

Short-lived tolerance. An euphoria of the 1938 Voortrekker Centenary as in the editorials of a local newspaper: *The George & Knysna Herald*

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Abstract

There have been many studies on the Voortrekker Centenary of 1938 and the unforeseen consequences it had, including the subsequent surge of Afrikaner nationalism and political developments. As the wagons moved across South Africa, the processions infused Afrikaners with pride in their heroic past. Afrikaner nationalism, the ideology that focused on protecting Afrikaner culture, the striving to regain an independent republic and, importantly, affirmation that they were God's chosen people, were rekindled.

The event also generated a widespread sense of connection. It was not only Afrikaners who were swept up in the euphoria of the celebrations, but also many non-Afrikaners were emotionally affected by the event.

This article narrows the focus down to George, a small town in the Western Cape Province, where Charles Sayers, the editor of the local newspaper, the *George & Knysna Herald*, a firm supporter of the United Party and a fierce critic of the Reunited National Party, seems to have been swept up for a short period by the fever of the celebrations. A year later, in 1939, when war broke out in Europe, Sayers loyally approved of the United Party's decision to support the war effort in Europe on the side of the Allies and became harshly critical of Hertzog and those Afrikaner nationalists who refused to join a war on Britain's side.

With the *George & Knysna Herald* as the primary source, this article attempts to determine what led the editor to undergo such an about-turn in his political views in 1938 and to be temporarily supportive of the celebrations that embodied the spirit of Afrikaner nationalism.

Keywords: Tolerance; Voortrekker Centenary; Afrikaner nationalism; Oxwagon Sentinel; Local newspaper; *George & Knysna Herald*.

Introduction

In the conflict-ridden world of today there is much talk about tolerance.¹ But what is necessary for people to tolerate one another, to bond into a social cohesiveness? What is the common ground required to connect people? Even for a short while?

The focus of this research is on a few significant events as reported by the George newspaper, *The George & Knysna Herald (G&KH)*,² in 1938. The first was the general election of May 1938, followed a few months later by the Voortrekker Centenary and a year later the outbreak of the Second World War.

What motivated this article was the way that the mood and content of the editorials in the *G&KH* changed within in a couple of months – from being judgemental and critical towards a certain ideological grouping to greater tolerance of the same group. This article is an attempt to ascertain the cause of this shift of ground.

The *G&KH* is the primary source and also the inspiration for this research. Grundlingh and Sapire examined the way that Great Trek mythology manifested over a period of fifty years. Other studies by Grundlingh on Afrikaners and Afrikaner nationalism were particularly useful.³ Research on the impact of newspapers on political life, or vice versa by Penn, Harber, Pinker, Broughton, Murphy and Gerber was also consulted.⁴ Studies on the

1 Tolerance is the ability or willingness to tolerate the existence of opinions or behaviour that one dislikes or disagrees with. This would include religious, racial, political and social tolerance (available at <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tolerance>, as accessed on 25 February 2020).

2 George Museum, Archives, *George & Knysna Herald*. The original copies of the *G&KH* are stored in the museum and was available to the researcher.

3 A Grundlingh & H Sapire, "From feverish festival to repetitive ritual? The changing fortunes of Great Trek mythology in an industrializing South Africa, 1938-1988", *South African Historical Journal*, 21, 1989; A Grundlingh, "The politics of the past and popular pursuits in the construction of everyday Afrikaner nationalism, 1938-1948", S Dubow & A Jeeves (eds.), *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of possibilities* (Cape Town, Double Storey, 2005); A Grundlingh, "Book 4: Industrialisation, rural change and nationalism – Chapter 3 – Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s" (available at <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/book-4-industrialisation-rural-change-and-nationalism-chapter-3-afrikaner-nationalism-1930s>, as accessed on 10 September 2018); A 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", *Journal of African History*, 40, 1999.

4 A Harber, "Newspaper ownership: Political influence trumps the promise of profits", *The Conversation*, 28 July 2015 (available at <http://theconversation.com/newspaper-ownership-political-influence-trumps-the-promise-of-profits-45168>, accessed on 15 March 2019); M Broughton, *Press & Politics of South Africa* (Cape Town, Purnell & Sons, 1961); R Pinker, "Regulating the local press", B Franklin & D Murphy (eds.), *Making the local news. Local journalism in context* (London, Routledge, 1998); AS Gerber *et al.*, "Does the media matter? A field experiment measuring the effect of newspapers on voting behaviour and political opinions", *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 1(2), 2007; J Penn, "How do newspapers affect civic life", *Journalists Resource*, March 11, 2014 (available at <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/news-media/how-do-newspapers-affect-civic-life-data-analysis-seattle-denver>, accessed 9 April 2019).

Ossewabrandwag conducted by Marx, Furlong and Visser were important to deepen a sense of the context of the times.⁵ A valuable source of information was Greta Gericke who lived in George for 76 years. She played a huge part in the educational-, sport- and cultural life of George.⁶ The study by Gericke on the role of religion in George provided more local information.⁷

The town of George, ca 1938

Despite the majority of the population being Afrikaans speakers, the weekly local newspaper, the *G&KH* under the editorship of Charles Owen Sayers, was published almost exclusively in English.⁸ In an interview Gericke explains that poverty and a lack of education hampered any initiative to establish a local Afrikaans newspaper.⁹

The *G&KH* was founded in 1881 and in 1883 it was taken over by Arthur John Sayers. In 1923 his son, Charles Owen, the key protagonist in this article, along with Herbert Stanfield Dyer as the publisher, took over the newspaper from his mother. Dyer retired in 1954 and Sayers was sole owner until he sold the paper in 1973. In 1940 Sayers served briefly in the Medical Corps in East- and North Africa. After he was wounded and eventually discharged, he returned to the *G&KH*.¹⁰ It can be safely accepted that the editorials published during the period covered by this research were written by Charles Sayers.¹¹

The 1938 election

The first significant event for the purposes of this study was the reporting by the *G&KH* on the 1938 election that took place on 18 May.

5 C Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel – Radical Afrikaner nationalism and the history of the Ossewabrandwag* (LIT Verlag, Münster, 2009); C Marx, “The Ossewabrandwag as a mass movement, 1939-1941”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20(20), June 1994; PJ Furlong, *Between crown and swastika. The impact of the radical right on the Afrikaner nationalist movement in the fascist era* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1991); GC Visser, *OB: Traitors or Patriots?* (Macmillan, Johannesburg, 1976).

6 Interview, G Gericke (retired, George)/L Maritz (researcher), 25 September 2013; I Schoonraad, Greta Gericke se invloed onmeetbaar, *George Herald*, 6 December 2018 (available at <https://www.georgeherald.com/News/Article/General/greta-gericke-se-invloed-onmeetbaar-201812050118>, as accessed on 19 February 2020).

7 G Gericke, “Die invloed van die godsdienstebeleving en geloofslewe van die Afrikaanssprekende in die George-omgewing, 1920-1940, op sy lewensuitkyk en lewenswyse” (MA University of Stellenbosch, 1999).

8 The name of the *G&KH* indicates that it was also intended to circulate in the neighbouring town Knysna, which also had many English-speaking residents. Yet there were few articles about Knysna in the newspaper.

9 Interview, G Gericke (retired, George)/L Maritz (researcher), 25 September 2013.

10 George Museum Archives, Box: Sayers Family.

11 Despite a document search in the archives of the George Museum, the researcher was unable to get more information on the *G&KH*. Since the articles were not provided with bylines it was not possible to identify contributing journalists. It is also not known what the weekly print run was.

The candidates for the general election of 1938 in the George constituency were AJ Werth for the Purified National Party (PNP) and the ex-Brit, Colonel Mitchell-Baker, CBE, DSO, ADC, for the United Party (UP).¹² With his string of orders received for serving the British Empire, Colonel Baker was unmistakably pro-British. The majority of the residents in the George electoral district, mostly Afrikaans speaking, were pro-PNP.

The UP was formed in December 1934 by a merger of Prime Minister General Barry Hertzog's National Party (NP), which was in the majority, with the rival South African Party (SAP) of General Jan Smuts. The UP drew support from different sections of South African society, including English-speakers, Afrikaners and Coloureds. Cooperation between the two language groups was one of the important tenets of the UP. The UP was seen as more liberal than the PNP, but it did not have a clear policy regarding the contentious racial issue and white minority rule. JH Hofmeyer, who according to Hermann Giliomee was "the chief exponent of liberalism in the UP", admitted that the liberal approach could give no guarantees, and said "Whether, in fact it will ensure the white man's position in South Africa, will make South Africa safe for European civilization, who will say?" There were members in the UP who can be described as having a liberal viewpoint. Their views on Afrikaners and Afrikaner identity and their attempts to establish and maintain their own language and culture implied a sort of benign superiority.¹³ This tone was reflected in the *G&KH*.

The Cape National Party rejected the idea of fusion proposed by Hertzog and Smuts, and in July 1934 formed the PNP with Dr DF Malan as leader. The PNP was in favour of protecting Afrikaner identity and envisaged an independent republic. Republicanism was one of the main tenets of Afrikaner nationalism as an ideology. In his seminal work, Dunbar Moodie defines Afrikaner nationalism as a civil faith derived from the belief that the Afrikaner people were God's chosen people. The destiny of this people, with their distinct language and culture, would be their own republic, free of the fetters of British rule.¹⁴

12 Anon., "Practical issues in the George constituency", *The George & Knysna Herald*, 18 May, 1938, n.p.

13 J Leatt, T Kneifel & K Nürnberger (eds.), *Contending ideologies in South Africa* (Cape Town, David Phillip, 1986), p. 57; H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a people* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2003), pp. 409 and 447.

14 DT Moodie, *The rise of Afrikanerdom. Power, apartheid and the Afrikaner civil religion* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1975).

These bonds were still highly visible in the 1930s as British capitalist hegemony excluded Afrikaners from political and economic power. Afrikaner businessmen felt curtailed and overwhelmed by the English middle-class.¹⁵ Because of their lack of skills, many Afrikaners were forced into manual labour, where they competed with black workers for lowly paid jobs, and as a result many became increasingly impoverished. The farmers felt threatened by the demands for cheap black labour from the industrial sector. Many became migrant farmers, peasant farmers and *bywoners*. In the southern Cape formerly independent woodcutters struggled to make a living. They formed part of the George constituency.¹⁶ In this multifaceted society that was the Afrikaner, it was English domination that fuelled Afrikaner nationalism.

The Afrikaner Broederbond (AB), a secret society founded in 1918, tried to unite the multifaceted Afrikaner community – rural people and urban people, rich and poor, political idealists and pragmatists – under the banner of Afrikaner nationalism. The organization aimed to maintain Afrikaner culture, develop an Afrikaner-based economy, and ultimately to gain control of the South African government. During the 1930s the Afrikaner Broederbond created several public front organisations – one of them, the Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuurvereniging (ATKV), would play an important role in organising the Voortrekker Centenary.¹⁷

In the run-up to the general election in George, the editor of *G&KH* openly expressed his disapproval of the pro-republican PNP candidate: “People who know Mr Werth ... tell us he is a nice man, but that his politics are all wrong.” He is “like a piano out of tune”.¹⁸ The editor commented “It has been said that the Archangel Gabriel would not stand a chance in the George constituency unless he had a sandwich-board with the word Nationalist back and front...” He added wistfully, “... a great deed has been done by our leaders for this land ... putting away old habits of mind, old prejudices and uncharitableness of thought...”¹⁹

15 B Bozzoli, *The political nature of the ruling class. Capital and ideology in South Africa 1890-1933* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 281-282.

16 DT Moodie, *The rise of Afrikanerdom...*, p. xvii.

17 A Grundlingh, “Book 4: Industrialisation, rural change and nationalism – Chapter 3 – Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s” (available at <https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/book-4-industrialisation-rural-change-and-nationalism-chapter-3-afrikaner-nationalism-1930s>, as accessed on 10 September 2018); A Grundlingh, “The politics of the past and popular pursuits...”, S Dubow & A Jeeves (eds.), *South Africa's 1940s...*, p. 194.

18 Editorial, “The General election”, *The George & Knysna Herald*, 11 May 1938, n.p.

19 Anon., “Practical issues in the George constituency”, *The George & Knysna Herald*, 18 May, 1938, n.p.

But a candidate who was not conversant with Afrikaans did not stand a chance. The result in George was a majority win of 62% for the PNP. A week after the election the *G&KH* analysed the national results. Nationally the UP party had an easy win of 111 seats against the 27 seats of the PNP, which became the main opposition party. The *G&KH* reported that the PNP seats were “located in a belt comprising 18 constituencies with George practically in the centre position”. Clearly unhappy with the local results, the *G&KH* refers to the southern PNP constituencies as a “dark belt” with “unhappy folk who wander in a circle and make a desert of their lives. They are afflicted with their own limitation, hindered by their own isolation.” The paper despaired at the lack of “mental culture” along this belt. It pointed out that in the rest of the country there is “racial cooperation and mutual friendship in the cause of national welfare”, but for this group the paper noted “a symptom of the decline of critical faculties, the Dead Sea sickness of ideas which have outlived their value still running in the veins.” The paper refers to the PNP leaders as people whom “the Bible refers to ... as blind leaders of the blind.” The paper concludes that there should be change, and is not sure what is needed, “patience or a charge of symbolic dynamite”.²⁰ Mitchell-Baker was nevertheless elected as mayor of George. This was undoubtedly because of the support of the English-speaking business community.

The editor did not disguise his opinion on the results. The allusions to “limitation” and “isolation” suggest that he thought that the PNP voters were behind the times – conservative. This was indeed strongly critical and judgmental reporting. It was indeed the case that 17 of the 20 seats won by the PNP were in areas of comparative economic deprivation – the areas classified by the Carnegie Commission as “very poor”.²¹

However, a few months later the same editor’s reaction when the ox wagons of the Voortrekker Centenary passed through the town was surprising.

The Voortrekker Centenary

In 1938, fuelled by nationalist and republican sentiments, HJ Klopper, founding member of the Afrikaner Broederbond, who was then the chairperson of the ATKV, organised the centenary celebration of the Great Trek. A symbolic trek would start in Cape Town and would culminate in the

²⁰ Editorial, “The stronghold of the Malanites”, *The George & Knysna Herald*, 25 May 1938, n.p.

²¹ NM Stultz, *Afrikaner politics in South Africa, 1934-1948* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1974), p. 57.

laying of the foundation stone of the Voortrekker Monument near Pretoria on 16 December 1938. That day would commemorate the Battle of Blood River that took place on 16 December 1838 during which the Voortrekker pioneers, against overwhelming odds, defeated the army of the Zulu people. This victory was attributed to the hand of God and the day was later celebrated on 16 December as the Day of the Covenant.²²

On 8 August 1938 the wagons started their journey northwards from the statue of Jan van Riebeeck in Cape Town. From the beginning the wagons received massive support and the symbolic trek gained a momentum of its own. More wagons were added so that eventually nine wagons crossed South Africa and almost all towns were visited.²³ If the intention was to mobilise Afrikaner nationalist sentiment, this succeeded beyond the organisers' wildest expectations.

By the time the two wagons reached George, enthusiasm for the event had reached feverish proportions. The reception was so overwhelming that Mrs Tibbie Steyn, the widow of President Steyn, who was on one of the wagons, later wrote, "We received the most powerful and largest reception since our departure from Cape Town. Amidst astonishing enthusiasm we were followed by a two-mile long procession." A commando of 100 men, about 3,000 schoolchildren, almost 50 ox wagons filled with young women in Voortrekker dress moved along the main streets of George, which were lined with spectators.²⁴

The *G&KH* reported that the George Chamber of Commerce, which consisted mostly of English and Jewish businessmen, had unanimously decided that all shops would close at 1 p.m. on the afternoon of 1 September 1938, when the ox wagons were due to arrive in town. The reason was that "all employees were sympathetic towards the movement and so they should meet them in every way". There was a request that, "The commercial community should show appreciation of the Voortrekkers and should participate in the erection of the monument". It was noted for the agenda that as "the Voortrekkers had opened this country for civilization, they should show a whole-hearted gesture by closing at 1 p.m."²⁵ The editor of the *G&KH* reported this decision

22 H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a people*, pp. 432-433.

23 C Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel...*, p. 271.

24 D Mostert (ed), *Gedenkboek van die ossewaens op die pad van Suid-Afrika, Eetsees: 1838-1938* (Kaapstad, Nasionale Pers Bpk, 1940), pp. 204-205.

25 Anon., "George shops to close tomorrow", *The George & Knysna Herald*, 31 August 1938 n.p.; G Gericke, "Die invloed van die godsdiensbeleving...", p. 42.

without any comment.

The *G&KH*, despite its former anti-republican sentiments, reported extensively on the event. Full coverage was given on the front page and continued with double-page spreads inside. Sketches and pictures, which were exceptional for the *G&KH*, illustrated the articles. It is obvious that the shift in the attitude of the editor was radical. Whereas the reporting prior and after the election of 1938 was blatantly anti-Afrikaner nationalism and anti-republican, the articles on the Voortrekker Centenary and the visit of the ox wagons to George, was without negativity or sarcasm. The researcher will attempt to find rationalisation for this sudden change in viewpoint later in this article.

That afternoon the wagons were welcomed by the reverends JS Klopper and GJ Lötter at the Dutch Reformed Church and a crowd of 3,000 people. Sermons, the baptism of three babies, the exchanging of gifts and speeches were part of the programme.²⁶

Towards evening a huge crowd of about 8,000 people gathered at the show grounds to attend a function that was organised by the municipality. Despite being under the mayorship of the very pro-British colonel Mitchell-Baker, the municipality did not only plan the entire event, but also donated 20 sheep to the underprivileged for the barbeque that night. Despite the huge gathering the paper reported that “The function was vested with an atmosphere of religion”. A choir in Voortrekker dress sang hymns and the Rev. Lötter said a prayer of gratitude for the power given to the Voortrekkers to make sacrifices and gain victories. In a long rousing speech JJ Muller compared the road of hardship and sacrifice of the Trekkers to the path of today’s Afrikaners and he warned against straying from the path of pure Afrikanerdom. The *G&KH* reported, “Figuratively speaking, South Africa was still on the Trekpad, seeking that for which the Great Trek stood. It must cling to the religion of its ancestors, be true Afrikaners, help each other on the Trekpad, and persevere. The 1938 wagon had not seen the attainment yet of the Trekkers’ fight, complete independence culturally and politically. Therefore, a call was made to the Afrikaner to treasure the heritage of his forefathers.” This was followed by a school choir that sang songs that celebrated the two Boer Republics. As grand finale to the evening’s event, a staged attack of Zulus on the laager at Blood River was represented. “In waves the impis attacked, to be beaten off

26 Anon., “The Voortrekker Wagon at George”, *The George & Knysna Herald*, 7 September 1938, n.p.

by the Voortrekkers, who finally signified their gratitude in the singing of a hymn”.²⁷

The wagons were intended to celebrate Afrikaner heroism, confirm their religion and give hope to the poor and discouraged.²⁸ On 1 September 1938 this all played out in George and was duly reported by the *G&KH*, without any criticism.

The Second World War and the voice of Georgians

A year later, in September 1939, World War II broke out in Europe. Although South Africa was a sovereign state, it was part of the British Commonwealth, but could decide whether it wanted to enter the war or not. Hertzog, then Prime Minister, supported neutrality and stated that Britain and France had brought the war on themselves by imposing the humiliating Treaty of Versailles on Germany. He also feared that entry into the war would damage the trust between the two white communities. Malan supported Hertzog and emphasized that South Africa would be a country of slaves if they were dragged into every war Britain entered. Smuts, on the other hand, accused Hertzog of being pro-German and anti-British, and adamantly stated that the Union should not stay neutral, as the future of Western civilization, even the human race was at stake. He believed that South Africa had to help stop Germany's further invasion of the European countries. Hertzog's neutrality motion was defeated by 80 votes to 67; he resigned and Smuts became Prime Minister. On 6 September 1939 South Africa joined Britain and the other Commonwealth nations in declaring itself to be in a state of war with Germany. A few months later, on 29 January 1940, Hertzog and Malan formed the Reunited National Party (RNP).²⁹

Smuts' entry into "Britain's War" opened up deep divisions amongst South Africans. According to Giliomee, this was a watershed in white politics. The polarisation brought about by the war was drawn along language lines. The English-speaking whites in general considered it to be their duty to assist the Allied forces. Afrikaners, however, did not boycott the war effort as a group. By the end of 1939, 137,000 white men had volunteered to fight, the majority of whom were Afrikaners. Afrikaners did not join out of a sense of

27 Anon., "The Voortrekker Wagon at George", *The George & Knysna Herald*, 7 September 1938, n.p.

28 A Grundlingh & H Sapire, "From feverish festival to repetitive ritual...", *South African Historical Journal*, 21, 1989, p. 23.

29 H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a people*, p. 440;

idealism, but pay and potential adventure attracted those from impoverished backgrounds.³⁰

On 13 September 1939, a week after the government had declared war against Germany, "George" penned an urgent request to Georgians in the *G&KH*. He acknowledged the fact that as an RNP stronghold a huge number of people supported neutrality. But he begged for "calm heads and serious minds" to avoid a division of opinion that would destroy the "harmonious unity" of the town. He also cautioned that frantic stockpiling of goods led to shortages and price increases.³¹

But despite the urge for harmony, the *G&KH* was openly in support of the Smuts government's war policy. Its support of the war effort was defiant in the light of the town as an RNP stronghold. During the first months of the war there were numerous articles in the paper on Hertzog's weaknesses: "General Hertzog has never been blessed with the gift of clear thinking: time and again he has 'loved to choose his path'" and "One might say his [Hertzog's] mind was too slow for the present day, that he was hampered by the burden of past history".³² When on 22 June 1940, 9,800 women protested in Pretoria against the war, the *G&KH* questioned their reasoning and appealed to South Africans to think of what the outcome would be before submitting more such petitions.³³ On 6 July 1940, 3,000 people gathered on the showground in George to protest against Britain's war against Germany and Italy. The speeches were reported verbatim, without any comment, but a headline "Republican propaganda" suggested where the sympathy of the paper lay.³⁴

This contrasted sharply with pro-Smuts and pro-government columns, where no negativity about the government's war policy is evident and readers were urged to support the war effort. Headlines such as "An appeal to back the Oubaas" and captions that refer to Smuts as "our leader and father" conveyed this sympathy.³⁵ The South African Mayors' Fund was an initiative of the mayor of Johannesburg for municipalities to raise money that would be submitted to the British government for its war effort and also to assist South

30 H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a people*, p. 440; N Roos, "The second world war, the army education scheme and the 'discipline' of the white poor in South Africa", *History of Education*, 32(6), 2003, p. 650.

31 Anon., "Talk at the Parish Pump, in which 'George' pleads for calm heads and serious minds", *George and Knysna Herald*, September 12 1939, n.p.

32 Anon., "Making history in South Africa", *George and Knysna Herald*, September 27 1939, n.p.; "The lost leader", *George and Knysna Herald*, November 8, 1939, n.p.

33 Anon., "The cry for peace", *George and Knysna Herald*, 3 July 1940, n.p.

34 Anon., "Mass meeting protests against war", *George and Knysna Herald*, July 10 1940, n.p.

35 Anon., "An appeal to back up the Oubaas", *George and Knysna Herald*, November 13, 1942, n.p.

Africans who had served, or were serving and their dependants. This initiative was enthusiastically supported from the start by the *G&KH*. Contributions and fundraisers for the fund received prominent weekly coverage.³⁶

The Ossewabrandwag (Oxwagon Sentinel)³⁷

Riding on the fever of the Voortrekker Centenary and a fanatical revival of Afrikaner nationalism, the Ossewabrandwag (OB) was established in February 1939. Advocating Afrikaner unity (*volkseenheid*) and the establishment of a republic, the movement quickly gained a membership of 300,000.³⁸

The OB soon became much more than a cultural organisation, which had been its original mandate. Under Commandant-General Hans van Rensburg it became more militant. The South African government's decision to side with the Allied Forces against Germany was fiercely rejected by the OB. Members of the OB refused to enlist in the South African forces and sometimes harassed servicemen in uniform. The Stormjaers [Stormtroopers], a paramilitary wing of the OB, sabotaged electric power lines, railroads, and telephone- and telegraph lines.³⁹

Greta Gericke mentioned that in George most of the young Afrikaner men in the town and district joined the OB. She attributed the popularity of the OB to the fact that the Afrikaners' self-worth was emphasized and that a republic was envisaged. Her husband and many of their friends were members. The meetings were compulsory and filled the Dutch Reformed Church Hall to capacity. She was emphatic that the Georgians were not militant, but was nevertheless always fearful that her husband would be "taken away", by authorities.⁴⁰ This contradictory comment of Gericke implies that the Georgian OB members were not as passive as she suggested.

The government tried to force the OB into a more moderate position by arresting and interning the leadership.⁴¹ Their militant stance was unacceptable for most Afrikaners, and in 1942 Malan ordered the RNP to break with the OB, saying that the OB, which he called gangsters, hoped to achieve the

36 Anon., "The mayor's million pound national fund", *George and Knysna Herald*, October 4 1939, n.p.

37 The OB needs mentioning in this article since we know from interviews and reporting in the *G&KH* that many Afrikaners in George were members.

38 C Marx, "The Ossewabrandwag as a mass movement...", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20(20), 1994, pp. 196-198.

39 PJ Furlong, *Between crown and swastika...*, pp. 138-140.

40 Interview, G Gericke (retired, George)/L Maritz (researcher), 25 September 2013.

41 C Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel...*, pp. 350 and 376.

salvation of Afrikanerdom by creating confusion.⁴² These sentiments were shared by some Afrikaner men in George. Phillip Stander, who was a young man in 1940, when interviewed later in his life, said that at the time there were in George the English, the Nazis (referring to the OB), the UP and us (referring to the Reunited National Party).⁴³

The *G&KH* reported in October 1942 that a teacher at Outeniqua High School in George had been arrested and sent away for internment.⁴⁴ A few months later another five young men from George were sent to Koffiefontein for internment.⁴⁵ In nearby Blanco about 700 sympathisers met in the tiny hall and many more outside. With rousing speeches and Nazi-style salutes, the crowd was swept up. Smuts was accused of intimidation of OB supporters by interning them, while Malan and the RNP were accused of sowing distrust, making empty promises of a future republic and trying to break up Afrikaner unity.⁴⁶ Although the OB blamed their opponents for causing discord, their right wing militant ideology drove a conservative wedge between the anti-war and republican-minded section of the Afrikaner, thus causing yet another division.⁴⁷

The *G&KH* was strangely unresponsive towards the OB. During the entire period only three articles appeared in the paper. Staunchly pro-war and pro-Smuts, the paper ignored this movement. Perhaps it feared the militancy of the fiery OB members, although this was denied by Greta Gericke during her interview.

Why did the *G&KH* change its political viewpoint?

It is apparent that the political viewpoint of the editorials of the *G&KH* changed from its reporting on the election of 1938 to the Voortrekker Centenary, only to double back on the South African government's war policy. From being intolerant towards, and even derogatory about, the policies of the PNP, which was the majority party in the George constituency, it became supportive of and sympathetic to the sentiments behind the Voortrekker Centenary, but then soon after backed the government's support of the Allied war effort. It seems indeed that the editor was able for a short time to suppress

42 GC Visser, *OB: Traitors or Patriots?*, pp. 105-106.

43 Interview, PM Stander (retired, George)/L Maritz (researcher), 4 April 2009.

44 Anon., "Teacher interned", *The George & Knysna Herald*, October 23 1942, n.p.

45 Anon., "Interned", *The George & Knysna Herald*, January 22 1943, n.p.

46 Anon., "Ossewa's attitude to the election", *The George & Knysna Herald*, June 25 1943, n.p.

47 GC Visser, *OB: Traitors or Patriots?*, p. 209.

his own prejudices, his previous criticism of Afrikaner nationalists and his scathing comments. What caused these reversals of opinion?

According to Oosthuizen, the primary function of newspapers is to keep their readers informed about the world that they live in. At the same time the newspaper would serve as a window through which a society can be viewed.⁴⁸ By studying the editorials and articles that are relevant to this research, it is obvious that the *G&KH* did not only report on the local candidates, but also commented on the larger political arena.⁴⁹

The second important function of a newspaper is to influence and comment.⁵⁰ Newspapers have a huge impact on society in particular and the world as a whole. It has been argued that a local newspaper can control the consciousness of its readers, form opinions and exert ideological control.⁵¹ Harber points out that newspaper owners and/or editors can exert a political influence and manipulate governments and regulators.⁵² There is conclusive evidence that even a short exposure to a newspaper's political attitudes can influence voting behaviour, increase voter turnout, and have an impact on some public opinion. This is even more so in the case of a local newspaper, as a recent survey indicated that 39% of the respondents said that they trusted what they read in their local newspaper, compared to 8% who believed the national dailies.⁵³ It is acknowledged that a newspaper would have its own agenda and that editorials can reveal the bias of the editor. Although the political bias of the news source has an impact on voter behaviour, it is also true that if individuals perceive the newspaper to be more neutral, they may be more likely to be influenced by the reporting. In the long run, newspapers that pursue long-term goals, like supporting the more liberal ticket in the case of the *G&KH*, are the ones that survive.⁵⁴ Apart from strongly revealing

48 C Faure, "Introduction to the print media", LM Oosthuizen (ed.), *Introduction to communication, course book 5, Journalism, press and radio studies* (Cape Town, Juta, 1996), p. 22.

49 Editorial, "The general election", *The George & Knysna Herald*, May 11, 1938, n.p.; "Practical issues in the George constituency", *The George & Knysna Herald*, May 11 1938, n.p.; Editorial, "The election of a new parliament", *The George & Knysna Herald*, May 18, 1938, n.p..

50 C Faure, "Introduction to the print media", LM Oosthuizen (ed.), *Introduction to communication...*, p. 22.

51 J Penn, "How do newspapers affect civic life", *Journalists Resource*, March 11, 2014 (available at <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/news-media/how-do-newspapers-affect-civic-life-data-analysis-seattle-denver>, accessed 9 April 2019).

52 A Harber, "Newspaper ownership: Political influence trumps the promise of profits", *The Conversation*, 28 July 2015 (available at <http://theconversation.com/newspaper-ownership-political-influence-trumps-the-promise-of-profits-45168>, accessed on 15 March 2019).

53 R Pinker, "Regulating the local press", B Franklin & D Murphy (eds.), *Making the local news...*, p. 262.

54 AS Gerber *et al.*, "Does the media matter?...", *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 1(2), 2007, pp. 35-52.

its political party and favoured candidate, the *G&KH* also castigated and ridiculed the PNP's policy and candidates and urged its readers to go out and vote for the UP.⁵⁵

The editor is paramount in fulfilling the abovementioned functions. Broughton argues that the role of an editor is that of a functionary: "...the editor is the man who is socially, morally, ethically and legally responsible to the public and the law for the conduct, standards and policy of the newspaper under his charge." Broughton further distinguishes between two types of editors: the ones who stand firm in their opinions and principles, and those who are affected by every influence: "They become gloomy with the clouds and bright with the sunshine and some even to be affected by the moon." The ideal would be to combine both, "plasticity in news [and] firmness in principle".⁵⁶ Measuring Sayers against these criteria, it is possible that he was the ideal editor. He did show the capacity to be swayed by the fever of the Voortrekker Centenary, but eventually stood firmly by his political beliefs.

According to Weissberg, "Tolerance is putting up with the disliked", but he adds that "political tolerance can coexist with overwhelming personal intolerance".⁵⁷ What led this editor to temporarily change his own opinions and to demonstrate tolerance?

Was it the euphoria of the Voortrekker centenary? Not only ordinary Afrikaners, but other South Africans countrywide were swept up in the celebration of the Christian-National mythology and rituals that accompanied the festivities.⁵⁸ Could this excitement have swayed the *G&KH* momentarily from its anti-nationalist stance to express compassion with the Afrikaner cause? Tied with these points is the view that a newspaper must not only be guided by the preferences of its readers, but must also guide the readers: "We need to provoke them, we need sometimes to make them angry, sometimes make them cheer with the us...".⁵⁹ The readers of the *G&KH* were in fact mostly English speakers. From the newspaper's reporting we learn that the citizens of George, the business community, the city council, etc., were caught up in

55 Anon., "United Party supporters urged to vote", *The George & Knysna Herald*, May 18, 1938, n.p. For more examples see section on the election of 1938.

56 M Broughton, *Press & Politics of South Africa*, pp. 76-77.

57 R Weissberg, *Political tolerance. Balancing community and diversity* (Thousand Oaks, Sage Publication, 1998), pp. 90-91, 221.

58 DT Moodie, *The rise of Afrikanerdom...*, pp. xvii-xviii.

59 F Nel, *Writing for the media in South Africa* (Halfway House, International Thomson Publishing Southern African, 1998), p. 19.

the fever... Was the editor perhaps himself caught up in the romance of the celebrations? Voortrekker dress, ox wagons, campfires and songs could have swayed the former critic of Afrikaner nationalism and induced him to sweep his readers along on the wave of enthusiasm.

Religion and a providential view of history played a fundamental role in the festivities. The Voortrekker Centenary was a celebration of the sacred history of the Afrikaner nation as guided by the hand of God. The *G&KH* often made use of biblical metaphors in its criticism of the RNP. Can it be that the religious overtones of the Voortrekker Centenary were a commonality and struck an empathetic chord with the editor?

The *G&KH* was open in its support of the more 'liberal' UP. Since many UP supporters claimed that they held more progressive views, this would have tied in with one of the main tenets of liberalism, namely tolerance. Liberalism was manifested in various forms in the 1930s. According to Bozzoli, liberalism gained increasing prominence in South Africa between the two world wars. She suggests that this was the result of an absence of a national spirit at the time that can be attributed to parochialism and individualism.⁶⁰ Yet Bozzoli's view is questionable. Did she take the surge of Afrikaner nationalism into account? There were liberals who aligned with the new discipline of social anthropology, which recognised the needs of racial and cultural communities.⁶¹ Grundlingh and Sapire suggest that the ideology of a united white nation, South Africanism, was adopted in the 1930s by state and capitalist formations.⁶² In the period before the Voortrekker Centenary, the editor with his outspoken criticism of the NP, nationalism and their leaders was definitely not conveying a liberal perspective. Yet it is possible to speculate on whether the various forms of liberalism influenced the editor to be supportive of the Voortrekker Centenary, despite the fact that it was a celebration of Afrikaner nationalist culture.

Conclusion

During the 1938 election the editor of the *G&KH* was expressing his despair at the conservatism, republicanism and the exclusive ideology of Afrikaner

60 B Bozzoli, *The political nature of the ruling class...*, p. 206.

61 S Dubow, "Uncovering the historic strands of egalitarian liberalism in South Africa", *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 2014 (available at <https://go-gale-com.ez.sun.ac.za/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA396138403&v=2.1&u=27uos&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>, as accessed on 19 February 2020).

62 A Grundlingh and H Sapire, "From feverish festival to repetitive ritual...", *South African Historical Journal*, 21, 1989, p. 27.

nationalism, but the Voortrekker centenary brought about a complete turnaround in his attitude. In the reporting on the centenary celebrations the paper did not only tolerate Afrikaner nationalist sentiments, but praised “our ancestors” and noted that the participants of the festivities were “filled with hope and encouragement by this honour to South Africa’s forefathers”.⁶³

Whether this was done to influence the readers, to convey a more liberal approach, to express tolerance, to participate in the euphoria of the Voortrekker Centenary, or to uphold religious values or South Africanism, it is clear that there is not one specific factor that led to the about-turn in the *G&KH*’s editorials. But this was also short-lived. When the excitement of the celebrations died down; the OB took up the populist sentiments of the celebrations in a more adversarial agenda and by the time South Africa came to support Britain in the Second World War, the *G&KH* was firmly behind the government again.

The 1938 Voortrekker Centenary commemoration mobilised Afrikaner nationalist sentiments beyond the expectations of its organisers. But it is clear that even staunch critics of Afrikaner nationalism were caught up in the fervour. This was definitely the case in George. Apart from Charles Sayers’s change in attitude and the thousands of Georgians who attended the festivities, the *G&KH* reported how the George Chamber of Commerce, with its mostly Jewish and English-speaking members, and the municipality that was led by a very English mayor, supported the event. The reporting in the *G&KH* shows that the enthusiasm kindled by the celebrations was able to bond the people of George together and that differences were tolerated. For a short while.

63 Anon., “The Voortrekker Wagon at George”, *The George & Knysna Herald*, 7 September 1938. n.p.