

## Fighting for a White South Africa: White working class racism and the 1922 Rand Revolt.

Keith Breckenridge

I realized only quite recently—although I suppose I must have known it in an unconscious way for a long time—that all of the most recent generations of my ancestors are descended from members of the Witwatersrand white working class. My great-grandparents make up a strangely representative ethnic sample of the white working class in 1920. My maternal great-grandparents on my father's side came from Lithuania to the 'Rand after the South African war. Their daughter lived with a degenerate Scottish artisan who was himself the child of a Glaswegian family who came to take up work at Luiperdsvlei gold mine before the South African War. On my mother's side, my great-great-grandfather was a Cousin Jack – one of the first batch of Cornish miners who came out to the 'Rand in the 1890s. His daughter married another Cornishman who worked at Crown Mines. Their son married one of the six daughters of Steyn Greyling, a former Boer prisoner at St Helena who came to the same mine from a farm near the Free State town of Bethlehem during the First World War. This ethnic jigsaw mirrors the major waves of white immigration to the Witwatersrand before the 1922 strike but I mention this genealogy for two different reasons. I think that my family history nicely captures the ways in which ethnicity, after the trauma of the 1922 strike, ceased to be an important part of white working class life. I, also, want my readers to know that I approach the history of that strike, and of the workers who were caught up in it, without, at least, an attitude of contempt for the white working class.

The clinical destruction of the armed uprising of white workers that followed the 1922 strike marks the coming of age of the unified South African state; it was, as David Yudelman showed twenty-five years ago, the moment of the establishment of an unambiguous Smutsian hegemony. In the events on the 10 – 13<sup>th</sup> of March, 1922, the central government deployed a relatively small professional army, bomber aircraft, tanks and artillery against the pockets of armed revolution in the towns along the Reef. The rapid collapse of working class resistance marked the end of a string of revolts that had rocked the foundations of the new South African state over the previous two decades.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with the events of the Bhambatha tax revolt in 1906, the settler state that Smuts and Merriman fashioned faced a string of violent protests. In 1907, under the pall of truly frightening silicosis fatalities, the white mineworkers initiated a bitter fifteen year struggle for control over the arrangement and rewards of underground work. Initially, in the absence of a properly organized police power, the conflict carried in their direction. In 1913 the syndicalist leaders of the mine workers were able to humiliate the two key figures of the Union government, Botha and Smuts, forcing them to accept the white workers' terms of settlement or face the sacking of the city of Johannesburg. When the strike season began again a year later Smuts was, famously, better prepared. He drew upon his republican political allegiances to mobilize the newly reconstituted rural commandos, bringing a force of 70,000 Afrikaner burghers to the city. With this overwhelming force at his back, Smuts declared martial law, arrested and deported--without trial--the key syndicalist leaders.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> David Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labour On* (Cape Town: David Philip: Cape Town: David Philip, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Guy, *The Maphumulo Uprising: War, Law and Ritual in the Zulu Rebellion* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005)., Leonard Thompson, *The Unification of South Africa, 1902-1910*. (Oxford : Clarendon Press: Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1960)., Jonathan Hyslop, "The Notorious Syndicalist" *J T Bain: A*

Smuts' dependence on the commandos was a fragile coercive arrangement, pitting the forces of mostly republican rural landownership against white working class syndicalism—a risky strategy as thousands of poor Afrikaners abandoned the land to take up the ghastly work of the mines. It was only six months later that the same leaders who had come to the state's rescue in Johannesburg mobilized thousands of the poorest Afrikaner farmers of the Free State in a rebellion of their own in response to the new government's decision to invade Namibia. With imperial troops all en route to Europe, the only coercive resources available to the government were the result of personal loyalties that the older members of the commando force felt for the Prime Minister, General Louis Botha. It was in the events of the Boer Rebellion--of the commanders and troops of the recently formalized commandos--that the new state came closest to losing its grip on the country.<sup>3</sup>

An acute shortage of white labour during the First World War dampened the conflict over the control of mine work but in 1922, under the pressure of an extraordinary inflationary crisis, two racist streams – white working class syndicalism and an atavistic Boer republicanism – coalesced in armed uprising. Smuts' use of the new technologies of industrial war gutted both of these political traditions, comprehensively, clinically, and they were never again to be a meaningful threat to the state's power. What I want to show here is that the supporters of these traditions did not share the fate of their political ideologies--the real victims of the events of 1922 lay elsewhere.

In its defeat the organized white working class secured the long term impoverishment, and unskilling (for want of a better word), of the African working class. Far from its being a spontaneous working class uprising against capitalist power, a major strand of the 1922 strike was a deliberate, violent assault on the political organization of their African working class peers. This assault came at precisely the moment that the self-organization of Africans was approaching success. Just two years before the white workers revolt, 70,000 of their black colleagues had staged a desperate, internally coordinated week-long strike that ended only after the police and the army forced workers at bayonet-point to return to work. The work stay-away ended only after the South African Mounted Rifles stormed, with live rifle fire, the Village Deep Compound in the heart of the city.

The 1920 strike, much more than the decades of protest against the informal colour bar underground, had persuaded those responsible for the recruitment of the African work force that “An effort should be made to persuade the white employees to give up certain classes of work to competent natives notwithstanding the fact that this will cause a displacement of a number of white employees in the Mining Industry,” the Chairman of the Native Recruiting Corporation wrote to the directors of the mining groups, “If the semi-skilled class of native labourers can be allowed to even partially obtain their justifiable aspirations for advancement in industrial life the danger of recurrent strikes with their attendant losses and disorganisation may be largely prevented.”<sup>4</sup> Many forces were arrayed against the organization of African workers, amongst them company directors who were terrified of increasing working costs and Chamber officials who sought to replace politically experienced workers with innocent

---

*Scottish Rebel in Colonial South Africa* (Johannesburg: Jacana: Johannesburg: Jacana, 2004)., Elaine N Katz, *The White Death: Silicosis on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines, 1886-1910* (Johannesburg: WUP: Johannesburg: WUP, 1994)., Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labour* On 109.

<sup>3</sup> S. Swart, "a Boer and His Gun and His Wife Are Three Things Always Together': Republican Masculinity and the 1914 Rebellion," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998)., Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003), 379-83.

<sup>4</sup> CMA Native Labour--General, 1920, Villiers, Charles W. Chairman, Native Recruiting Corporation. to Members of Board of Management, 1920/03/01

migrants from Tropical Africa, but the primary agents of the defeat of the skilled African mine workers were the armed white workers of the 1922 revolt. Anyone who is interested in the building of a just society in contemporary South Africa will know that the social consequences of this fact weigh upon us like Sisyphus' stone. I want to show, in short, that there is little to celebrate in the events of 1922.<sup>5</sup>

## A new study of the White Revolt

Jeremy Krikler has produced an empirically rich and provocative new history of the Rand Revolt. This book is the product of a decade of scholarship, and it presents an extremely comprehensive review of the existing archival record. Like much of the most successful historical writing, it is about violence, and that makes for a good read. The narrative of the events is mostly fluently, and compellingly, arranged. And it is especially as historical geography that the book is useful -- in the reconstruction of the varieties of organization and tactics that emerged in each of the different white working class communities. (For those who have read this book, the contemporary South African jokes about Benoni and Brakpan will have an especially bitter-sweet taste.)

The book warrants engagement, then, on its own terms. This is not quite as self-evident as it once was. One of the things that most worries me about contemporary historical scholarship in South Africa is that major works of scholarship seem to be simply disappearing without a trace. Really important works by Etherington and Chanock, to choose just two not very recent examples, which present potentially revolutionary arguments for our historiographical field seem not to have engaged the attention of a single scholar.<sup>6</sup> Reversing that trend seems to demand a much more determinedly historiographical stance than has been the case in the field of South African historical scholarship for some time. Historians have a professional responsibility to read, and write about, each others' work.

So, aside from the densely reconstructed narrative of the events, what are the key claims of this book? Here I can discern five distinct issues. The first concerns the historical significance of popular revolutionary violence. For Krikler the Revolt is important as the "only popular plebian attempt to bring down a ruling order with a single punch in South African history," and much of the book is concerned to chart the political and military musculature of the arm that threw that punch. It is difficult to avoid the impression that he is interested in the 1922 Revolt as the closest thing to Trotsky's seizure of power that South African history can provide. The kind of society that the revolutionaries might have tried to make after they had power (perhaps because they never had an opportunity to do anything about it) does not interest him.

A second, but closely related issue, is the political character of almost the entire white working class involved in the revolt. Here, like Jon Hyslop's recent study of J T Bain, it is the revolutionary intellectual and organizational features of the white working class that Krikler is concerned to emphasize and understand. "I stepped," he explains at the beginning of the book, "into a world where the streets were thronged with the detachments of a workers' army, where women joined the battle of their menfolk in

---

<sup>5</sup> K. Breckenridge, "'We Must Speak for Ourselves': The Rise and Fall of a Public Sphere on the South African Goldmines, 1920 to 1931," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, no. 01 (1998): 88. See also P L Bonner, "'1920 Black Mineworkers' Strike: A Preliminary Account'," in *Labour, Townships and Protest* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979)., Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labour On* 150-1. and Solomon Johannes Terreblanche, *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002* (Pietermaritzburg: Jointly published by University of Natal Press and KMM Review Publishing, 2002), 271.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Chanock, *The Making of South African Legal Culture, 1902-1936 : Fear, Favour and Prejudice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)., Norman Etherington, *The Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa, 1815-1854* (London: Longman, 2001)..

startling ways, a place of such heat and pressure that *The Rights of Man*, *The Communist Manifesto* and ideologies of race and nation were fused together in weird amalgams.”

The third, and the most provocative, claim of the book is that the tightly organized commandos that drove the revolt in Fordsburg, Newlands, Brakpan and Benoni, in particular, drew more upon the experience of the recent World War than they did on the history of settler paramilitary organization. In arguing for the centrality of the World War, and the relative insignificance of the “Boer tradition” Krikler implicitly links this revolt to other similar uprisings in Europe. If this argument holds it will require a significant reworking of a major part of our historiography.

A fourth, related point concerns the meaning of the widespread racial killings that preceded and coincided with the uprisings. For Krikler these terrifying shootings and assaults presented a most disturbing problem for research. “It would have been impossible for me to extend sympathy to this class and what it went through,” he explains, “had racial killing and hatred been the dominant features of its movement.” In this account, perhaps inevitably, the racist murders of African workers that occurred along the Reef in the days before the uprising began, and again in the working class stronghold of Vrededorp during the revolt itself, were not intrinsic to the political ideas of the white workers. “A day before the racial killing began,” he observes, “no one could have foreseen it.”<sup>7</sup>

And then, finally, there is the issue of the result of the revolt. Like Yudelman, Krikler sees utter defeat in the consequences of the uprising. The white workers trade unions were broken on the mines, their shop stewards chased from the working place never to return. This decline in the industrial power of the guild unions on the mines translated into lower average wages, increased ratios of black to white workers, and a small decline in the numbers of employed whites. The broader national victory of the Labour Party, in its alliance with the Nationalists, was of little benefit, in this account, to the families of the workers trapped on the mines during the hard times of the 1920s.

Each of these claims is important, there is a measure of insight in each of them, and in some of them a substantially new way of understanding the significance of events. But in each there are also some real problems of fact and interpretation. Most importantly, throughout the book Krikler relies on carefully chosen omissions to carry the weight of his argument. Let us consider the cast of characters in the dramatic events of 1922.

## **Dramatis Personae**

What of the people who were involved in this struggle? How does Krikler characterize them, and how does that correspond with the rest of what we know about each of the actors?

It is easiest to begin with Capital. Towards the beginning of this story, the term that Krikler uses to describe the opponents of the strikers is “mine-owner,” and he seems to have Lionel Phillips, in mind. By the 1920s Phillips was the last remaining figure from the hey-day of the Randlords, but he was certainly not a significant “mine-owner.” There is little ambiguity in the characterization of these “hated mine owners.” They were arrogant and indifferent to the predicament of the white workers they employed. Some of this is obviously correct. Phillips certainly endorsed the prospect of a strike, and sought to persuade his friend Smuts to support it, but throughout his letters there is abundant evidence of his paternalistic concern for what he called the “workmen” – a term that was exclusively used for the white miners of the individual mines. In the

---

<sup>7</sup> x, 15

months that followed the strike Phillips wrote long irritably exculpatory letters to his brother—another director of Rand Mines—complaining, fairly, that he had never advocated the abolition of the underground Colour Bar.<sup>8</sup>

Phillips was, in any case, out of the country for the first quarter of 1922. As the book progresses Krikler uses the term “employer” much more commonly; this is certainly a more accurate way of describing people like Phillips, but in a way it obscures a very interesting and important feature of the strike. The strike occurred very soon after Ernest Oppenheimer had managed to persuade JP Morgan to fund the establishment of his new Far East Rand company, Anglo American. Central-Mining, which had already begun the long slow decline as its key directors sought to move themselves and the assets of the company out of the country, was being managed by the timid Evelyn Wallers. In the resulting vacuum, the pace of the conflict between the mining companies and the trade unions was set, to the consternation of some of the key directors of the mining companies, by the paid officials of the Chamber.

By the end of 1921 the key individual in the Chamber of Mines, its former Actuary and Secretary, was William Gemmill. For the better part of thirty years it was Gemmill who dominated the labour policies of the South African mines. He was determined to confront the power of the white unions. In June 1920, having just returned from a tour of the United States where he experienced the tonic effects of union smashing at first hand he had strong advice for his employers, and for the state. “As a result of their correct understanding of the labour position and their known willingness to fight if necessary,” he advised the Federated Chamber of Industries, “the employers in America and Canada retain freedom of initiative, management and control, and so have a great competitive advantage over many employers in European countries.” It was Gemmill, more than any other individual, who was behind the mines’ determination to seize control of the organization of underground work, and the distribution of semi-skilled jobs. He also wrote, and carefully distributed, the blue-print for the state’s response.<sup>9</sup> If this was, as Krikler suggests, the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, it was the first time that salaried, professional managers, who owned no significant equity, had unfettered control of the entire mining industry.

On the other side of the barricades Krikler describes something quite similar in the relationship between the traditional union leaders and the “generals” of the commandos that rose in each of the mining towns of the Reef. By the 8<sup>th</sup> of March decision-making power had clearly passed into the hands of the men elected to lead the commandos. On that day the SAIF called a meeting of the commanders to discuss the eruption of racial killings across the ‘Rand. It was at this meeting that the “generals” formed a special “Committee of Officers,” announced that they were “not there ‘to deal with natives’” and set the date and time for a coordinated insurrection. The most important of these figures was clearly Percy Fisher, guiding spirit of the syndicalist Council (and the later military Committee) of Action, and the commander of the Fordsburg commando, which had its base in the Market Buildings.

Who was Percy Fisher and what was he after? Krikler repeatedly describes him as an “uncompromising class warrior,” but I am not entirely sure what that means. Nor do I know what he means when he says that “militants hung upon the lips of this great and lucid rank-and-file leader.” What, in short, was he saying? We know that he was the

---

<sup>8</sup> Maryna Fraser and Alan Jeeves, *All That Glittered: Selected Correspondence of Lionel Phillips, 1890–1924* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1977), 337.

<sup>9</sup> CAD MNW 573, MM 1739/21 W. Gemmill. Address, 1921. Gemmill, William. Actuary and Labour Adviser, Transvaal Chamber of Mines to Annual Convention of the South African Federated Chamber of Industries, 1920/06/15. See Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labour On* 151-55.

most outspoken advocate of violent revolutionary action against the state and the mining houses, and that he repeatedly tried to contain and redirect the white workers hostility to Africans. But, beyond the insurrection, what kind of society did he imagine the revolutionaries would fashion on the Witwatersrand? He was, unlike many of the other union leaders, who were strongly influenced by an older tradition of Witwatersrand syndicalism, a member of the newly formed Communist Party. We know that Percy Fisher was the only Englishman of the small final Committee of “fighting men” dominated by Afrikaans commando leaders. Like many of the Afrikaners around him, he had come to the Rand relatively recently, in order to escape service in the “capitalists’ war.” Here, and throughout this book, Krikler seems to assume that the intellectual history of the class war is self-evident, with some perplexing results.

Much the same difficulty applies to the motivations of the white workers themselves. The two key characteristics of the white working class that emerge from Krikler’s account are their defensive militancy and their unanimity of action. There was “widespread popular consensus for militant action” and the “fiercest determination to stand their ground.” He shows how the pattern of densely settled white working class married housing drew women, and their children, into bitter family conflicts between strikers, scabs and the non-unionized officials. The use of aircraft in policing the mining towns during the strike, which Churchill had invented nearly a decade year earlier to support the occupation of Somalia, and which Smuts had used against the Bondelswarts people in Namibia, brought white women and children up against the cutting edge of the state’s power.<sup>10</sup> What was suitable for colonial subjugation was not acceptable for the policing of white communities: Hertzog’s description of Smuts after reports of the bombings reached Cape Town, as the man whose footsteps “dripped with blood” remained with him for the rest of his life.<sup>11</sup> The involvement of the mine workers wives and children in the events of the strike does seem to have been both cause and effect of the particular militancy. One of the slogans used in the strike captures this well: “vir elke vrou of kind sal daar 10 polisie doodgeskiet word—For every woman/wife or child, ten policemen will be shot.”

But what was it that the white working class was so determined about? The issue at the heart of the workers’ anger was the Chamber of Mines’ intention to abandon the terms of something called the “Status Quo agreement.” This was a list drawn up in 1918 of the jobs, varying from mine to mine, that were still in the hands of white workers after several years where the mines had begun to employ Coloured and African replacements. At the end of December 1921 the Chamber announced its intention to abandon the terms of the agreement, beginning the process of recruiting cheaper semi-skilled black replacements. Here then is the key issue for the militant white workers: a determination to confront the arbitrary capitalist power in the workplace. The white workers were defending racial privilege, certainly, but they were also determined to resist their employers’ violation of an agreed contract, a contract drawn up by their organized representatives. The white workers were furious about their employers attempt – “dishonourably, aggressively and contemptuously--to impose change upon organized labour.” So far, so true.

But look again at the Status Quo Agreement--there is an interesting history here that Krikler chooses not to explain. The Agreement was a detailed schedule of the jobs in white hands that was begun in February 1917 after a strike of white workers at one mine after the employment of nine Coloured waste packers. These were jobs that were not legally reserved for whites by the racial provisions of the Mines and Works Act –

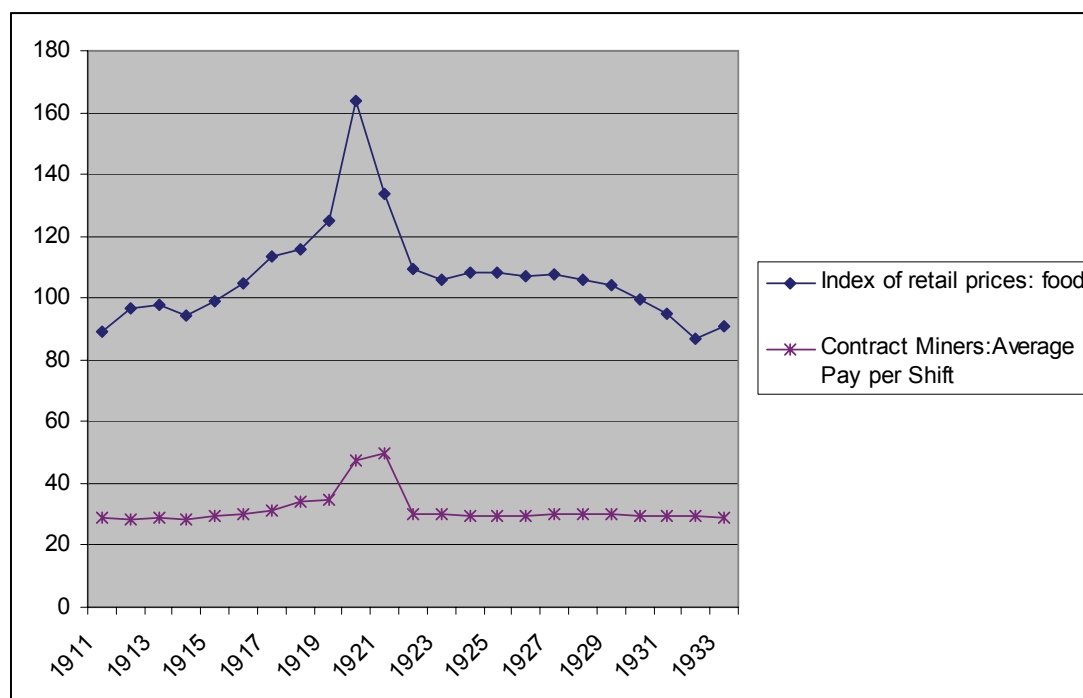
<sup>10</sup> D. Killingray, "a Swift Agent of Government": Air Power in British Colonial Africa, 1916-1939," *The Journal of African History* 25, no. 4 (1984): 432.

<sup>11</sup> Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*, 332.

they were just mostly done by white workers. Nor did the unions recognize that the terms of the 1918 agreement bound them from seeking its extension: in 1919 they demanded the replacement of all African clerks by white men and a total ban on the employment of coloured men. Six months after the 1920 black mine worker strike the SAMWU, which represented the most poorly paid of the white workers, was still demanding an extension of the agreement. It is hard to accept, given this history, that the outrage of the white workers was prompted by the Chamber's arbitrary decision making, especially in the light of the recent strike by the black workers. The organized white workers on the Rand were militant, but they were much more militantly racist than they were militantly socialist.<sup>12</sup>

Nor is it really persuasive to suggest that the white workers believed that their employers planned to "expunge" them. The Chamber's proposals to the South African Industrial Federation, which precipitated the events of the strike, called for a maximum of 2,000 white dismissals. White managers, and the state, were completely wedded to the system of racial supervision underground. Union and commando leaders certainly made the argument that the retrenchment of 2,000 of the least skilled white workers threatened the long term prospects of white employment, and the very basis of life, but that does not immediately explain why people would believe it. It makes more sense to argue, as Krikler does, that the white workers believed that they faced a real threat of "final extinction" from silicosis. Elaine Katz's history of the disease before compensation became a legal requirement in 1911 has demonstrated how much it shaped the struggle over working conditions. But it is not immediately clear that the regime of silicosis inspection would have encouraged workers to view themselves "grappling with mortality."

A better explanation for the militancy of the workers and their wives, especially for those who did not face retrenchment, was the subsistence crisis that immediately followed the war. Like workers around the world, the intense inflationary spike of the



last years of the World War had left them materially dramatically poorer than they were five years earlier. There is no great mystery here. But the financial predicament of white

<sup>12</sup> Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labour* On 144-50.

working class families leading up to the strike does not provide a very convincing accounting for the fact that dozens of white men stalked the streets of Johannesburg shooting “every coloured man” that they could see.

## Racial Killing

The racial killings that took place during the strike took three different forms. The first events took place in Vrededorp, the tightly packed neighbourhood that served as home to many of the poorest Afrikaners and one of the few areas of the city with African and Indian freehold properties. Starting on the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, the day after the announcement of a general strike by the combined unions, dozens of white men armed with rifles staked out the streets of the suburb and began shooting at any Africans, including school children, who were out on the street. Similar events took place in the adjacent working-class suburb of Ferreirastown.

The following day African workers guarding the Glencairn shaft on the New Primrose mine in Germiston had begun fighting with the members of the Primrose Strike Commando. Within minutes the entire white population of the nearby town of Germiston poured on to the property of the mine, taking up positions on the dam wall opposite the Primrose Compound. They watched as hundreds of white riflemen opened fire on the compound, directing a hail of bullets at the occupants inside who were struggling to close the compound gates. It was only the arrival of armed mine officials and the South African Mounted Rifles that prevented the Primrose Commando from breaking in to the Compound. It was, presumably, these events that prompted the SAIF to call the meeting of the commando leaders to “go into this matter of the natives.” That it was a meeting called to discuss the unions’ response to the beginnings of conflict with Africans that provided the occasion for the announcement of an armed uprising suggests that the events of March 7-8 had begun to persuade the commando leaders that the key rule of white labour disputes was about to be broken: at all costs avoid the involvement of the Africans.<sup>13</sup>

Less than a week later, as the Smuts directed shrapnel and machine-gun fire into the buildings housing the revolutionaries, white workers in Fordsburg and Rosettenville began to take out their anger on the African civilians that they found on the streets. Krikler aptly describes these murders as a pogrom. The murders included the mutilation of the body of one the victims. How widespread were these cold-blooded killings? In the two months of the strike, and the weeklong uprising, the total numbers of African people killed on the Witwatersrand numbered around 150, most of them certainly murdered by the strikers.

Krikler does not offer a single comprehensive reason for the violence. His explanations are scattered through the text accompanying the accounts of events, and they vary as the circumstances do. He does successfully show that for the union leaders of the revolt, like Fisher, the killings were anathema and, also, that only a small minority of the strikers were involved. But, overall, he does not attempt to argue that the killings were unrepresentative of the general mood of the white workers. Black workers, he suggests, offered whites a mirror image of their own prospects as workers: “The whites concerned could not abide what they saw in that mirror and they proceeded to smash it.” The core of his argument about the racial violence, the point that he most often repeats, is slightly different. Here he suggests, ungrammatically, that the white working-class lashed out at Africans because it was seeking to “assert its community with that ‘White South Africa’ that despised them.” This is a variation of an argument that Yudelman, and more recently Giliomee, have made, but it is different in an important way. For the

---

<sup>13</sup> 3-9, 177, 131



latter the strategic use of racist arguments for the purposes of patching over material or ideological differences does not suggest that these racist prejudices were less significant to the ideological and political intent of their framers.

Here lies the real problem with what is otherwise a rich and complex assessment of the motivations and practice of the white workers: the implication that the pattern of conflict between white and black workers was not itself a key engine of the events of the uprising. “Neither those who perpetrated the racial attacks nor those who were victimized by them,” he argues, “experienced these as something with pattern or logic.” Throughout the book Krikler suggests that the outbreak of attacks was contingent, dependent upon the particular circumstances of the strike: the moment when Smuts turned his face against the strikers; when capital arrogantly dismissed the unions terms of negotiation; or when the artillery began to fall on the headquarters of the insurrection. The truth is different. The white workers of Johannesburg, especially the Afrikaans residents of the inner-city suburbs of Vrededorp, Fordsburg and Ferreirastown, had been shooting Africans on the streets of the city for three years before the strike.

What is analytically important about these attacks, I think, is that the white workers were specifically targeting the trade union organization of African workers on the Rand. The conflicts date from March 1919 when the Transvaal Native Congress began to organize militant, to use Krikler’s term, anti-pass protest meetings in Vrededorp. The following year the neighbourhood was the site of meetings during the strike by African mine workers. “After the close of the meeting when the people were on their way to town, they found the Boers awaiting them in all the streets of Vrededorp,” Charles Nxumalo reported to *Abantu Batho*:

The Boer occupants poured in to assist the police, with rifles and revolvers. Here are many people dead, women and children. I can say nothing about men. It is not the first time for the Boers of Vrededorp to do this, they treated people this way during the Pass Strike. How long are we going to sacrifice our bodies? What have the passes we threw away to do with the Boers of Vrededorp? The money we want; do we demand it from the Boers at Vrededorp?<sup>14</sup>

In a long letter to the Director of Native Grave, Sudabazimbi ka Mikwamibi (Bad News of Bad Habits), complained that the government was assisting the Dutch people to remove Africans from Vrededorp. “Passes were demanded from us by Dutch children,” he protested, “while their fathers were following behind them with revolvers.”<sup>15</sup>

Nor is it in any sense reasonable to claim that the racial shootings of the 1922 revolt were unpredictable. Many of the reports on the shootings in Vrededorp passed over the desk of A E Trigger, the head of the Witwatersrand CID. In a meeting with the leaders of the Transvaal Native Congress in 1920, the Director of Native Labour, SM Pritchard, threatened the black unionists with exactly that kind of racial violence in the event of a black workers’ strike. “I have warned you that in the event of a strike here or elsewhere there is bound to be shooting because there are many people who are up against the native and these are the people I have been endeavouring to get to think more sympathetically and wisely of the position,” he predicted. “You had the shooting at Vrededorp, at Port Elizabeth and you will have shooting here at Johannesburg unless you are careful.”<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> TAD GNLB 312, 125/19 Newspapers: Cuttings, Native Strike, 1920, Nxumalo, William Charles to Abantu Batho, 1920/03/18 and see CAD JUS 0268, 3/127/20 Industrial Unrest Natives 1920 Native Congress Reports on Activities, 1919--22, Trigger, A. E. Inspector, Divisional C. I. Officer, Witwatersrand, SAP. to Secretary, S. A. P., 1920/03/05

<sup>15</sup> TAD GNLB 312, 125/19 Native Strike, February 1920, Rioting, Etc (Village Deep), 1920, to Director of Native Labour, 1920/03/08

<sup>16</sup> TAD GNLB 310, 1215/19/48 Native Wages: Conference called by Chamber of Commerce, 1920, Director for Native Labour to Transvaal Native Congress, Johannesburg Branch, 1920/11/08

The point is an embarrassingly simple one. Virulent racism was (and is) real. It had an autonomous power, independent of any other material or political context. And both white and black people experienced it as one of the key imperatives of life on the Witwatersrand. A further point is less obvious, and probably less palatable: notwithstanding the evidence from Vrededorp, levels of racial violence in South Africa, by comparison with many other settler societies were surprising low precisely because the state policed it very carefully. When the commandos seized power on the Witwatersrand they displaced the mechanisms policing white racist violence. The question we must now consider is whether they replaced it with a form of working-class power derived from the experience of the Western Front, or with the paramilitary organizations of white settler power.

## Commandos

The claim that the commandos of the Rand Revolt represented a “workers’ army” is rich in significance. If true, it would, simultaneously, rescue the story of the Rand Revolt from the narrative of Afrikaner nationalism and place the uprising in the same analytical category as the failed revolutions in central Europe and the successful one in Russia. Jon Hyslop has already done much of the work of establishing the international linkages between Witwatersrand syndicalism and the revolutionary labour parties in other countries (especially Britain and Australia) in his recent study of J T Bain. But the Rand Revolt, implicitly at least, marks an abrupt break with the pre-War pattern of international working class solidarity. If the commandos were expressions of workers’ and soldiers’ power then they were part of the international socialist insurrection that followed the war.

Krikler convincingly demonstrates that the forms of military organization that the workers used in the uprising were almost entirely derived from the First World War. Demobilized veterans played important roles in the organization of the commandos that emerged in each of the towns in January and February 1922. He points to the drilling, tin hats, rations, dispatch riders, red flags, motor cars, machine guns, and, especially, the motor-cycles and bugles that provided the organizational, and military, spine of the commandos. Much of the evidence for the conventional military organization of the commandos came from Trigger, the chief of the detective branch on the Rand, and, while he certainly was not the most sanguine source of intelligence, he was an experienced policeman, especially in the special field of labour unrest.

There are some small contradictory points that might be worth considering here. Many of these tools of war were ordinary elements of the organization of mine work – the parallels between deep level mining and trench warfare are many. Krikler believes that these military experiences help explain the success of the commandos in the early days of the uprising, especially their use of massed rifle fire. My own understanding of the nature of the war on the Western Front comes from Erich Maria Remarque: he made an utterly convincing case that the key determinant of success in the trenches was keeping one’s head down. Prowess with a rifle was of very little moment where two-thirds of the casualties in France came from artillery. (Expert riflemen were, of course, abundant on the South African platteland.) Indeed, without being snide we can, surely, ask whether the strikers might not have been a little better prepared for artillery if they had spent more time in the trenches. And then there is the ubiquitous jingle from the trenches which, as Krikler pointedly observes, was written on Percy Fisher’s suicide note on the note before the army’s final assault on the Fordsburg Market building: “Are we downhearted? No!” This is, at least, very ironic, for throughout his book Krikler fails to mention (or contradict the widely held view) that Fisher had fled Britain in order to avoid service.

What then of the Boer commandos? “If the Boer tradition had been fundamental to the rise of the commandos of 1922 -- rather than being supplementary to its main source,” Krikler argues, “we would have seen these military formations of workers a decade earlier during the bitter and violent 1913 strike, when the proportion of the white mineworkers that was Afrikaans was substantial, and at which point the Boer War was recent memory.” This is not a serious claim. In 1913 the entire leadership of the white working class was in the hands of experienced English syndicalists—many of whom, like Bain, had fought on the side of the Boers in the war. They scarcely needed to consider the problem of raising an army because the state had almost no coercive forces. The following year, when Smuts brought a huge burgher force to the Rand, it was a different matter, but it is important to note (as Krikler does not) that the raising of a commando was, in fact, proposed by Bain and by George Mason.<sup>17</sup>

The evidence for a specifically South African tradition of commando mobilization is, in fact, overwhelming. Military recruitment in South Africa, after Smuts’ reforms of 1912, was very largely handled under the auspices of the Active Citizen Force, a deliberately reinvigorated and rationalized system of rural commandos.<sup>18</sup> The very first act of the revolt was the derailing of a passenger train using the methods of the South African war. Another, more important point, is that, at the onset of meaningful rebellion, the key leaders of the workers’ commandos embarked on a mission to the rural homes of the Boer commanders of the 1914 rebellion--strange behaviour indeed for socialist revolutionaries. When they returned they announced to meetings of workers in Johannesburg that “seventeen-thousand burghers were ready to come and help the strikers.”<sup>19</sup> This kind of political alliance cannot be explained away by describing it as an alliance with the “radical-populist element within rural Afrikanerdom.” I must ask the question, what kind of new society could the commando leaders, and their potential rural allies, have in mind? A return to the old order of the Republics is the only meaningful answer. They sought to restore a less comprehensively capitalist one than that in which the Afrikaner workers now found themselves embroiled. But it was, also, a world in which white men ruled by force of arms, and Africans knew their place. Here, then, was the meaning of the famous slogan of the revolt: Workers of the World Unite for a White South Africa.

## Consequences

They failed, of course. And the prosecutions followed a familiar pattern. Hundreds of people were arrested, and dozens convicted, but only four were sentenced to death, two of them for shooting innocent Africans. Smuts released all of the others before the 1924 elections. (Something to remember if you are ever planning treason in South Africa: if you can avoid the death sentence you will be home within a year). For Krikler, the crushing of the strike was a singular, utter defeat: wages declined (although, remember, so did prices), and, crucially, labour militancy died. But did the workers, really, lose the battle and the war, as both Yudelman and Krikler have suggested?<sup>20</sup>

Not if the struggle was over racial job reservation. Leave aside the question of the effectiveness or otherwise of the Pact Government’s strategies to protect white workers in the parastatal industries. The key issue, for the mine workers, was the passing

---

<sup>17</sup> John R. Shorten and Johannesburg (South Africa). City Council., *The Johannesburg Saga* (Johannesburg): John R. Shorten (Proprietary) Ltd., 1970), 315.

<sup>18</sup> Swart, "a Boer and His Gun and His Wife Are Three Things Always Together': Republican Masculinity and the 1914 Rebellion."

<sup>19</sup> 178

<sup>20</sup> Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labour On* 35.

of the Industrial Conciliation Act, by the Smuts government, in 1924. This act, which explicitly excluded Africans as “pass-bearing” workers, established a framework for the resolution of disputes over wages and working conditions in all industries. The results for African workers, on the mines and beyond, as Sampie Terreblanche has recently observed, were simply disastrous. Excluded from the key state machinery for the management and resolution of workplace disputes, African workers were bound by an invisible hand to the worst paid and least skilled jobs. A renewed Status Quo Agreement could not have more effectively subjected them to a job colour bar.

To understand the experience of white workers after the strike we would need to look closely at the effects of the 1925 Miners’ Pthisis Act. It created a generous schedule of compensation and an infrastructure of medical treatment for white workers; black workers diagnosed with silicosis received modest lump sum payments and a ticket back to the reserves. A similar story could, I think, be told for the expansion of company benefits and the growth of officialdom. White workers, especially after the Depression began a decade later, benefited dramatically both in terms of the numbers employed and their average wage levels. But the real story lies beyond the mines. The children of white workers had access to excellent, free and compulsory education. This was the key to prosperity in the second half of the twentieth century. It still is.

#### Bibliography:

- Bonner, P L. "'1920 Black Mineworkers' Strike: A Preliminary Account'." In *Labour, Townships and Protest*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979.
- Breckenridge, K. "'We Must Speak for Ourselves': The Rise and Fall of a Public Sphere on the South African Goldmines, 1920 to 1931." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, no. 01 (1998): 71-108.
- Chanock, Martin. *The Making of South African Legal Culture, 1902-1936 : Fear, Favour and Prejudice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Etherington, Norman. *The Great Treks: The Transformation of Southern Africa, 1815-1854*. London: Longman, 2001.
- Fraser, Maryna, and Alan Jeeves. *All That Glittered: Selected Correspondence of Lionel Phillips, 1890--1924*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Giliomee, Hermann. *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2003.
- Guy, Jeff. *The Maphumulo Uprising: War, Law and Ritual in the Zulu Rebellion*. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005.
- Hyslop, Jonathan. *"The Notorious Syndicalist" J T Bain: A Scottish Rebel in Colonial South Africa*. Johannesburg: Jacana: Johannesburg: Jacana, 2004.
- Katz, Elaine N. *The White Death: Silicosis on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines, 1886-1910*. Johannesburg: WUP: Johannesburg: WUP, 1994.
- Killingray, D. "'a Swift Agent of Government': Air Power in British Colonial Africa, 1916-1939." *The Journal of African History* 25, no. 4 (1984): 429-44.
- Shorten, John R., and Johannesburg (South Africa). City Council. *The Johannesburg Saga*. [Johannesburg]: John R. Shorten (Proprietary) ltd., 1970.
- Swart, S. "'a Boer and His Gun and His Wife Are Three Things Always Together': Republican Masculinity and the 1914 Rebellion." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 24, no. 4 (1998): 737-51.
- Terreblanche, Solomon Johannes. *A History of Inequality in South Africa, 1652-2002*. Pietermaritzburg: Jointly published by University of Natal Press and KMM Review Publishing, 2002.
- Thompson, Leonard. *The Unification of South Africa, 1902-1910*. Oxford : Clarendon Press: Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1960.

Yudelman, David. *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labour On Cape Town*: David Philip: Cape Town: David Philip, 1983.