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An Imperial Dominion: South Africa in the First World War

Matthew Patterson, Huron University College

Abstract: This paper examines the role of the Union of South Africa in the First World War, specifically through the lens of its role as a part of the British Empire in the war. It seeks to demonstrate that South Africa functioned not as a part of the British war effort in the way of other dominions, but rather as a nation state with its own imperial interests. It examines the relationships between native Africans, Boers, and British Colonists and how their interactions changed the war effort in South Africa. This argument challenges historiographies which have been complacent in their placement of South Africa within the British war effort rather than examining it in its function as an independent actor.

Keywords: South Africa; Imperialism; First World War; British Empire; African Theatre; Boers.

Despite attaining the title of a world war, public perceptions of the First World War tend to focus on it as a European conflict, largely ignoring its global nature. While the majority of the fighting did occur in Europe and the Middle East, there were significant conflicts within the colonies of the major European empires that had long lasting implications. Africa in particular was one of the most unique areas of the war, with ramifications that are still felt today. While there were several theatres of battle within Africa, one of the most interesting aspects from a colonial perspective was the involvement of the newly formed Union of South Africa, which had to balance its status as a British dominion with a population comprised mostly of native Africans and Dutch descended Boers.¹ The result of this balancing act was a course of military action unlike anything seen elsewhere, and its story deserves to be told separately from other narratives of the war. This paper will contend that the nature of South African involvement in the war was fundamentally different than the rest of the British Empire. Both the internal social and political views of the country and its course of action in the war demonstrate its own ambitions which largely disregarded those of Britain. These differences are significant enough that South Africa should not be viewed as a part the British war effort in the same way as the other dominions, rather it should be viewed as a largely independent actor in the war.

The Union of South Africa was formed as a result of the Boer War, combining the former Transvaal, Capetown, Natal, and Orange River colonies, but to call it unified would be tremendously misleading. The vast majority of the population were native Africans, who were rarely permitted to vote or take part in government. The second largest group were the Boers, descendents of Dutch settlers, who just years prior had been engaged in a difficult war with Britain.

¹ Although in contemporary society they are typically referred to as Afrikaaners, during this time they were still known as Boers and referred to themselves as Boers, and most of the historical research in this area uses the word Boer. This paper will follow in that tradition and they will be referred to using the term “Boers”.

Indeed, at the start of the war in 1914, both the Prime Minister, Louis Botha and the Minister of War, Jan Smuts, were Boers who had been active leaders in fighting against Britain just over a decade ago.² Despite being a dominion of the same status as Canada, Australia and New Zealand, this put them in a uniquely difficult situation. Most Boers in South Africa, including members of parliament, felt little to no connection to the British Empire, in fact, they felt much more deeply connected to their neighbouring German colonists, who had a similar background.³ The situation was serious, and forced the South African government to delay entering the war in any significant way, fearing that mobilisation would be extremely unpopular with the Boer population, thereby creating significant problems domestically.⁴

These fears were proven to be valid, as when South Africa did eventually enter the war it sparked a massive backlash, unlike what had been seen virtually anywhere else in the war. There was an armed rebellion amongst the Boer population in response to mobilisation, consisting of around 11,500 men, mostly veterans of the Boer War.⁵ This forced the first action of the South African army to not be taken against Germany, but rather against its own population. The rebellion required a force of 30,000 men to be quelled, and created a serious challenge for the fledgling state.⁶ While fighting was well underway in every other theatre of the war and most armies were beginning to grasp the nature of the war, South Africa was still occupied quite literally fighting its own battles. The ramifications of this rebellion are interesting to note, as Britain was unable to

² Timothy Joseph Stapleton, *No insignificant part: the Rhodesia Native Regiment and the East Africa Campaign of the First World War* (Waterloo, Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006), 16.

³ Anne Samson, *Britain, South Africa and the East Africa Campaign, 1914-1918: The Union Comes of Age* (London, Tauris Academic Studies, 2006), 83.

⁴ *ibid.*, 81.

⁵ Christian Koller, "The Recruitment of Colonial Troops in Africa and Asia and their Deployment in Europe during the First World War", *Immigrants and Minorities* 16 (2008), 111.

⁶ Anne Samson, *World War I in Africa: the Forgotten Conflict Among the European Powers* (London, I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013), 75.

send troops to support the government, forcing South Africa to handle its own military affairs, further separating it from the war action taking place elsewhere. While Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and even India were fighting alongside British forces, South Africa was heavily isolated and dealing with its own objectives.

It should also be noted that resistance was not limited to the Boers. In neighbouring Southern Rhodesia, which had a similar settler population, native Africans were prepared to resist the possibility of conscription as well. One chief went as far as to prepare a force of 100 armed men to fight against conscription in case their military service was demanded.⁷ While there was resistance to military service in almost every country involved with the First World War, the scale and intensity of the resistance in South Africa clearly sets it apart and had a massive impact on the operations of the military.

The threat of an African uprising against the European powers because of a war fought in Africa was a significant idea with serious impact on how the war would play out. Initially there were calls, especially from Germany, for African colonies to remain neutral.⁸ There were a variety of fears which contributed to this idea, but interestingly, they tended to be unique to Africa. Firstly, many feared that the removal of white police and military forces to go fight in the war would create an opportunity for native Africans to overthrow the colonial state; this fear was especially large in states with recently growing colonial populations, such as Southern Rhodesia.⁹ That this was such a concern to colonists is a testament to just how little control they believed they had over their African colonies, and their own insecurities in the region. In South Africa, the defense force that

⁷ Stapleton, *No insignificant part*, 26.

⁸ Melvin E. Page, "Black Men in a White Man's War," in *Africa and the First World War*, ed. Melvin E. Page (Houndmills, The MacMillan Press Ltd, 1987), 1-27, 8.

⁹ Stapleton, *No insignificant part*, 22.

would be used in the First World War was created largely out of fear of a native uprising.¹⁰ While Europeans made bold claims of ownership over Africa, their actions around defense quite clearly show that they were deeply afraid of those claims being challenged. In South Africa this is especially true, as the white population was divided between Boers and British, a conflict which could easily create room for a native uprising. Indeed, likely the only area on which there was legitimate agreement and cooperation between the two groups was repression of the native African population.

One of the more common arguments against the use of African soldiers came from the school of paternalistic racism, which viewed non-white races – especially black people – as inferior and in need of the protection and support of Europeans. Some of those influenced by these ideas viewed World War One as a “white man’s war”, and argued that it would be wrong to use Africans as soldiers.¹¹ This philosophy was far more popular near the beginning of the war, before the European powers realised how long it would last. The French, especially, saw very little problem with using Africans as soldiers, shipping approximately 200,000 men from French West Africa to fight on the Western Front.¹² The British policy was somewhat different, in that it used Africans as soldiers in the colonies, but tended not to make them combatants in Europe.¹³ The South African government, however, refused to arm native Africans at all for most of the war, using them only as labour.¹⁴ But this cannot be written off as just another part of the so called “white man’s war”. There were around 1.5 million Indian soldiers who fought in the war, including in Europe and the Middle East, showing that the British were willing to use colonial soldiers in European

¹⁰ Samson, *The Union Comes of Age*, 75.

¹¹ Stapleton, *No insignificant part*, 147.

¹² *ibid.*, 15.

¹³ Koller, “Recruitment of Colonial Troops”, 113.

¹⁴ Richard Fogarty and David Killingray, “Demobilisation in British and French Africa at the End of the First World War”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 50 (2015). 104.

battlefields.¹⁵ Even other dominions sent their indigenous peoples to European battlefields, with Canada sending 4,000 indigenous soldiers overseas.¹⁶ It is clear, therefore, that South Africa saw their role as a dominion in the war in a critically different way than other dominions. Where Canada saw the need to use as many soldiers as they possibly could, South Africa largely refused to arm the vast majority of their population. It should be noted that this was not a decision met with unanimous support. Many British officials, especially those with a colonial background strongly supported the enlistment of Africans. For example, Winston Churchill gave an impassioned speech to British parliament calling for Africans to be used in combat, and fearing military failure because Britain “forgot Africa”.¹⁷ Nonetheless, South Africa ignored these calls, and continued with a policy of a white military, arguably limiting its effectiveness.

Despite the resistance to war, South Africa eventually did attack Germany’s African colonies, although not for loyalty to the British Empire. Prime Minister Botha and Minister of War Smuts had a difficult pitch to make to the South African parliament, and an even more difficult case to sell to South African voters. While other dominions, particularly Canada and Australia, were predominantly populated by British immigrants who felt a call to defend their motherland, South Africa had no such connection, with most of its voting population having much more animosity towards the British than loyalty.¹⁸ Where Botha eventually saw an opportunity to convince the populace to support the war effort was their desire to possess more land, namely German South West Africa (modern day Namibia). He presented the mobilisation of South African troops as an opportunity to annex German South West Africa, and argued that should South Africa

¹⁵ Koller, “Recruitment of Colonial Troops”, 113.

¹⁶ Timothy C. Winegard, *For King and Kanata: Canadian Indians and the First World War*, (Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 6.

¹⁷ Koller, “Recruitment of Colonial Troops”, 114.

¹⁸ Samson, *The Union Comes of Age*, 83.

fail to join the war the task would be given to Australia or India, thereby eliminating any hopes of South African annexation.¹⁹

Although imperialism is widely regarded as one of the causes of the First World War, this is generally in the context of the European empires, not of the dominions or colonies. South Africa had no intention of supporting British colonialism, rather they sought to take what could have potentially become a new British colony and make it part of their own union. It was their own “imperialist vision” that was the driving force of their actions, more than even the defense of their state.²⁰ They viewed themselves not as working as part of the British effort, but rather as tentative allies for their own benefit.

Southern Rhodesia is arguably the most similar area to South Africa, and was likewise motivated by its own expansionist and imperialist ideas; but it also showed important and distinct differences. Whereas South Africa was attempting to establish its place in the world in its own right, Southern Rhodesia appears to have been more focused on improving its place within the British Empire. It sought the status of a dominion within the Empire, but did not appear to have ambitions to move beyond it.²¹ Southern Rhodesia clearly viewed itself as a part of the British Empire, fighting in the same theatres as South Africa, but taking a very different approach to the war. Southern Rhodesians tended to act out of loyalty to the British Empire, and while South Africa resisted greatly to the outbreak of war, Southern Rhodesians reacted with excitement and enthusiasm seen elsewhere in the Empire.²² That is not to say that they did not have their own ambitions, however. They, along with colonists in Kenya, Northern Rhodesia, and even Belgians

¹⁹ *ibid.*, 82.

²⁰ P. Michael Phillips, “James Stejskal. 2014. The Horns of the Beast: The Swakop River Campaign and World War I in South-West Africa”, *African Studies Quarterly* 15 (2015), 121.

²¹ Stapleton, *No Insignificant Part*, 19.

²² *ibid.*

in the Congo, and Portuguese colonists in Mozambique “all saw German East Africa as a potential area for territorial gains.”²³ The fundamental difference between Southern Rhodesia and South Africa is that Southern Rhodesia viewed its expansion as an expansion of the British Empire. For it, expanding its territory and control would benefit Britain, which was its goal in the war. It should therefore be seen that Southern Rhodesia functioned as a part of the overall British war effort, albeit with its own ambitions.

It should be known that some South Africans, including Botha and Smuts, viewed the war as an opportunity to gain the trust of the British, thereby increasing their own authority of self-governance.²⁴ Prior to the outbreak of the war, Britain had stationed a significant number of soldiers in South Africa to defend British claim over the land, from both German attack and internal rebellion.²⁵ Upon declaration of war against Germany, almost all of these soldiers were sent back to England, which created a difficult situation for the new Union of South Africa. Many parliamentarians viewed simply allowing the exodus of British troops as sufficient proof of loyalty, and argued that ordering South African troops into combat would push things too far, essentially forcing upheaval and disloyalty.²⁶ Botha and Smuts, however, did not accept this as the minimum for proving loyalty to Britain, and viewed South Africa’s future autonomy as being linked to their support of Britain in the war. While there were certainly debates in other parts of the Empire and other dominions about issues such as conscription and to what extent their militaries would be involved in the war, they tended not to be based on the idea of a show of loyalty. South Africa found itself in a very peculiar situation, and eventually agreed to a solution which, when compared

²³ *ibid.*, 16.

²⁴ Samson, *The Union Comes of Age*, 82.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 80.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 81.

to the other dominions, represents a substantial compromise between its own goals and that of the British Empire.

Even after South Africa finally mobilised and agreed to invade German South West Africa, there was still significant fear of the mission failing due to rebellion or upheaval. The most obvious response to this fear came from Prime Minister Louis Botha. He decided that the only way to ensure order among the military was to lead the invasion himself.²⁷ This meant leaving the country and handing over control of domestic affairs to deputy Prime Minister Jan Smuts, a unique act among governments within the British war effort. It would be absurd to think of Robert Borden or Lloyd George standing in the trenches of France, yet Louis Botha felt he had no choice but to take on direct command. The other important aspect of his direct leadership is that it implies an invasion from a nation state, not from a colony. Whereas the other dominions at least initially placed their troops under the command of British officers, South Africa clearly avoided this system of what it viewed as foreign command. Perhaps more interesting is the essential reversal of roles between Louis Botha and Jan Smuts. Smuts, as War Minister, seems like the obvious choice to lead the army if they felt that they needed a senior government official to lead the invasion; however, he was left at home to handle domestic affairs. The reasoning behind this was that Botha felt he was the only one who could effectively command the support of the army, as many Boers felt like Jan Smuts was too close with the British, a concern which would seem highly unusual in the other dominions.²⁸ Botha's actions make it clear that South African soldiers wanted to fight for South Africa, and certainly did not want to fight for the British, and likely did not want to be a part of the British war effort.

²⁷ Samson, *The Forgotten Conflict*, 79.

²⁸ *ibid.*

With the conquest of German South West Africa complete in 1915, there arose a new debate around what would be next for the South African military. While the Boers were eventually willing to fight in German South West Africa in the hopes of annexation, it would be difficult to use that argument anywhere else, as Germany had no other territories bordering South Africa. This situation arose at the same time as trench warfare began to take hold in Europe, and the realisation set in that the war would last far longer than originally expected. There was, therefore, a large amount of pressure on the South African government to continue to wage war with Germany, but finding a means of doing so which the public would support was no easy feat. The largest German colony in Africa was the one which was proving the most difficult to capture, German East Africa (modern day Tanzania), and calls came for South Africa to send soldiers.²⁹ The Allies would have preferred to ship South African soldiers to Europe, but were aware of the extent of Boer resistance to the British. They therefore thought it best to keep them in Africa, where they would not have to fight alongside British soldiers against whom many of them had recently fought.³⁰ Sending troops to East Africa was a compromise which Botha and Smuts saw as an opportunity for South Africa for several reasons. Firstly, South Africa had a long held ambition of bringing Rhodesia into the Union, which would have put German East Africa on their border.³¹ By helping to remove Germany from East Africa, it would be ensuring that in the event of a successful union with Rhodesia it would have an ally on its north-eastern border, rather than the constant threat of Germany. There was also discussion of using East Africa as a settlement location for displaced Belgians, who were generally one of the most sympathetic groups in the war in the eyes of the allies, due to their perceived attempts at neutrality.³² Smuts and Botha were therefore able to justify

²⁹ Samson, *The Union Comes of Age*, 94.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 95

³¹ *ibid.*, 101

³² *ibid.*

the campaign, not as being in the interest of the British Empire, but in the interest of South Africa and humanitarianism.

The First World War in Africa had long term implications for the continent and colonialism there, but it is critical not to overstate its importance to the immediate outcome of the war. The Allied victory was realistically decided in continental Europe, and while African battles were important to Africans and colonial officials, they did little to change the final results.³³ It is no surprise then that the European powers avoided sending soldiers to Africa, and, as mentioned earlier, in some instances sent Africans to fight in Europe. Likewise, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, and even Indians tended to be sent to Europe. The South African military was divided on sending troops to Europe. The British population of South Africa was quite eager to assist, and knew that the best way to help the British cause would be to go to Europe to fight; but the Boer population strongly opposed such measures. The compromise they came to was that South Africans could volunteer for European service, but no soldiers would be ordered to go.³⁴ It should be noted as well that there had been no conscription in South Africa, making soldiers who wished to fight in Europe volunteer twice, once for service and again for service in Europe. South Africa was clearly not doing itself any favours in the eyes of the British, for the other dominions were sending entire expeditionary forces overseas, whilst South Africa was essentially trying to merely appease its own (white) people. British war command clearly wanted more out of South Africa in Europe, and were underwhelmed by the South African response, with Herbert Kitchener requesting a “Division of combined British and Boer brigades as well as a brigade of mounted troops” be sent to the Western Front.³⁵

³³ Fogarty and Killingray, “Demobilisation in British and French Africa”, 104.

³⁴ Samson, *The Union Comes of Age*, 100.

³⁵ Samson, *The Union Comes of Age*, 96.

Louis Botha and Jan Smuts were in an unenviable position amongst politicians at the outbreak of the First World War, leaders of a Dominion of the British Empire, but one with very few tangible ties to Britain. What emerged from the South African war effort was not an attempt to support the motherland, but rather an attempt to expand its own territory and advance its own imperialist interests. It is true that some of the things which set South Africa apart from most of the war were not completely unique to South Africa. Southern Rhodesia also had expansionist interests; however, there was a crucial difference in motivations and how they viewed themselves. Southern Rhodesians, along with other European colonists in Africa, viewed their interests as part of the interests of their empire. They saw the expansion of Southern Rhodesia as the expansion of Britain's hold on Africa, whereas South Africa saw the Annexation of German South West Africa as an opportunity to improve the fortunes of South Africa, not necessarily of Britain. Similarly, South Africa was not the only colony which was afraid of an African uprising as a result of the war; most of the colonies were very aware of this possibility, and implemented policies to mitigate it. What makes the South African situation unique is that it faced not only resistance from the native population, but also from the largest settler population, who did, in fact, rebel against the war. South Africa was in a unique situation, and fought the war not in the interests of the British Empire, but largely in its own interests and for the motivations of its own colonial population. It is, therefore, insufficient to consider South Africa as part of the imperial war effort in the same way as the other dominions or colonies, but rather it should be considered an independent actor, acting in the unique African theatre of the war.

While recent scholarship of the First World War has begun to include more colonial perspectives, the focus has tended to be on the war's impact on indigenous populations and the processes of colonialism. The impact of the war on the internal functioning of colonial states has

largely been left out of international historiographies which is a disservice to understanding the global nature of the conflict. Future scholarship would be well advised to consider not only the imperial political contexts of the First World War, but also the political contexts of colonial states. This paper takes on this subject in regards to South Africa; however, a wide variety of colonial states could be subject to this type of analysis, which would benefit the broader historiography of the war.

Author Bio

MATTHEW PATTERSON is a student at Huron University College at the University of Western Ontario, in London, Ontario, Canada. He is in his 3rd year of an honours specialisation in History. His research interests include Canadian history and the history of the First World War, particularly in a colonial context.

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