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Title: Black Men in a White Man's War: The Impact of the First World War on South African Blacks.

by: Albert Grundlingh

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BLACK MEN IN A WHITE MAN'S WAR: THE IMPACT OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR ON SOUTH AFRICAN BLACKS*

Albert Grundlingh

The past decade in European and Anglo-American historiography has witnessed a steady growth of literature in what is generally termed 'war and society' studies. This development is largely a reaction against the 'drum and trumpet' school of military history; a field of inquiry that may be valid in its own right, but one that often degenerates into a discussion of uniforms and badges and seldom rises above campaigns and battles - the major weakness being an inclination to divorce the fighting side of war from its socio-economic and political context. Practitioners in the field of 'war and society' therefore seek to place warfare in its total historical milieu and they share *inter alia* a common interest in war as an agent of social change.[1]

In comparison with the position in Britain, America and Europe, the historiography of 'war and society' in Africa is relatively underdeveloped. As David Killingray has recently pointed out in an informative assessment:

> The lack of research into the two World Wars in Africa is reflected in the paucity of treatment and the assumptions about these two major turning points in the modern history of the continent that appear in many standard text books. Greater space has been accorded to an administrative device, a minor revolt or a small quasi-political association than to two major wars which had wide and pervasive effects on peoples throughout the whole of Africa.

However, the outlook is not completely bleak and there are indications (for example a conference held in 1977 at London University on Africa and the First World War) that the "ideas about war and society that are familiar to European history are now being moved south into Africa."[2]

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* The terms African 'Blacks' and 'Africans' are used as synonyms in this paper.

As far as South Africa is concerned, the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 has consistently attracted scholarly attention, but despite the numerous works on this conflict it is only in a recent publication edited by Peter Warwick and S.B. Spies that some of the wider effects of the war on the various societies involved have been investigated in a systematic way.[3] Whilst certain advances have been registered in the studies of the Anglo-Boer War, the same cannot be said of South Africa's involvement in the First World War. For a background to the war period one is dependent on general, though stimulating, overviews by S.E. Katzenellenbogen[4] and N.G. Garson.[5] Given the lack of interest in South Africa and the First World War, it is not surprising to find that black participation in the conflict has passed almost unnoticed. Except for a pioneering article by Brian Willan on the South African Native Labour Contingent which served in France,[6] little is known about black involvement and even less about the responses that such a cataclysmic event as World War One elicited from various African groupings.

This paper develops some of the issues mooted by Willan and furthermore attempts to evaluate the general consequences of the war as they relate to the black population in South Africa. The topic is being dealt with by focussing on the following aspects: first, the effect of war-time service on the socio-political consciousness of those South African Blacks who served as labourers in France and the related question, namely, whether veterans acted as catalysts for resistance against white rule on their return to the Union; second, the wider ramifications of the war as it affected the political perceptions and expectations of those Africans outside the military sphere; and third, the implications of war-related socio-economic changes for certain African groupings. The essay concludes with an assessment of the nature of change wrought by the war and the hypothesis - common in some studies of 'war and society' - that underprivileged groups in society tend to benefit from war-time changes is considered. Within this admittedly arbitrary framework, only the more salient features are highlighted; the paper makes no claim to be exhaustive and to have covered the total impact of war.

I

The South African Native Labour Contingent (S.A.N.L.C.) was formed by the South African Government in September 1916 in response to urgent requests from the Imperial authorities for manpower to expand the military infrastructure for the gigantic Somme offensive. A suggestion by the Colonial Office that the Union government might also consider arming Africans for service in France was summarily rejected since the South African authorities feared the implications of training Africans in the

use of firearms and allowing them to fight against Europeans. Blacks therefore only served in a non-combatant capacity, and till January 1918, when the decision was taken to disband the S.A.N.L.C., 21 000 men left for France where at one stage they constituted almost 25% of the total military labour force. Recruitment for the contingent met with considerable black resistance; partly because Africans did not consider the military wage of £3 per month (approximately 10% higher than the average mining wage) as sufficient compensation for the dangers inherent in war-time labour, but more pertinently because the South African government, which did the recruiting on behalf of the British, had through its repressive policies alienated the African population. Various coercive measures were employed to induce Africans to enlist, but obviously certain recruits also had their own reasons for joining. A prevailing drought in some rural areas and attendant poverty assisted the authorities to swell the ranks of the S.A.N.L.C., whilst a criminal element, on the run from the police in the Witwatersrand area, found a relatively safe haven in the contingent. For the educated African elite, who enrolled in numbers disproportionate to the size of their class in the total black population, the idea to prove their loyalty to the 'civilising' Imperial power in an hour of need, as well as the notion that service abroad was an educative experience, were important considerations.

In France the various companies of the S.A.N.L.C. were used mainly for loading and unloading ships in the channel ports, though some were also employed for work on the railways, roads, quarries and forests. On the insistence of the South African government they were isolated and housed in closed compounds - the only unit in France to be accommodated in such a way. This extreme measure of social control - a direct transplant from, in particular, the diamond mines in Kimberley - was instituted to ensure that members of the S.A.N.L.C. would not come into contact with 'harmful social conditions' in a foreign country experiencing total war and was regarded as an essential safeguard to prevent Africans acquiring ideas which the authorities considered detrimental to white South African interests.[7]

The white officers and non-commissioned officers who accompanied the contingent were carefully selected. They were mainly officials from the Native Affairs Department and compound managers drawn from the mines; men who were either intimately involved in the implementation of the Union governments race policies or who were well versed in controling the black labour force on the mines. Their reports on the effects of war service on the black members of the contingent reflect an almost obsessional tendency to present the venture as an unqualified 'success', with the Africans returning to South Africa 'uncontaminated' and 'unspoilt'. Because of their own prejudices and vested interests in the matter, their impressions are heavily biased towards a sanitised

version and the African voice is only audible when it has been decoded, and even then very rarely.[8]

Service overseas nevertheless presented Africans with an opportunity to contrast the crass, or at best, paternalistic racism prevailing in South Africa, with the way in which Whites abroad behaved towards them. Although the officers tried to ensure that members of the contingent had limited contact with the civilian population, some of them did on the odd occasion manage to acquaint themselves with life outside the compounds. Such encounters with French civilians gave them sufficient reason to question in a more searching manner the rigidity of South African society. "Coming from South Africa, we had fixed ideas about black/white relationships, so we were surprised that some of the French would mix freely with us", declared R. Mohapeloa. Similarly, P. Mabathoana was impressed that "we were treated with dignity by white people."[9] Moreover, Jason Jingoes drew a fine distinction between paternalistic racial attitudes and involvement on the basis of equality. The way in which white women received them with tea and other refreshments when they stopped at Liverpool in England before embarking again for France, caused him to remark: "They were so friendly and we warmed to their concern for us.... . Although white women had served us with tea in Cape Town, we know they were only doing it because we were going to war. These girls were different."[10]

The South African authorities were particularly concerned about the possibility that members of the contingent might establish intimate relationships with French women; in fact, this was one of the main reasons for the compound system. However, some Africans devised resourceful plans to abscond from the compounds and a few were involved with French prostitutes who frequented the dockyard areas. The very nature of such affairs made them momentary and superficial, but there is also evidence to suggest that certain members formed somewhat more enduring relationships with French women that went beyond casual sexual flirtation. It is instructive to note that after the return of the S.A.N.L.C. to South Africa, the chief censor, J.M. Weaver, intercepted and destroyed ten letters from French women to members of the contingent. Weaver argued that such letters "will give the natives a wrong impression as to their relative position with regard to Europeans."[11] Liaisons between black males and white females were not completely unknown in South Africa; however, white public 'morality' ensured that they were always clandestine, and when revealed, such relationships met with near hysteria as a dangerous aberration that threatened the *status quo*.[12] In war-torn France a relatively more permissive atmosphere prevailed amongst the civilian population,[13] and it can be surmised that particularly those members of the S.A.N.L.C. who were involved in Black/White affairs become more acutely aware of the discrepancy and less inclined to view the racist ideology

in South Africa as an immutable force.

Through the exigencies of war-time service certain companies of the S.A.N.L.C. also came into occasional contact with white labour battalions which did exactly the same manual work as Blacks. This exposure, which was in sharp contrast to the position in South Africa where Whites left most of the hard labour for Africans to perform, did not fail leave an imprint. What impressed some Blacks even more though, was that the Whites in labour battalions displayed little colour prejudice and treated them as equals.[14] Jason Jingoes even struck up a friendship with a British labourer, named William Johnstone, and it was in this respect that he noted: "It was our first experience of living in a society without a colour bar."[15] The implications of black labourers indentifying with their white counterparts, caused considerable distress amongst the white officers in the contingent - those ever watchful custodians of vested South African interests. It is therefore not surprising that the policy adopted was that only in the most pressing circumstances should Blacks be allowed to work alongside Whites and that they otherwise should be kept completely separate in the work-place.[16]

In one respect the carefully controlled labour regimentation of the S.A.N.L.C. in France differed from the standard procedures usually followed in South Africa. Whereas it was normal practice on the South African mines to divide the black labour force along ethnic lines, in France it was decided to integrate the various 'tribes'. Practical considerations dictated this course of action, and it was also argued that such an arrangement would prevent the possibility of sympathetic strikes amongst members of the same enthnic group.[17] This had an unintended consequence. The continuous contact between workers from the different 'tribes' in the work situation and the fact that they were all exposed to the same conditions in a white man's war, meant that at least for some Africans the ethnic affiliations became distinctly blurred. In an unambiguous statement Z.F. Zibi revealed: "We are not here as Mfengu, Xhosa and other tribes. We are conscious of the fact that we Blacks are united in staying together... . Therefore we shall never be deceived. ... Otherwise it would mean that we are like people who share mat but quarrel - in such cases one never sleeps well."[18] The exact degree and intensity of solidarity is difficult to determine, but it seems clear that to some extent a common consciousness of their position as workers, as opposed to members of an ethnic group, began to develop in France.

In a more generalised sense the war-time experiences of some members also meant an expansion of their world view. On the way to France several troopships called at Sierra Leone, where M. Mokwena was particularly impressed by the fact that he met "some pure black negroes of very high educational attainments equal to that of the best Europeans...".[19] Similarly,

certain Africans regarded the sea voyage and what they were allowed to witness abroad as formative influences. Thus D.S. Makoliso, who came from a small Transkeian village, Cala, wrote: "I am glad to say that my experiences are more than any man's in Cala... . My head is full up with new things and the wonders of the world".[20] Likewise, E. Mdlombo viewed the period spent in France as "an education" which provided him with new insights and knowledge.[21]

One outstanding event in France left a very marked impression. On 10 July 1917 the British king, George V, inspected and addressed the contingent. For many of the educated Africans it was an unforgettable experience to see the king in person - the supreme symbol of Imperial supremacy and British 'justice' which loomed so large in their imagination. "We saw him, George V, our king, with our own eyes... . To us it is a dream, something to wonder at", mused M.L. Posholi.[22] What made this visit even more memorable, is that the king in his address not only praised them for their labour, but also assured them: "You are also part of my great armies fighting for the liberty and freedom of my subjects of all races and creeds throughout the empire."[23] The implications of these words were not lost on Posholi. "We are indeed in the midst of great wonders", he wrote, "because we personally heard that we blacks too are British subjects, children of the father of the great Nation, trusted ones and helpers, and that we are cared for and loved."[24]

For some Africans at least, the cumulative effect of their war-time experience and observations, as well as a hopeful expectancy that their assistance to the white man in troubled times might yet yield rewarding dividends, found expression in greater self-esteem and a less deferential attitude towards Whites. Jason Jingoes strikingly revealed that "we were aware, when we returned that we were different from the other people at home. Our behaviour, as we showed the South Africans, was something more than they expected from a Native, more like what was expected among them of a white man."[25] Jingoes was not the only one to experience a change in outlook and to adopt a more assertive attitude. The commanding officer at the demobilization depot in Cape Town, major H. Dales, who was in an unique position to witness the demeanour of time-expired Africans returning from France, testified from a white point of view that "the conduct of these natives left much to be desired, great laxity of discipline being apparent, and their behaviour in general being a great contrast to that of recruits in training for overseas."[26]

Although the period spent in France undoubtedly sensitised certain members, it is of prime importance in a general assessment of the effects of war time service on the socio-political consciousness of the participants to consider also those factors which counteracted the development of increased militancy. Apart

from the fact that the impact of military service obviously differed according to individual temperament, personality and the pre-existing degree of socio-political awareness, members of the contingent were also exposed to influences which undermined their confidence. In this respect they had occasion to witness the almost inexhaustible armed resources of the white man and the techniques of modern warfare in France. This caused some of them to realise that in the face of the ever increasing military potential of the Whites an African uprising in South Africa stood even less chance than before of succeeding. One veteran summed up the situation succinctly when he said: "Our assegais are no good now; they could not reach an aeroplane."[27]

Moreover, it was the avowed policy of the South African authorities to stifle the potential 'harmful' effects of war-time service and the closed compound system was the salient feature of this policy. Although this system was not completely successful - black opposition and the practical military demands caused its imminent breakdown and were the major considerations in the disbanding of the contingent in January 1918[28] - it nevertheless severely limited the intensity of exposure to new conditions in a foreign country. Colonel S.M. Pritchard, commanding officer of the contingent, probably had sufficient reason to declare in a self-congratulary statement in November 1919:

> Knowing as he did the conditions under which they [the Africans] were employed, knowing the restrictions placed on their movements, and the strict discipline enforced, it would be a remarkable thing if these natives came back any the worse.[29]

From a different perspective, what is indeed remarkable under these circumstances, is that at least some Africans, as indicated, used the restricted opportunities in the way they did.

This analysis points to the need to maintain a fine balance in evaluating the effect of participation in a white man's war. For every participant who returned from France with a changed outlook, there might have been another who was less affected. In addition, virtually all the factors in overseas service which had the potential to broaden the social and political perception of black members were consciously emasculated by the South African authorities.

Related to the war-time exposure of S.A.N.L.C. members were grievances about the callous treatment meted out to them by South African officers in France and resentment about the paucity of post-war recognition. Veterans received no war

medals or gratuities. Furthermore, the inflated promises made to lure the unsuspecting into the recruiting net during 1916-17 were simply brushed aside; promises that they would be relieved from paying poll tax, be exempted from pass laws and be given free grants of land as well as cattle remained unfulfilled. To add insult to injury, former members were even expected to pay poll tax for the period they had been absent from South Africa.[30] A disillusioned A.K. Xabanisa certainly echoed the sentiments of a considerable number of veterans when he wrote: "I am just like a stone which after killing a bird, nobody bothers about, no cares to see where it falls."[31] It was in this context of post-war disillusionment amongst veterans of the contingent that Edward Roux claimed in his seminal work on black resistance in South Africa: "After 1918 there were thousands of black men in the country who were not willing any longer to endure the anti-Native laws, men who were prepared to stir up their fellow Africans to revolt against the system."[32]

Did they, however, in practice act as political catalysts? It remains to explore the links between military service in France and tangible opposition to white rule in South Africa. The fact that some members of the S.A.N.L.C. returned from France with a sharper awareness of their relative deprivation and were discontented over their post-war treatment, does not necessarily mean that their feelings and insights were actually translated into active resistance. It is therefore essential to consider whether the stimuli of service abroad and all that accompanied it, were sufficient to galvanise veterans into political action.

Some ex-members did become active in formal black politics. Shortly after the war Doyle Modiakgotla joined the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (I.C.U.) and later became secretary of the Griqualand-West branch. In 1920 S.M. Bennet Ncwana also became a member of the I.C.U. and in addition initiated a short-lived publication, *The Black Man*.[33] Although it is significant that they became overtly involved in the black cause, there is no firm evidence to suggest that their war experiences were the prime motivating force. It can only be surmised that to some extent their exposure in France must have had a contributory influence.

Other veterans were not be found in formally organised political opposition, but nevertheless influenced their compatriots in more subtle ways. Shortly after his return from France, L. Molife addressed rural peasants in the Rustenburg district in the western Transvaal and assured them in the following terms that their plight would soon be relieved: "The Germans were building powerful airships, capable of moving an army - they must not worry, that shortly a German army would be in Africa and would help them gain their freedom". This message, endorsed by similar statements from other ex-members,

was received with considerable acclamation.[34] The factual accuracy of Molife's account is of course besides the point; what is important is its strong millenarian element. Millenarianism usually reflects a pessimism about the efficacy of human agencies to effect change and is grounded in a belief that social transformation can only come about by cataclysmic extraneous means.[35] In this particular case Germany was cast in the role of the saviour who would liberate them from white oppression. There were, it is true, no large scale post-war millenarian movements in the Transvaal, but it is nonetheless revealing that certain veterans of the S.A.N.L.C. were instrumental in the dissemination of millenarian ideas.

In contrast with the Transvaal, millenarianism was an outstanding characteristic of rural resistance in the Eastern Cape and Transkei during the twenties. Here America featured prominently as the country which would deliver Africans from bondage.[36] There is some tantalising evidence to suggest that a few former members of the contingent were involved in these movements; however, it seems as if they could only have played a very marginal role.[37]

On a more individual and personal level some veterans did not hesitate to demonstrate their sharper perception and increased self-confidence in everyday and practical South African situations. In the Pietersburg district in the northern Transvaal an anonymous ex-member refused to accept passively what he regarded as exorbitant prices in the local trading store. He confronted the shopkeeper, named Williams, and a subsequent police report on the incident strikingly reveals (though this was obviously not the intention) the way in which this particular veteran asserted himself:

> A native who had recently returned from France came to his [Williams'] store and stated that the Europeans were responsible for the high prices of foodstuffs. He then asked Williams to whom the ground on which he was trading belonged, on receiving a reply that the ground belonged to Williams, the Native replied, 'the ground belongs to the Natives and we will show you.'[38]

Such instances could be multiplied, but there is no satisfactory evidence that ex-contingent members were in the vanguard of sustained and coherent black resistance to white domination. For example, no indication could be found that former members were involved in the black industrial unrest on the Witwatersrand during 1918-19.* Nor does it appear, on a somewhat different level, that veterans acted as 'modernisers' in rural societies.

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*These events are referred to in Section III of the paper.

Immediately after his return, Jason Jingoes found (and one can readily assume that this was not an isolated case) that "he was thrown back into the old traditional ways."[39]

The evident lack of involvement on the part of ex-members in overt resistance seems to prove that war service as such, for the reasons already mentioned, was not sufficient to either jolt veterans into revolt or for them to encourage others to do so. However, it must be borne in mind that even those who possibly contemplated such action, had to consider the formidable power of the state to crush any uprising. It is nevertheless clear that in the South African case the general assumption that service in a white man's war is often a catalyst for vigorous black resistance, cannot be taken for granted. When Africans did resist, as they did on the Witwatersrand in 1918-19, it was not because they were influenced by "new ideas" emanating from abroad, but because of the fundumental oppression built into the South African system or white domination - and they did not have to go to France to become aware of that.

II

The impact of the war was obviously not only restricted to those who actually participated. It is therefore important to delineate the wider effect of the war as it was manifested in African political responses and perceptions.

Immediately prior to the war, the South African Native National Congress (S.A.N.N.C.) - founded, as is well known, in 1912 as an African political organisation and composed of the educated elite - was involved in sustained protest against the 1913 Land Act which left numerous rural Blacks destitute in the northern provinces and denied Africans the right to purchase land outside certain limited scheduled areas. As an important part of their campaign the S.A.N.N.C. had sent a deputation to England in the early months of 1914 in an attempt to persuade the Imperial government to intervene on their behalf and to influence the policy being pursued by the South African government. Although it was abundantly clear even before the outbreak of war in August 1914 that the British government was not prepared to pressurise the Union cabinet, the belief nevertheless persisted amongst certain S.A.N.N.C. members that the deputation "might have had a real effect had not the First World War been declared in the midst of that agitation."[40] Besides the obviously wishful element in this claim, it can also be viewed as an indication that at the time of the outbreak of war members of the S.A.N.N.C. were in their own minds still hopeful that Britain would not completely abandon African interests in South Africa.

The S.A.N.N.C. was in session in Bloemfontein when the news was conveyed that hostilities had broken out in Europe. They immediately affirmed their loyalty to King and Empire, pledged to suspend all public criticism of the Union government, and to refrain from agitation in connection with the 1913 Land Act. A delegation from Congress further informed the authorities of African support for the duration of the conflict.[41] However, one dissenting voice was heard. J.T. Gumede, a more militant member of Congress, considered it essential to keep up criticism of the South African government despite the war. He argued in March 1915 that such a policy would be more beneficial to African interests "than the present attitude of folding their hands in idle talk of the war, which they have no right to claim as theirs... ."[42]

Although Gumede's argument was an exception to the overwhelming loyalist response, it nevertheless points to the precarious position of a middle-class constitutionalist body like the S.A.N.N.C. . Since they operated through constitutional channels, they were ultimately dependent on official goodwill and could hardly have afforded to alienate the authorities on such a major issue as the war. It would be wrong, however, to construe their loyalist response and co-operative stance as an indication of passive acceptance of their subservient position. Given their limited range of options to bring about constitutional change, they regarded loyalty during the war as an additional method to be utilised in the unequal struggle. In identifying themselves with the white ruling class in a common cause and openly proclaiming a common allegiance to the British crown, they expected in due course to be rewarded for their loyalty. They also hoped that such an attitude might enable them to pressurise the authorities into granting meaningful recognition. In addition, they had implicit trust in the ability of the British government to effect favourable change. This clearly influenced their view that an event as cataclysmic as the First World War would change the nature of the Empire with corresponding benefits accruing to the African population.[43] During the war the S.A.N.N.C. consistently adhered to this policy. They did, it is true, express criticism on various issues and gave half-hearted support to strike action on the Rand in 1918, but their loyalty as such was never in doubt.

Towards the closing stages of the war black participation in the hostilities had further raised the level of expectancy amongst African political leaders and they became more strident in their demands. "We expect to be rewarded for our work after the war when prizes are distributed to the brave who were in battle", insisted D.S. Letanka, an influential S.A.N.N.C. member, in February 1918.[44] In April 1918 his colleague,

L.T. Mvabaza, made a similar point and furthermore located African aspirations within the context of freedom and democracy - the declared war aims of the allied forces. Unambiguously he stated:

> That in consideration of the sacrifices the Bantu have made during this war which we are continually being told is for democracy and freedom, the British and the white people of this land should redress our grievances and give the freedom for which we lost thousands of men in this struggle.[45]

It was basically such beliefs - reinforced by statements of the American president, Woodrow Wilson, and the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, to the effect that the post-war settlement should allow sufficient scope for the self-determination of subjected peoples - that prompted the S.A.N.N.C. to send yet another deputation to Britain in 1919. The efforts of this delegation are documented elsewhere and need no recounting here;[46] suffice to say that despite sympathetic remarks by Lloyd George, the deputation was a dismal failure. In retrospect their attempts to bring about British constitutional intervention may appear unrealistic and even naive. This however, would be too harsh a judgement. Viewed in their own terms and the overall historical context it becomes clear that in the more hopeful post-war climate their attempts amount to a resolute move by constitutional minded men to effect favourable change through the only avenue they deemed promising and available. "The Great War has .... .. opened a chance to us, ... let us not lose the chance," argued L.T. Mvabaza on the eve of their departure to Britain.[47]

The failure of the deputation left the S.A.N.N.C. disillusioned and eroded their earlier trust in the British government. Even Lloyd George's sympathetic attitude was no consolation. "Lloyd George said he did not know the black people were so badly treated in Africa, but Lloyd George is a white man and cannot be trusted...," was the reaction of J.D. Ngoja, a Cape member of the S.A.N.N.C.[48] In his study of the African National Congress Peter Walshe regards the fruitless visit to Britain as a watershed in the history of Congress. Its constitutional efforts frustrated, the organisation found it difficult to realign itself and to adopt decisive new strategies; consequently its support declined in the post-war years.[49]

In assessing the effect of the war on the S.A.N.N.C. it is clear that increased expectations brought about by the war only buttressed the aspirations of Congress for a limited

period. When it became evident that there would be no concessions on account of black loyalty and sacrifices, the organisation lapsed into a mood to political cynicism which contributed towards its relative stagnation in the twenties. It would thus appear that viewed from the perspective of the twenties the war actually had a detrimental effect on the position of the S.A.N.N.C. However, the subsequent decline of the S.A.N.N.C. can obviously not be attributed to post-war disillusionment only; other factors, such as the rise of the more populist I.C.U., also played their part.

It further remains to explore the way in which the war affected the political perceptions of African groupings other than the S.A.N.N.C.. Often the loyal rhetoric of the African elite conceals the ferment in the rest of society. To dispel a notion of general and undisturbed tranquillity it is necessary to look beyond the utterances emanating from a few, not necessarily representative, African leaders.

In contrast with the loyal response of the educated elite at the outbreak of war, dissenting views were expressed by the African working class on the Witwatersrand gold mines. They were quick to draw their own conclusions from the European struggle and relate them to their experiences as an exploited labour force on the mines. Britain was associated with the oppressive system in which they found themselves and therefore Germany was seen as worthy of their sympathies. On the Nourse Mines L. Ralitane informed his fellow labourers that "the Germans are beating the English, and you boys are foolish to work for the English when the Germans are giving them a hiding." Ralitane's 'inflammatory' views earned him the option of a £25 fine or six months' imprisonment.[50] Another labourer even more clearly directed his animosity against the British. "God be with Germany and clear out all Englishmen on earth," was his fervent wish. "Indeed," he continued, "if the German came out in South A.[frica] we shall be glad if we can help them too."[51] Moreover, some mineworkers also perceived that the war held out opportunities for resistance against the repressive system in which they found themselves. The chief compound manager at the Crown mines reported in September 1914:

> I notice a great change the last weeks in the attitute of the natives towards Europeans, the natives being very cheeky and insurbordinate. They appear..... to have the idea that the Government are in difficulties owing to the war and are in consequence weak at and frightened of the natives.... .[52]

Lack of organisation on the part of these Africans, as well as the effective controlling agencies of state and industry - which were particularly pronounced during war-time - prevented such resistance from taking the form of concerted mass actions in 1914. Manifestations of African resistance and their perception of the war as having liberating potentialities were however no less real.

These responses were not confined to the working classes in industrial areas. From rural Natal pro-German sympathies were very much in evidence amongst the Zulu peasant communities. They associated the British with the white colonization of Natal; if Britain could be defeated, it was argued, their position might also change. From their perspective any change of the *status quo* was regarded as preferable to the existing dispensation.[53] Not surprisingly, these desperate expectations found expression in millenarian fantasies. In the Pietermaritzburg district S. Nkabindi gained a considerable following as a prophet predicting that the Whites in South Africa would be annihilated by the Germans who would then restore the land to their rightful African owners.[54] Likewise, in the Dundee district an anonymous prophet claimed that Dinuzulu (former head of the Zulu Royal House who had died in 1913 after being deposed in 1909 and sentenced to four years' imprisonment for his part in the Zulu rebellion of 1906) was still alive and that the Germans would bring him to South Africa and reinstate him as the supreme African ruler.[55]

Others did not look to the Germans, but perceived the war as an opportunity to deliver themselves from bondage. The magistrate of the Greytown district declared explicitly:

> Certain natives are going amongst the tribes .. .. saying that now the English are at war with another nation, you have a good chance to fight them, as England cannot send men to assist. Why should you forever be under a contract to a white man...? What are you to do? Your chance to ease your burdens is to fight the white man and get your country back.[56]

Although it must be kept in mind that at the outbreak of the war Whites were prone to exaggerate the possibility of African uprisings - a psychological overreaction which had more to do with white stereotyping and fears than the actual African response - in this particular case there is no reason to doubt the veracity of the report.

In the Transkei - where the impact of white rule and settlement was less pervasive - some Africans did not merely indulge in speculation on the opportunities offered by the outbreak of

war, but actually used the occation to come out in revolt. Between 12 and 19 November 1914 an uprising occurred in the Matatiele district where the Hlubi destroyed dipping tanks and burnt and looted a number of trading stores. The situation seemed critical at the time and the Whites in the countryside hastly fled into the town for protection. The Chief Magistrate, W.T. Brownlee, immediately acted to re-assert white dominance in the district; every available member of the Citizen Force was called out, armed and rushed by motor car to the scene of disaffection. Confronted by the armed might of their white overloads, open resistance on the part of the Hlubi petered out. A subsequent report revealed that they were seriously aggrieved at the way in which the authorities applied compulsory cattle dipping regulations against East Coast Fever. Although Matatiele was not a fever-stricken area, African peasants in the district were nevertheless forced to comply with the dipping regulations. Moreover, they had to make weekly payments for such dippings, whilst white farmers of greater financial means managed to evade these regulations with impunity. Dipping regulations were admittedly the focal point of the revolt, but the timing of the Hlubi resistance to these measures is of considerable significance in assessing the African response to the outbreak of the Great War. The revolt took place at a time when white authority in the Transkei was particularly vulnerable since many policemen had been drafted into the South African Defence Force. It is clear from a series of meetings held prior to the revolt that the withdrawal of a substantial section of the police had not gone unnoticed amongst the Hlubi. With the white man's attention diverted by hostilities elsewhere, the opportunity for meaningful resistance had, as they were clearly aware, presented itself. To their surprise, however, more armed men turned out to quell the revolt than they had anticipated. It is nevertheless clear that the Hlubi reaction to the outbreak of war represents a definite and organised attempt to rid themselves of the obligations imposed by white rulers.[57]

The Hlubi revolt was the only rural African uprising in the Transkei, or for that matter in South Africa, that can be related to the war. Perhaps less dramatic, but not necessarily less important, was the way in which the wider ramifications of the conflict exerted an influence on post-war millenarian movements in the Transkei. These movements, already alluded to, were connected with the war as far as black disillusionment with the failure of the British government to intervene in South Africa, shifted the attention to America. In 1927 W.D. Cingo, a Transkeian journalist, graphically explained this strand in millenarianism and its relation to the war:

> The Great European War also had its contribution to these illusions. The moral and military power of America came into prominence. Her declaration for the 'Self determination of smaller nations'... caught the tender ears of the unsophisticated natives in these parts. They regard the voice of America as that of a mighty race of black people overseas, dreaded by all Europeans. .... Hopes for political and economic emancipation were revived and today the word America (iMelika) is a household word symbolic of nothing but Bantu National freedom and liberty.[58]

Furthermore, another occurrence related to the war - the death of 615 members of the S.A.N.L.C. who lost their lives when the troopship, the S.S. Mendi, sank off the Isle of Wight on 21 February 1917 after being rammed by the S.S. Darro - featured in post-war African thinking. The memory of the sinking of the Mendi was kept alive by the Mendi Memorial Club, formed by African ex-servicemen, and the annual commemoration of 21 February as 'Mendi day'. In course of time the actual events of that fateful night were related in exaggerated heroic terms and assumed a mythological nationalistic dimension in African group-memory.[59] Related to this was the 'Mendi Memorial Bursary Fund' founded in 1936 to sponsor promising black pupils. A distinct characteristic of this fund was the perceived need to increase black self-esteem through education and the importance of education in the struggle against white domination. During a Mendi memorial meeting in Johannesburg in 1946, attended by 20 000 Blacks, it was argued: "The white men are clever people and the only way to oppose their oppressive measures is by education and cleverness."[60]

It is clear that the wider effects of the war on African perceptions and responses are evident in a number of disparate ways - reflecting the complex diversity in African society itself. Nevertheless, one overriding impression that remains is that several African groupings viewed the war as an event that could be used for expressing their opposition to white rule. The war, however, did not constitute a turning point in this respect; to claim that would mean that the preceding and subsequent process of African resistance would be distorted. Neither would it be correct to assume that *all* African groupings were affected by the hostilities conducted beyond the South African borders. Some Africans paid scant attention to the white man's quarrels. "The feeling came to be pretty common amongst them," it was reported, "that this was only one more of those wars to which the Europeans, who ought to know better, were accustomed, and that it was not in any vital sense a Bantu concern."[61]

III

Apart from the impact of the war on African political perceptions, certain war-related socio-economic changes also affected the black population. It was particularly in the industrial areas of South Africa that these changes made themselves felt and where the effects were starkly visible.

Shortly after the outbreak of war the directors of De Beers decided to suspend all their mining operations on the diamond fields. The mining magnates argued that the uncertain war conditions in Britain and Europe would have a detrimental effect on the international demand for diamonds. Beside cheap labour, the profitability of the industry was dependent on the careful marketing of diamonds and it was therefore essential to avoid flooding the market at a time when the international prospects for luxury items like diamonds appeared decidedly bleak. The possibility of continuing mining operations and stockpiling diamonds to market at a later stage was also considered unfeasible because of the considerable capital investment and high risk involved. Consequently some 5 000 Whites and 45 000 Blacks were dismissed from the various diamond mines and mining operations were only resumed on a limited scale in July 1916.[62]

For the mining magnates such a policy made sound financial sense, but the summary cessation caused considerable resentment amongst the unemployed workers. After the Jagersfontein mine has been closed down, an indignant white worker asked:

> Is it right that a few men who have obtained their wealth by the labour and sweat of their employees in Jagersfontein, can stop a whole industry and plunge a whole town into the miseries of starvation, to save themselves not from ruin but from the temporary loss of their fat dividends and profits?[63]

And, one may very well ask, how much more applicable must these sentiments have been to the black workers who found themselves on the bottom rung of the labour ladder?

Whilst white workers were offered some financial assistance to tide them over, no such provision was made for African workers. Having served their purpose, they were repatriated without any further ado. Many of them were in dire distress; without food and little money they streamed back to poverty-stricken areas which they had actually left

in the first place to supplement their meagre income. This was particularly the case with the Sotho who had left Basutoland on account of a shortage of food during 1914. Not surprisingly the police on the border between South Africa and Basutoland reported that "a disquieting feature is the behaviour of the natives who are returning from the diamond fields. Their attitude is mutinous and quite unlike their usual behaviour."[64] Equally clear is the motivation which prompted a number of labourers returning from Kimberley to Basutoland to plunder a shop in Brandfort and remove the food supplies in it.[65]

In contrast with the diamond mines, the production of gold was uninterrupted by the war; gold being sold at the fixed price of 85/- per fine ounce. During the war though, a situation arose on the gold mines which could have had far-reaching effects for the black labourers. Approximately 25% of the skilled or semi-skilled white labour force left for active service,[66] and the opportunity therefore existed for Blacks to replace them. The Chamber of Mines was in favour of such a move - not on account of any 'liberal' considerations - but only because skilled or semi-skilled black labour would be cheaper than similar white labour.[67] However, this did not materialise to any great extent since the white Mineworkers Union ensured that the places of those who had left for the front were filled by 'poor white' Afrikaners.[68] Thus, although a few Blacks did move up in the labour hierarchy during the war, it was hardly of any significance for the great majorty of the African working class who made no gains during the war.

The labour supply to the gold mines was not seriously affected by the military recruitment of Blacks; although it caused a slight drop, this was off-set by unemployed workers from the diamond fields finding their way to the gold mines.[69] In the closing stages of hostilities though, the labour supply became insufficient to satisfy the demands of an expanding industry and in the aftermath of the war increased production costs, due to war-time inflation, contributed to a serious profitability crisis.[70] This had as we shall see later, important implications for black wage rates and war-time inflation also contributed to a few 'wildcat' strikes during the war years which foreshadowed the extensive strike of February 1920 involving 71 000 black workers.[71]

Strained industrial relations were of course not confined to the gold mines. Outside the mining industry considerable labour unrest occurred during 1918-20: the demands for higher wages in Bloemfontein in February 1919; the large scale revolt against passes in Johannesburg in March and April 1919; the dock strike in Cape Town in December 1919 which launched Clements Kadalie's I.C.U.; and the agitation for wage increases in Port Elizabeth in January 1920. These upheavals, which were particularly sustained in Johannesburg during 1918-19,

have been well documented by other historians and will not be further discussed here.[72] However, several writers have briefly hinted at or merely assumed that the war contributed to the rising tide of militancy. Although this assertion is undoubtedly valid, it has not been demonstrated, except for rather vague statements,[73] how hostilities conducted mainly in Europe influenced black workers in a country 10 000 kilometers removed from the seat of war. Within the context of this paper it is therefore important to establish the links between the war and labour unrest.

In this respect it is essential to note the rapid secondary industrialision which occurred during the war years. There was a brief decline in trade and industry at the outbreak of war, but soon after that remarkable growth took place. From 1915-16 the number of factories and other manufacturing enterprises increased from 3998 to 6890 in 1919-20 - an increase of 72%.[74] Basically this development was related to the war in that South Africa was unable to import articles not usually produced locally and local manufacturers were induced to take advantage of the opportunity created by diminishing foreign competition whilst the natural protection which South African industries enjoyed as a result of being thousands of kilometers from Europe and America was increased during the war by the rise in freight, insurance and other import changes as well as the severely reduced commercial output of the belligerent nations.[75] The industrial take-off was closely allied with accelerated urbanisation. During and immediately after the war, the number of unskilled workers (mainly Africans) employed in urban industries (excluding mines) rose dramatically by 83%; from 61 654 in 1915-16 to 113 037 in 1919-20.[76] The vast majority of these workers were concentrated in the industrial heartland of S.A., the Witwatersrand area, where they were housed in appalling conditions. The rapid proletarianisation clearly had important implications for labour unrest and indirectly the war thus provided the broad socio-economic context for strained industrial relations. This connection did not go unnoticed amongst the officials of the Native Affairs Department. In a memorandum of May 1919, dealing with the position of Africans on the Witwatersrand, it was explicitly pointed out:

> "The disorganisation of the commercial world.... .. has thrown the British Dominions on their own resources, and one is amazed at the strides that have been made in local manufacturing during the past four years. In short, the war has put the hand of time forward many years ... and this is perhaps most noticeable in regard to the natives... . They have been awakened by the roar and noise of a universal war ..... . Johannesburg has become the centre in which native

> thought has developed most during the war, and from which native political movements will radiate. ..... It is on the Witwatersrand that the native has had the opportunity of realising what industrial labour strikes mean".[77]

Important as war time industrialisation might have been in accelerating proleterianisation, it was of course, not the only contributory factor. Underdevelopment of the reserves - an ongoing process which drove Africans off the land - as well the effects of droughts in the rural areas also loomed large in this transformation. Once again the necessity of balancing war-related developments with other trends in society is evident.

A further consideration in examining the links between the war and labour unrest, is that of inflation. As a result of war conditions in Britain, demand for goods exceeded supply and consequently prices increased drastically. Since South Africa had intimate trade links with Britain, this also affected the price structure in the Union. Moreover, banking and credit facilities were considerably extended during the war-time industrialisation and the unproductive debt almost doubled between 1910 and 1920. The cost of living, according to official statistics, increased by 15,07% between 1914 and 1918, but there are indications that retail prices for the same period rose between 31% and 39%.[78] Although white salaries were adjusted accordingly, black wages were either pegged at pre-war levels or only increased marginally.[79] Not surprisingly, the issue of wages become a burning grievance and the focal point for industrial unrest.

In addition to these developments, the sacrifices made by African participants in the war also impinged on the ideological consciousness of Blacks during the unrest on the Witwatersrand. Thus a black women, E. Mallela, declared at the time of the so-called one shilling strike: "King George in France said to the natives you are my soldiers. Why should we be arrested and killed under the Union Jack? We have helped. We must be free, why should we be slaves? Think of the blood of our boys in France."[80] Essentially the same point was made by an anonymous African at more or less the same time: "Some of our brothers are in France today. Some of us are dying for Botha's Government which do[es] not give us anything."[81] These were not isolated examples and it can be readily assumed that this awareness must have had a stimulating effect. However, despite the significance of these war-related ideas actually surfacing on the Rand during 1918/19, there is no satisfactory evidence that these were important considerations for spurring either black workers or petty bourgeoisie elements into revolt.

The links between the war and labour unrest are therefore mainly confined to industrialisation, proletarianisation and inflation. Of these, the effects of inflation on black wages were directly connected with the primary cause for agitation. However, as P.L. Bonner has noted in his paper on the unrest on the Rand, it would be wrong "to exaggerate the importance of this factor [black wages] at the expense of the wider range of repressive discriminatory mechanisms ....". The iniquitous pass system, poor housing and inadequate educational facilities were all interrelated and integral to the system of labour repression which evoked such sustained resistance.[82] In evaluating the effect of the war on urban discontent, these inherent structural inequalities are obviously of overriding and paramount importance; war-related developments only served in an oblique way to expose and emphasise the exploitable position of African workers.

IV

In his seminal work on war and social change in the Anglo-American and European context Arthur Marwick has generalised that "in modern war there is a greater participation on the part of larger underprivileged groups in society, who tend correspondingly to benefit, or at least develop a new self-consciousness." More specifically he contends that participation in the war effort involves "a strengthened market position and hence higher material standards for such groups; it also engenders a new sense of status, usually leading to a dropping of former sectional or class barriers."[83] In the southern African context few historians have provided an overall assessment of the impact of war, but S.E. Katzenellenbogen has nonetheless ventured to suggest: "Generally, all social groups in southern Africa benefitted economically from the war. Wages were driven up by the greater shortage of labour..."[84]

Katzenellenbogen's assertion can be readily dismissed; as indicated the economic position of South African Blacks actually declined during 1914-1918 as a result of war-time inflation. Although Marwick's generalisation is more subtle than the foregoing extract would suggest, it is also largely unacceptable when applied to war-related development in South Africa. Admittedly participation in the war did serve to increase the self-esteem and consciousness of certain Africans, but apart from the enduring effect of the Mendi disaster, little, if any, practical advances were achieved.

Obviously a key question in determining the impact of war is whether the war itself actually initiated new trends or reinforced existing ones. For South Africa it would be

claiming too much to aver that the war was responsible for a completely original departure. However, particularly in the field of war-time manufacturing and commerce, decisive changes did occur. "While imperial capital's influence declined", B. Bozzoli has recently shown, "that of national capital rose; while the elements that constituted imperial capital were shaken by the war, those of national capital seized the opportunity to grow and become firmer..." [85] Closely allied to growth of local capital was the extension of social and political control over urban Africans in the post-war period - formally embodied in the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas Act.) This legislation, as Peter Kallaway has interpreted it, was "the basis of a much tougher political creed, namely the foundation of a stable urban African community in the towns of South Africa, which would because of its stake in the *status quo*, form a bulwark against labour unrest and political agitators." [86] Thus, even from this cursory discussion of the nature of changes effected by the First World War, it is clearly evident that the white man's war not only brought greater hardships for Africans during the war-period, but that war-related developments outside their control also had detrimental longterm implications.

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