

THE DAY GENERAL J C SMUTS ASSISTED THE OSSEWA-BRANDWAG

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History is not without its witty moments or ironies. An example of such an incident is when General Smuts knowingly assisted members of the Ossewa-Brandwag one day in 1941 on their way to a secret (and illegal!) meeting.

General Smuts is usually portrayed as the stern, uncompromising leader who could not suffer fools easily. The incident in 1941 shows however the other Smuts — the more human side. It shows a Smuts who could appreciate a humorous situation; a man with a deep understanding of human nature and above all, an understanding of his fellow Afrikaner.

At that stage General Smuts was Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Force and prime mover behind a number of emergency regulations concerning anti-state activities during World War II.¹ One of those regulations prohibited the possession of private arms and activities endangering the security of the State.²

A movement which was under close scrutiny during the tense early years of the War was the Ossewa-Brandwag (O B). The O B was not so pro-Afrikaner as it was anti-British and, for that matter, anti-Smuts.

Smuts was regarded not only as traitor of the "Boerevolk" because of his active participation in World War II on the side of the British, but also as "handyman of the British Empire". The relations between the O B, especially an elitist action group within the Transvaal O B known as the **Stormjaers**, and the State were severely strained. The Stormjaers publicized their objection to the War by blowing up vital installations and sabotaging Government buildings.³

The formation of the O B was publicly announced on 6 February 1939 by its founder Colonel J C C Laas. It was a direct consequence of the Ossewatrek of 1938 to commemorate the centenary of **Geloftedag**. Afrikaners who were actively involved in the celebrations felt the urge to preserve the popular sentiment which persisted even after the celebrations.⁴ The movement attracted large numbers of Afrikaners and by February 1941 had between 300 000 and 400 000 members.⁵ Initially it was essentially a cultural movement striving for the maintenance, extension, and realization of the traditions and principles of the Boer nation.⁶

Things had changed dramatically however since January 1940. Dr Hans van Rensburg, former Administrator of the Orange Free State, took over the leadership. He was essentially a man of discipline and a firm admirer of Hitler. Under his leadership, the O B tended to follow a National Socialist direction. He was a man of action and very anti-Smuts. He associated himself closely with the **Stormjaers**. In his autobiography he writes: "I immediately felt at home with this crowd... we clicked at once."⁷

By April 1941 it was very clear that the O B had become a para-military movement with a strong pro-Nazi tone and certain elements among its ranks participated in subversive activities as a result. Many of its members were interned by the Government. General Smuts's patience was tested to the maximum. The O B increasingly adopted an aggressive anti-State stand.

It is against this background that an excerpt from a private letter from General Smuts to a friend of his,

Margaret Gillett from Oxford, shows something of the more, and relatively unknown, human side of the Prime Minister. Writing on 1 July 1941 he had some news of a peaceful weekend at Rooikop, a farm of his near the present-day Rust de Winter, north of Pretoria. General Smuts continues: "And we had some thrills too. Sunday afternoon we went up to the dam and as we emerged from the gate above it, we heard a loud report as of an aeroplane crash. It then appeared that a car had run sharply against the cement corner of the little bridge over the canal close to us, and smashed itself. Two men and a young woman jumped out, the latter in tears of fright! Rushing to help them we found she had been the driver, knew little of driving, and in turning at the little bridge she had meant to reverse but had unfortunately gone into first gear and jumped her car on to the bridge and smashed it. Looking into the car we saw some rifles and ammunition, and jokeskeys. This showed at once that we had to do with a Ossewa Brandwag party for a night affair or function. Questions elicited that they were going to a farm near Settlers but missed the turn in the road and were turning back when the accident happened. Sun was setting and there they were. At this stage the bus from Skilpadfontein turned up but could not move on with the smashed car blocking the road; so we told the bus to back so that we could first move the car out of the way. Meanwhile another car had moved close up behind the bus, and the bus in reversing banged into this second car — with another smash. The situation was now getting very mixed. Then a deus ex machina appeared in the person of Van Rensburg the grass man on his lorry. To cut the Gordian knot I ordered Van Rensburg to pick up the O B party and take them to their destination, while leaving the first smashed car to be drawn to Pretoria by a lorry. The bus passed on after some altercation with the other car damaged by it but still able to move on its own power. On the way to the farm the O B party asked Van Rensburg who was the good old gentleman with the cap on. He answered: "Genl, Smuts". To which the O B response was: "Good God!" I was of course the man whose destruction they were plotting, and here I was saving them from a horrible situation. For the rest of the journey no word was said, but I do hope that some people were thinking deeply. Such are the tragedies of life..."⁸

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