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# ANTI-FASCISM IN SOUTH AFRICA 1933–1945, AND ITS LEGACIES

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Between the 1970s and the early 1990s, quite a number of young men and women from the global north – especially from the Netherlands, Britain and Canada – travelled to South Africa to work underground for *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC). A strikingly common feature of this cohort was the way in which they saw their actions as connecting to the struggles against Franco and Hitler which had been the defining experience of their parents' generation. Sean Hosey, from north London, who served a five year prison sentence in Pretoria in the 1970s, said in retrospect: 'There was a thread that ran through my upbringing, Spain, the Second World War, American Civil Rights, Vietnam and of course South Africa.'[1] The actions of this group were perhaps the most dramatic manifestation of the way in which international opinion identified the apartheid regime as a continuation of pre-1945 fascism, and their opposition to it as taking forward an old struggle. Much of the power of the international anti-apartheid movement came from this perception. And to a large extent the liberation movements themselves shared the characterisation of apartheid as fascist; a widely circulated paperback of the 1960s, written by ANC political exile Brian Bunting recounted *The Rise of the South African Reich*.[2] There was indeed a relationship between the struggle against apartheid and the worldwide traditions of anti-fascism. But it was far more complex than a simple equation of apartheid and fascism would allow for. This chapter explores in some detail the South African fascisms and anti-fascisms of the 1930s and 1940s, and then points briefly toward some of the consequences of that historical experience for the country's later politics.

Until relatively recently, there has been a strong strain of 'methodological nationalism' in South African historiography, with the contours of the nation's history described and explained in rather inward-looking terms. But South African history is currently being re-thought in a global framework,[3] and this more

expansive view is especially germane to our understanding of the politics of fascism and anti-fascism from 1933 to 1945. South African political actors were acutely aware of the transnational political struggles to which they were connected. There was a strong overtly fascist strand in South African politics, mainly within Afrikaner nationalism, and there was a range of political forces that identified with anti-fascism. Transnational imaginaries of fascism and anti-fascism, and real links to international movements and their political sponsors, were crucial to the whole spectrum of South African politics. Opposition to fascism was particularly shaped by the linkages of the South Africa to the United Kingdom, especially through the influence of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), which was to some extent guided by the Communist Party of Great Britain, and the South African Labour Party (SALP) and its affiliated trade unions, which had connections to the British Labour Party and Trade Union Congress. Moreover, given the key role which South African Jewish communities were to play in anti-fascism, the networks between them and British Jewish organisations were important. Many of the European Jews who emigrated to South Africa at the turn of the century had come via England rather than directly from Eastern Europe, and there were a myriad of connections, personified in the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire from 1913 to 1946, Joseph Hertz, who had previously spent years in South Africa. As in the UK, the 1930s saw a running battle between fascists and anti-fascists, utilising a similar political vocabulary. But there were also important differences. As in the UK, in South Africa, during the war years overt fascists were interned, but this policy was not carried out on the same scale. There was a much broader support base for fascism in South Africa than in Britain, located in the ranks of radical Afrikaner nationalism. Unlike in Britain, a substantial fascist movement survived the outbreak of war, there was an active sabotage campaign by Nazi sympathisers, and street fighting between fascists and anti-fascists continued well into the 1940s.

South African anti-fascism also differed from that of Britain in that it was fundamentally shaped by the country's profound racial cleavage in access to political power. Recent international scholarship has rightly questioned crude assumptions that anti-fascism was a unitary phenomenon based on the manipulations of the Comintern. It has revealed a wide range of anti-fascisms, cross-cutting with liberalism, nationalism and Social Democracy as well as Communism.[4] This was certainly the case in South Africa. But in addition, in a segregationist social order, anti-fascism was critically segmented along racial lines. The chapter will show that though there were some points – in the small but hyper-active CPSA, some small liberal circles and broader united front movements – at which people of different races came together, to a large extent there were *different* black and white anti-fascisms.

1930s and 1940s fascism and anti-fascism was to shape South Africa's post-war history. There was a definite fascist ideological influence on the Afrikaner-dominated apartheid state established in 1948, and many of its early key personnel had fascist histories. Yet it differed significantly from classical fascism; the dominant strand of Afrikaner nationalism was populist rather than fascist. Despite the violent

repressiveness and brutality of the state, there was a bigger element of surviving civil society and a greater element of legalism than was typical of fascist regimes. To put it provocatively, the apartheid state was a state with many fascist-inclined personnel, but it was not a fascist state.

Yet a number of important political activists in the country saw the struggle against apartheid through the lens of the fight against Nazism, and especially of the Second World War. This view became a key part of the ANC's political vision during the movement's turn to armed struggle under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and a mainly Communist leadership group in 1960–1961. Their tendency to characterise the regime as fascist was highly understandable. But it did not recognise the small but important remaining space for the emergence of above ground political movements. A militarisation of politics occurred in the liberation movement which was partly a legacy of the anti-fascism of the Second World War.

## Pre-war white politics and the fascist powers

There was surprisingly strong resistance by the South African state to the claims of Mussolini and Hitler in the 1930s, primarily based in contingent geopolitical interests. But it nevertheless established a distance between the South African state and the dictators. On the other hand, the radical rightist political opposition who saw the state as failing adequately to assert Afrikaner racial and ethnic interests, were drawn to the German example.

The Great Depression had a disastrous impact on South Africa, sparking a major crisis in the white-dominated political and social order. In a major realignment in 1933 the supporters of Prime Minister J. B. M. Hertzog, the historic leader of Afrikaner Nationalism, and those of the opposition leader Jan Smuts, representing the forces of British Empire loyalism, came together to create a coalition government. Hertzog remained as Prime Minister, with Smuts as his deputy. The instinctive responses of the two key figures in the government to the rise to power of Hitler were very different. Hertzog's reflected a strong strand of Germanophilia in Afrikaner nationalist politics, which went back to German support for their cause in the Boer War: he told the German Consul-General Wiehl of his admiration for the 'new Germany'. Smuts on the other hand, racial paternalist and elitist as he was, was consistently hostile to the Nazis. He conceived of freedom as a matter of individual self-realisation within a legal order, was suspicious of popular politics, unattracted by biological racism and saw the British Empire as the crucial historical vehicle for the gradual extension of freedom. He was thus appalled by Nazism's disregard for law, its collectivism, its racial ideology and its threat to the British imperial order. Wiehl called him 'the Jew-protector'. Smuts was staunch in his hostility to the fascist powers through the pre-war period and later as leader of South Africa's war effort in the British cause.[5]

Despite Hertzog's sympathetic predisposition toward Germany, geopolitical factors quickly made him suspicious of German intentions. The Nazis made it clear that one of their key foreign policy aims was the return of Germany's African

colonies. Hertzog had no intention of giving up South West Africa (now Namibia), which had been conquered by the South Africans in 1915 and then allocated to South Africa to rule as a League of Nations mandate territory, under the Treaty of Versailles. There had been considerable settlement of Afrikaners as farmers in the territory since the war. The small but cohesive South West African German settler community though still dominated the economy and were to prove extremely receptive to the appeals of National Socialism. There was a full-blown Nazi movement throughout South West under the auspices of the party's Berlin-based *Auslands-Organisation* (*A-O*: Foreign Organisation). There were also Nazi party branches among the small but influential German community in South Africa. Hertzog took measures to constrain the Nazi Party in South Africa and the mandate territory, but the *A-O* always found ways to continue their activities. In 1937 Smuts, with Hertzog's support, sent a large contingent of police to South West Africa in order to crack down on Nazi agitation.[6] Geopolitics also led the government to take a strong stand against Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. Both Hertzog and Smuts strongly condemned Mussolini, with Hertzog calling for a tougher line by the League of Nations against Italy. They were apprehensive both of Mussolini's further ambitions on the African continent, and that the disruption of the status quo in Africa would lead to concessions by the great powers to Hitler's colonial claims.[7]

But there was a level of Nazi sympathy within the Hertzog government, which did affect its policy in a more pro-Hitler direction. Hertzog restricted Jewish immigration, mainly in order to stave off the pressure on his right flank. The main figure in this ultra-rightist configuration was Oswald Pirow, a senior cabinet minister. The son of a German immigrant family, Pirow became rabidly pro-Nazi. He visited Germany in 1933 and again in 1938, and was received by the Führer on both occasions.[8]

## The origins of South African anti-fascism

The Smuts–Hertzog rapprochement led to breakaway movement by more hard-core Afrikaner nationalists to form a 'Purified' National Party, under the leadership of D. F. Malan. Accusing Hertzog of having sold out to pro-British stooges, they launched a populist movement aiming to mobilise all sectors of Afrikaner society. The 'Purified' party envisaged a united Afrikaner people in which class divisions would be overcome. They sought to mobilise the savings of Afrikaners in order to build independent businesses, which, it was promised, unlike British enterprises would not exploit the workers. The central aims were to displace the social domination of the Anglophones, to make a republican break with the British Empire and to establish a far a more rigid form of racial segregation, which they named as 'apartheid' (separateness). A key role was played by the *Broederbond* (Brother's League), a secretive fraternity which sought to coordinate every aspect of Afrikaner social and political activity. A vast array of social organisations – women, youth, charitable and so on – were organised or taken over.[9]

Hendrik Verwoerd, the Malanite party's leading intellectual, made his career as an expert on the 'problem' of the poor whites, and the project of 'upfliting' them socially and economically in order to save them from racial mixing.[10] The demoralising effects of urban life and the need to destroy the hold on Afrikaner workers of the existing, often leftist, British and East European Jewish leadership of the trade unions became a central part of Malanite ideology. The Malanites were brilliant cultural entrepreneurs: a major coup for them was their successful take-over of the spectacular 1938 centenary commemoration of the Great Trek.

There were clear resonances with Nazism in Malanite ideology, although whether this came from shared intellectual roots or from common social dynamics of the movement is perhaps debatable.[11] The direct ideological influence of the Nazis on the Malanites via intellectuals who studied in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s has probably been overstated. But certainly, there were similarities in ideological terms – the need for *volk* unity, negation of class division within the nation, mystical nationalism – and in mobilisational techniques, such as spectacular rallies. There was, too a strong streak of anti-Semitism in their world view. Arguably, anti-Semitism in Afrikaner culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was relatively weak – British-origin South Africans were probably much more guilty of it. But anti-Semitism began to creep into the nationalist movement in the 1910s, with a tendency to conflate Rand mining magnates and Jews, and greatly intensified in the 1930s, propagated in Malan's speeches. Verwoerd again played a crucial part, leading to a 1936 protest campaign against the arrival in Cape Town of the ship *Stuttgart*, carrying Jewish refugees from Germany. The Johannesburg mass circulation newspaper which he edited from 1937, *Die Transvaler,* had a strongly anti-Semitic tone: the city was portrayed in its columns as the 'cosmopolitan' den of vice which was destroying the Afrikaner character. There were also some direct links between the Malanites and the Nazis, who seem to have considered them as potential future allies. There were a series of student trips to Hitler's Germany organised by the Afrikaner *Studentebond* (Student League), which impressed the visitors with the regime's 'achievements'. Piet Meyer, a future head of the *Broederbond*, led a student delegation to Germany in 1933 and was actually invited along on a skiing holiday by Rudolf Hess.[12]

The Malanites cannot strictly be considered a fascist organisation as such, in that they broadly accepted a framework of legality and change through the parliamentary mechanisms. Aside from occasional punch-ups at political meetings, they did not by and large, actually advocate physical violence. There was a great deal of informal individual racial violence in South African workplaces and farms, and Malan supporters were certainly involved in violent incidents against Indian shopkeepers which characterised the upsurge of nationalist sentiment in 1938. But killings, lynchings or political assassinations were not a significant feature of the movement. This is perhaps attributable to the sense that whites could rely on the state to do their repression for them, but it also reflects a certain legalist ideology. The Malanites are better understood as authoritarian racial populists than fascists as such.

Outside the 'Purified' ranks a sprinkling of overtly fascist organisations grew up. The most effective of these was the movement known as the 'Greyshirts'. Modelling themselves on the Nazis, they were founded in 1933 by a hairdresser, Louis Weichardt. They published a bilingual newspaper *Die Waarheid/The Truth*, putting forward the conventional Nazi equation of Communism with a Jewish conspiracy. The Greyshirts were responsible for a great deal of harassment of Jewish communities. They had support among white workers and also among a few intellectuals. From 1934, there were regular gatherings in Johannesburg and Cape Town by the Greyshirts. They also were to the fore of the campaign against Jewish immigration. But they never became a real mass movement – the Malanites occupying most of the available political space on the right until 1939.[13]

From 1933 on, a wave of anti-fascist sentiment started to surge among white political liberals and leftists. This was remarkable given the weakness of white liberal and left politics. An earlier strand of white radicalism, the syndicalism of the 1910s and early 1920s, had largely disappeared. The main party of white workers, the SALP, pursued a white labour protectionist agenda. The CPSA, a movement that initially came out of a fusion of small groups of British trade unionists and Jewish Bund socialists, had been quite disproportionately effective in the 1920s. But it almost destroyed itself through purges and infighting in the early 1930s and collapsed into a rump sect. And many liberals had been sucked into the stifling hegemony of the Smuts–Hertzog alliance.

The first public manifestation of opposition to the Nazis came, almost immediately after the *Machtegreifung*, from the Jewish communities of the country. These communities included a highly successful business sector in the major cities, a significant number of traders in small towns, and a working class component, especially in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Many Jews had family connections in Eastern Europe and thus they were acutely aware of the rise of Hitler.[14] There was a high level of political engagement with the threat to the Jews in Germany, from establishment community organisations led by the Jewish Board of Deputies, from Zionist groups and from the Jewish leftists. The first Jewish community protest meetings in Johannesburg in 1933 also had strong support from the Anglo-South African establishment, including senior Anglican clerics, and leading lawyers, educationists, and journalists. The Communist-orientated Johannesburg Jewish Workers Club was to be relentlessly active in anti-fascist causes for the next decade. A boycott of German businesses was launched by the Jewish community organisations, and seems to have been rather strong – by 1934, the German Consul-General complained that though boycotts in other countries were fading, that in South Africa continued to be effective.[15]

The Greyshirts became a focus of anti-fascist activity, in a sense providing a target that could dramatise the fascist threat. A number of Jewish groups, including the Board of Deputies, produced publications attacking the Greyshirts. In a celebrated 1934 libel case in the Eastern Cape, Rabbi Abraham Levy successfully sued three Greyshirt leaders over their claim that there was a Jewish plot to take over South Africa, inflicting serious damage on the organisation.[16] However, there were

divisions in the South African Jewish world over how to respond to the fascist groups. The Jewish Workers Club were committed to physical confrontation whereas the Board of Deputies were anxious to avoid violence.[17] There were regular physical clashes between the Greyshirts and leftists in Johannesburg and Cape Town. In April 1936 there was a major confrontation between leftist and Jewish demonstrators and the Greyshirts when Weichardt spoke on the Grand Parade in central Cape Town.[18] Around the Johannesburg area in 1938, a considerable amount of mayhem arose from the activities of a small but virulent fascist movement known as the Blackshirts. In May, in the nearby mining town of Benoni, there was a vicious battle in which two hundred people stormed a Blackshirt meeting. This was followed by an attempted bombing of the Benoni synagogue by the Blackshirts. On 27 November 1938, the clashes between fascist groups and leftist and Jewish organisations culminated with violent fights in central Johannesburg between Blackshirts and anti-fascists. This was said to have been the biggest disturbance in the city since the insurrectionary white workers' rebellion of 1922. These events led to a temporary government ban on Fascist and anti-Fascist meetings in the Cape and the Transvaal.[19] It is perhaps important to emphasise that Jewish communities were by no means isolated in these confrontations with the 'shirt' movements. In the 1936 Cape Town protest, Jewish protesters were joined by 'Coloured' political militants from the National Liberation League led by then-Communist Cissie Gool.[20] Even in the small Cape town of Oudtshoorn, when the Greyshirts arrived to intimidate the local Jewish community in 1934, the Afrikaner town councillors opposed their activities and the demonstration fizzled out.[21]

The Spanish Civil War captured the imagination of young white radicals for the anti-Fascist cause. Uys Krige, a glamorous young Afrikaner who had travelled widely in France and Spain, wrote '*Die Lied van die Fascistiese bomwerpers*' (Song of the Fascist Bombers) a savage attack on Franco which remains among the best known poems in Afrikaans literature.[22] A handful of South Africans fought on the Republican side in Spain including Buck Parker in the British Independent Labour Party contingent and Jack Flior, a member of the Johannesburg Jewish Workers Club in the International Brigades.[23] South African-raised Jason Gurney was to write one of the most notable memoirs of the International Brigades and South African photographer Vera Elkan created the outstanding photographic record of the Brigades.[24] Journalist George Steer, who had formerly worked on the *Cape Argus*, had gone to the Horn of Africa to cover the invasion for the London *Times*. Dismissed by his arch-reactionary colleague Evelyn Waugh as a 'zealous young colonial reporter', he sympathised with the Ethiopian cause and was befriended by Haile Selassie. In Spain, Steer broke the story of the bombing of Guernica in *The Times:* it was his report that inspired Picasso's famous painting.[25] There was a spread of political activity inspired by the events in Europe. For instance, in Johannesburg a student, Rusty Bernstein, a future stalwart of the anti-apartheid struggle, got involved in politics through raising money for medical aid for Spain. This led him into Labour League of Youth – the youth wing of the SALP – and into the discussion group of the local branch of the Left Book Club.[26] The

Club – created by the London-based Victor Gollancz publishing house – had a following in South Africa and even in Southern Rhodesia, with its titles largely focused on the battle against fascism in Europe. A discernible left emerged in the SALP, sympathetic to anti-fascism and as a consequence more progressive than the old trade unionist party leadership. The Labour League of Youth became critical of their party, demanding that the SALP started admitting black members and develop a more egalitarian racial policy. A Friends of the Spanish Republic group was set up in Johannesburg, which sought to raise money to send a 'food ship' to Spain.[27] An Anti-Fascist League emerged, operating in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban, and frequently coming to blows with the Greyshirts. It was a CPSA initiative, but seems to have escaped control and to have been seen by the party – reflecting its paranoid mood – as something of a redoubt of expelled oppositionists and maverick leftists.[28] In Johannesburg, a leading part in the League was played by recent British immigrant, SALP member and trade union organiser, E. J. Burford. Burford had been on holiday in Madrid when the Spanish Civil war had broken out and had got involved in driving Republican soldiers to the front and broadcasting on Radio Barcelona. In Johannesburg he organised guards for left meetings and distributed anti-Hitler propaganda.[29] At the time of the Munich crisis there was a protest meeting and demonstration against Hitler organised by University of the Witwatersrand students who clashed with members of the German Club in central Johannesburg.[30] These developments largely took place in a white political world: but they also portended a potential shift in the politics of race.

## African nationalist politics and anti-fascism

The 1930s was a decade of relatively weak black political opposition in the country. The ANC, although generally recognised as the main political organisation of the black elite, was small, gradualist, and rather ineffective. The great mass movement of 1920s, the ICU (Industrial and Commercial Workers Union) had collapsed. The CPSA, which in the late 1920s recruited some leading young black labour and political activists, was now lacking in mass influence. There was considerable small radical group activity in Cape Town, but only at the end of the decade were local leaders like Cissie Gool able to start big political mobilisations based in the 'Coloured' community. Black activists were to respond to the challenge of fascism, but by and large in different ways from whites. Black anti-fascism foregrounded questions of racial inequality and colonial rule, and implicitly or explicitly mounted a critique of white leftists' blindness to these questions, or of their willingness to subordinate anti-colonialism to defeating fascism.

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 aroused fury among African nationalists. The symbolic importance of an imperialist attack on one of the two self-ruled African states of the continent was vast. The most dramatic expression of this was the solidarity strikes that took place among dockworkers, in Durban, Cape Town and South West African Lüderitz. In all three ports, dockers refused to work on vessels carrying cargos to the Italian Army in the Horn of Africa.[31] The strong

influence of Pan-Africanist ideas in these harbours was important here. In the 1920s, African American, West Indian and West African sailors and labourers had been highly active in bringing the doctrines of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association to southern African Ports. Arturo Emile Wattlington, from St Thomas in the Virgin Islands was to the fore of the 'Hands off Ethiopia' campaign in Cape Town, and a number of South African Garveyites such as Zach Masopha and A. J. Maphike also participated.[32] Former Garveyites such as Bennett Ncwana and Joel Bulana spoke out against the invasion. In Cape Town, the various small leftist groups agitated around the war and a Communist front organisation, the League against Fascism and War, held mass meetings in support of Ethiopia, attended by large, predominantly black, crowds. There were even discussions among black activists of whether it was possible to join Haile Selassie's forces.[33]

At the start of the Second World War, the ANC had taken up a position in support of the British and South African war effort. In a sense this was a repeat of the approach its predecessor, the South African Native National Congress had taken in 1914, in the anticipation that a grateful British Empire would intervene with the white South African authorities to bring about egalitarian reforms in the country – a hope that was completely and bitterly disappointed. However, American-educated Dr A. B. Xuma brought an astute understanding of the global politics of the war to his position when he became Secretary General of the ANC in 1939. He was assisted in his new political project by Z.K. Matthews of Fort Hare University, a former student of Malinowski at the LSE, who also had a shrewd sense of the international political potentialities of the war. The Xuma leadership seized on the ambiguities in the 1941 Atlantic Charter issued by Britain and the US. With the entry of the US into the war as Britain's senior partner, the ANC understood that there was a political space to exploit American hostility to British territorial empire and the Allies' desire to cast the war as a fight for democracy. The 1943 conference of the ANC produced a document entitled 'The Atlantic Charter and the Africans', adopting a Rooseveltian rhetoric, and positioning African nationalists within the war against fascism.[34] While maintaining full support for the war, the Xuma–Matthews approach was to try to leverage the British – American split over the issue of European empires, in the hope that the US, as the new factor in the equation, would lean on Britain, and thus on South Africa, for change. The language of American liberal anti-fascism – Roosevelt's 'Four Freedoms' – was specifically invoked by Xuma against the recalcitrant British government.[35]

A very different political response to the war against fascism emerged in the Western Cape. In 1943, a group called the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) was founded in Cape Town. It elaborated its own political positions, emerging from Trotskyism, but developing into a more broad internationalist anti-colonial nationalism. It gained a strong hold among the 'Coloured' and African intelligentsia in the Cape, and especially among teachers. The NEUM straightforwardly characterised the Smuts government as *itself* Fascist. They recast the struggle in South Africa in rhetorical terms derived from the conflict in Europe. The

dominant whites were sarcastically referred to as the *Herrenvolk*, thus appropriating the Nazi term for the dominant 'race'. Black people who worked with the government were referred to as 'Quislings' in reference to Vidkun Quisling, the pro-Nazi Norwegian traitor.[36] The NEUM used the power of European anti-Fascist resistance language for anti-colonial purposes. They placed an overwhelming emphasis on refusal to 'collaborate' with the state, stressing the need to boycott government institutions, thus invoking the European resistance model of rejecting and targeting those who had sold out.

However, the three key emerging young African Nationalist leaders – Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu, worked within the ANC. But they were not now convinced by ANC's pro-war position. When this youth circle formed the ANC Youth League in 1944, the importance of the war for Africans was largely denied. Whereas the ANC leadership (and the small but influential number of CPSA activists) continued to stress the importance of choosing the side of the Allies, the ANCYL made only a nod to the notion of the war as a fight for freedom, essentially treating it as irrelevant to African interests. The ANCYL insisted that no outside force could accomplish anything for African people. The enemy was at home and had to be tackled head on, in a spirit of self-reliance. The ANCYL document pursued a shrewd rhetorical strategy, ventilating some of the NEUM-style criticisms of the ANC leadership, but attributing them to outsiders, and assuring their own loyalty to the ANC.[37] Their approach was to lay the groundwork for a gradual takeover of the ANC by the advocates of a more militant strategy and for the campaign of mass disobedience which the ANC would launch in the 1950s.

## White anti-fascism in wartime

In 1939, a new political movement arose, merging Afrikaner nationalism with overt fascism. It was called the *Ossewabrandwag* (OB) – the 'Ox-wagon Sentinels', evoking the symbolism of the previous year's Great Trek commemoration. Although it initially posed itself as complementary to other Afrikaner organisations, the OB was clearly a challenge to Malan's dominance in the political realm. The message – although initially not always explicitly stated – was that it was not Malan's parliamentarianism, but insurrectionary nationalism that would bring the desired republic. A complex struggle for the political soul of Afrikanerdom between Malan and the OB unfolded. The OB proved particularly adept at winning over white workers in the industrial towns and cities. It established a paramilitary wing, the *Stormjaers* (Stormtoopers), created a cult around its leader, Hans van Rensburg, and devised its own uniforms and salute (right hand raised horizontally across the chest).[38] Unlike the Greyshirts, the OB became a real mass movement.

When war broke out the SALP heartily supported the war, although at the cost of losing some of its Afrikaner support. The Communists had been thrown into confusion immediately before the outbreak by the Hitler–Stalin Pact, and even more by the Comintern's deposing of the British Communist leader Harry Pollitt, who was admired in the South African party, over his initial support for the

declaration of war. But the CPSA ultimately accepted the line of the new CPGB Secretary, R. Palme Dutt, that the war was an 'imperialist' one.[39] The CPSA began to recover from the disaster of the 1930s, starting to make connections to the growing discontent in black townships through trade unions and local protests.[40] The anti-war position was also popular with the Indian community because it corresponded to that of the anti-colonial movement in India itself. Given the party line, anti-fascism was somewhat put on the back burner as a political project. But the party's public meetings – for instance those held on the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall every Saturday night – involved frequent clashes with the OB and other Fascists.

As the United Kingdom went to war, Smuts advocating support for the British cause, and Hertzog, calling for neutrality, clashed. Smuts won a majority in parliament and led the country into the conflict on Britain's side. He set about building the armed forces and war industries and achieved considerable success in doing so. Because of Afrikaner resistance to participation, Smuts called for volunteers rather than using conscription. The army was to be segregated, with only whites as combat troops and blacks confined to support roles. Over the course of the war, over 200,000 white and 100,000 black troops, and 100,000 white women auxiliaries were mobilised. South Africans were to fight in the Horn of Africa, in the Western Desert and in Italy. A sizeable Air Force was created which was to play a significant role in the Mediterranean theatre. Industrial production was reorganised and produced significant amounts of military equipment for the British as well as the South African forces. Coastal defences were strengthened and South African ports serviced huge British convoys to North Africa and the Far East. Though Smuts was himself notoriously conservative on racial issues, the departure of the Hertzogites produced a significant liberalisation of the political administration. Some white liberals and social democrats, with broadly anti-fascist positions, gained influential positions in the civil service. This was to create political space for both liberals and the left which had not existed before, with, some important consequences for anti-fascist projects.[41]

In the years between 1939 and 1942, when there appeared to be a possibility that Hitler would win the war, Malan hedged his bets. Although he certainly did not want to be subordinated to Germany, he hoped that a victorious Hitler might place control of the country in Afrikaner hands. He held clandestine talks with Nazi emissaries. On the other hand he did not depart from his basically parliamentary politics, giving him another option if Hitler did not prevail. Pirow, who had left the government with Hertzog, intensified Malan's problems by establishing another overtly fascist group the *Nieuwe Orde* (New Order), which initially had some following among disaffected nationalists in parliament – but quickly faded. The OB by contrast, thrived, attracting powerful support from radicalised Afrikaners. The *Stormjaers* began engaging in sabotage and working toward a future insurrection. They also connected up with Axis intelligence networks operating out of Portuguese East Africa, which were particularly dangerous because they were passing information on British convoys to the German navy, which was

mounting a serious submarine campaign on the African coast. A spectacular role was played by one Robey Leibbrandt. Leibbrandt had represented South Africa in Boxing at the 1936 Olympic games and been dazzled by Nazi showmanship. He returned to Germany and after the outbreak of war was trained as an agent by the *Abwehr*. He was landed on the South African coast from a yacht, with the mission of building an underground network, carrying out sabotage, and, allegedly, assassinating Smuts. It took a long time for the police to catch Leibbrandt, and he attained a legendary status in South African political mythology.[42] Smuts interned a considerable number of OB members and other fascists and German nationals, but the underground enemy proved difficult to subdue.

Malan knew how to bide his time, and was an extremely canny political operator. When it became clear in early 1943 that the Nazis would lose the war, the steam started to go out of the OB. Malan was able gradually to roll up most of the OB and the Pirow faction, incorporating them into his party, and benefiting from the organised base that the OB had built in the urban working class. What he also inherited though was a number of individuals whose thinking came out of the mainstream of the fascism of the 1930s and 1940s. Some would become politically important after Malan came to power on his platform of 'apartheid' in 1948. But they were subordinated to Malan and Verwoerd's leadership.[43]

When the Soviet Union was invaded in June 1941, the CPSA turned to the policy of supporting the war effort. They also saw – by no means mistakenly – the opportunity to draw some of the South African military forces toward the left. After some initial meetings in the second half of 1941, the Communists played the key role in founding an organisation called the Springbok Legion (SL), aimed at organising servicemen. This movement was very broadly socially based, but it was led by the Communist network in the Union Defence Force. The Legion was conceived as a soldiers' trade union, addressing issues of pay, conditions, and post-war social reintegration. It also sought to use the uniting theme of anti-fascism as a vehicle for drawing white soldiers towards a more egalitarian politics. This was by no means a hopeless task – hatred of the OB and Malan nationalists, who were seen as traitors, was intense among the troops, and servicemen on leave on the Rand and in Cape Town were frequently involved in physical fights with them. Soldiers had many practical grievances and consequently, a sense of injustice. White servicemen were impressed with Soviet resistance to Hitler. And they were resentful of the British Army's patronising attitude to 'colonials'. One sergeant in the Western Desert campaign summarised his men's attitudes as 'admiration for Uncle Joe, fury and impatience with Britain's ineptitude and constant disasters', and disillusion with Smuts ('a bloody platitude factory').[44] The SL was also influenced in Egypt by the radicalisation underway in the British forces, and especially its expression in the 'Soldier's Parliament' which included in its leadership such notable figures as the Communist Party theorist James Klugman, the future Labour MP Leo Abse, and the future historian of African nationalism, Basil Davidson.[45]

Soldiers of colour were included in the movement, and there is certainly some anecdotal evidence that the rigidity of racial boundaries weakened at times in the

North African campaign – but the SL's intended audience was clearly mainly white (and male). The organisation was astonishingly successful, peaking in 1944 at 50,000 to 60,000 members, a number equivalent to about quarter of all the white troops who volunteered for the war, and a much bigger proportion of the men actually serving at that time. It also created the Home Front League (HFL) organising women and male civilians. An SL–HFL protest campaign about soldier's pay and widow's pensions in 1943 succeeded in winning a meeting between the Legion leadership and the government, which resulted in modest improvements. The combination of championing material grievances and street-level anti-fascism provided a basis for the SL. But it also tried to change the social and racial attitudes of white soldiers, emphasising wartime comradeship across the colour line and advocating progressive social policy. SL activists believed that white working class soldiers, once removed from the direct influence of the Afrikaner nationalists and British chauvinists, were remarkably open to entertaining ideas about egalitarian post-war social reforms and about improving the social conditions of African workers. The SL was genuinely keen to support the war effort. In mid-1942, at a time when the British position in North African was threatened, it energetically supported the recruitment campaign for a new South African Division. In the 1943 election it put its now considerable organisational resources behind securing a Smuts victory, subordinating its critique of the government to the need to keep the anti-war Afrikaner nationalists from power. However the Legion also advocated policies which went against the government line in many respects. It called for conscription for whites, which Smuts resisted on the grounds that it would antagonise many Afrikaners. And on both egalitarian and military grounds, the SL demanded the arming of black soldiers, which the government was opposed to both for racist reasons and because of fear of white public opinion.[46]

A key figure in the Springbok Legion was its Secretary, Jack Hodgson. Jack was the son of an English immigrant who had been killed in a mining accident. He grew up in extreme poverty, spending some time in an orphanage. Becoming a miner, Jack went to work on the Northern Rhodesia Copperbelt. There he participated in leading a major strike of the white workforce, and was won over to Communism by the strike's main activist, an Australian called Frank Maybank. Hodgson served in the army in North Africa, carrying out dangerous missions in a mobile unit which operated behind enemy lines. After he was invalided out, he set up and operated the Springbok Legion's central office in Johannesburg. He then met Rica Gampel, a middle class Jewish woman then in the Air Force, who was in a mainly Coloured branch of the Legion.[47] Rica became the Legion's highly effective fund raiser; they married and were later to play a key role later in the liberation movement's turn to armed struggle.

Developments within the Communist-led SL also interacted with a broader swing to the left in state policy and white public opinion. The left in the SALP strengthened its position, with figures like the leftist Johannesburg SALP City Councillor, Jessie McPherson, advocating egalitarian post-war social and racial political reforms. The CPSA-steered South African Friends of the Soviet Union

and Medical Aid for Russia became influential: for example a 1944 Cape Town event under the slogan of '3 Years Fighting Alliance with Russia', was addressed by an Anglican Church Bishop and by McPherson.[48] The SL joined in these campaigns, which also echoed the British left's demand for a 'second front' in Europe. The CPSA even won a handful of municipal council seats in white areas in Johannesburg, Cape Town and East London. Smuts's director of intelligence, E. G. Malherbe, created an Army Educational Scheme (AES) which was aimed to help inoculate the troops against the ideas of the pro-Nazi political forces in South Africa. Under the leadership of a very able liberal, Leo Marquard, it not only performed this task but also sought to make the troops more sympathetic to the idea of social and racial reform in the future. Many of the lecturer posts in the AES were taken by advanced liberals, social democrats and communists, who initiated wide-ranging discussions in the camps in Egypt and later in Italy, and who took the opportunity to advance their anti-fascist ideas.[49] Guy Butler, later to become a leading intellectual figure in South African liberalism, was as an AES officer and was extremely sympathetic to the Soviet Union at this time. He described himself and his colleagues as 'social democrats' and as hoping that the post war period would see the end of the 'industrial colour bar' (which prevented Africans from taking most skilled jobs) and a (gradualist) extension of the franchise.[50] The war ended on a note of anti-fascist euphoria for the activists. Rusty Bernstein, now an SL activist with the troops in Northern Italy, recalled fraternising with partisans and making friends with a journalist on the Italian Communist Party's paper *L'Unità*. He experienced the celebration of victory in Milan as the most glorious of his life, next to South Africa's 1994 democratic election.[51]

But the SL's mass support did not long survive the war, perhaps primarily because of the underlying racial politics. The racism of the South African troops was hard to shake, and it was often tied to a suspicion of egalitarianism. Guy Butler eventually despaired of winning over the men to a social democratic or non-racial perspective.[52] Moreover, the immediate aftermath of the war had a hugely demoralising effect on the South African troops abroad. Bernstein recalled how the extreme delays in repatriation from Italy caused the troops to sink into political lethargy, psychological depression and epidemic black marketeering.[53] At a transit camp in Helwan, Egypt, a major riot by frustrated soldiers took place in which the entire facility was burned to the ground – but it was perhaps as much a sign of despair as of politicisation.[54] By 1946, the SL's membership had completely collapsed; it struggled on until 1953, but essentially reduced to a tiny core of Communist-aligned activists. Government mismanagement of demobilisation, including a desperate housing shortage for veterans, may well have tipped a number of Afrikaner former soldiers toward voting for the Nationalists in 1948.

## The afterlife of South African anti-fascism

The National Party came to power in 1948, and gradually created one of the most extensive and bureaucratically regulated systems of racial inequality in world history.

But though many of the officials of the new regime had genuinely fascist pasts in the OB or the Pirow faction, they were subordinated to the Malanite racial populists. And the latter too sought to cover the tracks of their anti-Semitism and ambiguous relation to the Nazis.

Wartime anti-fascism had its own afterlife. This was most dramatically manifested in a brief revival of white soldier radicalisation. In 1951 the NP government sought to change the constitution in order to remove the franchise rights of 'Coloured' male voters in the Cape, which had survived until then. Protest over this led to the formation of a veteran's organisation called the Torch Commando (TC) which aimed to mobilise the ex-servicemen against the Afrikaner nationalists. The TC invoked the history of the war against Nazism, and sought to rekindle the brotherhood of the battlefield. Spectacular military-style parades and torchlight processions were held, and Group Captain A.G. 'Sailor' Malan, a South African who had been a fighter ace in the RAF during the Battle of Britain, emerged as a charismatic leader. The tone of the TC though was largely liberal, with a large presence of the white Anglophone establishment and influence from big business. Its policies were rhetorically constitutionalist and democratic, but vague, and its racial politics largely paternalist. The core of old SL Communist activists were involved, but they were not dominant, and were eventually pushed out of the movement. As the apartheid regime consolidated its control and ensured that it won the white elections through gerrymandering, the Commando gradually faded away.[55] White opponents of the NP continued to invoke the history of the OB and its wartime treachery in their polemics, but this was a last thin connection to an almost forgotten moment of radical anti-fascism.

As Neil Roos has shown, in the end both the Springbok Legion and the Torch Commando foundered on the rocks of racial politics.[56] White soldiers and veterans were often genuine in their loathing of Nazism and its South African acolytes. They often felt sympathy for the sufferings of black South Africans, and were frequently persuadable that more egalitarian social policies and greater personal freedoms were desirable. Yet fundamentally, they did think of themselves as 'white' and thus as having a superior claim to power. They baulked at the possibility of a majority non-racial franchise. Anti-fascism did not trump racial identification.

But there was one other very important legacy of the Springbok Legion era. After the CPSA was banned in 1950, the Communists went underground. Around the same time, they developed a close alliance with the new ANC leadership group around Mandela and Tambo. Communists from a Springbok Legion background played a key part role in building this connection. These veterans tended to see Apartheid as another form of fascism, and the battle against it as a continuation of their participation in the war against Hitler. When in 1960, the state repressed oppositional movements, these white former soldiers were crucial in influencing the turn of the ANC and its allies toward armed struggle.[57] Jack Hodgson was an early and strong advocate of the military turn. His skills with explosives, acquired as a miner and in the army, came to the fore. The initial campaign planned the sabotaging of industrial and state infrastructure.[58] According to Nelson Mandela,

Hodgson became 'our first demolition expert', and Mandela was present when Hodgson set off the first trial explosive devices.[59] This interpretation of apartheid as a fascism which required a war to crush it was a highly understandable one given the experience of Hodgson's cohort. It was reinforced by the subsequent experience of the ANC's militants abroad. In the early 1960s, young black ANC members were sent to the Soviet Union for military training. There, they were taught by instructors who were veterans of the Great Patriotic War, and whose thinking was based on the experience of Soviet partisans from 1941 to 1945.[60] Thus the idea of the struggle as a war against fascism was further entrenched. Though the importance of political direction was often asserted, by the 1980s the ANC built up a considerable military apparatus, which was envisaged by at least some elements of the movements as eventually toppling the regime. Yet the ANC's armed struggle in the end remained symbolic; it never came remotely close to militarily threatening the regime.

By interpreting the regime as 'fascist', the ANC did not see the limited but important room for political manoeuvre that the nature of the state did give. Unlike in classical fascism, beleaguered but important civil society space did exist. It is not in fact clear that it would have been impossible in the early 1960s to continue with some form of mass political mobilisation.[61] When powerful independent black trade unions emerged in the 1970s, the ANC, on the assumption that real trade unions could not exist under fascism, denounced them as fake organisations. In fact, during the great political confrontations of the 1980s, these unions turned out to the bedrock of mass resistance.[62] While the regime was intensely repressive it did not ever fully close down civil society. Community organisations, civil rights groups, independent lawyers, a critical press, and critical intellectuals did continue to operate, albeit often under extreme harassment. Their work did open up space for challenges to the regime, which were crucial to the ultimately successful mass resistance of the 1980s. By construing the political terrain solely as one of war against fascism, the ANC prevented itself, until very late in the day, from seeing the importance of these social movements and institutional and cultural struggles. And because the regime was conceived as monolithic, proponents of a negotiated settlement within the ANC had to push back against militarist thinking in the organisation in order to achieve their eventually successful strategy. The mythology of the anti-fascist war militarised politics, in the end hindering more than helping the movement.

## Conclusion

The global anti-fascism of the period 1933 to 1945 was central to modern South Africa's formation. In some respects the history of South African anti-fascism followed the pattern of anti-fascism in the United Kingdom, with the formation of a broadly based anti-fascist campaign in the mid-1930s and considerable enthusiasm for the Spanish Republican cause; a split between pro-war labourites and anti-war Communists between 1939 and 1941, and a return to left-liberal unity against the

Axis powers after the German invasion of the USSR. As in the UK, there was a political radicalisation among the armed forces that emerged from the politics of anti-fascism during the war years. There were, as in Britain, tensions during the 1930s between radical leftists on the one hand, and moderate labourites, liberals and Jewish establishment organisations on the other, as to whether to oppose local Fascists in a violent or a peaceful manner. But South African anti-fascism was also shaped by the country's specific social and political formation as a settler state with a majority, politically subordinate, indigenous population. It was fragmented along racial lines with the Garveyites, the opposing factions of the ANC, and the Unity Movement all conceptualising opposition to fascism in ways that differed both from each other, but also from the strategies and tactics advocated by white leftists. The very real politicisation of white troops in the Second World War could not overcome issues of race in the end. And, in a peculiar way, the wartime anti-fascism of white Communist soldiers returned in the early 1960s to help shape the African nationalists turn to the armed struggle.

The memory anti-fascism has had a remarkable persistence in the South African political imagination. From 1945 onward, across a broad political spectrum, there has been a tendency for all those who in any way identify with the cause of democracy, to cast themselves as continuators of anti-fascism and their enemies as the heirs of Mussolini and Hitler. At the time of writing both an Afrikaner organisation (*Afriforum*) and a black nationalist organisation (Economic Freedom Fighters) are daily accused of fascism in the South African press. Neither perhaps actually fully quite fits the bill: but it is no accident that political actors see the invocation of fascism as a crucial political resource. It is not only in Europe that politics cannot escape from the history of the anti-fascist struggle.

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