

## 'You were men in war time' – The manipulation of gender identity in war and peace

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The story of the Rebellion begins where many stories end, with the Treaty of Vereeniging. Twelve years after the end of the South African War, a handful of men in the rural backwaters of the south-western Transvaal and north-eastern Free State tried to overthrow the young South African state. The rebel leaders mobilised their followers with the rhetoric of Republican nostalgia, using the seductively refashioned images of the Republican struggle in the South African War to foster rebellion.<sup>1</sup> In the first decades of the twentieth century, Boer masculine identity was based, in part, on a Republican ideal.<sup>2</sup> This article focuses on this facet of Boer identity, which was inextricably bound up in a sense of Republicanism forged in the South African war and fostered by the rebel leaders. It also shows how the memories of a war can metonymically capture a sense of gendered national identity and its manipulation can contribute to a movement as powerful as a rebellion against the state.<sup>3</sup>

Afrikaner masculinity at that time was encoded and institutionalised in the Republican commando system, which functioned as a practical and symbolic mode of masculinity of Boers, who, by the turn of the century, were coming to consider themselves as constituting Afrikaner society. The commando system extended into politics, culture and social mythology. *Kommando* was part of the social machinery in the construction of Afrikaner manhood, carrying a wealth of symbols and a strong Republican ideology.<sup>4</sup> Ethnographic studies of commando life are rare, but it would appear that enrolling in the commando was a rite of passage. A contemporary magazine noticed this phenomenon: 'In South Africa a man

<sup>1</sup> The nomenclature of war is beset by political and ideological partisanship. The 1899-1902 war has been called 'Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog' (Second War of Independence); 'Die Engelse Oorlog' (the English War); the Boer War; the Anglo-Boer War; and the South African War. I've adopted the latter term out of deference to the current trend.

<sup>2</sup> The self-conception of Boer men has not received historiographical analysis. The identity and role of Boer women has been analysed: see, for example, Elsabe Brink, 'Man-made women: Gender, class and the ideology of the *volksmoeder*' in Cheryl Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> This paper is a product of an ongoing interest in masculinity as an analytical category. I am greatly indebted to Robert Morrell for a mixture of friendship, wisdom and careful editing. Many thanks to Cathy Burns of the University of Natal, Durban, and to Lt Col Ian van der Waag of the Department of Military History, University of Stellenbosch (South African Military Academy). My thanks for comments made by delegates at the conference 'Rethinking the South African War', UNISA Library Conference, 3-5 August 1998.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, P.H. Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians, Civil-military relations in South Africa* (Cambridge, 1984) and F. Pretorius, *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902*, (Cape Town, 1991). A commando system is a method of military organisation in which an army is divided into units by drawing soldiers from a particular place and then using them in that area largely. *Kommando* refers to the commando system, with its socio-political implications. The term 'Republican' is used to refer to a broad definition of the ontology of the state; 'Republican' here refers to specific Boer Republican ideology.

unwilling to serve in the defence of Land and People would hardly be regarded as a man.<sup>5</sup> *Kommando* was then a system for assigning status and was important in early socialisation of the young Boer: the manner in which he acquitted himself in the commando would affect his status as a man in the community and his status in the social realm would in turn decide his authority in the commando.<sup>6</sup> The commando system and its imagery from the South African War provides a window into the symbolic and ideological as well as the chronological structure of the Boer Rebellion. The commando lay at the heart of Boer society's sense of identity, simultaneously representing defence of freedom and the structure of authority.

### The Commando System - Myths, memory and social reality

The first armed militia controlled by whites in southern Africa was established by the Dutch East India Company (D.E.I.C.). At first the Company had no large garrison: it relied on a few soldiers supplemented with local farmers and the indigenous people - who volunteered or were forced to join a *kommando*. The commando grew in complexity with the settlement: Dutch authorities introduced local commanders. In the new *trekboer* communities, the commando system became the dominant military mode. Members of the commando were expected to provide their own mount and saddlery, rifle and 30 rounds of ammunition. The commando was made up of mounted marksmen, without uniforms and formal training. Formal disciplinary codes did not exist.<sup>7</sup>

As Camus observed 'Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence', the innocence of an invented past.<sup>8</sup> Cultural images of *kommando* of the South African War corresponded little with the reality of warfare and seductive imagery helped fuel the Republican nostalgia. The myths focused on race, class and egalitarianism. The commando system was conceived as a white force, but in reality, from earliest times people of other races could be commandeered, and were used in the South African War. The commandos were racially mixed, partly because of sheer lack of white numbers and partly because of white reluctance to respond to call-ups: a white farmer would often send a substitute from his black labourer force.<sup>9</sup>

The Boer ideology of the commando was that it was egalitarian and democratic in the sense that officers were elected and a council of war voted on battle plans. General Ben Viljoen, a Boer war hero, wrote a chapter in his memoirs on 'The Fighting Boer and his Officer'.<sup>10</sup> He noted the chasm of class between the British officer and his men - while 'no social distinction' existed in the Boer commando: a 'boer owning ten farms may occupy the same rank as a *bywoner*'.<sup>11</sup> The *kommando* was remembered as the great social leveller in

<sup>5</sup> 'Burgher Service', *Blackwood's Magazine*, February 1914, p271; Central Archives Depot (hereafter CAD): A 139 E.L.C. Watson, "The Breaking Strain: A study of Labour on the Rand".

<sup>6</sup> Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, p24.

<sup>7</sup> C. Grimbeek, 'Die Totstandkoming van die Unieverdedigingsmag met spesifieke verwysing na die Verdedigingswet van 1912-1922' (ongepub D Phil verhandeling, UP, 1985), p7.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (1953), p3.

<sup>9</sup> C.M. Bakkes, 'Die Kommandostelsel' in P.G. Nel (red.), *Die Kultuurontplooiing van die Afrikaner* (Pretoria, 1949). Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London, 1966), p1; J.L.Comaroff (ed.) *The Boer War Diary of Sol. T. Plaatje: an African at Mafeking*, (London, 1973); Bill Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape*, (Cambridge, 1991); and P. Warwick, *Black People and the South African War 1899-1902* (Cambridge, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Viljoen, *My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War* (Cape Town, 1973), p309.

<sup>11</sup> This was the case in theory - but very few Boers with ten farms or more would be found below the rank of veldcomet. See Stanley Trapido, 'Reflections on Land, Office and Wealth in the South African

which all men were equal. Recent research, however, shows this to be untrue. Denoon has argued that during the South African War, the National Scouts, who aided the British forces, consisted of poor whites and *bywoners*, while the *bittereinders* tended to be landowners that had something to lose.<sup>12</sup> Investigation does show that the majority of the rank and file joiners were of the recently urbanised or labour tenant class.<sup>13</sup> For example, 72 percent of a National Scout unit analysed, were landless.<sup>14</sup> Complete egalitarianism was also a myth. During the South African War, there was a move to limit the election of officers and to restrict the popular Councils of War.

The myths about commando functioned not only in the stories told of the South African war, but also in the contemporary period, in the lead up to the Rebellion. The anthropologist Malinowski argued that myths were pragmatic charters of extant institutions, corresponding to social arrangements. A myth is 'not merely a story told, but a reality lived... It expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it ... enforces practical rules for the guidance of man.'<sup>15</sup> Myths about masculinity were used to mobilise support, maintain law and order, maintain social stability, and to ensure social solidarity. Levi-Strauss has argued that the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a '(real) contradiction'.<sup>16</sup> These were the contradictions of Republican masculinity. The myths thus worked like the French Honour code, helping to overcome 'social and cultural distinctions [dividing] men... into different social, political, and cultural categories, each with its own codes and criteria of manly comportment'.<sup>17</sup> *Kommando* myths served to fuel Republican nostalgia.

### Reviving the Myths

Leadership, the claim to authority by an individual or individuals, was a critical feature of the commando system. For all that Boer society was purportedly egalitarian, the cultural politics of leadership proved powerful in facilitating rebellion. When one reviews the political economy of the early twentieth century from an ethnic and gendered position the motive for the republican revival by rebel leaders is explained. The distinctions between Boer men were increasing as industrialisation gained momentum. Boer society was fissured through with class and regional divisions. It was precisely this wide social divergence that led the rebel leadership to resuscitate old republican notions of masculinity to paper over the economic and political cracks.

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Republic, 1850-1900' in Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore (eds.), *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> Donald Denoon, *A Grand Illusion* (London, 1973), pp17-18; Denoon, 'Participation in the "Boer War": People's War, People's Non-War or Non-People's War?' in B.A. Ogot (ed.) *War and Society in Africa* (London, 1972). This is a little simplistic: for example, Piet De Wet, a landed farmer, was not only a *hendsopper* but also a *joiner*, and leader of the Orange River Colony Volunteers.

<sup>13</sup> Albert Grundlingh, 'Die Vrystaatsse en Transvaalse Burgers wat die Republikeinse oorlogspoging vanaf 1900 versaak het: Hulle rol en posisie gedurende die tydperk 1900 tot 1907' (ongepub MA tesis, Unisa, 1976); and 'The Handsuppers', *Military Historical Journal* 3(1) 1974.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Grundlingh, 'Collaborators in Boer Society' in Peter Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds.), *The South African War - The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, (London, 1980), p272.

<sup>15</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, 'Myth in Primitive Psychology', *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Glencoe, 1948) p79.

<sup>16</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York, 1963), p229.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Nye, *Masculinities and Male Codes of Honour in Modern France*, (New York and Oxford, 1993) p215.

Following the South African War there was an increasing reliance by wealthier white landowners, the *heerenboeren*, on black labour. For a variety of reasons, black labour was more productive than white labour and black family units increasingly replaced white *bywoners*. There was an ambiguous boundary between real and contrived resentment towards this phenomenon. There had been examples of the manipulation of racial fear on the part of the rebel leadership, coalescing the black labour issue with other socio-political concerns. The rebel leader De Wet, for example, used his constituency's anxieties over the crisis on previous occasions: using grievances over black labour to gather support, simultaneously fixing fissures between *heerenboeren* and *bywoners* and lambasting the government. At the poor white settlement at Kopjes, on 22 October 1914, he referred to 'the question of the natives being allowed to roam about and not being controlled as they used to be controlled'.<sup>18</sup>

The capitalisation and commercialisation of farming affected more than the livelihood of the *bywoner* - his sense of identity was challenged. Even those men who had not owned land before felt their identities under threat. There was originally no shame in being a *bywoner*. He and his family were welcomed by landowners for a share in their crops, for their service on commando, for the status they lent him. Although the complete egalitarianism of Boer society was a myth, there had been rhetoric of equality, the form of republican *gelykheid* or equality between white adult men, purportedly unaffected by class.<sup>19</sup> It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that landlessness became a decisive determining factor in the process of class differentiation.<sup>20</sup> Following the economic changes, however, his status declined, not because of the land shortage, but because of the commercialisation of farming - he changed from status symbol to albatross around the neck of capitalising farmer.<sup>21</sup> Rev. J.D. Kestell, noted to the 1938 Peoples Economic Congress, how the position of *bywoners* had changed over time: "Our forefathers had time for *bywoners*. The children learnt to respect the *bywoner*. He ate at the same table as the landowner and he could feel that blood crawls where it cannot run. After the [South African War] a new spirit was abroad, a spirit of each for himself... Then we had no more time for *bywoners*."<sup>22</sup>

After the war, state interventions increased pressure on small farms and *bywoners*. There were initiatives to revive work as transport-riders or self-employed work on the salt-pans and diamond diggings. Poor whites often had to capitulate, at a cost to the traditional life-style. Urbanisation was a part of the poor white's new life: in 1899, 2,6 percent of people that could crudely be classified as Afrikaners lived in urban areas, by 1911, the figure had reached 24 percent.<sup>23</sup> The trek to the cities was a journey to the mines, railways, and factories where they saw themselves working at unfamiliar jobs, taking orders like black people, living in squalid conditions adjacent to black shanty towns, and having to speak a

<sup>18</sup> Bottomley has theorised the distinction between *heerenboeren* and *bywoner* in John Bottomley, 'The South African Rebellion: the influence of industrialisation, poverty and poor whiteness'. For a discussion of this phenomenon and its immediate ramifications, see S. Swart, 'Black Peril, White Rebel' (unpub paper, South African Historical Associations Biannual Conference, July 1997, Pretoria).

<sup>19</sup> *Volkseenheid* was a teleological imposition, born out of the need for political unity at specific times. Quite the opposite of this mystical unity existed: the group was historically prone to factionalism, divided on lines of class, region, province, ideology, and personal ambition.

<sup>20</sup> T. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrialising South Africa*, p20.

<sup>21</sup> Stanley Trapido, 'Reflections on land, office and wealth in the South African Republic, 1850-1900', p359.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Trapido, 'Reflections on land, office and wealth', p359.

<sup>23</sup> Bottomley, *Public Policy and White Rural Poverty*, p248.

foreign language - English - like a conquered race. Poverty was to have an enormous influence on the outlook and political ambitions of the rural Afrikaner.<sup>24</sup> The stigma of poverty was attached to the Afrikaans family with English social discourse portraying the Afrikaner male as the backward railway worker, the crude policeman and illiterate stationmaster.<sup>25</sup> State relief measures only served to compound these stereotypes and visit further shame and resentment upon those facing such a fate. To replace this, Afrikaners had to build a new identity, a new image of themselves. Poverty meant more than merely a low self-esteem. Poverty became part of the political discourse and a powerful mobilising factor, for both National Party and for Rebellion. The notion of the regression of the Afrikaner, relative to English-speakers and blacks was variously a grim prophecy, a political weapon, a social evil and a routine method of drawing an angry crowd in any rural constituency.

Poor white men tried to resist efforts to change their life-style and that of their families. The industrial sector wished to see a proletarian work ethic instilled in poor whites. It was repeatedly bemoaned that *bywoners* were not prepared to do 'Kaffir work': the depressed class was still reluctant to let its daughters enter domestic labour and its sons to take up agricultural labour.<sup>26</sup> The rebel male was faced with the loss of his identity through the undermining of his status as patriarch. This had resulted from his removal from the land, being forced to become an urban labourer or becoming a marginalised and scorned *bywoner* obsolete in capitalist farming, his inability to set his sons up with a farm of their own, and the apparent lack of expected aid from the state. The urbanisation process undermined the cultural mores, particularly undermining the sense of rural family life on both symbolic and practical levels. One commentator noted poignantly that the familiar appellations *Oom* and *Tante* were being replaced with *Meneer* and *Mevrou*, if not 'mister' and 'missis'.<sup>27</sup> Although often the male head of the family would move to centres like the Rand in search of work, it was frequently the unmarried female members of the family who moved first to the urban areas, further undermining the poor white father as bread winner.<sup>28</sup>

Probably many who took part in the government schemes or trekked to the city planted their 'sole hopes for the future in the possibility of returning to the past...'.<sup>29</sup> This nostalgic *ubi sunt* motif was a powerful element of populist rhetoric. Many poor whites increasingly believed that a return to the Republican life-style could be achieved if smaller farmers and poor whites were re-instated on the land. It was believed that this should be

<sup>24</sup> Bottomley makes this point well in his analysis of public policy *Public Policy and White Rural Poverty*, p250.

<sup>25</sup> L. Salomon, 'Socio-Economic Aspects of South African History, 1870-1962' (Unpub PhD, Boston University, 1962), p107. The stereotypes persist today in jokes about ignorant, naive 'Van der Merwe'.

<sup>26</sup> The ORC Minister of Public Works told the legislature in 1908: 'There is unfortunately a foolish pride to be met with which prevents parents from allowing their children to work', Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, p32.

<sup>27</sup> G. Cronje 'Die Huisgesin in die Afrikaanse Kultuurgemeenskap' in *Kultuurgeskiedenis van die Afrikaner* (Kaapstad, 1945), p273.

<sup>28</sup> The sexual division of labour may explain this reverse of the usual pattern of black migrant labour. Control over black women's labour within black societies by the bridewealth system meant male migrant labour could occur without the household collapsing and rural production carrying on much as before. The Boer traditional household was less flexible in the face of industrialisation. Female heads of families seldom stayed on in the rural areas. Young women would move to the towns on a permanent basis and send back a little money to their families. Grosskopf, *Rural Impoverishment*, pp214-29.

<sup>29</sup> Salomon, 'Socio-Economic Aspects of South African History, 1870-1962', p116. Quoted in Bottomley, *Public Policy and White Rural Poverty*, p236.

accompanied by traditional means of relief: doles of cash and animals.<sup>30</sup> J.H. O'Connor, writing immediately after the Rebellion, noted that the majority of rebels were men who had not "an acre of ground or a decent flock of sheep to their names, to whom 'On commando' means a happy time of riding around on horseback from town to town, living on the country as they proceed."<sup>31</sup> Many Afrikaners hankered after the Republican life-style, which they hoped could be recreated if poor whites returned to the land. An important dimension of the rebel leaders' rhetoric was a way of fixing the fissures between *heerenboeren* and *bywoners* by appealing to their common republican heritage, including their sense of shared masculinity and emphasising the threat that was presented to it by independent black labour and the depredations of the state.

### Republican Nostalgia

After the South African War, however, the Boer male faced both military defeat and social reconstruction. A new Defence Act was introduced in 1912, which was to change more than the national defence system. The Act was, in part, the embodiment of the threat to Republican masculinity presented by the modernising state. Certainly, there had been efforts at modernisation prior to Union, with a strong Progressive faction opposing President Paul Kruger.<sup>32</sup> After Reconstruction and Union, however, the rate of modernisation and the extent of change increased immeasurably. The main focus of this analysis is on the period after 1912, when the Defence Act imposed modern training methods, uniforms, ranking system, disciplinary codes and promotional norms. This presented a challenge to the masculinity of both the Boer leadership and ordinary Boer. In the build up to World War I, Afrikaans-speaking males living on the periphery of the new locus of central state power in Pretoria, began to turn to alternative authorities to express their grievances and to gain support. In the south-western Transvaal and the northern Free State particularly, farmers and *bywoners* who were alienated by the state's failure to alleviate the economic recession, turned not to the state, nor to the Labour Party, but to their old commando leaders, who for various reasons went into rebellion, with the hope of re-establishing a republic. This network of influential patriarchs, like Generals Beyers, Christiaan De Wet and Jan Kemp were able to lead the rank and file into rebellion, using the mobilising device of 'Nostalgic Republicanism'.<sup>33</sup>

Republicanism - defined as the rule of a state in which supreme power is held by the people or its elected representatives, rather than a monarch or nobles by descent - had come to symbolize to many Boers the egalitarianism of all white men, as in the days of the old Boer Republics. In 1914 this version of Republicanism was not a neutral political ideology. Along the way, Republicanism had acquired a heroic element, especially after the atrocities and bitter economic aftermath of the South African War and Milner's Reconstruction

<sup>30</sup> Such a reclamation agenda was adopted by the Free State government: the Land Bank, established in 1908, loaned money to the landless on the security of promissory notes signed by two landowners. As many as 884 loans were granted to poor whites by 1912 when the Union Landbank was established. The Transvaal Land Bank was leery of cash loans without collateral, but did provide cattle and donkeys to those threatened by dispossession.

<sup>31</sup> J.H. O'Connor, *The Afrikaner rebellion: South Africa Today* (London, 1915), p12. Many discouraged men must have remembered the old Republican days when they could receive a free rifle on receipt of a certificate of poverty. While on campaign, burghers had been fed and clothed by the state, and their families received support.

<sup>32</sup> C. T. Gordon, *The Growth of Boer Opposition to Kruger, 1890-1895*, (Cape Town, 1970).

<sup>33</sup> At the same time, a number of Boer leaders used those same patron-client relationships to keep their 'clientage' out of Rebellion. One must be careful not to overstate this portrayal of the old republics - they had begun to embrace modernity, albeit tentatively, as they recognised the Imperial threat posed by Britain.



program.<sup>34</sup> For the young Union State, Republicanism contained a potentially radical threat to the new parliamentary system.<sup>35</sup> Republicanism itself was not monolithic. There was, for example, a dichotomy between constitutional republicanism, espoused by General J.B.M. Hertzog, versus revolutionary republicanism, which was to be favoured by the rebels.<sup>36</sup>

The inherent tension between the ideal 'classless society of rural patriarchs' and the powerful leaders and wealthy oligarchy which emerged, was maintained into the Reconstruction era, 1902-1910. The modernising state presented a political, economic and social threat to the Boer way of life, both real and mythic. In part, the Rebellion was a movement built by men on nostalgia for a past only recently faded and yet already re-imagined by them, a past nostalgically represented as a 'Golden Age'. Nostalgia for a republic that had never really been and the desire to be once more the men that ran it, proved strong.

In the difficult times following the South African War, during the Reconstruction period and the changes wrought by Union, the old 'people's democracy' of Kruger's Republic suggested itself as model for many who had no faith in the new socio-economic and political policies that accompanied British liberal democracy. Complete egalitarianism in Boer society was a myth propagated by later nationalist discourse; *Volkseenheid* or 'national unity' was a teleological imposition, born out of the need for political unity at specific times. Quite the opposite of this mystical unity existed: the group was historically prone to factionalism, divided on lines of class, region, province, ideology and personal ambition. Republicanism was an assemblage of contradictions, both in theory and practice. The same paradoxical understanding that allowed the slave-owning Thomas Jefferson to consider himself a republican, held in the Boer Republics.<sup>37</sup> The practical working of this democracy was circumscribed, and there were certainly neo-feudalistic limitations, but the emphasis on participatory *volkswil* or 'the will of the people' and the regular elections were republican. There were contradictions within this form of republicanism: there was a devotion to strong leaders and a tendency to rely on the hereditary principle.<sup>38</sup> The rhetoric of populism was strong, however, serving to mask a nepotistic spoils system, favouritism and corruption.<sup>39</sup>

It is hard to establish to what extent burghers insisted on, or were even cognisant of, their Republican rights. Literate men certainly kept abreast of *Volksraad* action through *De*

<sup>34</sup> Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p10.

<sup>35</sup> Seegers, *The Military in the making of Modern South Africa*, p10.

<sup>36</sup> B.Lanz, 'Hertzog and the Leaders of the 1914 Rebellion' (unpub Honours paper, UNDA, 1976).

<sup>37</sup> C. Louis Leipoldt asked a bushveld farmer the same question over the coffee cups. The farmer was 'a violently Anti-Botha man' who held that if Botha had only declared the independence of the Transvaal in 1914 there 'would now have been a republic embracing the whole of Africa south of the Zambezi'. Leipoldt asked: 'But, Uncle, you know a republic means liberty...[a]nd equality ... and brotherhood. Are these possible when three-quarters of your citizens are natives?' The farmer, after refilling his pipe, patiently explained, as if to a small boy: 'You do not understand, Doctor. We were a republic in the old days...'. Leipoldt countered this: 'Scarcely that, Uncle. You were an oligarchy... a state of whites ruled by an executive committee elected by the whites alone.' The old man replied that: 'the native cannot be a citizen. He must be a ward [because] [y]ou would not give burghership to children [and the native] ... would not grow up in the lifetimes of his children, nor his children's children', C. Louis Leipoldt, *Bushveld Doctor* (Braamfontein, 1980, 1937), p147.

<sup>38</sup> For example, *Kommandant-Generaal* A.H. Potgieter was replaced upon his death in 1854 by his son. Andries Pretorius was succeeded by his son, M.W. Pretorius who was later elected to the position of Transvaal president. This remained evident well into the twentieth century and was, Ian van der Waag notes, to a certain extent entrenched in such Afrikaner institutions as the Afrikaner Broederbond. Personal communication.

<sup>39</sup> J.S. Marais, *The fall of Kruger's Republic* (Oxford, 1961), pp11-21, 19-21.

*Republikein, Land en Volk* and *De Volksstem*. W.A. Kleynhans has researched the role of petitions and has found people to have been conscious of their rights of sovereignty. He provides numerous examples in which people referred to themselves as '*het volk, de Koningstem des landes*' - the people, the sovereign voice in the land. A gulf existed between being listened to and being heeded, but it was the former that served to satisfy most men that considered themselves Republican.

But in the years following the Treaty of Vereeniging this Republican spirit played little role in public politics. One searches in vain for references in political speeches. Hertzog went so far as to maintain that the '[Republican] feeling was non-existent until the expedition against German South West' with regard to the Free State.<sup>40</sup> It was still part of the discourse, but it had gone underground. Republican talk could be punished as sedition.<sup>41</sup> Republican rhetoric had moved from the election trail and public podium to the kitchen table. In private, over coffee and rusks, Republicanism survived, with Republican prayers offered within the home.<sup>42</sup>

To the older generation Republicanism meant as much about themselves and their former positions as a way of running a state. Republicans objected to the modernising state - not just its anglicisation and economic effects, but also for its impact on their identity as men. Smuts introduced a whole new regime, ignoring Republican protocols. He had never been popular: as a young man he could not disguise his lack of proper respect for the old men, which engendered resentment. On one occasion, the older generation of men even compelled him to leave Kruger's *Volksraad* because he was wearing a grey suit - they promptly sent him home to get into regulation black.<sup>43</sup> He did not retain the old Republican practices, he did not have the patience.<sup>44</sup>

## The Defence Act of 1912

The Selborne Memorandum of 1907 and the Conference of 1908 opened the way for the National Convention and by 31 May 1910, the Union of South Africa was established.<sup>45</sup> During the Reconstruction years, the Imperial forces decreased, reaching 10 500 by 1909. This led to the need for volunteer forces. The idea of colonial volunteers was related to Lord Kitchener's notion that by this method he could decrease the numbers of Imperial troops and the country would acquire its own, indigenous defence system.<sup>46</sup> On 14 July 1912 the Defence Act was implemented and eight days later the first committee was appointed.<sup>47</sup>

The Union Defence Force provided for a small permanent force of 2 500 Mounted police and Artillery supplemented first, by some 25 000 men enrolled in U.D.F. regiments either as volunteers or, if necessary, as conscripts between the ages of 17 and 25 (drawn on

<sup>40</sup> House of Assembly, Select Committee: S.C. 1, p295.

<sup>41</sup> H. Oost, *Wie is die Skuldiges?* (Johannesburg, 1958), p35.

<sup>42</sup> G.D. Scholtz, *Die Rebelle, 1914-15* (Johannesburg etc., 1942), p15; and F.V. Engelenburg, *Generaal Louis Botha*, (Pretoria, 1928), p218.

<sup>43</sup> H.C. Armstrong, *Grey Steel* (London, 1937) p50.

<sup>44</sup> As Prime Minister, Botha did keep the older protocols, but with his increasingly poor health and his concentration on other issues, it was mainly Smuts as Minister of Defence who dealt with military issues. Mrs. Williams-Wynne, a member of Smuts's secretarial pool, has made this facet clear. She describes him as cold, with little capacity for casual friendship. Personal interview with Williams-Wynne, March 15, 1996.

<sup>45</sup> L.M. Thompson, *The Unification of South Africa* (Oxford, 1960).

<sup>46</sup> B.G. Simpkins, *Rand Light Infantry* (Cape Town, 1965), p1.

<sup>47</sup> *Staatskoerant*, G.K., no. 1, 31 May 1910; 871, 22 July 1912.



lot on a district basis); and secondly, by men serving in rifle organisations, (virtually the commandos traditional to the countryside, who were free to make their own rules and choose their officers subject to ministerial approval). The new system was to be modelled on the Swiss system.<sup>48</sup> There were essentially four parts to the defence scheme:

- i. a permanent force of mounted riflemen and attached artillery,
- ii. a trained Active Citizen Force on a temporary basis,
- iii. Rifle Associations, especially for older men, and
- iv. a cadet corps.

Between January 2 and 15, every young man of European descent, who was to turn 17, 18, 19, 20 or 21 in the coming year, was required under penalty of up to 25 pounds sterling or 3 months imprisonment to register with a magistrate, police station or (except in Natal) with a *veldkornet*. Exemption was allowed only if one were studying, was required at home, or because of one's religious beliefs, professional duties, lack of access to training facilities due to geographical isolation, bodily or mental unfitness.

Several attempts at English-Boer integration were made. *The Daily Telegraph* called several of the appointments 'frankly racial', the government's passion for equity taken to an 'absurd extent'.<sup>49</sup> The fifty Staff Officers for training were equally divided between Dutch and English-speakers. Smuts had included Beyers, who, though a member of *Het Volk*, often spoke in public with a decidedly nationalist bent.

There was much government rhetoric surrounding the law.<sup>50</sup> It was portrayed as a vehicle for 'The two great white races in friendly unifying work to unite for communal aims'.<sup>51</sup> Much emphasis was laid on the notion that men come together and fight as one. There was the hope expressed that will bring 'the young men of Dutch and British origin together in a spirit of brotherhood'.<sup>52</sup> In 1912, after a course in Bloemfontein, a core of 51 military officers filled the positions at the new U.D.F. headquarters in Pretoria and the 15 military regions countrywide. In opening the Bloemfontein training school Prime Minister Louis Botha sent a message to be read; he argued that the nation wanted a 'real Army, not only capable of coping with a little Kaffir war, but also able to defend South Africa against any odds, wherever they came from'.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, according to the rebel leader Jan Kemp, the immediate origins of the Rebellion were to be found in 1912 in a dormitory in the Military School in Bloemfontein. The men who were to become part of the core of rebel leaders, Ben Bouwer, Manie Maritz and Kemp shared a room and Jacques Pienaar was in the room next door: "We were to be the leaders of our military units and already we shared out the roles to be played when the day came to take revenge against the robber empire."<sup>54</sup> The officers undergoing the course were kept close to the residence - which was irritating for married men and perceived as denigrating. The British press referred to one of the 'most dashing' of the younger Boer commanders in

<sup>48</sup> Military Archives Depot: DC group, 26, Smut's Portfolio, file no. 1(a) 530: Some notes on the condition of service in the Swiss army.

<sup>49</sup> 'South African News', *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 August 1912.

<sup>50</sup> Attempts to popularise it included the short and alarmingly dull film 'A Day in the Life at Potchefstroom Training Camp', 1916.

<sup>51</sup> Translation from the Afrikaans. *Die Volkstem*, 13 February 1912. 'De Onderwerp - Krygswet'.

<sup>52</sup> 'The Defence Force', *Evening Standard*, 25 January 1913; and CAD: A139.

<sup>53</sup> 'The South African Defence Act', *The Morning Post*, 2 July 1912.

<sup>54</sup> Translation from the Afrikaans. J.C.G. Kemp, *Die Pad van die Veroweraar* (Kaapstad ens., 1946), p108. The reader must however tread carefully. These autobiographical comments are written with hindsight and after the rebellion.

the war, who was said to object to the plain khaki uniform *sans* decoration: "Not content with reducing a man of his years and position to the status of a schoolboy, the people at the college actually want to put him in a uniform which will make him *prima-facie* inferior to any policeman with one stripe on his sleeve ..."<sup>55</sup>

The uniform itself also proved a problem. Usually on commando, the Boer had served in ordinary dress, in soft-rimmed felt-hats for protection against the sun, and with a cartridge-filled bandoleer. Boer soldiers had often appropriated bits of British uniform.<sup>56</sup> But there was a difference between appropriation and imposition. The new U.D.F. uniform was Bedford cord of a khaki shade, with dark green collar and pipings, and the letter 'V' or 'U', for union, on each arm. Many Boers refused to wear khaki. The colour of the British army during the South African War, khaki had come to be invested with much symbolism; indeed, 'Khaki' was a short-hand reference to a British soldier. There was even an Anti-Khaki Movement in the Active Citizen Force. Reference was made to Gideon Scheepers shot for wearing khaki in the South African War. The Minister of Justice hotly denied the A.C.F.'s contention: the colour of the uniform was 'not khaki, but drab'.<sup>57</sup> Stellenbosch university students protested, and drew up a petition.<sup>58</sup> Awkward questions were also raised in the House of Assembly on the purchase of uniforms made in England. On short notice, only a London manufacturer could produce uniform in such bulk - although South Africans were permitted to tender for 16 000 pairs of knickerbockers.<sup>59</sup>

The icons of the South African War were important in mobilising rebellion. In one dramatic public incident, for example, Maritz undid the brim of his hat which was up on the left and refastened on the right - in the Republican manner.<sup>60</sup> Another icon was the Republican flag. A committee of women had made a *Vyfkleur* - a combination of the Transvaal and Free State flags, during the South African War.<sup>61</sup> This De Wet had kept and used to draw people as he recruited rebels.

Age was important in the Boer construction of masculinity; leadership was by a patriarchy of old men. Hence beards were important for their dual symbolism of age and manliness, as iconic representation of Republican masculinity. Descriptive work on the South African War made much mention of Boer beards, whereas the archetypical British soldier was clean-shaven.<sup>62</sup> A common image in Boer descriptions of commando life is 'By day with the sun warm upon us and the dust thick upon us, we sit with our ... wild, uncombed beards...'<sup>63</sup> In the days leading up to the Rebellion, Smuts's son noted that 'The

<sup>55</sup> 'South African News', *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 August 1912.

<sup>56</sup> A bit of war apocrypha still to be heard in platteland bars, maintains that when President Steyn passed through Waterloo Station, on his way to Holland after the South African War, his entourage were still clad in the eclectic ensembles they wore on the battlefield, with one heavily bearded man donned in a tattered remnant of a 17th Lancer's uniform. A retired Colonel of the British army, stared at them in astonished dismay and thundered: 'My God, what are the Lancers coming to?'

<sup>57</sup> Debates of the House of Assembly, 1914, col. 1289. It is interesting that in the early 1920s there was a move to introduce a green uniform for wear by the U.D.F. units, but a suitable dye proved elusive. By 1930 a dye was made and some units adopted a green veld uniform. This was worn until the 1930s when khaki uniforms again predominated, with the green uniforms phased out between 1940 and 1942.

<sup>58</sup> Oost, *Wie is die Skuldiges?* p156.

<sup>59</sup> Debates of the House of Assembly, 1913, Col. 350.

<sup>60</sup> Oost, *Wie is die Skuldiges?*, p89.

<sup>61</sup> Oost, *Wie is die Skuldiges?* p265.

<sup>62</sup> Ben Viljoen, *My Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War* (Cape Town, 1973), p302.

<sup>63</sup> Translation from the Afrikaans. TAD: W 90 DS Van Warmelo, 'Kommando en Guerillalewe', 1899-1902. p91.

English were loyal and impatient, but bearded men talked open sedition.<sup>64</sup> With the Defence Act, facial hair came under the control of the state. In terms of the King's Regulations and orders for the army, 1912: "The hair of the head will be kept short. The chin and under lip will be shaved but not the upper lip. Whiskers, if worn, will be of moderate length."<sup>65</sup>

One of the post-Rebellion experiences which fuelled nationalist momentum was the humiliation of prison - when the Boer populist prophet Van Rensburg had his beard forcibly shaven off.<sup>66</sup>

The new law affected more than just the soldiers. Military institutions comprise 'more than uniformed men' - they encompass the state itself and their influence permeates the society.<sup>67</sup> There was immediate public response to the new law. The Act provoked a great deal of dissension. The English press was for it: *The Pretoria News* noted that the Act was 'constructive and desirable'.<sup>68</sup> An open letter to Smuts, however, warned that no Englishman would comply with Dutch orders.<sup>69</sup> There was also mild concern that other races were excluded;<sup>70</sup> as well as a limited degree of concern over the inclusion of lower class men in regiments because of conscription.<sup>71</sup>

'Ou Vale' noted that the old Transvaal and the Free State Commando laws had been marginalised. It was particularly worrying that the old officers of the Transvaal artillery had offered to give their advice, but had been ignored by Smuts.<sup>72</sup> The shift to a distant, parliamentary style of politics, where politicians talked and constituents listened, also offended. So much of the politics of the time was also personal: Smuts did not have the old forms of Republican statehood - he would not patiently listen to any burgher over coffee, in the manner of Kruger and Botha. Republican practices were neglected and this rankled. Republicanism meant the ritual of treating all men as equals. A contemporary noted: 'there is almost not an Afrikaner alive who at the bottom of his heart has not the slumbering illusion that one day we would again be a free *volk*, under our own elected president with whom we can sit on the veranda and drink a cup of coffee'.<sup>73</sup>

Beyers who was in charge of the new Defence Force and who was to become one of the rebel leaders was particularly critical because Smuts had not consulted with the old officers of the former Republics. English officers and government men were consulted - but even then, the Act was already in existence. Beyers also wanted the Act explained in a series of meetings to the People, in the Republican manner, but this was not done. There was also general concern about holding the military camps in and nearby cities. This was for several

<sup>64</sup> J.C. Smuts, *Jan Christiaan Smuts*, (Cape Town, 1952), p137.

<sup>65</sup> I am indebted to Major-General Philip Pretorius, Director of the South African National Museum of Military History, for a copy of the regulations.

<sup>66</sup> This Republican symbolism was to resurface in 1938, with the Great Trek centenary an association known as the *Beardmanne* was established, which together with singing Republican songs, organised competitions for beards conforming to the old styles.

<sup>67</sup> Barton C. Hacker, 'Military Institutions and Social Order: Transformations of Western Thought since the Enlightenment', *War and Society* 11(2) 1993.

<sup>68</sup> *The Pretoria News*, 30 November 1911.

<sup>69</sup> *The Pretoria News*, 2 December 1911.

<sup>70</sup> 'Voice of the Native', *The Star*, 2 January 1912.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Morrell, 'White Farmers, Social Institutions and Settler Masculinity in the Natal Midlands, 1880-1920' (unpub PhD thesis, UND, 1996), p129.

<sup>72</sup> 'Besware teen die Wet', *Die Volkstem*, 22 February 1912; and Debates of the House of Assembly, 26 February 1912, col 517.

<sup>73</sup> Translation. TAD: Accession W/87/4, Jan-Petrus, 'Die siener van Lichtenburg', 22 October 1914.

reasons. The cities were argued to be a breeding ground for social ills, but more importantly it would increase the likelihood of English becoming the language of instruction.<sup>74</sup> Broadly speaking all the regiments in the industrial areas used English and the rural regiments used Dutch.<sup>75</sup> There was anxiety that the General Staff would not be bilingual and that the highest positions would go to unilingual Englishmen.<sup>76</sup>

In the commando system there had been no formal military training. Van der Merwe notes romantically that in the South African War: Man, horse and gun meant military preparedness.<sup>77</sup> It was a common observation that 'the boers never drill'.<sup>78</sup> This was part of the mythopoeic image - that no training was necessary, that the boer lifestyle would suffice in teaching him equestrian skills, musketry and proficiency at stalking. Now, however, training was enforced, with training courses in Bloemfontein.

The Boer military system had maintained a very different relationship with the state in comparison with the British army. Its discourse was that of the equality of men and the importance of individual contribution. The British army was integral to society; but the Boer commando system was integral to every man. The two systems were based on different ideologies and had different symbolism. Harm Oost, editor of *Het Volk* and a rebel, made the distinction explicit. The British army, he wrote, purports to be the 'servant of the state', in Republican terms, a people's army was the state itself - every man and boy from 16 years up was involved in the defence of the state, choosing their own officers, who exercised both military and civil duties.<sup>79</sup>

In the South African War, children of school-going age had served in the military.<sup>80</sup> But the introduction of compulsory cadets caused much dissension. Cadets had long been in existence in English-speaking schools in South Africa. The 1912 Act introduced the system into the educational mainstream. Cadets were to be drawn from the 13-17 age bracket: physical exercise, target shooting and signalling were to be taught.

There was great division on the issue. The English press was for it: *The Pretoria News* urged that cadets be compulsory.<sup>81</sup> Aston noted at a school prize giving that the repeatedly raised spectre of militarism was just a scare tactic.<sup>82</sup> However, within the Afrikaans-speaking community the idea was met with distrust. This concern over cadets was part of a wider fear over the implications of the anglicisation of Boer children. Milner's ham-fisted attempts at anglicisation had left a deep impression in the years since Vereeniging. Beyers had noted in 1905, in a speech at Pietersburg: 'Lady Curzon - an English lady wrote shortly after the peace: "Get the children and make Englishmen of them." ' Beyers used this occasion to appeal to a sense of fatherly protection of the Boer children: "Is that not a policy calculated

<sup>74</sup> 'Besware teen die Wet', *Die Volkstem*, 22 February 1912.

<sup>75</sup> 'Territorial Movement in South Africa', *The Morning Post*, 22 October 1913.

<sup>76</sup> The Act had provided for 201 officers and 50 drill instructors. Of these, 100 were from the former Departments of Defence of the late Colonies, of whom 38 were bilingual; 27 were from other government departments, of whom 25 were bilingual and 74 were new appointments, of whom 60 were bilingual. A large percentage of the 50 drill instructors would qualify to instruct in both languages.

<sup>77</sup> Van der Merwe, 'Die Militere Geskiedenis van die Oranje-Vrystaat 1910-1920' (ongepubliseer MA, UOFS, 1987), p7.

<sup>78</sup> *Daily News*, 23 Juné 1899 from *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* (Oxford, 1996).

<sup>79</sup> Harm Oost, *Wie is die Skuldige?*, p153.

<sup>80</sup> J.N. Brink, *Oorlog en Ballingskap* (Kaapstad, 1940), p115.

<sup>81</sup> *The Pretoria News*, 30 November 1911.

<sup>82</sup> G.G. Aston, 'South Africa and Imperial Defence', Address to Pretoria Cadets, 19 June 1909, p9.

to make us desperate and everybody knows what a Boer is capable of when he is desperate. If it goes on like that we will again have war in our country - You were men in war time. Be men also in peace-time and fight such a pernicious policy".<sup>83</sup>

Lord Methuen, the British army commander in South Africa, had done little to endear himself with the Boer faction, casting aspersions upon the manliness of those who objected to the Act: "[T]here seems to be amongst some people of the elderly spinster description a strong prejudice against lads being forced to learn how to defend their homes"<sup>84</sup> There was the powerful fear that the Boer male child would have his masculinity replaced with an English conception of what it meant to be a man."

People organised their demonstration on military lines, as was the Republican custom, with generals, assistant generals, *kommandants* and *veldkornets*. Dr Krause noted: 'They talk of their veld-cornets whether it be war or no war and they organise in that fashion'.<sup>85</sup> The movement grew from that of armed protest to a republican revolution. It became an aim to proclaim a Republic, with an ill-defined goal to take Pretoria and demand the removal of the troops from G.S.W.A. and, if the government refused, to hoist the *vierkleur*.<sup>86</sup> Republicanism and a sense of Boer masculinity were inextricably bound up in one another. Nostalgic Republicanism was used as a mobilising device, as a balm for wounded identity. Contradictions were masked, the myths reinforced.

## Conclusion

The new military of the modernising state threatened to extinguish a Republican masculinity remembered and misremembered from the South African War. The 1912 Act imposed colonial training methods, uniforms, ranking system, very hierarchical bureaucracy, disciplinary codes and promotional norms. The new system was impersonal and old Republican protocols were increasingly ignored. The egalitarian rituals were neglected. Military professionalisation entailed overt social differentiation and hierarchy, which the commando system had formerly served to mask. The Act also appeared too English, especially following so closely upon Milner's Anglicisation policy. The Cadet Corps appeared to pose a threat to the Boer male children. The State's neglect of Republican protocol as the situation developed, with its official silence on the South West African expedition precipitated the Rebellion. The 1912 Defence Act, and what it represented in terms of a changing state, presented a challenge to the masculinity of both the leadership and ordinary Boer. On the periphery, farmers and *bywoners* were alienated by the state's failure to alleviate the economic recession and turned to their old commando leaders of the South African War, with the hope of re-establishing a republic. Cultural images of commando may have corresponded little with the reality of warfare, but seductive imagery propagated by rebel leaders helped fuel the republican nostalgia that centred on a particular understanding of manhood. The rebels sought to destroy the hated present in order to recapture an idealised past in an imaginary future. They sought a break through into the past and longed for a new community in which old ideas and institutions would once again command universal allegiance. In an act, suffused with mystical Republicanism and cultural despair, was the quest for a lost manhood in the complex of ideas and institutions that characterise industrial society.

<sup>83</sup> G.D. Scholtz, *General Christiaan Frederick Beyers*, (Johannesburg, 1941), pp122-123.

<sup>84</sup> House of Assembly, Report of Select Committee, 1912, Vol. II, p5.

<sup>85</sup> TAD: A 333, Krause Collection, p35.

<sup>86</sup> The old Republican flag.