Chapter Two

> Africans would find it hard to believe that a thief can protect them from theft or that the English thief is better than a German one. Moses Kotane.[1]

The Politics of War

I was too young in the early 1940s to understand the thorny questions of the politics of war. Was it an imperialist war or an anti-fascist one? Political activists invariably have to live with the decisions of their erstwhile leaders. The Left's description of the war between August 1939 and June 1941 as an imperialist one followed the thinking of communist parties internationally and affected all of them for a long time. In defending this position a few years later, when Nazi Germany attacked Russia in 1941, I was perhaps justifiably mystified by the shift from the concept of an imperialist war to an anti-fascist, peoples' war.

Having inherited the analysis that the war was initially for corporate profits, I accepted that assessment without question. Adjusting to the new view was difficult. The delayed support for the war by communists the world over never ceased to be the stick with which the Left was beaten and I suffered the jibes of the party's critics on that matter just as I did the chronic criticism of Stalin when I entered the movement in 1944 at the age of fourteen – a few months before my fifteenth birthday. I avidly read *The Guardian*, not an official organ of the Party, but its independence was only technical, and its editorial comment for the most part reflected the views of the CPSA and the ANC throughout the 1940s and of the SACP and the congresses after that. Its independence, however, did not save it from being banned from publication by the National Party government in 1952, although its independent legal status allowed it to continue under a different name until 1960 when the last title, *New Age* was banned from publication. On the other hand, *Inkululeko* was the official newspaper of the Communist Party, but its solid design of uninterrupted text (in English and African languages) was mainly for the most committed readers.

The Party communicated its analysis of the war in no uncertain terms both in *Inkululeko,* and *The Guardian*, which I regularly sold on a Friday night on the corner of Diagonal Street, Johannesburg, along with other stalwarts in the YCL and the Party. A little later, I remember selling the YCL newspaper, an uptight, professionally designed four-paged tabloid entitled *YOUTH, for a New South Africa.* No one has preserved all the

issues of this publication and most libraries no longer seem to be aware of its existence, although it lasted for two years from 1946 to 1948. I sold either one or more of the papers first as a schoolboy in my gaudy green and yellow-striped school blazer and later as an adult. Diagonal Street was the frontline of our activity. It was a splendid location for selling "the paper of the people", as I confidently marketed *The Guardian*, waving it at frantic commuters rushing for a seat on the crowded buses. Set on the diagonal, the street had roads running off it at all angles to various parts of the city, leading towards Fordsburg, Vrededorp, to the Market Square and to the townships west of Johannesburg, including Sophiatown. The commuters were mostly men, some of them already high on liquor in early anticipation of a lively weekend in the townships. The war seemed very remote from their lives. Later on I often wondered what they thought of this stalwart group and the white boy, still in school uniform, ardently entering into debate about war, the workers and "our social responsibility to defend the world from fascism".

In retrospect, I realise how much a voice in the wilderness we were for much of that time, and how confusing it all must have been. The Afrikaner nationalists in parliament, the street fighters in the fascist "shirt movements" and the communists in the CPSA were all opposed to the war, but their reasons could not have been further apart. The communists opposed Nazism and were ambivalent about the real nature of the war. The Afrikaner nationalists sought a Nazi victory. The broad belief of the nationalists, *The Guardian* explained, was that Germany was likely to secure very large successes quickly and that their vision of an independent Boer Republic would be realised. While *The Guardian* berated the nationalists and Hitlerism, it invested little trust in the Smuts government. "Neither Boer nor 'Brit'", it stated frankly, "would be other than bitterly opposed to the rise of non European rights, non European Unions, [and] non-European political action in this … rich non-European country." It was the convention to use the phrase "non-European" as if whites were in the majority of the population and Africans marginal. "African" is what was meant or "black" if the statement was intended to include Indian and Coloured people. At any rate, the inference of *The Guardian*'s statement was that while the Smuts government purported to be defending democracy, there was little difference between them and their nationalist opposition on issues of domestic freedom.

For its part, the Left agonized over its stance on the fascist menace: Smuts was "ready and willing" to go to war and his government had budgeted for an increase in defence preparations while the leaders of the oppositional nationalist factions of Hertzog and Malan were "neutral".[2] The CPSA pamphlet written in June 1939, "Must We Fight?" held that pacifism would not stop the war and neutrality would not save South Africa from the fascist menace. What the Party needed to know (its question, "Must We Fight?" was pertinent) was whether the war would be in the interests of capital and markets or genuinely in defence of democracy? This was the seminal question that preoccupied the

Party throughout the first years of the war; it would not go away. It arose in a number of different forms. In this instance, support for a government that seemingly acted to defend democracy abroad while eschewing it at home, seemed like a contradiction in terms. “The African”, the Party argued in 1942, “feels no loyalty to a government that binds him with pass laws, burdens him with oppressive taxation, prevents him from buying land … and in every way closes the door to [“his”] advancement”.[3] In the light of its consistent pre-war warnings of the dangers of the fascist menace and the untrustworthiness of the capitalist class, the Party felt it correct to stay with that logic and prudently adopted the slogan, “Democracy at home – Collective action against fascism abroad!”.[4]

As I was too young to join the army, I had to defend the position which had already been taken by the time I entered the movement. It was intriguing to note the ways in which some of the most profound political analysts on the Left could get themselves entangled in inextricable knots. Notions I read about in earlier editions of *The Guardian* were fanciful. In one instance, as fascist armies were sweeping through Europe, latter-day Bolsheviks conjured up a Leninist vision of world Socialism. At least one such enthusiast believed that as Russia in 1917 was for Lenin the weakest link in the capitalist chain, so Nazi Germany was in that position in 1939/1940. What he meant was that just as Russia was the weakest of the capitalist allies in World War I, Germany would be similarly weakened by the coalition against it and its demise would trigger a socialist revolution. This was reinforced in a letter from a “Socialist” printed in *The Guardian,* in which the writer believed that neutrality would only bolster the dominant capitalist powers and lead to the entrenchment of Nazism. “We cannot stand aside and say this is no quarrel of ours,” he said, “the German people can only be liberated by the defeat of Hitlerism”, which would be the quickest way to convert Germany into a Socialist country and “herald the next step to world Socialism and a world without war”.[5]

The Guardian (perhaps in sympathy with this view) was not at that stage averse to participation in the war. The possibility of a repetition of events similar to those in Russia in 1917 was fresh in people’s minds. It was all very confusing when the same newspaper appeared to draw back from its support for the war: “We cannot however help being lukewarm in our support for Messrs. Chamberlain and Deladier,” it said, suggesting that neutrality was preferable to supporting the capitalists. Later, noting that its signals had become a little mixed it clarified the point, stating that it was not half-hearted about defeating Nazism, but had no sympathies with the likes of Chamberlain and Deladier.

By the time the war broke out, the Party had already made up its mind to oppose it, although it still insisted that the ruling class in Britain and France would ultimately make common cause with their counterparts in Germany. Britain’s “lethargy” in the early months of the war, when it ostensibly directed its troops to Finland to defend it against attack from the Soviet Union, seemed to support this. Was the war “a struggle between

rival imperialisms for raw materials, markets, capitalist domination and the power to exploit colonial peoples in Africa and Asia?" Or "would the capitalists of Britain and France … come to terms with the German capitalists against the workers [in] another Munich scandal?" as *The Guardian* columnist, "Vigilator" noted. The assumption seemed to be that the capitalist class in Hitler's Germany would rather unite with capitalists in the USA and Britain against the "Bolshevik Menace" than follow a strategy of their own to dominate the world.

Moses Kotane, the general secretary of the Communist Party of South Africa, in his written and public pronouncements was cynical about both imperialist blocs: "Africans would find it hard to believe that a thief can protect them from theft or that the English thief is better than a German one." Turning the emphasis from the eventual unity of the capitalist class to the awakening of the "inarticulate mass of the people", he believed that "… this war will wear out the strength of the unjust rulers and exploiters of the earth … and then their chance will come".[6] Later, there was evidence that Hitler was far from prepared to make common cause with Britain against the USSR but would accept a separate peace in which he would allow Britain to retain its empire, albeit as a client state of the German Reich.[7] However, the Tory appeasers who might have accepted this were unable to deter Churchill (who later replaced Chamberlain) from continuing the war if it entailed such abject surrender. In the event, Churchill won overwhelming support for his stance, reflected in his buoyant speech: "We shall fight on the beaches; we shall fight on the shores … we shall never surrender!" I do not recall the rest of the speech, but I do remember the gist of those memorable words relayed many times, muffled as they were by the crackle and static of our wireless set, technologically obsolete even by the standards of those days.

I was struck in the early years of the war by the very direct way in which the Left leadership and the ANC connected the anti-fascist struggles with the winning of democratic rights and the more parochial struggles at home. These were the high cost of living and the multiplicity of local grievances. I.B. Tabata, formerly a CPSA member and prominent in the short-lived Non-European United Front of South Africa (NEUF) urged "that the government grant the non-Europeans the right to bear arms and fight on an equal basis with Europeans", adding defiantly: "only when we are granted definite democratic rights will we be prepared to defend South Africa". The language of protest became increasingly militant.[8] The ANC more or less unequivocally supported the war on the condition that Africans be included in the "body politic" and the government's defence schemes. While it approved the Union parliament's declaration of war on the side of Great Britain, it also said "it was time the Union Government considered the *expediency* [!] of admitting the African and other non-European races of the country into full citizenship in the Union, with all the rights, privileges, duties and responsibilities

appertaining to that citizenship". It included in this a demand for the removal of the colour bar in the Defence Act. This was followed up later in the Natives Representative Council (NRC) calling for an amendment of the Defence Act of 1912, pressing the government to open the door "to all loyal South African citizens, irrespective of race or colour to take part in any sphere of hostilities for the defence of their common country".[9]

It was a sign of the times that this amendment was rejected by the conservative African members of the NRC as too strident and "embarrassing". The year was 1941 or 1942, a few years before I became active in the movement. It would take another three years before the ANC would look the government directly in the eye and broadly challenge it on some of the fundamental issues of democracy. The ANC was nevertheless becoming increasingly assertive. In 1942 it once again called for the abolition of the Pass Laws, the de-regulating of trading rights for Africans and "freeing the African people from oppressive laws".[10] Meanwhile, the Indian and Coloured responses to the war were more inclined to equate the fascism in Europe with oppression in South Africa and to be more emotive. John Gomas (a member of the Party in the Cape Province) asked irately "how can we be interested in fighting Nazism thousands of miles away, while in reality we have a similar monster devouring us here daily?"[11] At the same time a young Yusuf Dadoo, chairman of the Transvaal Indian Congress, was prosecuted for embellishing the human rights appeal of the Non-European United Front, repeating the NEUF slogan*:* "Don't support this war where the rich get richer and the poor get killed". This led to his conviction and a sentence of four months in jail.[12]

The priority in South Africa for Africans, Coloureds and Indians was to look after their own interests, ensure the defeat of the pro-Hitler Malan–Pirow group, and demand that the Smuts government suppress the Ossewa Brandwag (OB), the Greyshirt and Blackshirt groups in South Africa. The OB, Pirow's New Order group and the Greyshirts were pro-fascist and renowned for their National-Socialist slogans. Apart from the New Order group, whose core members were articulate MPs and neo-Nazis, these groups were drawn from backward Afrikaner workers and overtly racist sections of the middle class. In a bizarre inversion of logic, Smuts had initially interned a number of vocal anti-fascist activists on the Left, while leaving the majority of pro-Nazi elements at large. The initial arrests were made under emergency regulations promulgated by Smuts in 1939 at the start of the war, to anticipate the Afrikaner republicans fomenting a rebellion, as they had in 1914 at the beginning of the First World War. These regulations, as it turned out, were amended after the OB-led explosions in 1941/1942, in the wake of which scores of their members were subsequently interned.

In January 1941, the second year of the war, *The Guardian* provided a chilling resume of

> the death and destruction and indescribable misery … wrought by the class responsible for the horrors of the past two years of the war … They were in power, they formulated policy; they gave the orders resulting in War against China; the annexation of Austria, Albania, Czechoslovakia; defeated democracy in Spain and finally [were responsible for] the Second World War.[13]

This was written at the beginning of 1941, but these sentiments were often quoted in 1949 when their impact on me was stronger. Included in this denunciation of the "men of Munich" was an optimistic note, more pertinent to the future than to the present, in which the Soviet Union was cited as an inspiration to others, who, though currently enslaved by capitalists everywhere, should follow the example of the Soviet Union and have their own socialist revolution.[14]

"Vigilator", the indefatigable overseas commentator in *The Guardian*, re-enforced convictions that it was a capitalist war. In June 1941, two weeks prior to the attack on the Soviet Union, his messages got confused. It seemed to him obvious that the Führer's next move would be against Russia as thousands of German soldiers were massed on its borders. Hitler's objective, he believed, was to keep the USA out of the war "and what better way can there be than to assure Wall Street that Germany's going to fight not Britain but that nasty Socialist fellow whom they both dislike" in Russia. Unfortunately he did not let the matter rest there. In a macro assessment of the war, he momentarily accepted the logic of prevailing political opinion to observe that "they [the Nazi leadership] believed that if they turn their military machine against the Red Army, RAF raids against Germany would soon cease; a long war would exhaust the Capitalist powers" and to avoid that, Roosevelt would soon follow the logic of the capitalists' strategy and join the Nazis against the "Bolshevik Menace".[15]

Nothing of the sort transpired, although in one substantial respect he was correct. The Nazi Wehrmacht did in fact turn its guns on the Soviet Union on Sunday 22 June 1941, without any declaration of war or any change in its European alliances. Almost simultaneously the cities of Kiev and Sevastopol were bombarded by German artillery and before long a wartime alliance between Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill was established. As for the Left, its mind now concentrated on the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, it once again saw the bigger picture. The war was no longer an imperialist conflict, but one that touched the poorest and the most powerless, that is "the worker at the bench and in the fields, the Indian peasant and Chinese soldier, the African and all others who are oppressed, [even] the intellectual who cherishes freedom not for himself alone, but for humanity".[16] All would see "in this treacherous attack of Nazi Imperialism upon the Soviet Union a menace to themselves and their hopes for national liberation and Socialism". Instantly, the imperialist war had become a war of freedom.

The Party explained its new approach to the war on numerous occasions, then and later.

I repeated their explanations time and again, sometimes getting the logic confused and the sequences muddled, like the hapless sheep in Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The arguments were more tightly crafted than I'd realised. Communists now supported the war because "previously the party's view was that the war against British and German imperialism was a war for the re-division of the world's markets, colonies, raw materials and fields of investment." In June 1941 it was different. The "beleaguered socialist state now gave meaning to the struggle of all the world's oppressed. It was not only defending the home of Socialism, fighting for the cause of all other nations and peoples, but fighting for the workers of the world", Accordingly, the Party called upon "South African workers, friends, democrats and oppressed peoples to redouble their efforts to organize themselves for liberty and social justice".[17] At the same time *The Guardian* called for the release of anti-fascists who had been interned.

Among those on the Left who had been incarcerated were Max and Louis Joffe, two brothers, both communists. Max Joffe was our family doctor. He was interned from November 1940 to September 1941 under harsh conditions: half hour monthly visits in the oppressive presence of armed guards (his visitors screaming to make themselves heard and separated from him by a wire); no newspapers except for magazines like *Time, Life* and *Esquire*, which he would not normally buy. As he maintained a very professional, politically distant relationship with his patients, I never heard him refer to his prison experiences and often wondered subsequently whether it was his confinement which had made him so contemplative and sombre or whether he was naturally grave. Interestingly, the few "privileges" he had were reminiscent of my own prison experiences more than 20 years later. Max did not take kindly to being in the limelight of public attention. As in the later years, Mandela was the symbol for the freeing of those held on Robben Island and Bram Fischer for those in other prisons, Max Joffe was the focus of attention in the 1940s. The progressive media personalized his plight in order to make the case for the release of all anti-fascists from detention. Inevitably this detracted from the profiles of the others detained with him. At least two of these were active in the trade unions. They were Max Gordon and Louis Joffe, Max Joffe's brother.

Gordon was a pharmacist who had given his adult life to the trade union movement and was an effective secretary of several African trade unions, still unrecognised under the law. He owed his success in the trade union movement to his dedication to shop floor organization and the use of the Wage Commissions. At the time, these were the only effective legal instruments available to African workers for improvements in their wage and working conditions. Paradoxically Gordon was a Trotskyist with whom one would normally associate strikes and stand-offs instead of the use of this most legal of struggle

instruments. Louis Joffe, on the other hand, had given his life to the Communist and trade union movements and was intensely active, raising funds for the African Mineworkers' Union. The two brothers could not have been more unalike. Max was tall, thin, usually silent, and except for an overt air of impatience, the model of a professional medical doctor. Louis was short, prematurely grey with slightly crossed piercing blue eyes and a ruddy, scrubbed face. He regularly wore a grey cloth cap that matched a tightly fitting grey jacket, which once may have been part of a suit. In the 1930s he'd been in the leadership of the Party, but was expelled along with many others in a factional war over the controversial subject of "the Black Republic" (the appellation given to the debate initiated by the Communist International on the form the South African state would take during the democratic revolution, an egalitarian, developmental phase prior to Socialism).

Louis Joffe was never readmitted to the CPSA, despite his continual annual requests, although the SACP, its successor, eventually agreed to accept him. Sadly he died before he heard of their decision. Max was more reticent. For someone so private, the media attention he received during his detention must have been galling. Many of his patients wrote to *The Guardian* singing his praises. "The poor of the city of all creeds and colours, have good reason to bless his name … the depth of his patients' pockets had no interest for him". The same correspondent wrote from personal knowledge: "many an anti-fascist can remember being attended by Dr Joffe at the time of the Blackshirt and Greyshirt disturbances. His rooms were used as a dressing station for all anti-fascists who were injured – and he did not mind working until any hour of the morning …"[18] The ANC Youth League in Alexandra township also protested against his continued internment, in recognition of the fact that he had helped the people there win cheaper bus fares. Protests against his confinement were also made by the Durban Liberal Study Group and a number of progressive trade unions.

In addition to the CPSA's campaign for the release of detainees, the Party called for the removal of the ban on working class and Russian literature and the recognition of the Soviet Union by the Smuts government. In retrospect it seemed a disparate set of priorities, varying in urgency, but always the final call was for equality of status and rights for all South Africans regardless of race. At one of the "monster meetings' called by the Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU) "to defend the socialist sixth of the world" in which the subject of democratic rights for all South Africa's citizens was somehow woven into the theme, the meeting was addressed by a panel of speakers, including Bram Fischer. The crowd stood in the aisles and outside the door of the Selborne Hall (a long, narrow venue, smaller than the main auditorium, within the complex of the Johannesburg City Hall). Bram seldom spoke outside a court room, but the effect was the same, always thoughtful, careful over detail and marked with long pauses. A meeting less judicial in tone on the same topic, was reported to have taken place in Cape Town where Moses

Kotane, invariably strong on logic and soft on voice projection, raised the dilemma of the Left regarding the disjuncture between the government's war against fascism in Europe and the absence of democratic rights for the majority of the people at home. He argued by analogy: "it is very difficult to defend what you haven't got. If you haven't got pots and pans you can't defend them. If you haven't got a wife you can't defend her."[19]

It was only after the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, ten months after Max's arrest and fifteen months after Louis' internment, that both brothers and Max Gordon were freed from the detention camp at Ganspan on the condition that they refrained from participating in political activities. The USSR was now an ally in the war against Hitler, and it was no longer possible to ignore the appeals for their release. Max's ban on political participation, however, was only lifted in July 1944. In reporting his "unbanning", a rare picture of him, younger than I remembered, appeared in *Inkululeko* in the issue of 27 July 1944. A similarly youthful portrait of the indefatigable Yusuf Dadoo appeared in May 1941, just prior to the USSR's entry into the war. Yusuf had recently been released from gaol after his four-month detention on the absurd charge of contravening the country's Security Code. He addressed the enthusiastic supporters who gathered at the prison in Benoni on the East Rand to welcome him – patently undeterred by his incarceration. The paradox of these "amnesties" was that the anti-fascists had been released while many of the fascists in the Ossewa Brandwag, Blackshirts and Greyshirts still remained at large. These were the street fighters, the paramilitary groupings outside the mainstream of parliamentary parties.

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"Doing battle" with the fascists during the regular Sunday night open-air meetings at the Johannesburg City Hall steps was not anything for which I was physically equipped. Yet I was faithfully present on almost every Sunday evening "to defend the party platform". I stood in the crowd or behind the speakers, as instructed by the "veterans", most of them in their thirties, fresh from war-time military service "up north" (meaning beyond South Africa's borders in north Africa and Italy). They were a spirited group of Party protagonists: Joe and Nathan Marcus, Mike Feldman, Monty Berman and Joe Slovo, to name only the most prominent of the frontline defenders, and perhaps a dozen others from the Left Club and Springbok Legion, ready to move into action as soon as the heckling from the "street fighters" became too disruptive. It was only a matter of time before the hostile spectators began their inane heckling and surged forward to attack the Party platform. The speakers, Hilda Bernstein, Issy Wolfson, Betty du Toit, Danie du Plessis and Michael Harmel as well as others from the trade union movement, took turns each week to "confront the fascists" and defend the party's right to speak. Almost all of them were eloquent speakers who deserved more credit from us for their endurance of the racist

taunts and insulting jibes they received. Perhaps we would have better expressed this appreciation had we been less intent on containing the unruly elements in the mob and given more attention to the content of their speeches, which often compelled even the worst elements to be silent for a few moments.

I knew nothing of the political origins of the individuals in this audience or which species of the "shirt movements" had spawned them. It was evident that they were the foot-soldiers rather than the ideologues in the Afrikaner nationalist movement, although it was known that the white nationalist intellectuals often supported them, many of them having studied in the Third Reich or made pilgrimages to Hitler's Germany where they saw at first hand the para-military and extra-parliamentary groups that accompanied Hitler's rise to power. The formations referred to as the shirt movements to some extent emulated these street fighters.

One of the smaller extra-parliamentary formations in South Africa was the Greyshirts which concentrated on hate speech against Africans and Jews and propagated the coming of the National Socialist New Order**.** The Greyshirts were active during the 1930s and 1940s under their founder, Louis Theodora Weichardt.[20] He had left school in 1912 and spent three years in the Kaiser's army, which seemingly justified his description in the brochures of his organization as an "ex-soldier and leader" of the Greyshirts. His attributes were rather lyrically marketed in a pamphlet entitled "The Plan and the Man" where he is presented as the leader "[who] the South African National Socialist Bund offers to the Afrikaner volk".[21] He was, in the members' heroic image, "a visionary and forceful spiritual leader". This, however, was not sufficient to prevent his internment in 1944 (and possibly hastened it) under the same regulations for the detention of such saboteurs as B.J. Vorster, a "general" in the OB, later to become South Africa's prime minister. With Weichardt behind bars, the Greyshirts continued under R.B. Horak, an equally vicious Nazi who led the fascist operations in the major cities of the country.

In Johannesburg the Greyshirts complemented the nationalist political platform, voicing violently anti-Semitic and anti-African sentiments at political meetings. I recall one of these at the City Hall Steps early in 1946, when Horak's obnoxious heckling of a Communist Party speaker so angered the audience that the crowd surged forward, knocking down one of his supporters. The supporter was rescued (together with Horak) by two burly plain-clothes detectives standing next to me. It was one thing to read that the police conspired with the fascists against the trade unions and communists, but quite another to see this so cynically acted out in front of one's own eyes. After this fracas, Horak apparently spent the night in "protective custody" and took the next day off to recuperate from his night in goal in the Johannesburg office of the Greyshirts. This enabled him to be present when a reporter from *The Guardian* newspaper interviewed the Witwatersrand district organizer of the Greyshirts, an official named Du Plessis, who had

been appointed as head of the Witwatersrand district by Weichardt, the movement's founder. On the walls of the two small offices were the leader's picture, three swastikas and an anti-Semitic cartoon.[22] Du Plessis' explanations of the movement were quite uncomplicated. The Nuremberg trials were all lies: "low, dirty, mean, Jewish propaganda". The Greyshirt brand of National Socialism was "very different from Hitler's – "a pure South African product" (he did not elaborate on the differences). On the other hand, "the Broederbond [comprised] a bunch of parasites".

Although very sensitive about the organization of the Greyshirts, Du Plessis revealed something of its hierarchical structure: it had no committees, entertained no discussions and its members (arranged in secret cells) took orders from him. The literature in the office contained spurious references to the "Aryan German blood of the Afrikaner volk", bearing Goebbels' imprint on the subject of democracy which could be summed up in the phrase "British Jewish capitalism and Asiatic Communism". A pamphlet entitled "Secret Organizations" lumped together the Free Masons, the Elders of Zion and the Broederbond as "a conspiracy to run the state from behind the scenes". Unconscious of any hypocrisy, however, Du Plessis said that the secret societies (like the Broederbond) ought to be banned and that the Ossewa Brandwag, whom he referred to as "Kosher fascists" were only slightly better.[23]

Of all the fascist organizations, I was aware mostly of the Ossewa Brandwag which translated literally as the ox-wagon sentinel. Because they were the largest of the street movements and more overtly vicious, I saw them as even more anti-Semitic, violent and authoritarian than the Greyshirts or any of the other fascist factions of Afrikaner nationalism in the early war years. The OB was established in February 1939, during the highly charged nationalist centenary celebrations of the Great Trek and purported to be against imperialism, capitalism and "Jewish money power". It was formed ostensibly as an Afrikaans cultural movement "to safeguard the ox-wagon spirit", focusing on what it called cultural and communal activities.

At school we were conscious of the OB as an Afrikaner nationalist organisation with which our Afrikaans-speaking teachers probably identified. The celebrations in 1938 and 1939 were an emotive re-enactment of the movement of ox wagons from the Eastern Cape frontier into Natal and across the mountain passes of the Drakensberg to the more manageable terrain of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. The exercise has been described as an orgy of Afrikaner sentiment whipped up by the Broederbond to unify Afrikanerdom and rally the volk to its nationalist aspirations. Nine replicas of the ox wagons of the Voortrekkers, each named after a particular Voortrekker hero, trudged from the Cape to Pretoria, the capital of the Transvaal, to be met en route by passionate crowds of Afrikaner men and women, the former wearing beards and the latter in Voortrekker dress. All this was displayed in pictures tacked to the notice boards in our classrooms,

showing the women in *kappies* and scarves leaning against the tented ox-wagon carts. These were arranged in a circular *laager*, reminiscent of the wagon formations during the Great Trek, "to protect women and children against attack from the natives".[24]

In 1938, during this fervent Afrikaner cultural revival, I experienced anti-Semitism in a small way when one of the Afrikaans language teachers at Yeoville Boy's School referred to the Jews as "mongrels". The remark became the subject of a "class action" brought by my mother, to whom Leon and I reported the matter. She appeared promptly at the principal's office the next day, leaving us feeling rather embarrassed by the drama with which she laid the complaint. Formal statements were taken individually from "the twins" (always identified in the plural when we were in trouble) as well as a number of other pupils, who appeared before the principal, a mild man named Leach, who wore a brown leather glove on his right hand, which we found sinister. Fortunately, either as a result of this complaint, or for other reasons, the teacher did not return after the end of that term. He may not have been a member of the OB, but the memory of the incident and the image of the ox wagons carrying the intrepid Boer *conquistadores* over the mountain ranges, still lingers.

Encouraged by the fervour of these celebrations, the OB developed into a mass movement. As a group, they seemed very numerous, claiming between 300 000 and 400 000 adherents in 1941,[25] but this was probably exaggerated. Their following was drawn largely from the Afrikaner middle class, many of them teachers and civil servants. The movement has more recently been characterised as a Nazi clone, complete "with its '*führer prinzip*' authoritarian philosophy and anti-Jewish stance".[26] Its organization was more militarily inclined than culturally and was led by a *kommandant generaal*; first by Colonel Laas, and later, in 1940, by Dr J.F.J. van Rensburg, a high-ranking civil servant (the administrator of the Orange Free State province) and a self-confessed Nazi who held little brief for political parties, which in his parlance were "obsolete". In his way of thinking (not unlike some of his peers in the Afrikaner Broederbond) mass movements were more effective. His mission was to propagate National Socialist ideas in the most aggressive way possible and (after 1939) to establish an elite para-military core (a *Stormjaer* detachment) to promote a campaign of widespread sabotage to undermine the country's participation in the war.[27] Van Rensburg boasted that he had mobilized more than 200 commandos in the mines and industries where Afrikaners were predominant and that he had also established units in the *platteland* in the Orange Free State.

The public was as aware as the government that many of the police and members of the civil service were co-conspirators, if not leaders of the subversive movement. "It is no use forbidding members of the civil service from belonging to the OB", *The Guardian* reported, well aware that the public service was the primary source of this organization's support base. It called for "a thorough purge of the police force and the dismissal of all

disaffected individuals of whatever rank".[28] More practically it demanded a public trial of those involved in a conspiracy to blow up bridges, pylons and railway tracks in the Natal province and urged the United Party government to suppress the seditious propaganda and hate speech emanating from the OB and the various other para-military formations.[29] Recollections of this group and the feelings of menace they evoked, for the most part dominated my memories of the war years. A general election was pending (a Khaki ballot, due in 1943) and the Smuts' government was neither able nor willing to act in a way that was likely to offend any of the different strands of Afrikaner sentiment in its potential support base.

To be fair, the government recognised its nemesis in the pro-Nazi formations, but was too timid to suppress them regardless of five explosions within eight days in Potchefstroom at the end of 1941, and two attempts to dynamite the railway track to Lourenco Marques (now Maputo) within a week. If this was the political action-front of Afrikanerdom, as Van Rensburg claimed it was, it offered a bleak outlook for democracy in the years to come. In January 1942, the Springbok Legion, a progressive ex-servicemen's organization, launched the first issue of its journal, *Fighting Talk*, noting the developing drift to violence.[30] "Disappointed soldiers", it warned,

> are going to turn to these anti-democratic organizations with their seductive promises and high ranks. Fascists place a high value on trained men … It will only need 1 000 to 2 000 ex-soldiers to convert the OB into an absolute menace to the safety of the state.[31]

Fighting Talk's calls for government action were of no avail. There was a spate of further provocations against which the Minister of the Interior at the time (H. Lawrence), would not act, despite a public statement that there was "a fascist plot to seize public utilities and institutions in Durban". There was also evidence of plots to attack military camps and blow up the Marshall Square police station in Johannesburg, a popular target then and later. *Fighting Talk* may have brought "new life and vitality to the *cause* of democracy", but its deepest irony was that the torch that it hoped to keep alive for a world without Hitler was snuffed out within a decade by the fascist forces it came into existence to eradicate, and which still later destroyed Ruth First, its editor. The assault on the Left movement took greater shape at the end of the 1940s, when I was thoroughly involved in the CPSA's election campaign, as the National Party refined its organization and (by some self-regulation of its fascist para-military groups in the late 1940s) prepared itself to engage with the democratic process and make a bid for political power.

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In retrospect, I think we would have been less startled at the victory of the National Party in 1948 – and possibly more prepared for its assault on the CPSA a year or two later – if we had known more about the tenuous political sensitivities within Afrikaner nationalist politics and had a better sense of the limited extent to which Smuts' United Party commanded the country's electorate.

As for the street-fighting fascist groups (like the Greyshirts and the OB) the distinctions between them were more difficult to discern. Initially, there was a working partnership between the National Party (NP) and the OB and later much cross membership between them, making it all too easy to see the two organizations as the quasi-military and political sides of a single coin. After 1942, approximately 80% of the members of the OB were members of the NP and many senior OB members became important figures in the National Party, including P.O. Sauer, F. Erasmus, C.R. Swart and Eric Louw, who (without exception) became cabinet ministers in the first NP government in 1948. Swart, a stalwart leader in the National Party, was also on the *Groot Raad* (Grand Council) of the OB. He went on to become the state president after 1961.

The apparent identification of Malan's party with the OB at times made it difficult to differentiate between the political and "extra-political" branches of the movement. The language of the non-parliamentary factions shared a partiality towards hate speech, racism and invective – and where these failed in the early 1940s – the OB at least, used dynamite to demonstrate that it meant what it said. This situation lasted until the organization over-reached itself at the political level, prompting Malan to move speedily to immobilize it before the 1943 parliamentary elections.

In the mind of Malan, the extra-parliamentary groups complemented the role of the NP, but were markedly different from it; politics was the party's role. He pressed the point with the executive of the Broederbond (whose seminal role in the country's history is discussed in the next chapter), insisting that the OB's *volkspolitiek* and party politics were indivisible: it was the NP and not the OB which was to be dominant in the political sphere.[32] Malan accordingly planned the OB's organizational destruction, allegedly colluding with the Smuts government on the dangers of the OB and urging it to promulgate regulations under which the OB activists could be put behind bars. In principle, the OB was to confine itself to cultural issues, despite the fact that they were as political as the National Party. What triggered Malan's action was the OB's "unauthorised" publication of a proposed republican constitution in August 1941, the framework of which was allegedly the work of Afrikanerdom's arch ideologue, Hendrik Verwoerd, and intellectuals within the Broederbond.[33]

Malan fought hard to assert his party's supremacy in the political sphere. The OB was more than a splinter of the Afrikaner nationalist movement. It was a mass movement in its own right, contending in 1941/2 against the other nationalist formations for the

broad command of the political direction of the volk. At first, the roles of the National Party and the OB were seen as complementary (more or less defined by their extra-parliamentary and parliamentary roles), but complicated by the fact that the actors in each movement were sometimes leading members of the other. Their "partnership" continued until June 1942 when the agreement reached, the so-called Cradock Protocol, was signed between the NP and the OB, formalizing their respective spheres of activity. Accordingly, the National Party would work for Afrikanerdom in the political sphere while the OB would operate on the "cultural" front.[34] As the political and the cultural were informed by the same hate speech, it was inevitable that the agreement would be observed only in the breach, while the National Party turned a blind eye to the OB's frequent unsophisticated` racist and politically inappropriate references to British and Jewish capital.

As the avowed aims of the OB were to work towards a free independent Christian National Republic – in which the English language would have inferior status – and a social and economic policy that was "anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist", it was unlikely that the nationalists in the organization would confine themselves to narrow cultural aims.[35] They could hardly market their aims as anything other than political, especially as they regularly held forth about the expropriation of the goldmines and key industries – both of which were in their view "controlled by British and Jewish capital". Their language was less muted than the self serving phrases of Malan's NP, whose only hope of achieving political power was by appearing to be capable of governing the nation in the service of *all* the country's interests through parliament. These interests included the Chamber of Mines, about whose role in the economy the OB was not especially complimentary. As for the rest of the OB's aims, the National Party could live with its anti-communist sentiments, its macho views on the role of women ("whose duty it was to create the home and family") and with its ideas on the "conspiratorial" proclivities of the Jews – for whom "the Nuremberg trials represented the triumph of the ghetto".[36] But when it claimed the 1941 republican constitution as its own, it had gone too far. Its chosen path to power was one that would be decided in the streets rather than through the ballot box, which by this time was incompatible with Malan's strategy for attaining state power.

What was evident, though, was that the publication of the draft document on the Afrikaner republic was seen as likely to promote the image of the OB and to undermine the NP in the ensuing elections.[37] Malan's objections to the publication of the draft were based on the constitution's untimely appearance rather than its content and the fear that it was likely to exacerbate the factional tendencies within the party. It would also impair his party's electoral chances.[38] It was not that the National Party rejected the sentiments of the republican project per se: it was only that the messenger was the wrong one. At a more propitious time, in 1946, Malan told the Transvaal Congress of his party: "Once we are in power we are going to ask for a white Republic. We will most certainly exclude the

non-European from our Republic in which the white man will be the guardian of the non-European. He will have the only say."[39]

Even if Malan had not colluded with Smuts in crushing the OB's organizational structure, the revision of the regulations were long overdue and were needed to stop Van Rensburg's concerted campaigns to intensify the armed struggle by bombing targets in Vereeniging, Delmas, Potchefstroom and elsewhere. The worst of these explosions occurred at the end of January 1942. Over 300 members of the South African Police (SAPS) many of them non-commissioned officers, were involved.[40] At the same time, a case of treason against 48 *Stormjaers,* units of OB hotheads, was opened only to collapse with the mysterious disappearance of a key witness; however, the arrests crippled the OB organizationally and ended its political future.

With the amended regulations, Smuts felt free to intern an unknown number of pro-fascist "elements" without the burden of a trial. It was under these circumstances in 1942, that scores of the OB (including Vorster – and like-minded members of para-military formations) were interned, clearing the way for the National Party to pursue a political path to power without the embarrassment or rivalry of its more militant cohorts. With the demise of the OB an altogether more sinister organization, the Broederbond, took centre-stage in determining the country's political future.

Chapter 2

1 Cited in Brian Bunting, *Moses Kotane*: *South African Revolutionary, a Political Biography* (Inkululeko Publications, London 1975), p. 96.

2 Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 96.

3 Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 97 cited from the CP pamphlet "Must We Fight?", June 1939.

4 Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 96–97.

5 My addendum and italics. Cited by Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 98.

6 Moses Kotane, cited by Bunting from *The Guardian*, in Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 100.

7 Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*: *A Twentieth Century Life* (Allen Lane, London, 2002), p. 161–2. According to Hobsbawm, citing a letter from Churchill to Roosevelt, "Hitler offered to let Britain keep her empire … as a vassal state of the Hitler Empire".

8 M. Harmel (A. Lerumo), *Fifty Fighting Years*: *The South African Communist Party 1921–1971* (Inkululeko Publications, London, 1980), p. 70. According to Harmel, the Non-European United Front in the Transvaal, "demanded the right to live as human beings, the right to work in skilled trades, recognition of African trade unions … the abolition of all anti-colour legislation [and] full rights of citizenship".

9 Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 102.

10 Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, pp. 102–3.

11 Cited by Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 105, from *Freedom: The War on Segregation*, June 1940.

12 Harmel, *Fifty Fighting Years*, p. 70; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, p. 92.

13 *The Guardian*, 03.01.41.

14 *The Guardian*, 03.01.41.

15 *The Guardian*, 18 and 19.06.41.

16 *The Guardian*, 26.06.41.

17 *The Guardian*, 26. 06. 41.

18 *The Guardian*, 23.01.41.

19 *The Guardian*, 03.07.41.

20 Between 1938 and 1948 many of their members joined Malan's National Party. Some entered the Afrikaner Party led by Havenga after 1948. By the time of the formation of the Afrikaner Party many members of the Greyshirts had found a comfortable home in the NP.

21 The author of the pamphlet is Izak le Grange (cited in *The Guardian*, 07.03.46. A total of 38 pamphlets, mostly on the subject of "who are the Afrikaner volk?" are attributed to him).

22 *The Guardian*, 28.02.46.

23 *The Guardian*, 28.02.46.

24 The centenary is memorably described in Dan O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*: *Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism*, 1934–48 (Cambridge University Press, London, 1983), pp. 126 and 127. The reverence with which the participants viewed the celebration evident in his satirical observation that "Eufeesia" became the preferred name for female babies born in the wake of this political passion.

25 O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, p. 127.

26 Milton Shain, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in South Africa* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 2001), pp. 147–8.

27 O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, pp. 126, 127.

28 *The Guardian*, 08.01.42.

29 *The Guardian*, 08.01.42; 15.01.42.

30 The Springbok Legion was most vocal on the need for vigilance against such undemocratic forces. The mission of its journal, *Fighting Talk*, was no less than "to bring new life and vitality to South African democracy". The organization was richly supported by Communists in the South African army: Rusty Bernstein, Cecil Williams, Fred Carneson, Jock Isaacowitz and Brian Bunting, to name only the most prominent of them. In 1953 Ruth First (still heading the Johannesburg office of *The Guardian*) became its first editor as an independent journal. Members of the editorial board included among others Ruth, Rusty Bernstein, Cecil Williams *and me*. I remained on the board for about eight years until 1961, when lack of resources, capacity and interference by the security police, made it no longer possible to continue production. During the state of emergency in 1960/61, when Ruth was in hiding in Swaziland and Rusty in detention, I edited one of the last few issues before it ceased publication.

31 Cited in *The Guardian*, 08.01.42

32 O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, pp. 129–31.

33 It had the approval of Strijdom and the National Party in the Transvaal. It was not intended for immediate release but the OB jumped the gun, encouraged by the Potchefstroom ideologues led by L.J. du Plessis, or Nazis like Diederichs and Albert Hertzog. Both Verwoerd and Strijdom were opposed to the publication of the draft Republican Constitution, although they were part of its drafting and sided with Malan in condemning the OB for its "unauthorized" action in publicising it at that time. None of them was actually opposed to a republic.

34 Brian Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich* (IDAF, London, 1986), p. 91.

35 Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich*, p. 93.

36 Bunting, *The Rise of the South African Reich*, p. 93.

37 At the constituency level, it was doubtful whether the OB's fascist political platform and endorsement of National Socialism would appeal to the agricultural and farming classes who were benefiting from the war.

38 O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, p. 129, citing *Die Burger*, 23.01.42.

39 *The Guardian*, 17.10.46. The National Party waited a long time for its republic. Only after it had tightened its grip on the country and been excluded from the Commonwealth in 1961, after the Sharpeville massacre, was the republic declared.

40 They were arrested in January 1942, a month before the new regulations were promulgated.

Chapter 3