

1914: SA, WW1 and Afrikaner Rebellion



Dr Rodney Warwick

06 August 2014

Rodney Warwick writes on South African involvement in the Great War and the repercussions at home

1914 and South Africa, the First World War and Afrikaner Rebellion Anglo-South Africans and the First World War

A book which I recently read, Weep for Africa by Jeremy Hall contained his recollection of a crude act of school boarding house tomfoolery at Kearsney College in then Natal. A fellow boarder had cultivated "inhaling" into his rectum, then to other schoolboys' hilarity, breaking wind to the tempo of Die Stem. I could not help thinking that as a cultural entity "English South Africans" loyalty to the Afrikaner dominated state was never particularly strong, or at least weaker than Afrikaner loyalty. These schoolboys is an amusing understatement of how they would have agreed.

But once, boys at prominent English South African schools took patriotism very seriously and most particularly during the First World War. On 4 August 1914, the date South Africa with the rest of the British Empire was officially at war; such schools were fertile nurseries of Imperial loyalty. Any current visitor to the South African College School in Cape Town, Michaelhouse in Kwazulu-Natal, St John's College in Johannesburg, Pretoria Boys and numerous others can locate the prominently displayed lengthy Honour Rolls of the fallen. Maritzburg College and Bishops virtually tied in the highest numbers of Old Boys who served and quantifiably, Anglo whites by far made up the largest grouping of South African fallen.

The vivid school incident described above dated from the early 1970s; around a decade after South Africa become a Republic in 1961 via a narrow nationalist victory in a whites' only referendum. English-speaking whites voted virtually en bloc against this constitutional change which estranged them from their Queen, besides other British cultural and historical links. Actually the 1960s "South African English" hostility to the white majority Afrikaner nationalists was also grounded in bitter Anglo resentment at their being permanently relieved of political power in 1948, bolstered by their historic anti-Afrikaner prejudices, despite both groups at that time rejecting African nationalist majority rule.

Combined these fleetingly consolidating English South Africans into a furious "white African Ulster-type grouping" and appealing to world war sacrifices were absolutely core to this identity, particularly as numerous veterans from both conflicts were still alive. Afrikaner splits and ambivalences over participation in both world wars were not respected by English South Africans.

This said there is no denying the very central role which Anglo-South Africans played during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the modernisation of South Africa, although it was the bitter war of 1899-1902 which had both established the future state's boundaries, but also sown the seed of Afrikaner grievances.

White Afrikaners, most of who espoused little affection for the British Empire, served in their thousands during the 1914-18 campaigns in Germany's South West and East Africa colonies. South African war involvement was led at political and sometimes military level by Afrikaner Prime Minister Louis Botha and defence minister Jan Smuts. No successful local war centenary commemorations can possibly ignore the participation by all the diverse predecessors amongst current South African communities. However, the 1914 Afrikaner Rebellion, as it was precipitated by First World War and South Africa's immediate involvement (although the SA government had the right to determine the extent), demands some special detailed attention.

The magnitude of human loss - 17 million dead and the global historical consequences of the Great War aside, it is not difficult even today to understand that 1914 German militarism had few redeeming qualities. That Germany's invasion of Belgium to attack France, accompanied by the murder of Belgian civilians, was not unlike the dictator Saddam Hussein's ruthless falling on Kuwait in 1990. There exists a sound argument to view resisting Germany as a just war, a perspective which both Botha and Smuts shared.

The 1914 Afrikaner Rebellion

August to December will mark the Rebellion centenary, pertinent to study today both regarding understanding white South African historical identity and contemporary potential African nationalist political imitations. The 1914 Rebellion centenary could prompt grim recollections, besides new insights and comparisons pertinent to other events in the early 1990s and 1994 that might also have derailed our already so difficult De Klerk to Mandela and thereafter transition.

The Rebellion if thoroughly studied could also highlight historical nuances pertinent to comprehending an undeniable aspect of Afrikaner historical identity: The tendency of an enraged embittered minority to with violence almost destroy a political process they cannot perceive as directed towards a hopeful common good. Such incorrigible Afrikaner nationalists could not share the serious act of faith and compromise the Union of 1910 and the 1994 transition required. The recent Boeremag saga was another most pertinent, albeit tiny, but potentially destructive example of this pattern.

Whoever acknowledges the 1914 Rebellion centenary, their manner of commemoration and motives therefore, will also cast a spotlight deep into the sometimes turbulent relations within early twentieth century white South Africa. These dynamics, if broadened to a wider comparative study, might assist us

in appreciating similar complexities within our contemporary national politics, not least that being played out in current black South African political struggles.

Historiographically the 1914 Rebellion is historically understood as having been specifically catalysed by Prime Minister Louis Botha's affirmative response to British government appeals for the Union to invade German South West Africa (GSWA), thereby silencing German radio transmissions that reported to Berlin, Royal Navy movements and merchant shipping in the south Atlantic.

Botha and his highly influential associate Jan Smuts, not only acknowledged the British request as legitimate, but also considered as in the national interest, the German territory's possible later integration into the Union. These two former bittereinde Boer War generals turned politicians, in irreconcilable contrast to the republican-minded rebels, were also adamant the Union had definite Imperial responsibilities. Not least, considering that constitutionally South Africa was at war against Germany the moment the British ultimatum demanding the Kaiser's soldiers' withdrawal from Belgium had expired. Such was the Union's and other British dominions legal responsibility in 1914 to the "Mother Country".

Also enormously alienating to Afrikaner nationalists was the SAP government's view that after the Vryheidsoorlog, Britain had been financially and politically generous to the Boers by facilitating the 1910 Union, also ensuring the retention of close economic and cultural links to Britain. For Anglo South Africans and Botha/Smuts Afrikaner supporters, intervention in GSWA seemed obviously the honourable and potentially economically beneficial course. In fact, in the event of Botha declining, the Imperial government were considering using Australian troops as one alternative.

Revisiting the Rebellion should also prompt reflection upon the potentially cataclysmic national consequences that might have been, again both in 1914 and 94. In the former date it could have successfully ignited another Anglo-Boer War, just as its leading instigators risked; with such an historical nightmare being dangerously concurrent to the massive war already raging across Europe.

The British Army's crushing of the 1916 Easter Revolt in Ireland and resultant peremptorily execution of Irish Republican leaders, gives some clue as to the likely and even more shocking end a prolonged South African insurrection could have taken. Indeed as the Irish rebels also discovered, Afrikaner rebels both during the above dates and the later Boeremag had to endure the painful truth that most of their kin, even those to a greater or lesser degree sympathetic, could never conceivably support their methods.

During 1991 to 1994 another Afrikaner rebellion flickered in the form of several violent clashes between the state and Afrikaner Weerstand Beweeging members. A good example was the August 1991 "Battle of Ventersdorp" resulting in fatal AWB casualties from police action. But a more potentially ominous situation occurred during March 1994 when a component drawn from General Constand Viljoen's Afrikanervolksfront's purported "armed wing" mobilised for intervening in the Bophuthatswana political chaos. Without adequate arms and after suffering some casualties, Viljoen's force quickly withdrew, never to muster again. Another "rebel" group also arrived, but without AVF invitation: The distinctly unwanted 600 man strong AWB force who conducted a murderous rampage through Mmabatho, before

losing three men killed under the hideous circumstances comparable to the 60 black civilians cheerfully "potted" from the AWB convoy.

Later AWB and other extreme right-wing bombings and shootings completed this hopelessly doomed latter day rebellion; in total being far less destructive in lives and property than that of 1914 rebels. But respectable history is very unlikely to confer any even vaguely honourable commemoration upon these 1994 insurrectionists, who looked a faint image of the fighting men on both sides during 1914. In contrast, Viljoen remains a memorable, intelligent, heroic figure for as both a politician and a soldier, the Mmabatho events convinced him that insurrection against the state had no plausibility of sustainable success. Besides, Viljoen was personally also repelled by the AWB's racially hate-driven conduct and its undisciplined boorishness - as far as he was concerned, the antithesis of the SADF he had once commanded.

In a continued coincidence, 2014 also marks the twentieth anniversary of the 1994 elections. Perhaps for a majority of Afrikaners and other white South Africans, not to mention other minorities and black South Africans well outside the ANC camp, this will also prompt distressingly unavoidable questions as to the long-term sustainability and/or vulnerability of our beleaguered liberal democratic constitution, currently facing aggressive, uncompromising variations of African nationalism.

Our national constitution supposedly represents what the majority of whites fully acceded to during the 1992 referendum; what they understood was the only viable alternative to the impossible and definitely catastrophic "rebel" alternative, namely bloody civil war without end. The 1914 Rebellion centenary and the grim 1994 right wing buffoonery may be reviewed during 2014 from a variety of perspectives, but will still never constitute any sane inspiration to revolt against the current state with force of arms.

But the devastation and defeat of 1899-1902, coupled to the strong anti-British antipathy still felt by so many Afrikaners was a powerful disincentive to even remotely share their Anglo fellow citizens' often jingoistic enthusiasm for war. Yet some Afrikaners, like Smuts's close associates Denys Reitz, Jaap Van Deventer, Coen Brits and other former bittereinders, haltingly at first, then with growing conviction, followed the South African Party creed of reconciliation with British South Africans, accepting that on balance the Imperial link advantaged the Union.

The Rebellion's course is complicated to describe in brief. It includes several salient features encompassing heroism, tragedy, endurance and treachery. Any re-examination of Rebellion incidents this year will exhibit potential conflict around whom and what detail best describes each of these qualities. General Koos de la Rey's accidental shooting, occurring probably because of General Christiaan Beyers's panicking in trying to elude a police roadblock intended for common criminals, an explanation rejected by government foes, left forever unanswered the question as to whether De La Rey would have openly supported the rebels and led them in the field, as General Christiaan De Wet did.

Or whether De La Rey would have eventually accepted only constitutional politics, as had ex-Free State President Martinus Steyn, despite his rebel sympathies. Another rebel leader of note was Manie Maritz, a rock-hard, intolerant man and a formidable soldier, who also committed out and out treason in conspiring with the Germans and through these actions, the government believed he had contributed to

UDF casualties during the 26 September 1914 Battle of Sandfontein just inside GSWA. Maritz's son was a prominent AWB member during the 1980s.

Christiaan De Wet was an extraordinary Boer fighter but he sullied his remarkable Boer War reputation during the Rebellion by allowing the looting and destruction of property in the eastern Free State, conducted by his largely "Five Bob a day" landless and bywoener followers. De Wet's defeat at Mushroom Valley near Winburg was both ignominious for the rebels and costly in lives lost on both sides. It was during this phase of the Rebellion where later politician and then UDF officer Piet Van der Byl recorded the extreme pain felt by Louis Botha who directly commanded government forces in the field.

Botha lamented as Afrikaner friends, former comrades and even family members, exchanged shot and shell while the rebels persisted in their futile struggle until suffering inevitable defeat. Former UDF commander and Boer General Beyers who met his end drowning in the Vaal River while attempting to elude government pursuit, never knew of his close associate former UDF Major Jan Kemp, fleeing with his followers on a ride of massive resilience through the northern Cape and Kalahari into GSWA. But Kemp also committed treason in fraternising and plotting with the Union's German enemies. But let me pause to acknowledge here now - such are also the perspectives of a third-generation English-speaking South African, whose grandfather served as a professional UDF officer and fought against the rebels.

But there was one Rebellion story that retained significant power through later historical selectiveness and popular nationalist mythology: That of Jopie Fourie - a Boer War hero and serving UDF officer, who unlike Kemp and Beyers had never resigned his commission before joining the rebels. Fourie and the men under his command marauded in the Nooitgedacht area until in a final shoot-out which cost the lives of twelve government troops.

After a desperate bayonet charge by police and military personnel on a rebel defended donga, Fourie and his party finally laid down their arms. Colonel Nico Pretorius commanded the government troops and according to correspondence addressed to me several years ago by his son then living in the Nylstroom district, Pretorius senior who was also Fourie's cousin had been personally assigned by Smuts to try and first convince Fourie to surrender.

Smuts was outraged at the heavy loss of life in this one engagement where the rebellion had already been snuffed out elsewhere. Smuts poured out his anger on Fourie's leadership and conduct; indeed some accounts suggest Fourie had abused a white flag to lure troops out of cover. Perhaps politically unable to act likewise against rebels of De Wet's stature, and against the advice of Louis Esselen, one of Smuts's closest confidants, the then defence minister personally ratified Fourie's death sentence. Jopie Fourie found a place on the pantheon of nationalist martyrs - even still in 1968, the SADF in-house magazine Kommando provided a page to advertise Fourie's hagiographic biography.

During the National Party government's rule the 1914 Rebellion received limited, cautious official public attention, even amidst the post-1948 decades of intense Afrikaner nationalist enthusiasm and mobilisation. The fratricidal tragedy that marked the Rebellion amongst Afrikaners must have contributed to the event's limited official acknowledgement. Rather like the Handsuppers and Joiners

legacy from 1899-1902, prevalent during the desperate last two years of the Boer War, the Rebellion could not fit the nationalist historical master narrative and required some careful suppression and limited educational analysis. For within the decades to come, the NP had electoral support from ex-rebels, ex-National Scouts and disillusioned Sappe.

The 1924 official government military history of the Rebellion provides a figure of 11 472 men joining rebel commandos. The UDF required 30 000 troops to suppress the uprising; 20 000 of whom were Afrikaners for the larger proportion of Anglo South African soldiers were not directly utilised for fear of even further inflaming "white racial" emotions. 190 rebels were killed in action as opposed to 132 government troops. Counting losses of both sides there were nearly 600 wounded.

But the 1914 Rebellion casualties engendered excessive bitterness which swelled in later years, although the UDF invasion of GSWA continued successfully and despite the unpopularity amongst Afrikaners in serving the British Imperial cause, some 25 000 Boers in their commandos followed Botha, fighting alongside British South African infantry and mounted regiments. Similar proportions of Afrikaners later campaigned in German East Africa, where after Smuts was called to serve on the British War Cabinet, General Jaap Van Deventer assumed command of the region's entire Imperial Force.

Overall South African participation in the Great War and memorialisation

The figures representing South African involvement quantified by 'race' are that during 1914-1918, 146 000 white men, 400 white female nurses, 45 000 black men and 15 000 coloured men served. War dead casualties from action, illness and accidents amounted to 12 500; the heaviest occurring in France: 7121 amongst the 'white' 1st SA Brigade; most of which were by battle. A significant proportion of the casualty balance was incurred by troops of all races succumbing to tropical diseases in German East Africa.

However, it is also true that compared to the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, also all former components of the British Empire where the centenary has and is receiving, very considerable government and private support, within South Africa the interest has been faint. So why then this apparent local lack of remembrance as virtually a century ago, the then Union of South Africa was also in a state of hostilities with the German Empire; a war which besides masses of dead altered the course of global history?

Some answers can be drawn directly out of South African historical experiences post-1918: Veterans once did regularly attend 11 November Remembrance Days. While for some decades Delville Wood Day of 16 July was a rallying occasion of specifically the 1st SA Brigade veterans who had fought in the hellish trench warfare of the French/Belgium Western Front. But unlike within other former British dominions, this local remembrance received very limited concerted official support and as veterans passed on, so group memory dimmed.

White South African political divisions along the Afrikaans/English historical fault line ensured that under nationalist control, government history education did not stress the teaching of the war and even less so, South Africa's participation therein. While to Australians, Gallipoli has remained something of a

landmark historical occasion, surely also part contrived, whereby 'nationhood' was established by shared adversity and blood. The power of this explanation, mythical or otherwise, is manifested by these Turkish battlegrounds being visited each year by hundreds of Australian tourists representing all ages.

1st SA Brigade veterans and Anglo-Afrikaner politicians intended a similar historical symbolism for Delville Wood in 1926 when the memorial there was opened, expounding it as a battle by which white English and Afrikaners were at last 'united'. Around thirty per cent of white Springbok troops who served in France had Afrikaans surnames, but not all were Afrikaners. But the Delville Wood memorial was specifically designed to shape a collective memory of an Anglo-Afrikaner brotherhood supposedly forged in war. These attempts to construct a united (white) South African history were effectively air brushed from later popular Afrikaner nationalist historical perspectives and such amendments were in future decades propelled further forward to reconfigure Afrikaner historical memory. For them the war and particularly South Africa's military expedition to Europe was associated to British requests and needs.

Right up to the armistice of 11 November 1918, the 1st SA Brigade fought across a wide area of France; their best known final battle being at Marrières Wood during 21-22 March, where they bore the brunt of the fighting by the 9th Scottish Division and suffered severe casualties. Recent private attempts to install a South African memorial at Marrières Wood have not received SA government approval, on the spurious grounds that such would be "devisive".

The Cape Corps and lack of official recognition for the South African Native Labour Corps

But of course, South African war involvement was neither exclusively white nor 'English' or Afrikaners - both rebels and loyalists. Very recently the South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC) service in Europe was prominently positioned in the news with the re-interment of a black soldier's remains at the Delville Wood site.

The coloured Cape Corps served as a battalion of infantry which fought with distinction in German East Africa and Palestine; their magnificent memorial, unveiled in 1924 is located in the Cape Town City Hall. There were also non-combatant Cape Corps labourers and the Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport unit, neither of which units have any memorial. Cape Corps's fighting in Palestine against the Turks included temporarily sustained but now virtually forgotten accounts of heroism at the Battle of Square Hill on 20 September 1918.

SANLC veterans did not attempt to memorialise their soldier-labouring as honourable Imperial Service, although post-1994 the commemoration of the SANLC Mendi troopship tragedy has received very significant official recognition. But by 1919, this disaster together with lack of compensation comprised just some amongst scores of historical grievances which the ANC's forerunner, the South African Native National Congress brought that year to the British government. Added to the litany of segregation/apartheid issues and history of the resistance against, both Cape Corps and SANLC Great War legacies virtually died along with their veterans.

The SANLC members did not receive the British War Medal which was awarded to all members of British and Imperial Forces during World War One; the reason being racially discriminatory based procrastination by the Smuts government after the war, and finally the direct refusal for approving its award by the Hertzog National Party/Labour government, elected to office in 1924. This was an emphatic injustice as the British government made allocation for the decoration to be awarded to the SANLC. An ideal South African First World War centenary project promoting justice and reconciliation for would be to, as far as possible, locate current descendants of the SANLC veterans and let them receive this decoration, albeit a century late. All other South African troops, white and coloured, were awarded the British War Medal.

The waning of 1914 Afrikaner Rebellion and South African First World War Remembrance

Group identity is heavily dependent upon memory, along with deliberate public and private efforts to sustain aspects thereof, such as war remembrance. As the South Africa of 1914 was barely a culturally coherent nation, even amongst whites, official war memorialisation was dominated by the English group. Besides at the prominent boys' schools, many other memorials were unveiled nation-wide: The Cape Town Cenotaph in 1924 and those in Johannesburg and Durban during 1926; the "weeping" Delville Wood Cross in Pietermaritzburg's Garden of Remembrance and many others. Inside and outside Anglican churches across the country were erected plaques naming individual parishes war dead. These representations were as much about a pouring out of grief as of sacrifice and honour. A century later, they still should be seen as such.

During following decades, Anglo South Africa group identity became even more disconnected, although reinforced temporarily by participation in the following world war. Group identities also evolve to serve particular interests and ideological positions. The fluidity of the really amorphous white English South African identity was further extenuated by the individualistic prosperity of the 1960s and early 1970s; the generational advantages of apartheid; collaboration to various degrees with Afrikaner nationalists against increasingly militant extra-parliamentary black socialism and nationalism.

In this country 1914-18 war remembrance is now very distant, except to individuals interested in past family exploits and remaining obligatory 11 November services involving a few schools and small veteran associations, sometimes along with very limited government participation. It remains to be seen if the even more forgotten 1914 Rebellion centenary will suffer likewise. But its coincidental "numerical proximity" to the violent right-wing events of 1994 and general election of the same year, make it likely the stories of Botha, Smuts, De Wet, Fourie and others will resurface. Popular collective memory is not easily contrived: 2014 may witness a deepening of the pessimistic idealism and appeals inherent within Bok Van Blerk's De la Rey doggerel. But it may also be a time where we can reflect intelligently upon the nuances of our historical identities: Afrikaner - rebel, nationalist, Sappe, or like myself, descendants of Anglo-settlers who came to stay in Africa. Superimposed upon the current widening schisms of African

nationalist politics, not least within Zuma's ANC, the 1914 Rebellion may have left some historical guide lines where we can glimpse our future.

But for the vast majority of the South African population, including white Afrikaners, the First World War might still almost appear to have little significance, except to those with an interest in history's value as an intellectual endeavour or with an eye for political opportunism. As the four year Great War Centenary begins, the challenge for those involved in education is to give the long dead veterans of the SANLC, Square Hill, Delville Wood and those who fought in Germany's African colonies the honour they deserve, tempered with the humility that well taught history should stress.

Source: www.politicsweb.co.za