's plan, and from that point the Springbok Legion and the UP began co-operating to organise the spectacular, ostensibly spontaneous torchlight marches that followed.¹⁸

By 1950, the remaining membership of the Springbok Legion was predominantly communist. The sense of desperation which had overcome the extra-parliamentary

¹⁶Michael Fridjhon, "The Torch Commando and the Politics of White Opposition: South Africa, 1951-1953," (Paper presented to a seminar of the University of the Witwatersrand African Studies Institute, 1977).

¹⁷Ibid., 179.

¹⁸Ibid., 180.

left in the wake of state attacks on "communists" and "liberals" accounts for their involvement in the War Veterans' Action Committee (WVAC) - forerunner to the Torch. However, their reasons for doing so were diffuse, which is symptomatic of the ideological ferment amongst "former" members of the now disbanded CPSA.¹⁹ Some legionnaires such as Jack Hodgson, Jock Isacowitz, and Cecil Williams believed that the first priority of the white left was to ensure the UP's return to power.²⁰ They assumed that if a less reactionary party was in power, this would allow the Legion as an organisation and radical activists like themselves, greater leeway to forge an alliance with the black liberation movements.²¹ Other leaders of the Legion clung to the belief that the Legion should focus on organising and educating white ex-servicemen, the Legion's historical constituency. Guy Routh, later the acting chairman of the Legion, argued that given the lack of substantial difference between the UP and the NP, the white left had to settle for little to gain from concentrating on election politics. He believed, however, that the Legion should focus on prompting the white electorate - and in particular, ex-servicemen - in a more liberal direction.²²

¹⁹Anticipating the passage of the Suppression of Communism Bill, the CPSA disbanded itself shortly before the Bill was written into the statute books. For an account of the dismay and confusion amongst ordinary members caused by the CPSA's Central Committee to disband the Party, see Rusty Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting. Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics, 1938-1964, (London: Viking, 1999), 119-124.

²⁰Roley I. Arentstein, interview by author, Durban, 24 June 1986.

²¹Ibid. See also Neil D. Roos, "A History of the Springbok Legion, 1941-1953," (Master of Arts thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 1990), 116-165.

²²Guy Routh, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 16 March 1987.

From the outset, it seemed as if the fledgling WVAC would satisfy both camps of political opinion within the Legion. In a series of lengthy interviews that I conducted with former Guardian cartoonist and UP Director of Information Vic Clapham in 1986 and 1987, he acknowledged the Legion / UP link, but his emphasis varied quite considerably from that of Fridjhon. According to Clapham, the "Torch Commando was a product of the United Party Division of Information."²³ Shortly after the Speaker's ruling on 11 April, when it was clear the UP was losing the battle on the parliamentary front, Leader of the Opposition J.G.N. Strauss telephoned Clapham for assistance.²⁴ Strauss asked Clapham to "bring the UP out on the streets" with a view to forcing the government to the polls.²⁵ Clapham replied that the UP was not geared for a mass campaign against the Nats. Clapham believed, however, that if the UP wished to bring white non-Nationalists out in a show of force against the governments's "rape of the constitution," such a campaign should be spearheaded by an appeal to ex-servicemen, who were young, vigorous, disciplined and at least nominal supporters of the UP.²⁶ Clapham stressed to Strauss that such a campaign would require a respected and credible figurehead, and it was agreed to approach Battle of Britain ace Sailor Malan.²⁷ Moreover, Malan was under the patronage of Harry Oppenheimer, wealthy magnate and United Party MP for Kimberley.²⁸ Malan

²³Vic Clapham, interview by author, transcript, Botha's Hill, 12 March 1987.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Oppenheimer and Malan were introduced towards the end of the war. After the war, Malan was invited to join Anglo-American as private and political secretary

enthusiastically responded to Clapham's request to head the ex-servicemen's protest movement. This part at least of Clapham's story seems plausible. When I interviewed him, he had in his possession a photograph of Sailor Malan speaking at one of the major Torch Commando rallies, inscribed with the following dedication:

To Vic
In memory of the torch
we lit together in 1951
Very Sincerely
Sailor

Clapham recalled that he then approached a dozen or so ex-servicemen in and around Johannesburg and explained the plan in detail. All agreed to the formation of the Johannesburg War Veterans' Action Committee (WVAC). When I questioned him on the role of the Springbok Legion in the WVAC, Clapham replied that radical legionnaires did find their way onto the Committee, but

You couldn't form an open Action Committee and say 'No, we don't want you and we don't want you.' The climate was such that there was no ways that we could deny participation to known communists.²⁹

Even if Clapham exaggerates his own personal role in the formation of the WVAC, the essence of his account bears closer scrutiny, and is arguably more plausible than that of Fridjhon. Clapham resigned from the Legion's National Executive, and from the Legion itself in early 1948,³⁰ while his wife was expelled from the Home Front

to Oppenheimer. In October 1950, he took out a mortgage on one of the De Beer's farms near Kimberley, possibly on favourable terms. See Walker, Sailor Malan, 150-152.; 160.

²⁹Clapham interview, 12 March 1987..

³⁰Vic Clapham, interview by author, transcript, Botha's Hill, 12 December 1986.

League in 1944.³¹ It is thus unlikely that Clapham would approach the Legion, or be open to approaches by the Legion as an organisation, as Fridjhon suggests. Further, if the WWAC was in fact jointly conceived by the Legion and the UP, there would surely have been a greater proportion of legionnaires on the Committee. Yet, at an early WWAC meeting, only about one-third of those present had Legion affiliations.³²

It might be more helpful to see the differences between Fridjhon's argument and Clapham's recollections as complementary rather than contradictory. The few remaining members of the Springbok Legion, mostly communists, and representatives of the UP both saw political utility in mobilising white ex-servicemen against the "rape of the constitution." No matter which organisation came up with the idea of igniting a new wave of white ex-service protest, legionnaires and members of the UP jointly stage-managed the emergence of the WWAC as a mass movement.

Harry Oppenheimer, South Africa's leading businessman after the Second World War, lurks in the wings of Clapham's narrative as well as in stories recounted by other veterans of the Torch Commando. Oppenheimer, an Anglophone mining capitalist who had intimate links with the UP, might have lobbied vigorously in favour of the

³¹Home Front League Minutes, 17 October, 1944, A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

³²Legionnaires present were: A. Abrahams, F.B. Adler, P. Beyleveld, V. Browne, D. Etheredge, P.J. Hodgson, J. Isacowitz, D. Katzeff and C.G. Williams. Others present were: L. Kane-Berman (Chair), A.F. Bovell, G. Carrolll, V. Clapham, G. Enoch, L. Goldman, H.H. Greenwood, A.L. Kowarsky, J. Lorraine, R.S. Parrott, D. Pinshaw, J. Pretorius, A.G. Malan, H. Schwartz, H. Solomon, D. Whyte, J. Watson and J. Wilson. Minutes of the meeting of the Johannesburg War Veterans' Action Committee, 21 May, 1951, UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando 1951-1953, UNISA.

Torch concept in the UP hierarchy. If this assumption is valid, Oppenheimer would have been motivated primarily by a desire to force the government to the polls, possibly by the threat of insurrection. O'Meara and others have argued that the early years of Nat rule were a difficult period for men like Oppenheimer, on account of both his "Englishness" and the nature of his enterprise. In 1948, the NP came to power on an "anti-capitalist" platform. Its apartheid policy promised drastic state intervention in the functioning of labour and other markets, and strict state regulation of all sectors of the economy. Given the NP's overt intention to promote purely Afrikaner interests against the then-predominant economic power centres, O'Meara suggests that the Nats rise to power struck terror into the hearts of most Anglophone South African businessmen. The Johannesburg Chamber of Commerce spoke for organised Anglophone business when it declared in 1949 that the NP programme and policy orientation tolled the "death knell" of the "free enterprise system."³³

From about 1950, the state, seen in the political culture of Afrikaner nationalism as an instrument to serve the *volk*, was used to advance the interests of Afrikaner business, by providing technical assistance, granting "soft" loans and government credit, and also awarding government contracts to Afrikaner business.³⁴ As the chairman of a powerful Afrikaner finance company later wrote, the NP government strengthened "Afrikaner participation in the industrial progress of our country. . . as a

³³O'Meara, Forty Lost Years, 80-81. See also Alf Stadler, The political economy of modern South Africa, (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, and London: Croon Helm, 1987), 58.

³⁴Rob Davies, Capital, State and White Labour in South Africa, 1900-1960: An Historical Materialist Analysis of Class Formation and Class Relations, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979), 337.

bulwark against the Anglo-American corporation."³⁵ Explicit state support for Afrikaner business, along with the NP's protectionist policies, meant that in many ways, the Afrikaner capitalist class was the major beneficiary of Nat rule.³⁶

However, the NP's protectionist barriers were bad for the mining sector since they raised the cost of inputs upon which duties were imposed. As Anthony Lumby has pointed out, gold mining not only requires high levels of investment in exploration and plant, but is highly cost-sensitive since rising costs cannot be passed on in the form of a higher gold price.³⁷ After the war, Anglo-American was particularly sensitive to increases in the cost of mining. It had secured half of the mines - including six of the seven most profitable - on the new and very rich Orange Free State fields.³⁸ The investment levels and expenditure occasioned by the start-up, massive under any circumstances, were increased by protectionist trade barriers which diluted the benefits deriving from upward pressure on the gold price, from about 1949.

Although in the long run the NP's apartheid policies helped all big business, for example through the enforcement of draconian labour controls that suppressed

³⁵Ibid., 79.

³⁶Ibid., 80.

³⁷Anthony Lumby, "Industrial development prior to the Second World War," in Francis Coleman, ed, Economic History Of South Africa, (Pretoria: Haum, 1983), .220.

³⁸Rob Davies, Dan O'Meara and Siphon Dlamini, The Struggle For South Africa. A Reference Guide to Movements, Organizations and Institutions, (London: Zed Books, 1984), 66.

African wages,³⁹ the early days of the Nat regime presented an unknown and forbidding quantity to Anglophone businessmen, particularly those in the lucrative mining sector. The nature of the political economy in 1951 therefore makes it highly possible that Oppenheimer was willing to gamble on a type of counter-*Volkskapitalisme* project. As a representative of Anglo-American, and Anglophone capital more generally, and as an individual who commanded considerable influence in the UP, Oppenheimer might very well have been decisive in backing Clapham's proposal to mobilise ex-servicemen against the "rape of the constitution."

Oral testimony and surviving Torch correspondence dealing with the finances of the movement provide evidence of Oppenheimer's involvement. During the 1950s, Cyril Renton was a full-time worker for the UP in the Rand area, and party to its political decisions. He told me that, when the Speaker announced that the Separate Representation of Voters Bill required only a simple majority, "influential people" in the UP and big business decided that it would be expedient to operate in the extra-parliamentary domain.⁴⁰ Although Renton's discretion prevented him from identifying the personae implicated, his comment supports Clapham's assertion that Oppenheimer was present with UP leader Strauss, when Strauss telephoned Clapham to communicate the party's decision to "bring the UP out on the streets."

The ways in which the Torch was funded further implicates Oppenheimer. Former

³⁹In 1963, in what can only be described as a vote of confidence in the Nats' *bona fides* as capitalists, Anglo-American assisted *Federale Mynbou*, a Sanlam subsidiary, buy up, at a discount, the General Mining and Finance Corporation (later renamed Gencor). Ibid.

⁴⁰Cyril Renton, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 7 May 1986.

Torchman Vause Raw, UP (and later, New Republic Party) stalwart and veteran MP for Durban Point, told me that a "United Democratic Trust Fund" was established to fund the constitutional and electoral battle against the Nats. Its major contributors, he added, were Oppenheimer and Peter Gallo of Gallo Records.⁴¹ I have not otherwise encountered reference to a "United Democratic Trust Fund," and it is likely that Raw had the "United South Africa Trust Fund" in mind. The "United South Africa Trust Fund" was established in the late 1940s as a type of fighting fund to represent UP interests against the Nats. Besides allocating special sums to the Torch on an ad hoc basis, the Fund contributed £15,000 to help cover the Torch's operating costs, which amounted to about £2,000 per month.⁴² The Fund was the Torch Commando's major source of funding. While in principle the Fund's disbursements were governed by a Board of Trustees, correspondence between the Fund and the Torch indicate that Oppenheimer kept a tight reign on the Fund's purse strings, pointing to his personal involvement in the financing of the Torch.⁴³

Amongst the white left, there was little doubt about Oppenheimer's role as the *eminence grace* behind the Torch. Roley Arentstein, a former legionnaire and CPSA official who was an early member of the Torch Commando, bitterly commented that

⁴¹W. Vause Raw, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 20 April 1986.

⁴²Financial Statement. National Congress [War Veterans' Torch Commando], June, 1953. In the possession of Prof. W. Kleynhans, UNISA.

⁴³H.F. Oppenheimer to A.L. Kowarsky (Torch Commando National Treasurer), 7 March 1953; H.F. Oppenheimer to Harry Cooper (Secretary, United South Africa Trust Fund), 12 March 1953; Kowarsky to Cooper, 16 March 1953; Louis Kane-Berman (National Chair, Torch Commando) to Oppenheimer, 16 March 1953. All in UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1953, UNISA.

"Anglo-American broke the Torch,"⁴⁴ as Oppenheimer commanded inordinate influence in Torch affairs due to his funding role. After the Steel Commando riot in Cape Town (see below), Oppenheimer made future funding of the Torch contingent upon its precisely toeing the UP line.⁴⁵ Accordingly to Arentstein, while Oppenheimer was keen to demonstrate a show of force sufficient to compel the government to the polls, he wanted to avoid any confrontation that might threaten the foundations of the social order as a whole.⁴⁶ In 1994, Oppenheimer declined my request for an interview on the impact of Nat rule on Anglophone business.⁴⁷ Oppenheimer's rebuff - albeit expressed with elegance and tact - is hardly surprising. In 1994, the methods of big business in the newly democratised South Africa were aeons away from those deployed at the beginning of Nat rule. In any event, Oppenheimer's association with the Torch is not a major thrust of this thesis, although this issue presents a challenge to the historiography of South African capitalism, and in particular suggests the need for a more critical examination of Anglophone business in South Africa under apartheid.

Crises of white masculinity and the emergence of the Torch as a mass movement

The beginnings of the WVAC's transformation from a small committee to a mass movement can be traced to a wreath laying ceremony held at the Johannesburg

⁴⁴Roley I. Arentstein, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 24 August 1986.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Cliff Elphick (Personal Assistant to Mr. H.F. Oppenheimer) to author, 2 December 1994.

cenotaph on 21 April, and attended by about 3,000 ex-servicemen.⁴⁸ This ceremony set the moral and cultural parameters of the Torch's appeal to ordinary white ex-servicemen. A flag-draped coffin containing a copy of the South African constitution was placed at the foot of the cenotaph, setting the tone for the subsequent Torch campaign as the care of the country's constitution was symbolically entrusted to the fallen comrades.⁴⁹ From the outset, the WVAC sought to project itself as "apolitical," waging a moral crusade against the NP's un-constitutional behaviour. In this regard, the WVAC was well served by the appointment as provisional chairman of Sailor Malan, who had no former political affiliations. Cecil Williams, a member of the WVAC and the Springbok Legion, defended the emerging protest movement, insisting that it occupied high moral terrain. In his response to a letter criticising the manner in which the WVAC "desecrated the memory of the fallen with politics," he wrote: "We do not desecrate the memory of the fallen. Because we honour their memory and their sacrifice we carry on their struggle where they had to leave off."⁵⁰

The meeting at the Johannesburg cenotaph was followed by mass torchlight processions and meetings in Johannesburg and Durban on 4 May 1951, which were attended by an estimated 25,000 and 16,000 veterans respectively.⁵¹ Again, the ex-servicemen's obligation to honour the memory of their dead comrades by rallying in

⁴⁸The Natal Mercury, 23 April, 1951.

⁴⁹Interestingly, Fighting Talk reported that it was the Springbok Legion which laid the coffin. Fighting Talk, April 1951.

⁵⁰Ibid, May 1951.

⁵¹The Natal Mercury, 5 May 1951.

defence of "democracy" was iterated. In his speech to the gathering outside the Johannesburg City Hall, Sailor Malan said:

Are we, after successfully repelling the invaders, going to stand by and allow the white ant in our own midst to eat away the pillars of our national structures? . . . Who has the greatest claim to talk about saving white civilisation? The moles who now pay lip service to it, or the men who fought for it?⁵²

At a Port Elizabeth meeting, attended by about 5,000 veterans, it was unanimously resolved that:

This meeting condemns the present government for violating the liberties for which the wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 were fought and for disregarding the moral undertakings enshrined in our Constitution. We pledge ourselves to continue the struggle to ensure that we and our children shall live in true democracy.⁵³

The Johannesburg meeting passed four resolutions which set out, in broad outline, the manner in which the veterans' anger at the "rape of the constitution" would be translated into action:

1. We ex-servicemen and women and other citizens assemble here protest in the strongest possible terms against the action of the present Government in proposing to violate the spirit of the Constitution.
2. We solemnly pledge ourselves to take every constitutional step in the interests of our country to enforce an immediate General Election.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid.

3. We call on other ex-servicemen and women, ex-service organisations and democratic South Africans to pledge themselves to this cause.
4. We resolve that the foregoing resolutions be forwarded to the Prime Minister and the leaders of the other political parties.⁵⁴

Starting shortly before the rally on 21 April 1951 at the Johannesburg cenotaph, the WWAC received widespread media coverage by the pro-UP media. When the first march took place in Durban, veteran political reporter Dennis Henshaw of The Natal Mercury estimated that the crowds of supporters lining the streets were bigger than those that turned out for the royal visit in 1947. From the bigger towns like Johannesburg, Durban and Port Elizabeth, the white ex-service protests spread to other, smaller, centres.

For ordinary white veterans, the significance of the Torch Commando extended well beyond a battle to defend the coloured vote. Indeed, the Torch developed within the parameters of the colonial racial order. Manilal Gandhi, a member of the Natal Indian Congress, later observed that the only speeches that did not gain frantic applause at Torch rallies were those concerning the rights of coloureds.⁵⁵ In his speech in Johannesburg on 4 May 1951, Sailor Malan un-selfconsciously proclaimed the Torch's role in "saving white civilisation." And with heavy irony, coloured veterans were not invited to join the Torch, although separate branches for coloureds were

⁵⁴Rand Daily Mail, 5 May, 1951. SAIRR press cuts, SADF 1946-1951, 1305, CPISA Collections, Cullen. The Natal Mercury made no mention of the resolutions.

⁵⁵Cited in Walker, Sailor Malan, 181.

mooted from time to time. In sum, Torch's appeal to white veterans implicitly defined it as a white movement, itself implicated in the production and reproduction of racist culture. The Torch succeeded as a mass movement because it was able to tap into a vein of white ex-service discontent. At the same time, the alacrity and enthusiasm with which white ex-servicemen rallied to the Torch are indicative of crises of whiteness and masculinity amongst white veterans.

As the thesis argued in chapter four, the NP's racial policies spoke to white veterans' material and many of their cultural concerns, in particular those premised on racial exclusion - for instance, residential segregation and job reservation. Yet white veterans did not like the NP's rhetoric or style. White ex-servicemen also felt marginalised as the NP distributed the benefits of whiteness through an intricate web of patronage.⁵⁶ Levings summed up feelings of marginalisation when he said that while ex-servicemen were popular in 1946-7, after 1948 they were "the enemy."⁵⁷ White veteran's alienation went beyond mere exclusion from the most entitled reaches of whiteness. In a bitter letter to the editor of the Rand Daily Mail, veteran A.L. Israel grumbled about the way in which the NP-aligned Afrikaans-language media ridiculed ex-service experience and the honour it represented.⁵⁸ English-speaking South Africans had recently been challenged by a Nat MP to read the "Afrikaans papers." However this exercise, Israel wrote, "threatened to raise blood pressures and tempers, especially of ex-servicemen." According to Israel, white

⁵⁶See O'Meara, Forty Lost Years, 59-80.

⁵⁷Levings interview.

⁵⁸Rand Daily Mail, 27 October, 1951. SAIRR press cuts, SADF 1946-1951, 1305, CPSA Collections, Cullen.

veterans seldom asked for recognition of their war service “beyond the reward of their own reflections on a task well done.” Yet, he noted, when veterans wished to commemorate the Battle of El Alamein, and to “safeguard the principles for which such great sacrifices were made,” they suffered slander and abuse at the hands of the Afrikaner nationalist press. On the eve of the 1951 El Alamein memorial service in Johannesburg, Die Vaderland labelled four ex-servicemen building a bonfire to freedom as *bobbejane* (baboons). Israel ended his letter by asking rhetorically whether ex-servicemen should be “slandered because of our attempts to safeguard democracy, that very democracy which allows insults to be slung so openly.”⁵⁹

Most white veterans whom I interviewed readily recalled the Nat’s wartime politics, and voiced their suspicions of the NP’s “fascist” inclination as evidenced by its apparent disregard for the constitution. Harold Strachan, a wartime Air Force officer and member of the CPSA, reminded me during an interview that, despite their own relationship with the racial order, white ex-servicemen were highly sensitive to the dangers of fascism. The Nats “were on Hitler’s side and were now in fucking government,” he stated.⁶⁰ Sentiments of the sort expressed by Strachan were common amongst white veterans: the Nats were “home front fascists” or “Malanzis.”

Shortly after assuming office in 1948, the new NP Minister of Defence Frans Erasmus purged the senior ranks of the UDF, filling it with pro-government Afrikaners

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Harold Strachan, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 4 November 1986.

selected by the *Broederbond*.⁶¹ Included in the purge were officers popular with veterans, like Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, wartime Commander of the General Staff and Everard Poole, commander of the 1st South African Division. Bill Langton, zone commander of the Torch Commando in Durban, told me that white veterans considered the NP's assault on the integrity of the UDF as further alarming evidence of the Nat's intent to subvert "democracy" itself.⁶² As Dennis Henshaw observed, in 1951, white South Africans were "not yet so ground down and conditioned to Nat rule," and they felt that they could "do something."⁶³ Thus, in the dual contexts of white ex-service distaste for the new regime, and the white opposition's belief that it could be dislodged fairly easily, the Torch was, in Langton's words, a "spontaneous thing of utter resentment."⁶⁴

However, the Torch was more than just an upwelling of ex-service resentment at the NP's un-constitutional shenanigans. Len Manson remarked that while all soldiers were glad when the war was over, they nevertheless tended to covet certain of the "social" aspects of the armed forces as they faced the uncertain prospects of civilian life.⁶⁵ Consequently, there was a great deal of nostalgia amongst white veterans, and they tended to congregate together, drinking and talking about the "old days," even if they did not formally belong to any ex-service association. Levings, for

⁶¹O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, 62.

⁶²William Langton, interview by author, Durban, 29 January, 1987.

⁶³Dennis Henshaw, interview by author, Durban, 4 March, 1986.

⁶⁴Langton interview.

⁶⁵Len Manson, interview by author, Johannesburg, 8 July, 1998.

example, recalled that he normally socialised with fellow workers from his company - Mosenthal Wholesalers - who had served during the war. They would regularly meet in pubs and on weekends, play hockey or tennis. The Torch Commando therefore gave white veterans the opportunity to assert the value and honour of their service identity in the face of a rampant and exclusive Afrikaner nationalism. It also allowed white ex-servicemen to re-commit themselves publicly to the ideals of comradeship-in-arms - a notion of white masculinity which was exclusively theirs. As Willie Grobler recalled, "we joined the Torch for adventure and to be together again."⁶⁶

As noted in the previous chapter, gender relations amongst whites in South Africa underwent considerable change during and after the Second World War. A growing number of white women entered the labour market, and the ideologies and cultural practices that prescribed a women's place as the home, were subject to strain and challenge.⁶⁷ The idea (or the myth) that men were the sole protectors and providers of the household lost much of its sanction.⁶⁸ Such developments occasioned cultural stresses and contributed to what veterans describe as "restlessness" after the war. This crisis of white masculinity was partly ameliorated by the routines and pressures

⁶⁶Willie Grobler, interview by author, Durban, 5 June, 1997.

⁶⁷See Elsabe' Brink, "Man-made women: Gender, class and the ideology of the *Volkmoeder*," in Cheryl Walker, ed, Women and Gender in South Africa to 1945, (Cape Town and London: David Philip, 1990), 273-292. Her article examines how Afrikaner proletarianisation in the 1920's and 1930's forced adjustments to notions of "ideal womanhood," especially amongst working class Afrikaners.

⁶⁸Citing Daniel Scott Smith, Wyatt-Brown writes that shifting naming practices in the US south chart the waning power of the father. Increasingly, sons were given non-family Christian names. Wyatt-Brown's observation suggests an innovative methodology for "quantifying" shifts to the domestic balance of power in South Africa. See Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Honor And Violence In The Old South, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 67.

of “getting on.” Nonetheless, in the evolving climate of post-war gender relations, the Torch Commando, largely a white male project, gave veterans the cultural and political space to assert their identity as men who had served their country. By 1953, around 250,000 white men had participated in the Torch Commando’s protest.

The Steel Commando, the Cape Town riot and the subversion of the Torch as a popular mass movement

The resolutions adopted at the Johannesburg meeting on 4 May 1951 helped to define the focus of the emerging ex-servicemen’s protest movement. Logically, the next phase of mass mobilisation was to exploit the situation created by the Torch’s fourth resolution, namely to alert the Prime Minister and other political leaders to the seriousness of the veterans’ concerns.⁶⁹ Thus, on 8 May 1951 the WVAC met, ostensibly to consider how best to implement the 4 May resolutions.⁷⁰ In a press statement it was announced that the WVAC’s strategy would be made public by 13 May.⁷¹

On 12 May the Action Committee presented its plan. Jeeps and vehicles from seventeen towns in the Union were to set off in convoy to meet at Somerset West on the evening of 28 May. From there, they were to proceed to Cape Town to present the resolutions adopted on 4 May to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Official

⁶⁹Fridjhon, “The Torch Commando and the Politics of White Opposition,” 183.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

Opposition. The event, dubbed the Steel Commando, was intended to be the "largest white opposition demonstration in South African politics."⁷² On 15 May the WVAC announced that:

Reconnaissance men left Johannesburg on Monday afternoon [14 May 1951] after the last committee meeting to cover routes and make arrangements for reception committees and accommodation in the various big towns.⁷³

Suggestively, the available evidence indicates that the planning of the Steel Commando antedates the 12 and 15 May press releases quite considerably. While the WVAC publicised the Steel Commando as a spontaneous, grassroots response by ordinary veterans, this was not the case. Fridjhon believes that not long after the conclusion of the 4 May rally, Springbok Legion members of the WVAC had already decided on the means of conveying the resolutions to the Prime Minister. Fridjhon's informant claims that on 4 May, he and several other full-time Legion officials left for Cape Town to plot the route of the proposed Steel Commando to the Houses of Parliament.⁷⁴ Moreover, a WVAC directive issued on 16 May suggests that plans for the Commando were by then already at an advanced stage.⁷⁵ It also suggests that legionnaires assumed a powerful role in the WVAC by employing what remained of the Legion's organisational structures towards the planning of the Steel Commando. For example, the WVAC's Durban contact was Lance Stiebel, a legionnaire of long

⁷²The Natal Mercury, 13 May, 1951.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 15 May, 1951.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 184.

⁷⁵War Veterans' Action Committee Operation Order No.2 [1st for Natal], 16.5.51. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Action Committee - Torch Commando, 1951, memoranda, notes, UNISA. The reverse side of the document is inscribed with a personal note from Isacowitz to Stiebel.

standing, who was in direct contact with the National Chairman of the Legion, Jock Isacowitz.⁷⁶ In addition, Cecil Williams, soon to become Chairman of the Legion, was appointed "adjutant" (administrative officer) to the Steel Commando.⁷⁷

On the evening of 28 May 1951, the Steel Commando, led by *Oom* Dolf de la Rey, Boer War veteran and former Senator, and supported by a "huge procession of ex-servicemen" converged on the Houses of Parliament to present its resolutions to the Prime Minister.⁷⁸ However, D.F. Malan refused to receive the delegation, and instead the resolutions were handed to the UP leader Strauss for transmission to the Prime Minister.⁷⁹ After the meeting was officially terminated, rioting broke out during which at least 160 people were injured. It is unclear from which quarter the violence originated. Senator G. Heaton Nicholls, for example, wrote that policemen, each armed with "a pretty hefty weapon about the length of a rifle and fairly thick" attacked the peaceful crowds.⁸⁰ The Natal Mercury, on the other hand, headlined its 29 May edition with the caption "Lighted Torches Flung at Police." Its report observed that "trouble began at about 10.15 pm at the bottom of Parliament Street when a crowd, consisting mainly of coloureds, attacked a police cordon."⁸¹

The riot led to an acrimonious series of exchanges in the House of Assembly the next

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Fighting Talk, June, 1951.

⁷⁸The Natal Mercury, 29 May, 1951.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰G. Heaton Nicholls to L. Egeland, 21 June, 1951. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

⁸¹The Natal Mercury, 29 May, 1951.

day. While the bitter tone of the debate was no doubt a product of the need to gain political mileage, the Nats' contention that the affair was orchestrated by the Springbok Legion with a view to overthrowing the NP government does hold some water. For its part, however, the UP was ill prepared to exploit the wave of ex-service protest, and the overwhelming support for the Steel Commando caught the UP off-guard. Moreover, it appears that certain elements within the UP had tempered their initial enthusiasm for a wave of popular protest that would force the government to the polls. Shortly before the Steel Commando left Johannesburg, UP Members of Parliament Sir de Villiers Graaf and Harry Oppenheimer were urgently dispatched to inform the WVAC that on no account were they to call on the Government to resign, since the UP electoral machinery was in no position to contest a general election.⁸² The gist of this interpretation is corroborated by Roley Arentstein who claimed that it was "Anglo-American which broke the Torch Commando since it felt things were getting out of hand."⁸³ It seems plausible, therefore, to argue that the Steel Commando operation may best be understood as an audacious gamble on the part of some legionnaires, whose objective was either insurrection or forcing the Nats to fight an election from a position of weakness. Most likely, the Steel Commando was inspired by legionnaires such as Williams and Hodgson, who probably best represented the national liberatory strand of Legion thought, which had its origins in the CPSA's wartime popular front politics, and emphasised the need for unified struggle against facism.

Action Stations, a pamphlet written by Williams some months after the Steel

⁸²Fridjhon, "The Torch Commando and the Politics of White Opposition," 187.

⁸³Arentstein interview, 24 December, 1986.

Commando debacle, lends credence to this latter scenario. Echoing the rhetoric of national liberation, the pamphlet began by calling for an alliance of the "widest possible section of the South African people. . . [against] the fascists in the seat of power. . . since the jackboot cannot be turned aside by debate in parliament alone."⁸⁴ In the pamphlet, Williams warned of the political dangers of timidity and excessive caution. During 1951, he wrote, it might still have been possible to bring considerable pressure to bear on the Nats, as white ex-servicemen "were inspired, ready to go on with greater and even greater demonstrations." In an unsubtle critique of the UP's effete political stewardship, Action Stations lamented that veterans' morale was sapped by the "weakness" and "lack of direction" that overtook the WVAC from the time of the Steel Commando debacle - in other words, when the UP assumed greater control over the direction of the Torch movement.

In any event, the WVAC took fright after the Steel Commando debacle and initiated steps to distance itself from the "political radicals" in the Springbok Legion. A week after the Cape Town riot, a memorandum written by Clapham, which dealt with "The Problem Facing the WVAC," was circulated amongst members of the WVAC. Clapham's memorandum set out by noting that all members had come into the organisation as individuals. However, due to the "urgency of the moment," the WVAC had drawn on the resources of several bodies: the United Party, the Springbok Legion and the United South African Trust Fund. The "urgent period being over," the WVAC now needed to develop its own resources and structures. The Legion, Clapham continued, did not however accept this situation and was

⁸⁴Cecil Williams, Action Stations! A Crisis Call From The Springbok Legion, (Johannesburg: Springbok Legion, 1952) [Pamphlet].

"determined. . . to swing the WVAC in line with Springbok Legion policies." His memorandum then took a different tack, arguing that certain legionnaires, as indeed the Legion itself, were in danger of being listed under the Suppression of Communism Act. If this should occur, the WVAC would, by association, be open to accusations of "communist control" by the Nationalist press, and "all would be lost." Clapham's memorandum ended with a dire warning:

The choice is clear: Get the Springbok Legion members off the committee - or keep them on, sound the death knell of the WVAC as an effective body and set the United Party itself back a year or so.⁸⁵

On 7 June 1951, a special meeting of the Johannesburg WVAC was called to discuss "whether prominent members and paid officials of the Springbok Legion should continue to be members of the Action Committee."⁸⁶ Major J. Pretorius opened the debate on behalf of the anti-Legion faction, by declaring that he had been "informed by acquaintances" that the WVAC had fallen completely under "communist control" as a result of the presence of Springbok Legionnaires.⁸⁷ It was minuted that Pretorius was "deeply perturbed by the whole position."⁸⁸ In less emotive terms, Ralph Parrott, later to achieve prominence as National Director of the Torch Commando, presented his case against continued membership of Springbok

⁸⁵Vic Clapham, "A Few Remarks on the Problem at present facing the WVAC," [private and confidential], 5 June, 1951. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

⁸⁶Minutes of the meeting of the Johannesburg War Veterans' Action Committee, 7 June, 1951. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid.

Legionnaires. Arguing a similar point to Clapham, he emphasised that the NP could exploit the role of legionnaires in the WVAC to mischievous ends. With the passage of the Suppression of Communism Act, the state had shown itself willing to invoke accusations of "communism" against its political opponents, including the Springbok Legion and its officials. The WVAC, Parrott continued, could not afford to lay itself open to charges of guilt by association should the state list either the Springbok Legion or individual legionnaires as communists.⁸⁹

Cecil Williams and Jack Hodgson replied for the Legion, pointing out the valuable contributions made by legionnaires to the WVAC. Williams began by reminding the gathering that the "material resources" of the Legion were at the disposal of the WVAC, and that the Legion was "equipped to deal with organisational work on a large scale" having "developed a sound political sense during the ten years of its existence."⁹⁰ In addition, both Williams and Hodgson predicted that whether or not legionnaires were expelled from the WVAC, the new organisation would be subject to the same sort of attacks as the Springbok Legion had experienced. Hodgson concluded by asserting that the question should not be one of political expediency, but that of "a stronger or weaker War Veterans' Action Committee."⁹¹ The arguments raised by William and Hodgson failed to persuade the majority of their WVAC comrades, and it was decided by a vote that: "members of the Springbok Legion

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰Ibid. Williams' offer seems rather disingenuous when one considers that, by 1951, the Legion had very few "material resources" at its disposal, and was certainly not "equipped to deal with organisational work on a large scale".

⁹¹Johannesburg War Veterans' Action Committee, 7 June, 1951.

should withdraw from this Committee.”⁹²

Although the motives for Springbok Legion participation in the WVAC were diffuse, the expulsion of legionnaires from the WVAC in the wake of the Steel Commando riot negated the ability of white radicals to use the WVAC as a vehicle to somehow revive the Legion’s flagging fortunes. In July 1951, Legion Secretary Cecil Williams wrote an open letter to the now formally constituted War Veterans’ Torch Commando, expressing his bitterness at the exclusion of legionnaires from the new organisation, and scepticism about its efficacy as a robust protest movement capable of checking the Nats’ worst political excesses. Williams also took the Torch leadership to task for “retreating from its previous anti-apartheid policy.”⁹³ Furthermore, he warned the leaders of the fledgling organisation - prophetically, as it turned out - that “old school politicians” would seek to undermine the Torch’s independence.⁹⁴ According to Williams, the Torch leadership was “politically naive” and would have to guard against co-option by other political forces - no doubt Williams had the UP in mind - if it were to “succeed in the tasks its members have set it.”⁹⁵ However, by the following month the Legion seems to have re-evaluated its assessment of the legitimacy and potential of the Torch. While a leading article in Fighting Talk denied all links between the two organisations, it described the Torch as a:

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Fighting Talk, July 1951.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid.

vindication of the Legion's ten year old policy, that ex-volunteers had a special responsibility to carry over into 'civvy street' that active belief in democratic principles. . . which animated our wartime service.⁹⁶

Indeed, up until the 1953 general election, the Torch continued to receive favourable publicity through the columns of Fighting Talk.

Besides the expulsion of Springbok Legionnaires, the failure of the Steel Commando to force the government to the polls had other important consequences for the WVAC. The WVAC's commitment to constitutionality provided the movement with its very *raison d'être*, and precluded any consideration of insurrection - although radical legionnaires might not have harboured such scruples. Since its attempt to force the government to the polls had proved abortive, the WVAC would therefore have to bide its time until the government itself called an election. This was due only in 1953.

Thus, if the WVAC was to make an effective contribution towards defeating the NP at the polls in the 1953 general election, it required more formal organisation and also to clarify its relationship with the Official Opposition. Both of these conditions engendered a number of contradictions which would ultimately cripple the organisation.

In June 1951, the WVAC convened a conference in Johannesburg to draw up a constitution, establish organisational structures, elect office-bearers and generally prepare for the forthcoming election campaign. The name of the organisation was changed to the War Veterans' Torch Commando, and Sailor Malan was unanimously

⁹⁶Fighting Talk, August, 1951.

elected National President.⁹⁷ However, the crucial question of exactly how the Torch was to uphold the constitution and contribute to NP defeat in a general election was not spelt out. Instead, a rather bland statement, reiterating the goals of the Torch and stating that the organisation had no intention of becoming a political party, was issued.⁹⁸

The historical record suggests that behind the non-committal but unified facade of anti-Nat unity at the founding conference, two conflicting views concerning the Torch's relationship with the UP had emerged. One view held that the Torch should not affiliate with the UP, but should assist the Official Opposition "as vigorously as possible and avoid being involved in. . . political issues."⁹⁹ The other view maintained that the Torch's support for the UP should be conditional upon the UP adopting a more "bold and progressive" policy. For this second camp, "the return of the UP at the next general election will [not] have justified our fine promises and talk of basic principles. The UP has been in power before."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷Minutes of the National Conference of War Veterans, 28 June, 1951. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

⁹⁸Closing address, Group Captain Malan, Minutes of the National Conference of War Veterans, 30 June, 1951. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

⁹⁹A.G. Malan, "War Veterans' Organisation" [Unpublished position paper], 28 June, 1951. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

¹⁰⁰H.J.O. Prinsloo, "Memorandum of the purpose and policy of the War Veterans' Movement" [Unpublished position paper], 24 June, 1951. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

By early 1952, the first viewpoint had come to prevail within the Torch hierarchy, as the "progressives" were likely swayed by the personal prestige and influence of Sailor Malan and the desire to maintain an appearance of unity. A declaration by the National Executive committed the Torch, which now boasted a support base of 250,000 members, to supporting the UP's election bid. A Torch Commando press release declared:

The only practical course open to us. . . is for our members to accept the existing opposition parties on the main issues. . . [W]e will not form a political party, nor will we amalgamate with any of the existing parties. We will co-operate with them to the fullest extent in order to win the next general election.¹⁰¹

These relations were formalised with the conclusion of an election pact, known as the United Democratic Front (UDF), between the Torch, the UP and the Labour Party in April 1952.¹⁰² Having committed the Torch to the UDF, Sailor Malan was at pains to emphasise that the Torch Commando would in no way be subordinated to the UP:

The parties to this agreement will retain their separate identities, but will work in the closest possible collaboration until sane, democratic government is restored once more to South Africa.¹⁰³

However, from the very outset, the overriding feature of the relationship between the UP and the Torch, was that the Torch was very much the junior partner. The role of

¹⁰¹The Election Policy of the War Veterans' Torch Commando - A Declaration by the National Executive, 26 January, 1952. UP Central Head Office, pamphlets, 1946-1955, UNISA.

¹⁰²Minutes of the Meeting of the National Executive of the WVTC, Cape Town, 24 and 25 April, 1952. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

¹⁰³Ibid.

the UDF was to oust the Nats from power and the struggle was to be a parliamentary one; therefore the interests of the UP became paramount. Even before the conclusion of the election pact, it was clear that the UP would seek to exploit the Torch's numerical strength to the fullest possible extent. In September 1951, for example, J.L. Horak, a UP official, reported to Party Director F. van Biljon that: "The Commando could be used in canvassing and other organisational work, such work to be performed under the direction of the Party."¹⁰⁴

Although, in the post-war years, white veterans never displayed much affection or enthusiasm for the UP, they continued to swell the ranks of the Torch right up to the 1953 general election. Much of the Torch's strength as a political movement lay in its capacity to mobilise disillusioned white veterans, however divergent their political opinions. The Torch leadership carefully avoided committing themselves, or the movement, to any particular party political programme. Rather, they emphasised the moral dimensions of the movement, by arguing that veterans would be fighting for democracy, as they had during the War.¹⁰⁵ Notes prepared for Torch Commando speakers declared:

The last war was fought. . . to safeguard democracy. . .
The Nationalist Government is ruthlessly trampling on
our. . . democratic heritage. . . Dare we allow our wartime
service to be turned into a mockery? Dare we have
pointed at us the accusing fingers of our 10,000 dead

¹⁰⁴J.L. Horak to F. van Biljon, 29 September, 1951. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

¹⁰⁵Neil Roos, "The Springbok Legion and the War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1941-1953," (Paper prepared for postgraduate seminar, Department of History, University of Natal, Durban, October 1986), 16.

comrades?¹⁰⁶

The contradictions issuing from the Torch's subordination to the political leadership of the UP were thus largely overshadowed by the Torch's populist rhetoric of "saving democracy" and "fighting for the constitution."

The Natal Stand and the little tradition of regional secessionism

Underlying the Torch's rhetoric, which appealed to the masses, were divisions concerning its role in the UDF and its relationship with the UP. Debates over the implications of the UDF for the Torch dominated the proceedings of the WVTC's first national conference in July 1952. While Transvaal Central and Cape West Regions were happy to accept the arrangement,¹⁰⁷ others, notably Cape East and Northern Transvaal, asserted that since the Torch was now involved in an alliance with the two political parties, it would be logical for the Torch Commando to form itself into a political party too.¹⁰⁸ Some steered a middle course, arguing that the UDF should receive the Torch's unequivocal support if it accepted the principles enshrined in the Torch's constitution.¹⁰⁹ And, finally, some who accepted the UDF in principle were piqued at what they perceived as a high-handed way in which Sailor Malan had committed

¹⁰⁶Torch Commando Speakers' Notes, 1951. In the possession of Prof. W. Kleynhans, UNISA.

¹⁰⁷First National Conference of the War Veterans' Torch Commando, 7-9 July, 1952. Confidential Resolutions numbers 8 & 9. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., numbers 7 a, b & c.

¹⁰⁹Ibid., number 10.

the resources of the Torch to the UDF, without adequate consultation with the Regional Executives.¹¹⁰ Generally, such tensions were kept out of the public eye. Aware of the immensity of the task facing the UDF, most dissenters fell into line for the sake of retaining a facade of unity.

Only the two Natal Regions of the Torch openly defied the National Executive's decision. On 4 June 1952, the UP-dominated Natal Provincial Council passed a resolution calling for a new National Convention to reaffirm the South African Constitution.¹¹¹ Two days later, both Natal Regions of the Torch Commando organised a "Voice of Natal" rally in Durban, attended by about 45,000 veterans,¹¹² to endorse the Provincial Council resolution. The crowd took an oath administered by Senator G. Heaton Nicholls, binding them:

To preserve the sanctity of agreements entered upon at the time of Union as moral obligations of trust and honour binding upon the Parliament and the people, and to secure the repeal of any measures enacted in violation of such obligations;

To oppose any attempts to violate the Constitution embodied in the South Africa Act, and more particularly, to maintain respect for the Entrenched clauses of that Act;

To maintain the rule of law as the basis of our civil liberties.¹¹³

Immediately afterwards, E.G. "Gillie" Ford, chairman of the Natal Coastal Region of

¹¹⁰Louis Kane-Berman, "Why the Torch Broke Up - By the Torch Chief," Daily News, (Durban), 15 June, 1954.

¹¹¹G. Heaton Nicholls, South Africa in My Time, (London: n.p., 1961), 447.

¹¹²The Natal Mercury, 7 June, 1952.

¹¹³Ibid.

the Torch, framed the terms of a "Natal Stand" when he asked the crowd of white ex-servicemen:

Will you remain in a *Broederbond* Republic if this is declared on the pretext of the *Volkswil*?
(‘No,’ they responded)
Are you prepared to take the consequences if Natal is forced to stand on her own?
(‘Yes’)¹¹⁴

The Natal Stand and its bellicose arguments in favour of secession mark one of the more dramatic points in the history of the Torch Commando. Such sentiments are best understood as part of the wider struggle, from 1948, to contest the shape and form of the racial order in the idiom of an older "little tradition" of Natal secessionism. Construction of a hegemonic discourse like the NP's version of racist culture was a highly contested process.¹¹⁵ As Ann Stoler has argued in her study of colonialism in Dutch East India, the process of cultural reproduction involves struggles over rules, codes of behaviour, avenues of access to power and the distribution of benefits.¹¹⁶ By the early 1950s, there was not yet consensus amongst whites in South Africa about the internal topography of whiteness. Leaders of the Natal Torch who actively promoted the Natal Stand were all members of the Anglophone middle classes. Rev. J. B. Chutter, Chairman of the Natal Inland Region was a clergyman at Michaelhouse (an exclusive private school for boys); while Gillie Ford, Chairman of the Natal Coastal Region, Roger Brickhill, the Natal organiser and Robbie Hughes-Mason, Vice

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Bob Jessop, *The Capitalist State*, (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1983), 148.

¹¹⁶See chapter two.

Chairman of the Inland Region, were all attorneys.¹¹⁷ It is likely that men of their background would have been especially sensitive to the barbs of a confident Afrikaner nationalism which was, to them, arrogant, parochial and anti-constitutional. It is plausible to argue that such men would have sought what was to them a radical solution to the excesses of Nat rule, which still remained within the bounds of their legalistic understanding of "constitutionality." Since the constitution itself was premised on a variety of racist exclusions, the Natalians' secessionist "solution" would, of necessity, lie within the framework of the racial order.

In elaborating the ways in which political forms are embedded in culture, Bozzoli writes:

Men and women are formed and form themselves through society, culture and history. So the existing cultural patterns form a sort of historical reservoir - a pre-constituted 'field of possibles' - which groups take up, transform, develop.¹¹⁸

The architects of the Natal Stand drew heavily on a powerful historical myth, periodically invoked by Natal's white political elite whenever Afrikaner nationalism seemed to be on the rise. This myth claimed that Natal's participation in Union was conditional upon Afrikaner adherence to the "spirit" embodied in the Act of Union.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷Brian L. Reid, "The Federal Party: An English-speaking reaction to Afrikaner nationalism," (PhD dissertation, University of Natal, Durban, 1979), 269-282.

¹¹⁸Belinda Bozzoli, "History, Experience and Culture," in Belinda Bozzoli, ed, Town and Countryside in the Transvaal, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983), 28.

¹¹⁹See Neil Roos, "The Torch Commando, the 'Natal Stand' and the Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion," in Paul Thompson, ed, Natal in the Union Period, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal, 1988). For the most comprehensive accounts of white Natal separatism, see Reid, "The Federal Party" and Paul Thompson, Natalians First. Separatism in South Africa, 1910 - 1961 (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1990).

For the Natal Standers, the “spirit” of the constitution included the rule of law, the inviolability of the constitution, and the recognition of provincial rights.

The rank-and-file members of the Natal Torch went along with the Natal Stand. As a category of white ex-servicemen, they were more homogeneously English-speaking than their comrades in any other part of the Union. The crises of whiteness and masculinity that they shared with veterans in other parts of the country were thus exacerbated by a very visible layer of ethnic difference which set them further apart from the Afrikaner nationalist politics of the new regime.

Ford and Chutter used the mandate that they had received at the Voice of Natal rally to advance the Natal Stand, both within the Torch and the UDF. At the Torch Commando's national conference in July 1952, they persuaded reluctant delegates to support a resolution on the Natal Stand. However, the UP rejected the Natal Torch's resolution out of hand. Undaunted, Ford and Chutter went ahead with their attempts to extract political commitment for the Natal Stand from the UDF as a whole. However, even as Ford and Chutter struggled to marshal political support for the Natal Stand, influential white interests in Natal distanced themselves from the plan. A letter written to The Natal Mercury by “twelve leading Natal businessmen” stressed the “great material sacrifices and hardships” which secession would bring.¹²⁰ In a letter to his son in September 1952, Heaton Nicholls wrote that he doubted

¹²⁰The Natal Mercury, 12 August, 1952.

whether "Natal could be got to stand alone."¹²¹ Towards the end of the year, The Natal Mercury reported that the regional electorate were becoming intolerant of bickering and disunity amongst Natal leaders of the UDF. Then, in November 1952, the NP announced that it would contest more Natal constituencies than it had ever before. Amidst growing fears that the cohesion of the UDF was in jeopardy, an agreement was brokered in January 1953 between the Natal Torch and the UP in the province, whereby the latter made a vague and ambiguous commitment to the Natal Stand in return for Torch support for the opposition candidates.¹²² Roger Brickhill, one of the key protagonists of the Natal Stand, immediately left on a tour of the province to streamline the Torch's election efforts,¹²³ and Ford and Chutter offered their resignations from the Torch, although these were not accepted.¹²⁴

A retreat from "politics"?

Across the Union, the Torch Commando served the UDF well in the 1953 general election. The Torch supplied 15 full-time organisers, 5,000 cars and 60,000

¹²¹G. Heaton Nicholls to D. Heaton Nicholls, 27 September, 1952. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

¹²²WVTC Natal Coastal Region, Information Bulletin, No. 13, 23 January, 1953. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings, UNISA.

¹²³Ibid.

¹²⁴WVTC Regional Memorandum, No. RM61, 14 February, 1953. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings

canvassers.¹²⁵ Despite the Torch Commando's efforts, however, the NP was returned to parliament with an increased majority of 19 seats. Although it was some time before the Torch Commando was formally disbanded, the defeat of the UDF in the 1953 general election marked its end as a mass movement of ordinary white veterans. The 1953 general election was also the last instance where white Second World War veterans appeared as a category in the party political arena. Henceforth white ex-servicemen turned largely to the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTH), a conservative veterans' organisation far removed from the party political arena, to advance their material needs and to sustain their identity as white men who had volunteered to serve their country.

The Torch Commando was built on the myth¹²⁶ that it was "apolitical" - a national moral guardian fighting the NP government's "rape of the constitution." As this chapter has argued, the Torch's immediate goal was to oust the Nats in the 1953 general election. Its founding myths, which represented the organisation as a spontaneous outburst of moral outrage that transcended partisan political differences, precluded the Torch's ongoing participation in public life after the 1953 general election.¹²⁷ The Torch failed in its appointed task, and instead, the NP consolidated its hold on party political power and the state. White veterans'

¹²⁵Reid, "The Federal Party," 37.

¹²⁶Leonard Thompson notes that political myths originate in specific circumstances, and are a product of specific interests. They are often created by opponents of a regime to discredit it and promote its downfall. Leonard Thompson, The Political Mythology Of Apartheid, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 4-8.

¹²⁷Walker, Sailor Malan, 178.

collective experience as members of the Torch Commando confirmed that as a social category, they were powerless to influence the political arrangements of whiteness.

As a mass movement of white veterans, the major significance of the Torch Commando lies in the ways in which it illustrates how hegemony, such as that of racist culture, operates. The Torch emerged in opposition to the Nats, and the clashes between Torchmen and NP supporters were bitter, sometimes bloody: several of my informants recall supporters of both sides attending political meetings armed with bicycle chains and baseball bats. Post-war crises of social integration, exacerbated by the advent of Nat rule, played a significant role in rousing white veterans to action. However, the Torch was more than a convenient vehicle for the articulation of material and cultural frustration amongst veterans; it did, after all, emerge at a moment when most white ex-servicemen had already settled into civilian life. To a greater or lesser extent, white veterans took to the streets in defence of the constitution and the rule of law. In this sense at least, we might take the Torch to represent a short-lived but significant liberal moment in the post-war history of white veterans. Yet the Torch never once challenged the fundamental social hierarchy of race. The Torch rather recast the old dilemma of white politics in the Union period, namely the struggle between "South African" and Afrikaner nationalism. While the Torch fought to defend established rights and constitutional processes, its acceptance of the colonial order meant that it failed to extend the parameters of political debate beyond the question of how racialised politics could best be organised. The realisation of the limits of white politics, as indeed of "liberal" interventions such as the struggle to "defend the constitution," directed some more

radical white veterans away from the cultural constraints of white politics. As chapter six will demonstrate, this group was small in number, and most were communists who had been active in both the Springbok Legion and the Torch Commando. Through the 1950s and beyond, they participated in the Congress of Democrats and other movements which were part of the accelerating extra-parliamentary struggle against apartheid.

CHAPTER SIX

BEYOND THE POLITICS OF WHITENESS: THE SPRINGBOK LEGION, THE CONGRESS OF DEMOCRATS AND THE MOVEMENTS FOR NATIONAL LIBERATION

From class struggle to national liberation

In the wake of the UP's failure to check the NP in the 1953 general election, a small group of radical white veterans in the Springbok Legion became profoundly disillusioned by the weakness of white parliamentary opposition. They shifted the focus of their political activities away from supporting the UP in a party political battle against the Nats, towards developing a critique of the racial order as a whole. Mostly communists, their experience in radical politics stretched back to the late 1930s or in some cases, the war years. From the formation of the Springbok Legion during wartime, radical white servicemen saw their involvement in the Legion as part of a broader struggle to change the order of racial and class domination in South Africa. In the early years of the war, one of the major political concerns of these radical white volunteers was to shepherd white servicemen, whom they considered to represent the white working class, towards a non-racial class alliance with other sections of the South African working class.¹ This objective became patently untenable after the war, as the majority of returned white servicemen set about defining their own position in terms of race and service, rather than class.

¹See chapter three.

Along with their wartime focus on mobilising white servicemen, radical white legionnaires were well-informed about the currents in black politics. The CPSA itself was a non-racial party. Moreover, it was not uncommon for communists to belong to a range of left-wing labour and political organisations. Besides their membership of the CPSA, for example, a number of legionnaires were also active in the African trade union movement in the late 1940s and early 1950s. However until about 1952, their participation in the broader stream of non-racial politics was tentative and circumscribed. A number of factors constrained these white radicals' involvement in the broader non-racial national opposition to apartheid, including: a rather optimistic evaluation of the efficacy of white party politics to effect social change; the limits of their role as white activists in the Legion and the Torch, both organisations which catered mainly for white men; and the politics of the CPSA which were often inconsonant with those of the black anti-apartheid movements.

After the 1953 election, and in a climate of growing state repression, radical white veterans finally abandoned their attempts to influence the course of white party politics, or to educate the mass of white veterans. Although few in number, these radical white veterans subsequently played a disproportionately significant role in shaping the trajectories of resistance to apartheid from the mid-1950s on. The participation of white ex-servicemen in the anti-apartheid struggle is something of a neglected region in the historiography of South Africa during the apartheid period. Their role invites evaluation of some of the more polemic popular narratives of the struggle which have emerged since liberation in 1994.

CPSA stalwart Brian Bunting remembers that Party discipline remained strong through the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, despite the formal disbanding of the CPSA.² His observation suggests that the activities of communists in the Springbok Legion are useful in illuminating the politics of the CPSA during the period. Alan Brooks has shown that, by the time it disbanded in 1950, the CPSA had dropped its emphasis on class struggle and had become a quintessentially liberal party, albeit one which operated beyond the parameters of racist culture.³ The history of the Legion in the 1950s illustrates this ideological shift. I will argue that radical white legionnaires sustained an orientation towards a more liberal ethic through the 1950s and into the 1960s when they were party to the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the Congress movement. However, the Legion was more than just a mirror for policies conceived by the Central Committee of the CPSA, and it is likely that legionnaires' grassroots experience with "white working class" veterans - and with white politics more generally - helped to affirm the CPSA's growing emphasis on a set of liberal political concerns. Ultimately, the ideological shift undertaken by white radicals enabled their participation in the mainstream of anti-apartheid resistance, which was, from its very beginning, committed to the liberal goals of universal franchise and equal rights - what Brooks describes as national liberation.

²Brian Bunting, interview by author, transcript, Cape Town, 11 January, 2001. In 1950 the CPSA disbanded itself in the face of the Suppression of Communism Act. It operated underground until 1960 when it "emerged" as the South African Communist Party (SACP). Rusty Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting. Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics, 1938 -1964, (London: Pimlico, 1999), 118-134; 218. I use the word "Party" to refer to the Communist Party in both its CPSA and SACP manifestation.

³Alan K. Brooks, "From Class Struggle to National Liberation: The Communist Party of South Africa, 1940-1950," (Master of Arts thesis, University of Sussex, 1967).

NP rule and political uncertainty

In common with most members of the white left, the political options open to radical legionnaires were, until 1948, circumscribed by the classic liberal dilemma of the day: although the UP had shown itself to be fundamentally illiberal, it represented the only counter Afrikaner nationalism within the existing parliamentary structure.⁴ By 1948, most remaining legionnaires were communists, and the political space available to them was circumscribed by CPSA policy. For much of the 1940s, the CPSA remained committed to working class struggle, as both an ideology and a political strategy. Until at least 1948, the CPSA's faith in the praxis of a united working class struggle extended to the belief that it could successfully contend elections in white working class constituencies.⁵ The CPSA's preference for class struggle was accompanied by a corresponding and persistent scepticism about the efficacy of black national movements. On the occasion of the CPSA's 1949 policy review, for instance, reference was made to "Deficiencies in the National Liberation Organisations," which were described as petty-bourgeois in character, representing little more than an "intellectual revolt. . . [of] irresolute and timid character."⁶

⁴Janet Robertson, Liberalism in South Africa, 1948-1961, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1961), 12.

⁵In the years immediately following the War, participation in parliamentary and provincial elections was favoured CPSA strategy, not only in the interests of white working class unity, but also to keep the NP out of power. Lodge, T. "Class Conflict, Communal Struggle and Patriotic Unity: The Communist Party of South Africa during the Second World War," (Paper presented to a seminar of the African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, 7 October, 1985). See also Brooks, "From Class Struggle to National Liberation," 39.

⁶Brooks, "From Class Struggle to National Liberation," 60-62.

The NP's victory in the 1948 general election partially resolved the liberal dilemma for many radical white ex-servicemen, including communists. Moreover, since by 1948 most of the Legion's rank-and-file membership had disappeared, communists still active in the Legion had greater space to pursue their political objectives. As Roley Arentstein recalled, the NP's 1948 victory saw radicals in the Legion "becoming desperate" and "almost writing off all whites."⁷ Arentstein, along with Guy Routh, former Acting Chairman of the Legion and CPSA member, claimed that after 1948 radical legionnaires decided to regroup as a small core of activists, committed to the cause of national liberation.⁸ The Legion's decision to abandon its long struggle to mobilise and educate white volunteers in the name of a progressive, non-racial working class alliance coincided neatly with a nascent strain of egalitarianism which was emerging alongside the principle of class struggle in the formal aims of the CPSA. Suggestively, whereas in early 1944, the Central Committee of the CPSA was instructed to convene a working class conference, it was instructed by a similar resolution at the next annual conference to summon a "People's Convention." At its mid-year meeting in 1945, the Central Committee further articulated the new, more liberal policy orientation: taking Article 1 of the United Nations Charter as its keynote, the CPSA resolved to advocate for South Africa the basic rights of suffrage and election, education and employment, and "the other rights of citizenship, such as freedom of movement and the right to own land."⁹ Significantly, over the course of the 1940s, the CPSA grew from about 300 members to a small but influential party of

⁷Roley I. Arentstein, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 24 August, 1986.

⁸Ibid.; Guy Routh, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 16 March, 1987.

⁹Brooks, "From Class Struggle to National Liberation," 63.

over 2,000 members. The growth was sustained by an influx of black members, and Brooks attributes the growing emphasis on national liberation to their influence.¹⁰

The evidence suggests that the political reorientation, from class struggle to national liberation, outlined by Arentstein and Routh was rather more complex than either's testimony indicates. For the Legion, the advent of the NP government heralded in a new period of paralysis. As Paul Rich has pointed out in his study of the history and politics of liberalism in South Africa, the new political trends of apartheid changed the axis of resistance, even for those whose involvement extended beyond the cultural and political limits of white party politics. The advent of apartheid did not negate channels of liberal protest - indeed, throughout the history of the apartheid state, the achievement of a society based on liberal rights and freedoms remained central to all major traditions of extra-parliamentary resistance. However, the political conditions created by the consolidation of Nat rule demanded that those opposed to the system of class and race domination in South Africa search for a new political base, and new political allies beyond the parameters of racially-circumscribed politics.¹¹

After the NP assumed power in 1948, most remaining members of the Springbok Legion aligned themselves to the struggle for national liberation. Many radical white

¹⁰He writes that the history of Raymond Mhlaba, who was a member of the CPSA, the Laundry Workers' Union and the ANC, provides an example of how the ANC and the CPSA interpenetrated each other's organisation, and how class struggle and national liberation converged with the advent of the apartheid state, especially for black communists. Brooks, "From Class Struggle to National Liberation," 83-87.

¹¹Paul Rich, White Power and the Liberal Conscience: Racial Segregation and South African Liberalism, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), chapter 4.

legionnaires had proven their *bona fides* as opponents of the racial order through their involvement in the CPSA and other organisations. Moreover, by the end of the 1940s, liberal egalitarianism, present from the middle of the decade in CPSA circles, had begun to dominate Party thinking about political strategy. The centrality of national liberation thinking was manifest, *inter alia*, in the thrust of the CPSA's January 1950 National Conference, which focussed predominantly on this question.¹² Support for the national movements from the advent of the apartheid state thus did not require a major leap of political faith for radical white veterans.

However in the early years of the apartheid state, white radicals had few opportunities - as whites and as communists - to resist apartheid as part of a broader, non-racial alliance. From 1949, when the Congress Youth League became influential in the ANC, the major black movement for national liberation was closed to approaches from white political organisations or white activists. Committed to the ideology of "Africanism," the Youth Leaguers rejected the intrusion of any "white" ideology into Africanism, and were suspicious of "foreign" political leadership. The Youth Leaguers were especially wary of communists and white activists.¹³

The advent of Nat rule, coupled with the rebuff of white activists by the ANC, cast a pall of gloom over the Legion. In The Policy of the Springbok Legion, a pamphlet written some time after the election, the Legion anticipated "racial persecution" and assaults on the "fundamental democratic structure of society" similar to those which

¹²Brooks, "From Class Struggle to National Liberation," 83-87.

¹³Gail M. Gerhart, Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 61.

took place in Nazi Germany.¹⁴ In what was no doubt a comment on the exclusion of legionnaires and other white radicals from the major black resistance movement, the pamphlet urged that unity was critical for the “democratic grouping. . . to prove that our defeat is not permanent.”¹⁵ An article in Fighting Talk written at about the same time as The Policy of the Springbok Legion manifested the sense of desperation that had beset the white left. Although as late as 1947, the Legion itself had acknowledged that only a small core of members remained, the Fighting Talk article now enjoined legionnaires to “enrol your friends. . . and other ex-servicemen as members of the Springbok Legion,” and further suggested that the objective of the Legion’s membership drive should be to attract life members to the Legion.¹⁶ The fated Steel Commando plan, discussed in chapter five, is yet another example of the desperation experienced by radical legionnaires, deriving from the constriction of political space available to them in the early years of apartheid.

Repression and *rapprochement*

The year 1950 marked a major watershed in the history of the Springbok Legion, as it moved towards *rapprochement* and ultimately alliance with the black movements for national liberation. The year brought increasing state repression of anti-apartheid opposition, and the Legion’s response to these conditions helped to remove some of

¹⁴The Policy of the Springbok Legion (Johannesburg: Springbok Legion, nd - published some time after the 1948 election) [Pamphlet].

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Fighting Talk, July, 1948,

barriers of race and ideology that pertained between it and the black opposition movements.

In 1950, the government introduced the Unlawful Organisations Bill to parliament. Clearly intended for use against all manner of anti-apartheid opposition, the Bill prohibited "certain activities detrimental to the interests of the Union," and made it possible for the state to declare illegal any organisation engaged in such activities. The state also reserved the right to prohibit the publication and dissemination of "subversive" periodicals and other publications.¹⁷ The Legion responded to the Bill with an article entitled "The Anti-Everything Bill" in the May 1950 edition of Fighting Talk. The article warned that aim of the Bill was to "stifle all opposition in South Africa and to create a fascist state."¹⁸ The article noted that the Bill was framed to allow the Minister, in whom all powers were vested, to "interpret the provisions to cover any organisation or individual incurring his displeasure by opposing the Nationalist Government."¹⁹ Shortly before the Bill - revised as the Suppression of Communism Bill - was written into the statute books, the CPSA disbanded itself. However Minister of Justice C.R. Swart showed his willingness to exercise his newly-acquired powers when, in June 1950 he accused Legion Secretary Jack Hodgson of being a "communist" and alleged that the Springbok Legion was the "military wing" of the "Communist Party."²⁰

¹⁷Gwendolen Carter, The Politics of Inequality: South Africa Since 1948, (London: Thames and Hudson, 3rd edition, 1962),.64.

¹⁸Fighting Talk, May, 1950.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., June 1950. Hodgson was indeed a communist, but Swart's allegation that the Legion was the CPSA's "military wing" was bizarre. More than anything else, it exposes the Minister's paranoia about opposition to apartheid.

The passage of the Suppression of Communism Act and the Minister's attack on Hodgson and the Legion troubled the Legion's executive. In response, the Legion published a 34 page booklet - Will We Be Banned For This? - which must have severely taxed the Legion's meagre financial resources. The booklet set out to demonstrate the manner in which the Nats were leading South Africa along the road to a "fascist state." The booklet contrasted the Nats to the Legion, which could boast a fine record of having fought for democracy, during and after the Second World War.

Will We Be Banned For This? ended on a note of defiance:

we fought for the democratic way of life, for the progress of South Africa, for the elimination of all fascist tendencies. This is what we fought for ten years ago. This is what we fight for now.²¹

As Tom Lodge writes, in the 1950s the apartheid police developed a new blanket technique of raiding, which aimed "not to trace and trap known criminal gangs, but to conduct what resembles a punitive expedition against the whole local population."²²

The state's indiscriminate use of violence against all opponents to apartheid, black or white, blurred divisions between existing opposition movements. At a 1950 May Day protest, for example, 2,000 police were placed on duty to monitor the multi-racial ANC / CPSA crowd. In ensuing clashes in Alexandra, Sophiatown, Orlando and Benoni, at least 18 black residents were killed.²³

²¹Will We Be Banned For This? (Johannesburg: Springbok Legion, 1950) [Pamphlet].

²²Tom Lodge, Black Politics in South Africa since 1945 (Johannesburg: Longman, 1983), 34.

²³*ibid.*

In September 1951, Guy Routh was appointed acting National Chairman of the Legion until the organisation's next National Conference, scheduled for April of the following year.²⁴ Routh held no illusions that white veterans might re-enlist in the Legion or participate in the struggle for non-racial democracy. Routh had long shown himself impatient with the parliamentary system, and was sceptical about the outer limits of white South African political opinion and action. For him, the Legion's primary role should be to

[build] up contacts with Non-Europeans since the ultimate political development in Africa must depend on the Non-Europeans, thereby putting the petty squabbles among white South Africans into a relatively unimportant position.²⁵

Since the advent of Nat rule in 1948, the Legion had struggled to define its political role. But under Routh's tenure as Chairman, the Legion took a number of decisive concrete steps to establish a set of working relationships with the major black movements for national liberation. While some legionnaires had persisted with efforts to win white veterans over to a more progressive politics, it is likely that the expulsion of legionnaires from the Torch Commando, as well as Torch's failure to force the government to the polls in 1951, helped to strengthen Routh's position. At the Legion's 1952 National Conference, delegates finally relinquished the idea that white servicemen might rejoin the Legion. The Conference adopted a resolution acknowledging that "waverers and ditherers have fallen away," and delegates finally accepted that the Legion would in future confine itself to a small and dedicated

²⁴Fighting Talk, September, 1951.

²⁵Fighting Talk, January, 1952.

membership.²⁶ The Conference also recognised the convergence of the black struggle for liberation and the anti-Nat fight of white voters.²⁷ Implicit in this resolution were two ideas which had already gained some acceptance amongst white radicals in the Legion: that Parliament was not the only forum for challenging the Nats, and that white radicals should support campaigns initiated by the black liberation movements.

In January 1952, the ANC's James Moroka and Walter Sisulu sent an ultimatum to Prime Minister Malan calling for the repeal of six "unjust laws."²⁸ To nobody's surprise, the ultimatum was rejected in a letter from the Prime Minister's Secretary.²⁹ Although it was still six months before the ANC's opposition to the unjust laws were to crystallise in the Defiance Campaign, the ultimatum attracted comment in Fighting Talk. A leading article took pains to point out that the ultimatum was not directed at whites, but rather at the apartheid state and its unjust laws which "keep in perpetual subjection and misery vast sections of the population."³⁰ Towards the end of June 1952, when the first Defiance Campaigners were arrested, another supportive article appeared in Fighting Talk. The article was unequivocal in its support for mass action, and was remarkably sensitive to the types of debate current in the ANC and

²⁶Ibid., May 1952.

²⁷Springbok Legion - Ninth Annual Conference, April 1952. Report of the National Chairman. A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

²⁸These were: pass laws; stock limitation laws; the Bantu Authorities Act; Separate Representation of Voters Act; Group Areas Act; and the Suppression of Communism Act.

²⁹Lodge, Black Politics, 42-43.

³⁰Fighting Talk, February, 1952.

its partner in the Defiance Campaign, the South African Indian Congresses (SAIC)³¹

The Fighting Talk article also spelled out the role of whites in the campaign, which was to "combat the prejudice which will no doubt be spread, even by the 'liberal' Press and to try and gain maximum moral support for the Congresses' campaign."³²

Over the next two months, Fighting Talk published a number of similarly supportive articles.³³

The Legion also published D-Day for Democracy,³⁴ a booklet that supported the Defiance Campaign. The booklet emphasised the Legion's growing embrace of the need for extra-parliamentary struggle, and its support for the black national liberation movements. After reviewing the "unjust laws" which were being disobeyed, D-Day for Democracy claimed that white voters had failed to use their franchise properly, and had been blind to the needs of the disenfranchised:

The white voters did not vote against past injustice. In the last analysis, they did not even vote to keep from office the Nationalist standard-bearers of new and greater injustice.³⁵

³¹It considered, for example, whether the Campaign should be conducted according to Gandhi's notion of *Satyagraha* [passive resistance], or whether it should involve mass civil disobedience which would disorganise authority by filling courts and prisons to capacity. Fighting Talk, July 1952. See also Lodge, Black Politics, 41.

³²Fighting Talk, July, 1952.

³³*Ibid.*, August and September, 1952.

³⁴D-Day for Democracy, (Johannesburg: Springbok Legion, 1952) [Pamphlet].

³⁵*Ibid.*

Consequently, the voteless had opted for the only remaining avenue of protest: "the course of breaking those unjust laws, defying them and making them unworkable."³⁶

The Defiance Campaign presented white South Africans with a choice. On the one hand, they could side with the Nats in a "common European front to maintain *baaskap* [white supremacy]," in which case all whites would be painted as "tyrants who favoured injustice."³⁷ On the other, white South Africans could "chose the road of sympathy and support for the fight against injustice." This latter avenue would entail supporting the Defiance Campaign, and would eventually result in a

new golden era for us all; an era which marks the defeat of Nationalism and the halting of the drift to dictatorship; an era in which fear and race hostility give way to friendship and peace; an era in which liberty and progress will bring in its train an extending prosperity and happiness for all our people.³⁸

The Defiance Campaign undoubtedly effected a re-grouping of the white left between those who identified with it, and those who located themselves somewhere between the *status quo* and the radical political and social re-structuring envisaged by the Congresses. At the height of the Campaign, the ANC and SAIC invited a select group of whites, including radicals from the Springbok Legion and others who described themselves as liberals, to a meeting in Johannesburg where they were challenged to take a stand on the growing confrontation between the black population and the apartheid state. ANC representative Oliver Tambo stressed that if whites remained silent and uninvolved while the Defiance Campaign was underway, blacks would interpret their silence as collusion with racism and injustice.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

In turn, Tambo noted, black antagonism towards the apartheid state would develop into antagonism against whites in general.³⁹ The liberal group of delegates expressed certain reservations about the Congresses' position on matters like universal franchise and co-operation with communists. The liberals thus distanced themselves from Tambo's call for a firm public stance, declaring unequivocal support for the Defiance Campaign. Rather, the liberals proposed a "bridge-building exercise," to develop a park in Johannesburg's northern suburbs for black nannies and domestic workers to use on their Thursday afternoon off.⁴⁰ Rusty Bernstein - communist, war veteran and legionnaire - poured scorn on the liberal's suggestion, which he described as a "dismal and insulting response" to Tambo's challenge for a principled stand against apartheid. The episode reinforced the differences, which would later materialise into different political programmes, between radical pro-Congress whites and liberal whites.⁴¹ While the Legion's support for the Defiance Campaign placed it unambiguously in the camp of the ANC and its allies, it also helped to build bonds of trust and co-operation between radical white activists and their black counterparts.⁴²

The *rapprochement* between the Legion and the black movements for national liberation, prompted by their shared hopes for a non-racial society, received a boost

³⁹Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting, 136-137.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Eddie Roux, Time Longer Than Rope. The Black Man's Struggle For Freedom In South Africa, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2nd edition, 1964), 384-394.

in late 1952. In the wake of the Defiance Campaign, the ANC moderated its hardline Africanist position, and a more pragmatic faction headed by Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela asserted that mass action against apartheid should develop in a non-racial framework.⁴³ At a public meeting convened at Darragh Hall in Johannesburg under the auspices of the ANC and the SAIC, Tambo and Yusuf Cachalia invited the mainly white audience to form an organisation for whites that would cooperate with the ANC and the SAIC.⁴⁴

Radical whites and the formation of the South African Congress of Democrats

Although the available evidence is somewhat thin, it seems that during the first half of 1953, the Legion initiated negotiations with two other organisations based in the white community, the Congress of Democrats and the Democratic League.⁴⁵ In a Letter to Legionnaires in June 1953, Hodgson argued for the formation of an organisation that could mobilise all whites "who accept the Non-White Organisations and people as allies," and who were prepared to wage a "militant extra-parliamentary struggle for Democracy."⁴⁶ The Congress of Democrats, the Democratic League and the Legion were already working towards the realisation of similar goals; however, all 3 organisations were relatively weak, financially as well as numerically, and each

⁴³Mary Benson, The struggle for a birthright, (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 132.

⁴⁴Lodge, Black Politics, 62.

⁴⁵"The NEC and the Johannesburg Branch Committee have discussed this matter in numerous joint meetings." Jack Hodgson, National Secretary to Legionnaires, 15 June, 1953. A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

⁴⁶Ibid.

tended to duplicate the others' efforts. Moreover, Hodgson and the Legion's Executive felt that there was no longer any real benefit in maintaining the Legion's service identity. In his Letter, Hodgson concluded by asking legionnaires to respond to a proposed merger, which would entail the Legion's abandoning its exclusive service identity. Two responses to Hodgson's Letter were published in Fighting Talk. Both letters were of the view that even the creation of a new organisation would not be adequate to halt the government's march towards "fascism," while amalgamation would reduce the range of pressures on the Nats.⁴⁷

At about the same time, a letter signed by Legion Chairman Cecil Williams (who had replaced Routh at the 1952 National Conference) and "Bram" Fischer, Chairman of the Congress of Democrats, was circulated amongst members of both organisations. In spite of some objections to the establishment of an amalgamated organisation, Williams and Fischer wrote that "[a] national conference will be shortly held to constitute such a national body."⁴⁸ A little more than a month later, Hodgson reported that amalgamation was taking place at branch level. He claimed - rather optimistically - that "organised membership is now 500" and announced a founding conference for the new organisation. This conference, to be convened jointly by the Legion, the Congress of Democrats and the Democratic League, was to be held in Johannesburg on 10-11 October 1953.

⁴⁷Fighting Talk, July, 1953.

⁴⁸A. Fischer, Chairman, Congress of Democrats and C.G. Williams, Chairman, Springbok Legion to "Dear Democrats," 16 July, 1953. A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

In the meantime, ties were cemented by formal co-operation between the three "democratic" white organisations on a number of issues. The Legion and the Congress of Democrats, for instance, convened joint meetings on such topics as the banning of individuals, the Group Areas Act,⁴⁹ and the UNO Commission on Racial Discrimination in South Africa.⁵⁰ During mid-1953, the three white organisations clarified the ideological orientation of the proposed amalgamated organisation, as well as the role of whites in the broader struggle against apartheid. This objective was accomplished largely by using the newly-constituted Liberal Party's position as a springboard. An article published in Fighting Talk acknowledged, not without irony, that the Liberal Party's position was a "tremendous advance on the policies of the United Party and even those of the Labour Party."⁵¹ However, according to the Fighting Talk article, the Liberal Party position contained one serious flaw: that equal rights based on a common franchise roll were to be reserved for "civilised persons." The article held that in view of the special conditions pertaining to South Africa, where educational and other opportunities were unequal, this meant that the Liberals did not seriously envisage extending the franchise to blacks. The article asked rhetorically:

How liberal can you claim to be, if you reject the democratic franchise? How far are you removed from the white supremacists if IN ACTUAL FACT you debar groups of people from having the vote because of their colour?⁵² [original emphasis]

⁴⁹Springbok Legion. Chairman's Report to the National Conference, 1953. A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

⁵⁰Fighting Talk, September, 1953.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, June, 1953.

⁵²*Ibid.*

In a speech delivered during August 1953, Cecil Williams focussed on the paternalism of the Liberal Party's agenda, and insisted that it was no longer acceptable to regard the aspirations of black South Africans in the "familiar liberalistic terms of the past two or three decades."⁵³ On the contrary, if white democrats were to "swim with, rather against, the fast-flowing tide," they needed to co-operate with black organisations to secure "full and equal democratic rights for all."⁵⁴ Moreover, accordingly to Williams, in light of their numerical preponderance, blacks would undoubtedly play the major role in determining the direction and tempo of the struggle. It was on these terms that a new, militant organisation, operating mainly amongst whites, could take its stand alongside the ANC and the SAIC.⁵⁵

Clearly the state was alarmed by the prospect of an emergent radical, non-racial alliance against apartheid. On 4 June 1953, the Security Police raided the Legion's Johannesburg offices, seizing minute books, correspondence, pamphlets and other documents.⁵⁶ On 28 August, shortly before the amalgamation conference, Williams and fellow legionnaire Alan Lipman were ordered by the Minister of Justice to resign from any organisation to which they belonged, and were prohibited from attending any gathering for a period of two years.⁵⁷ A similar ban was imposed on Bram Fischer.⁵⁸

⁵³Ibid., August, 1953. Here Williams no doubt referred to the paternalistic tradition of white South African liberalism.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., June, 1953.

⁵⁷Executive Committee Report to the Joint Congress and Legion Committee - 30 September, 1953. A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

⁵⁸Ibid.

Despite escalating state intimidation, the amalgamation conference between the Legion, the Congress of Democrats and the Democratic League took place as scheduled in Johannesburg on 10 October, 1953. The new organisation was called the South African Congress of Democrats (SACOD). Legion Vice-Chairman Pieter Beyleveld was elected SACOD National President, while Lee Warden from the Democratic League and Hodgson were elected Vice-President and National Secretary, respectively.⁵⁹ Most of the Legion's remaining members joined the new SACOD. The SACOD inherited the shambolic organisational structure, ravaged by bannings and numerically weak, of its three constituents.⁶⁰ While its membership never exceeded more than a few hundred, the SACOD did help to accelerate and define the national struggle against apartheid. SACOD members were no strangers to political organisation, and many featured prominently in Congress movement's opposition to apartheid in the 1950s.

Rusty Bernstein and the Freedom Charter

As part of the Congress alliance, radical whites in the SACOD played an important role in conceptualising and planning the Freedom Charter and the Congress of the People held in Kliptown in 1956. In 1954, the ANC summoned its allies in the SAIC, the SACOD, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) and the Coloured People's Congress (CPC) to a joint meeting in Natal to discuss political strategy in the wake of the Defiance Campaign. ANC veteran Z.K. Matthews proposed a Congress

⁵⁹Ibid., November, 1953.

⁶⁰South African Congress of Democrats, Executive Committee Report, 30 September, 1953. A617, Springbok Legion, CPSA collections, Cullen.

of the People, which would draw up a Freedom Charter as a blueprint for a democratic, non-racial and unified South Africa. The SACOD's Rusty Bernstein was delegated to draft a Call, explaining the concept of the Congress of the People and asking South Africans everywhere to collaborate in setting the terms of the Freedom Charter. In his autobiography, Bernstein writes that: " I wrestled with it until a slogan, which seemed to crystallise the essence of the Congress of the People, came to mind: 'Let Us Speak of Freedom'"⁶¹ Bernstein recalls that, having identified his slogan, the Call "almost wrote itself,"⁶² and it was accepted unanimously by the Joint Congress Executives. For Bernstein, the Call represented a departure from past political style: this time, the Congress movement would not be campaigning around a ready-made programme, but would be searching for a national consensus.⁶³ Replies to the Call were received in all shape and form, and as the Congress of the people drew closer, the Working Committee urgently worked to turn the thousands of submissions into a draft Freedom Charter. This task was also delegated to Bernstein, who produced a draft version of the Charter which he expected to be discussed at the Congress of the People. However a police raid on the gathering prevented detailed discussion on Bernstein's draft, and the whole, unamended Freedom Charter was put to the vote and approved by acclaim.⁶⁴

⁶¹Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting, 149.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid., 158.

Military “experts” and the move towards violence

Radical white veterans also played a role in the Congress movement's campaign of armed resistance, particularly its early phase. Following the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the government declared a State of Emergency and outlawed the ANC and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). The leadership of the ANC immediately proclaimed that the organisation would not dissolve, and would carry on the struggle from the underground. Sharpeville and the State of Emergency thus represented a turning point in the history of resistance to apartheid. The policy of non-violence was called into question by the government's resort to force, and in June 1961, a small group of ANC leaders, including Mandela and Sisulu met to discuss the future direction of the liberation struggle. They concluded that the use of violence by blacks had become inevitable, but that this violence should be controlled and directed by responsible political leadership. They therefore decided to form a military organisation which could conduct a sabotage campaign, while simultaneously preparing for guerilla warfare against the apartheid regime.⁶⁵

Jon Pampallis, a commentator sympathetic to the ANC,⁶⁶ writes that the (now re-constituted) SACP backed the ANC's decision to employ violence as a political strategy. However in his autobiography, Bernstein contends that the SACP's decision to embark on a limited sabotage campaign predates that of the ANC. The matter featured on the agenda of a SACP conference in Johannesburg at the end of

⁶⁵Jon Pampallis, Foundations of the New South Africa, (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1991), 220.

⁶⁶He wrote his book while teaching at Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College.

1960. The Party Central Committee deferred a decision on the question of violence pending further discussion, but in the meantime, it agreed to set up small specialised units to investigate the practice, techniques and forms of armed struggle.⁶⁷ While the SACP's special units were being set up, so Mandela was enrolling volunteers for his force; as Bernstein comments, "[t]he Party and the ANC were moving in the same direction, but not on parallel tracks."⁶⁸ In any event, a small group of white radical Second World War veterans - members of both the SACOD and the SACP - were involved in the campaign of violence from its earliest stages. While Mandela's units soon outnumbered those of the SACP, the ANC lacked practical experience of armed conflict, and white veteran "experts" shared with ANC volunteers their knowledge of explosives, methods of sabotage and so forth. In November 1961, representatives of both groups met. They agreed that existing units would be merged into a single, independent force known as *Umkhonto we Sizwe* ("Spear of the Nation," or MK). All MK members would be free to remain members of the ANC, the SACP or both.⁶⁹

MK's first attacks were scheduled for 16 December 1961, a date of great significance for both the Congress movement (Heroes' Day) and the NP (the Day of the Covenant). Early in the evening, Congress volunteers posterred towns targeted for sabotage with copies of the MK Manifesto. The Manifesto was an integral part of the campaign, as it warned of the dangerous drift towards civil war and explained the purpose of MK's sabotage operations. However the police spotted the posters and

⁶⁷Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting*, 226-227.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 227.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 231.

before dawn, nearly all had been removed. White veterans featured prominently in the sabotage attacks scheduled for 16 December 1961. But despite their technical "expertise," this first night of sabotage was, in the words of contemporary commentator Eddie Roux, "amateurish."⁷⁰ That night, Bernstein and fellow veterans and legionnaires Hodgson and Joe Slovo were meant to cut the main telephone lines between Johannesburg, Pretoria and the reef towns. Bernstein recalls how he kept watch while Slovo and Hodgson, both experienced in the use of explosives, entered an underground chamber to tape their sticks of dynamite to the cables, but the explosives failed to detonate.⁷¹ Harold Strachan, also a veteran and legionnaire, led a unit which was tasked to sabotage the overhead telephone lines between Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage. He decided to cut the lines, and believed that his fishing gaff would be adequate to the task. Standing on the roof of a borrowed truck to give him sufficient height, he hooked the gaff around the telephone line. As he tugged, the gaff slipped on the copper of the telephone line and, catching Strachan off balance, pulled him off the roof of the truck. As he hung desperately to this fishing gaff, a car came past; remarkably it did not stop.⁷² Another ill-conceived episode in the night's sabotage took place in Cape Town. George Peake, a coloured City Councillor, was arrested by police while placing a home-made bomb at the back door of the Roeland Street Prison. And MK operative Petrus Molife blew himself up when his home-made bomb exploded in his hands.⁷³

⁷⁰Roux, Time Longer Than Rope, 424.

⁷¹Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting, 236-237. Bernstein notes in his autobiography that he only learned about the failed act of sabotage two years later, at the Rivonia Trial.

⁷²Harold Strachan, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 4 November 1986.

⁷³Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting, 235.

Strategically, the 16 December sabotage attacks were a failure. As the judge sarcastically observed when sentencing Peake to two years imprisonment, the bombing was clearly intended as a demonstration, and not meant to hurt anyone.⁷⁴ More than anything, the sabotage campaign was designed to confirm the activity of the resistance movements, and their will to resist in the face of banning and state brutality. However, much of the polemic value of the sabotage attacks was negated, due to the police tearing down posters bearing the MK manifesto.

Despite such early setbacks, MK persisted with a "rolling campaign of sabotage," while the MK High Command simultaneously began to plan the transition to guerilla war, the next phase of armed resistance.⁷⁵ Some former legionnaires such as Harold Strachan were gaoled for their part in MK's sabotage campaign. Others, including Bernstein, Slovo⁷⁶ and Hodgson left South Africa for exile, where they served the liberation movement in a variety of capacities. Age took its toll, and the majority of radical white veterans either died or retired from active political life before the advent of the liberation they fought so hard, and for so long, to achieve. Joe Slovo was appointed Minister of Housing in the first democratic government, although he died in early 1995. The huge and emotional crowds who lined the streets of Soweto and sung "*Hamba Kahle Umkhonto*" ("go well spear / comrade") as his body was borne on

⁷⁴Roux, Time Longer Than Rope, 425.

⁷⁵Elaine Reinertsen, "The influence of communism on the African National Congress of South Africa, 1927-1969," (Paper presented to a post-graduate seminar, Department of History, University of Natal, Durban, 20 November, 1986), 6. Reinertsen also suggests that MK made full use of the SACP's contacts in socialist Eastern Europe to secure training facilities for MK cadres.

⁷⁶Ibid; See also Joe Slovo, Slovo. The Unfinished Biography, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1995), 145-166.

a gun carriage from Orlando stadium to the Avalon cemetery, testify to the role played by Slovo and other radical white veterans in the struggle for national liberation.

The political legacy of radical legionnaires

Radical white legionnaires transcended the barriers of racist culture during the 1950s. They chose a brand of liberal politics which, in the context of South Africa's colonial race relations, promised - or threatened - radical social change. The extent to which they moved beyond the internal politics of whiteness was evidenced by the vilification and, to a lesser extent, violence that they suffered at the hands of other white South Africans during the apartheid period. Bernstein, for example, writes that neighbouring white children were refused permission to play with his children.⁷⁷ Strachan survived two assassination attempts which were, he believed, part of a security police "dirty tricks" campaign.⁷⁸ And I recall that, growing up as a white boy in the 1970s, Joe Slovo was demonised in popular white discourses as "public enemy number one."

During and shortly after the war, these veterans tried to achieve social justice in the form of an egalitarian social order based on a united, non-racial working class. However their experience with the majority of white veterans, who sought to define social justice and servicemen's rights in terms of race and the privileges of whiteness, bred a growing disillusionment with the progressive potential of South African whites. Consequently, most radical white veterans shifted their focus towards the black

⁷⁷Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting, 244.

⁷⁸Strachan interview.

struggle for national liberation.

As discussed in this chapter, the CPISA's reorientation no doubt influenced the way in which radical white legionnaires understood the terrain of political struggle in South Africa. White veterans, more than any other section of the CPISA, were sensitive to the currents in white politics, especially the political boundaries of racist culture. Their particular insights into white politics derived, at least in part, from the lessons learnt by the failure to persuade their ex-service comrades to endorse a more progressive, less racialised politics. Such insights in turn helped to confirm the CPISA's political and ideological re-orientation towards national liberation.

Although few in number, radical white veterans contributed significantly to the broad Congress strategy to resist apartheid. The everyday social mobility that they enjoyed as whites became increasingly important to the operation of the resistance movement as the tempo of oppression accelerated. White activists were able to perform a range of organisational tasks, which were more difficult for black activists who were subject to all sorts of state harassment and control on account of their race. Radical white veterans also contributed resources and expertise to the liberation struggle. In early in 1954, for example, the management and editorship of the well-established Fighting Talk was given over to an enlarged Board made up of members of the ANC, the SAIC and the SACOD. Under the editorship of Ruth First, Fighting Talk became the mouthpiece of the Congress movement. Drawing on their war experience, radical white veterans also provided initiative and tactical direction to the campaign of violent resistance to apartheid.

Although most legionnaires joined the SACOD, the Legion itself was not disbanded. As their links with the majority of white servicemen became more tenuous, there was some debate amongst remaining legionnaires about whether or not to disband the Legion. At the Legion's 1953 National Conference, it was decided that the Legion should return to "its beginnings as an ex-service body, devoting its attention to the problems and affairs of ex-servicemen."⁷⁹ But these functions were a relic from the Legion's past. Moreover, by the mid-1950s, the original focus of Legion activity had "shifted from the sphere of social welfare to the political sphere." And as a political body, the Springbok Legion no longer had a role to play, as its "vital political tasks [had] been inherited by the SACOD."⁸⁰ Virtually bankrupt and with most of its active members now part of the SACOD, the Legion quietly dissipated. That ordinary white veterans took little notice of the Legion's demise indicates the extent to which the racial order had been consolidated.

⁷⁹Chairman's Report, 1953.

⁸⁰Ibid.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION: TRAJECTORIES OF WHITE EX-SERVICE POLITICS

Contracts of whiteness

This thesis began from the premise that class and ethnicity, the major binary categories conventionally used to explain developments in white South African society, are unable to account for the history of white men who volunteered to serve in the Second World War. The thesis has argued that their history is best understood in the context of racist culture, which can be defined as an evolving consensus amongst whites in South Africa, on the political and social primacy of whiteness.

However, as Goldberg writes, while racially predicated exclusions lie at the heart of racist culture,¹ there is no generic "racism."² A range of racisms might exist concurrently, and it follows that different racisms serve different purposes.³ Put differently, within the racial order, competing modes of racialisation are asserted and contested, for a variety of reasons. While white servicemen / veterans represented a variety of little traditions, fairly distant from the loci of party political power, they were nonetheless historical agents in their own right. Key to understanding their social

¹David Theo Goldberg, Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning, (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993), 95.

²Ibid., 90.

³Ibid., 91.

and political history is identifying the struggles that took place between what Goldberg calls “race creation” (the subjective processes whereby volunteers articulated and asserted their own hopes as whites) and “race formation” (a more structural process, managed by dominant political players, which “inscribes one racially, and in society, and in the law.”)⁴

In chapter two, the thesis argued that the proletarianisation of poorer whites, which pre-dated the Anglo-Boer war, was exacerbated by the onset of the Great Depression. For the most vulnerable of whites, such pressures brought the spectre of *verkaffering* and, as scholars such as Clynick and Lewis have shown, gave rise to a variety of little traditions that threatened the stability of the regime of accumulation. Coalition and then Fusion brought about a political realignment which is central to understanding the fundamental cohesion of white politics until the very end of the apartheid period. A new contract of whiteness was negotiated between poorer whites and the state, whereby most little traditions were co-opted in return for a guarantee of their status as whites in an urban, industrial context. The maintenance of this contract became a condition of office for successive white governments. I suggested that most white volunteers were drawn from these co-opted little traditions. While volunteers presented a variety of reasons for enlisting, the act of volunteering added another layer to the relationships of obligation and entitlement pertaining between them and the state.

⁴Ibid., 82-83.

In chapter three, the thesis examined white troops' wartime concerns with post-war social justice. For white volunteers drawn from such a segregated colonial society as South Africa, social justice was almost inevitably framed as justice for white men. During the war, white servicemen joined the Springbok Legion *en masse* to ensure that they received a "square deal" after the war. While white servicemen supported the UP overwhelmingly in the 1943 general election, they became increasingly suspicious of the UP's intent and ability to maintain its side of the social contract implicit in their decision to volunteer. Although the Helwan riot was sparked by servicemen's frustrations at the slow rate of repatriation and poor conditions at Helwan camp, the riot also manifested a deeper displeasure amongst white servicemen with the UP as the war drew to a close. In part, white troops' restlessness as they were demobilised may be attributed to their crises of expectations.

In chapter four, the thesis outlined how wartime changes to the labour process not only wrought changes to relations of production and the composition of the workforce, but also brought an influx of Africans to the cities. In the context of a changing post-war world, the UP failed to maintain the conditions necessary to meet the post-war expectations of white ex-servicemen, despite the intentions of the Soldiers' Charter. Veterans' status as white men depended on access to housing and fairly well-paid employment. Given the general lack of skills amongst returned white servicemen, their entry into the sorts of jobs that would permit them to enjoy their status as returned white heroes was premised on more, rather than less, rigid, measures of racial exclusion. Their tenuous ability to establish "respectable" homes

in the city also required a general tightening of urban segregation. Yet the UP's post-war flirtation with the idea of "dismantling" segregation rendered it unable to maintain the structural boundaries of racist culture to the satisfaction of white veterans struggling to maintain a toehold in the industrial, urban political economy. The NP, on the other hand, promised to (re)impose precisely these sort of racial boundaries. However, the Nats' wartime record of hostility to the war effort and to servicemen, meant that white veterans could never wholly reconcile themselves to the NP. Rather, white ex-servicemen maintained an ambiguous relationship with both major political parties.

In chapter five the thesis argued that, while the origins of the Torch Commando were contrived, the overwhelming support it received from white veterans constituted a significant protest against the party partisan ways in which the NP set about allocating the benefits of apartheid. In its formal intentions to protect the coloured franchise and prevent the "rape of the constitution," the Torch Commando was indeed a liberal challenge to the Nats. However, in another sense, the ways in which the Torch fetishised the rule of law was more about protecting the constitutional rights of white voters - such as veterans - who remained outside the Afrikaner nationalist coalition. Tellingly, the Torch failed to admit coloured voters, even those who were veterans, into its ranks. Also, the question of the coloured franchise soon slipped off the Torch's agenda, replaced by concerns that the government would tamper with English-speakers' rights, the other entrenched constitutional clause. From early 1952, the whole focus on the Nats' disregard for the constitution received even less priority as the Torch marshalled its efforts to return the UP to power in the

1953 general election. After the Torch failed to oust the NP, white veterans never again attempted as a category to assert their rights as ex-servicemen on the party political stage.

“For seeing the graves at Alamein, you can never be the same again.”⁵

White volunteers' post-war material and cultural concerns, and the poles of identity from which such concerns derived, were not all that different from white men of similar background who remained at home. Servicemen themselves were aware that they would have to stake their claim in post-war society as white men. The privileges of whiteness - ranging from established cultural practice; to the racial and gender bias of the Soldiers' Charter; to legislation - helped white veterans to re-enter civilian life. After the war, they fled the Springbok Legion, thereby acknowledging that social justice would have to be won by means other than asserting their service identity. During the period of the Torch Commando, white ex-servicemen did organise as veterans, although the concerns raised by the Torch were not exclusively service issues.

Does this mean, then, that white veterans' service identity counted for nothing? This is clearly not the case. From an empirical and ethnographic view, the memory of war service bound war veterans together until their very old age. An abiding impression from my research is of old white men in their favourite bars day after day, hunched

⁵Gunner A.L. Gavshon,, cited in The Sable (Official Organ of the 6th SA Armoured Division), December, 1944.

together over their morning beer, talking and arguing about matters of common interest. Rarely did their talk turn to stories of the war. Rather, their conversations tended to refract the sort of values and interests that they had developed during their period of service. Topics covered ranged from the mundane (e.g. sport, the weather) to the foundations of a strong, white male South African identity (e.g. respect for the rule of law; strong notions of justice, and distaste for Afrikaner nationalism).

The position occupied by many veterans upon their return from war, as white men who commanded fairly high salaries, along with the extent to which race and NP *realpolitik* dominated the political scene in South Africa, meant that veterans had little to gain by invoking their service identity publicly. Nevertheless, they consciously preserved the memory of war service in extra-parliamentary arenas.

The end of ex-service politics?: the Memorable Order of Tin Hats and the study of racist culture

The majority of white ex-servicemen joined the Memorable Order of the Tin Hats (MOTH). The MOTH was formed in South Africa in 1927 by survivors of the Great War, to sustain that "personal, intimate comradeship which the frontline had generated and venerated."⁶ The MOTH was founded on three ideals : True Comradeship, Sound Memory and Mutual Help. By 1928, shellholes (branches)

⁶Charles A. Evenden, Old Soldiers Never Die: The Story of MOTH 0 (Durban: Memorable Order of Tin Hats, 1975, 5th edition), 124.

named for battles, regiments, personalities and other memories of military service.⁷ each headed by an elected Old Bill⁸ (chairman) had sprung up in Natal and on the Rand. Each shellhole was intended to be self-sufficient, and was expected to choose an objective or cause "in the interests of the wider community."⁹ The MOTH also sought to help members who "fell out of sorts." The Second World War provided the MOTH with a fresh influx of recruits, and by the early 1950s membership exceeded 100,000 white men.¹⁰

"MOTH 0" and founder of the order Charles Evenden claimed that the organisation was avowedly apolitical, and could break down racial barriers in South Africa.¹¹ By this, he undoubtedly referred to the antagonism between English- and Afrikaans-speaking whites, and the party political divisions that he presumed were engendered by this antagonism. In this sense, the MOTH was indeed "apolitical." However, as Jean Comaroff and others have argued, the realities of social and political power determine that political activity, and especially resistance, can be expressed in seemingly apolitical domains. Moreover, the mechanics of power deny simple

⁷These included Anti-Tank; El Daba; El Alamein; Edwin Swales V.C.; Long Range Desert Group

⁸Old Bill was a fond name for stereotype of the gruff, kind British sergeant-major of the Great War

⁹Evenden, Old Soldiers Never Die, 176-177.

¹⁰Ibid., 302. See also Fifty Years, 1927-1977. Memorable Order Of The Tin Hats, (Durban: Memorable Order of Tin Hats, 1977) [Commemorative brochure]. It was only in the 1960s that women were admitted as MOTHs.

¹¹Evenden, Old Soldiers Never Die, 175.

dichotomies between resistance and compliance.¹² The MOTH is thus best viewed as a “political” response by white men who were united not only by service but also by similar access to state power. While the MOTH did not consciously exclude other categories of volunteers, its practices, rhetoric and symbols were all rooted in the experience of white troops drawn from a colonial context.

White servicemen’s assumptions about race were manifest in the MOTH building programme, which began in the 1930s and accelerated greatly in the years immediately after the Second World War. Today, the MOTH owns built assets to the value of R 400 million (about £40 million). During the inter-war period, the MOTH tended to build halls and other public facilities for use by veterans. However, after the Second World War, the focus of MOTH building activities diversified. On the one hand, the MOTH concentrated on providing housing for demobilised white veterans. In a joint undertaking with the BESL, for instance, the MOTH raised funds for the construction of 58 small single bedroom flats for white ex-servicemen in West Turffontein, Johannesburg. This post-war spate of building also witnessed the erection of the “Africa Star Mansions” in Durban, and the building of a further 40 flats in Benoni.¹³ For a small number of the many white veterans who had fallen through the cracks in the state housing policy, such projects enabled them to create their own domestic space.

¹²Jean Comaroff, Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: the Culture and History of a South African People, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 261.

¹³Reef Barb, December 1945.

The MOTH also pursued limited building activities in areas where black ex-servicemen were concentrated, such as Boksburg location. However, such efforts were largely confined to the provision of recreation and community centres, and halls.¹⁴ Whereas building programmes undertaken by the MOTH on behalf of black veterans were undoubtedly well-intentioned - funds were raised by white ex-servicemen who also did much of the actual building on a voluntary basis - they perpetuated dominant understandings and images about racial difference. White veterans, in short, received homes - and along with them, the possibilities of independent domestic life - while their black comrades received halls and other forms of communal space. This contrast suggests that white ex-servicemen bore fairly well formed notions of the relative needs of black and white volunteers concerning the family, the built environment and, indeed, the unequal and separate roles that each would occupy in the post-war world.¹⁵

Willie Grobler commented that, at the level of the shellhole, the MOTH "helped guys to get ahead in life." Food parcels were provided for indigent MOTH members, and others were assisted with school and university fees.¹⁶ The bonds of comradeship, which were emphasised at every turn, meant that the organisation did not recognise "rank and swank."¹⁷ The MOTH was thus able to consolidate cross-class, cross-

¹⁴Ibid., October 1945.

¹⁵ For an account of the links between race and the geographies of the built environment, see Goldberg, Racist Culture, 5-7; 41-60.

¹⁶Willie Grobler, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 5 June 1997. My own high school education was subsidised by the MOTH.

¹⁷Evenden, Old Soldiers Never Die, 142.

generational and cross-cultural networks of white veterans. It is thus possible that the MOTH might have acted as a type of freemasonry amongst white ex-servicemen.

On one level then, the MOTH mirrored and helped to reproduce the racialised and gendered contours of South African society. At the same time, the order kept its distance from party politics and vigorously affirmed the “apolitical” service identity of white veterans. Collectively, white veterans’ participation in the MOTH represents profound disillusion with a state which seemed at best indifferent to their concerns. Most significantly, the MOTH provided white ex-servicemen, especially those most marginalised and “restless” in the post-war world, with an arena where they could preserve the social relations of the regiment. As their dreams of “homes fit for heroes” dissipated, the experience and remembrance of service became increasingly important for veterans. Rifleman Harris, an English volunteer who saw service at the Battle of the Somme during the Great War, captured the enduring importance of his service experience when he wrote that:

For my own part I can only say that I enjoyed life more while on active service than I have done ever since; and as I sit and work in my shop in . . . Soho, I look upon that time as the only worthwhile part of my experience.¹⁸

White volunteers returning to South Africa shared Harris’ sentiments. Willie Grobler, like many other ex-servicemen, claimed that lifelong comradeship with other ex-servicemen was “the most valuable thing he wanted after the war.”¹⁹

¹⁸Cited in Samuel Hynes, A Soldier’s Tale: Bearing Witness To Modern War, (London: Pimlico, 1997), 22.

¹⁹Grobler interview.

The MOTH, then, was at once a private and public reminder to white ex-servicemen of their sense of superiority and entitlement which derived from having volunteered, fought and survived. Significantly, these attitudes were usually expressed in terms of "difference"²⁰ - in relation not only to non-veterans but, increasingly, to blacks. MOTH membership was - and is still - signified by the wearing of lapel badge replicas of the "tin hat." This image also dominates shellhole meetings, where a candle is lighted on top of a military helmet to remind members of their "pals who did not come back"²¹ and of their own special bonds. The MOTH did not challenge post-war exclusive social relations between black and white; to the contrary, most of its members hoped that these would be defined with greater clarity. However, the MOTH did represent a challenge - albeit in symbolic form²² - to a party political culture that was insensitive to the concerns of white servicemen. Suggestively, the early years of NP rule saw the MOTH's most rapid period of growth.

In sum, the MOTH represented something of a little tradition amongst white ex-servicemen, that helped to mediate some of the contradictions occasioned by the onset of the NP regime. The "apolitical" MOTH is thus central to understanding how and why ordinary white servicemen made the shift from segregation to apartheid. Such an observation suggests the need to look beyond the "political" arena, towards

²⁰Scott Gibson, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Durban, 15 July, 1998; P. Levings, interview by author, transcript, Johannesburg, 16 July, 1997; Gerry Yates, interview by author, transcript, Durban, 18 June, 1997.

²¹Fifty Years Of The Memorable Order Of The Tin Hats, 8.

²²See Comaroff, Body of Power, 11.

social, cultural and domestic institutions and associations, for insight into the (re)production and contestation of racist culture, or indeed any hegemonic order.

White veterans and the Congress movement

Chapter six of the thesis explored the tradition of non-racial ex-service politics in the early apartheid period. This tradition was present from the formation of the Springbok Legion, nurtured by a cadre of radical white volunteers, mostly communists. In the context of what they read as "new ideas and attitudes"²³ developing amongst troops, this cadre hoped that through the Springbok Legion, troops could be marshalled in a new, progressive, direction after the war. However, as the war ended, radical legionnaire's hopes for the mass of ordinary white volunteers were dashed. While many veterans did maintain an element of liberal "progressivism," it was filtered through a highly racialised lens. Alienated from radical legionnaire's more egalitarian notions of social justice, and disenchanted by the Legion's inability to address the everyday concerns of their civilian world, the mass of white ex-servicemen left the Legion.

Between the end of the war and the advent of the Nat government, the political options available to those remaining in the Legion were limited. On the one hand, radical legionnaires were constrained by the liberal dilemma of the day. On the other, some believed that they might still succeed in attracting veterans back to the Legion. The Nat victory in 1948 resolved a number of questions that had vexed the Legion

²³Rusty Bernstein, Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs From a Life in South African Politics, (London: Viking, 1999), 64.

since the end of the war. Increasingly, radical white veterans shifted their attention towards the broader, non-racial movement for national liberation, in line with the changing ideological orientation of the CPUSA. However, until about 1950, the ANC in particular remained suspicious of white legionnaires, despite their political credentials. During the early 1950s, the shared experience of state repression helped to erode some of the ANC's misgivings about co-operation with white communists from Legion. At the same time, both the ANC and the Legion were moving towards a common position which saw the overthrow of apartheid as the primary political objective, and both favoured a non-racial, national opposition movement. In the context of such political and ideological conditions, white communists from the Legion participated in the Congress movement's resistance to apartheid from the 1950s on. Experienced, well-educated, and free from some of the everyday state harassment suffered by their black colleagues, white veterans made significant contributions to the anti-apartheid struggle.

In the 1960s many radical white veterans were gaoled and most went into exile where their commitment to a non-racial, democratic South Africa remained strong. Some, such as Roley Arentstein, Rusty Bernstein, Brian Bunting and Joe Slovo lived to see the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994 - although this did not necessarily mark the realisation of their hopes for non-racialism. Other veterans, such as Jack Hodgson and Cecil Williams, died in exile. Sadly, it seems that the role of these whites - veterans of the Second World War and the liberation struggle - is becoming marginalised as a new liberation historiography, concentrating on African (and Africanist) icons of the struggle, takes root in post-apartheid South Africa.

White servicemen and the study of race

It is both interesting and ironic to chart the different ways in which white ex-servicemen traded on their identity as volunteers. The majority of white veterans used the memory of service to stake their claim as white men who had served their country, and to negotiate "social justice" for themselves within the context of segregated colonial society. White radicals, on the other hand, invoked traditions of anti-fascism to challenge the very precepts of racist culture, and the racialised society which it sustained.

The ways in which different groups of white veterans used the experience and memory of service to mediate contrasting relationships with the racial order makes a powerful argument for scholars to historicise studies of whiteness and race more generally. In so doing, we are able to reclaim race as a category for historical analysis, and to challenge abstract and generic definitions of race which ultimately strengthen the hegemony of whiteness.

Selected Bibliography (partly annotated)

This Bibliography is divided into:

Primary sources

1. Unpublished documentary sources
(Arranged chronologically and by collection. Partly annotated.)
2. Published documentary sources (Partly annotated.)
 - 2.1 Newspapers and newsletters
 - 2.2 Periodicals
 - 2.3 Booklets, pamphlets and short publications
 - 2.4 Government publications and other official sources
3. Oral interviews

Secondary sources

4. Books
5. Articles
6. Unpublished Essays, Manuscripts and Theses

Abbreviations used in the bibliography

Don	Don Africana Library, Durban
JPL	Johannesburg Public Library
KCM	Killie Campbell Collections, University of Natal, Durban
Kleynhans	Documents in the personal collection of Professor W. Kleynhans, formerly of the Dept. of Political Studies, University of South Africa

Don	Don Africana Library, Durban
SAL	South African Library, Cape Town
Terry	Clyde M. Terry, Hall of Militaria, Kimberley
UNISA	Sanlam United Party Archives, University of South Africa
Wits	Church of the Province of South Africa Collections, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand

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[Activities of local shellholes and wartime anecdotes. Terry.]

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[Issued at a public meeting in Port Shepstone, this pamphlet appealed for greater provincial powers so the "Natal family" could develop "democracy" under the Crown. UP Division of Information, War Veterans' Torch Commando, 1951-1952, correspondence, pamphlets, newspaper cuttings. UNISA.]

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[Written by R. Feetham, this booklet argues that the NP's efforts to tamper with the Constitution were "dishonourable," and that this rendered NP "illegitimate." In author's possession.]

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[A booklet which offers a liberal egalitarian argument for 'non-racialism.' JPL.]

Shuttle Service for Springboks going Home. n.p., n.d.

[A pamphlet issued by the Union Defence Force explaining the procedures that servicemen should follow when using the shuttle service, as well as what they should expect immediately upon their return to SA. Terry.]

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