

Afrikaner (Boer) Rebellion (Union of South Africa)

By [André Wessels](#)

Summary

The South African government's decision to actively support Britain in the war against Germany led to much dissatisfaction within the white Afrikaans-speaking community. By the second week of October 1914, open rebellion erupted in certain areas. 11,476 Afrikaners participated in an ill-conceived and misplaced revolt which government forces effectively suppressed by the end of January 1915, but the political consequences would come back to haunt the government. This article examines the main causes of the rebellion and its aftermath.

Table of contents

[1 Introduction](#)

[2 The Causes of the Protest](#)

[3 From Protest to Rebellion](#)

[4 Christiaan De Wet and the Rebellion in the Orange Free State](#)

[5 The Rebellion in the Western Transvaal – and Kemp's "Great Trek"](#)

[6 Aftermath: Consequences and Impact](#)

[7 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction

The Afrikaner rebellion of 1914 to 1915 was a side-show within the broader context of South Africa's participation in the Great War, but for a few weeks in November 1914 it did to some extent pose a threat to the stability of the [Union of South Africa](#). Afterward, the Union

Defence Forces¹ were deployed to other operational theatres; events in those areas soon overshadowed the government forces' role in putting down the revolt at home. Nevertheless, for many Afrikaners the rebellion would become a political clarion call. The government deemed it necessary to appoint a number of commissions of inquiry with regard to the causes and the suppression of the rebellion. Thereafter followed several publications by Afrikaans- and English-speaking authors that provided different perspectives on the events.²

From the 1930s to 1961, when South Africa became a republic, there was an upsurge in Afrikaner [nationalism](#) with renewed interest in events such as the rebellion. The latter became the subject of several postgraduate studies, but for several decades it then left the academic radar. In the lead-up to the centennial of the rebellion, a number of new publications have been produced, namely those by Albert Grundlingh and Sandra Swart, Paul Grobbelaar, Louis Bothma, and under the editorship of Danie Langner and Andries Raath.³

The Causes of the Protest

From 1899 to 1902 the Transvaal and Orange Free State Boer republics fought desperately to retain their independence from the British [Empire](#). The Second Anglo-Boer War led to their defeat, leaving large portions of the republics devastated thanks to the British Army's scorched earth policy. It was especially the Boer *bittereinders*, or "those who had fought to the bitter end," who did not easily accept British rule and who looked for opportunities to regain independence.

In 1910, the Union of South Africa was established, consisting of the Cape Colony, Natal, the Transvaal and Orange Free State. A prominent former Boer commander, General [Louis Botha \(1862-1919\)](#), was the first prime minister and another well-known Boer commander, General [Jan Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#), was his right-hand man. They believed that South Africa's future lay with the British Empire and when war broke out in Europe in 1914, they regarded it as their duty to support [Britain](#). Consequently, on 4 August 1914, when Britain entered the war, Botha informed the [British government](#) that the Union would take full responsibility for its own defence, enabling imperial troops to be deployed elsewhere. When Britain, on 7 August 1914, asked the Union government whether they would be prepared to neutralise the radio stations in German South-West Africa, the Botha cabinet agreed. Of course, one must keep in mind that South Africa's status as a British dominion bound them to do so under the constitution. Botha, Smuts, and their supporters may have been pro-war, and their country was only at war because the British Empire was at war, but they could decide on the extent of their participation.

In September 1914 the Union's House of Assembly and Senate voted with a huge majority in favour of active participation in the war. A mere twelve years after the end of the Second Anglo-Boer War, most Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans did not agree with their government's decision to actively side with Britain in a war against [Germany](#). Especially in light of the fact that during the 1899-1902 war, many Germans had sympathised with the Boers. Although not all who disagreed would be prepared to take up arms against their lawful government, there were people who saw the war in Europe as an opportunity to restore their republican independence. In 1912 Botha's South African Party had split on the issue of the

Union's relationship with Britain and another former Boer commander, General [J.B.M. Hertzog \(1866-1942\)](#), led the break-away, establishing the National Party in early 1914. These occurrences strengthened anti-Botha feelings in certain quarters.⁴

The famous Boer guerrilla commander of the Second Anglo-Boer War, the enigmatic General [Koos De la Rey \(1847-1914\)](#), initially played a major role in organising the protest movement. It should also be noted that the controversial [Niklaas van Rensburg \(1864-1926\)](#), known as "*Siener*", i.e. seer/prophet, often influenced De la Rey.⁵ De la Rey called a meeting to be held at Treurfontein as early as 15 August 1914. As many as 800 men gathered to listen to De la Rey, but contrary to what many expected, he adopted a conciliatory stance. The commanding officer of the Union Defence Forces' Active Citizen Force, Brigadier-General [Christiaan Beyers \(1869-1914\)](#), resigned on 15 September 1914 because he was against the planned [invasion of German South-West Africa](#). For many Afrikaners, it was unthinkable to fight under the Union Jack and for the interests of the British Empire. On the evening of 15 September 1914, Beyers and De la Rey drove from Pretoria to Potchefstroom to meet with [Jan Kemp \(1872-1946\)](#). When they failed to stop at a road-block set up to catch a gang of armed robbers and misinterpreting these as efforts to stop them instead, De la Rey was shot dead.⁶ Several thousand people attended De la Rey's funeral on 20 September 1914 at Lichtenburg. The next day a protest meeting held in Lichtenburg called upon the government not to invade German South-West Africa, but there was no response. Other protest meetings followed where public figures such as [Christiaan De Wet \(1854-1922\)](#) exploited injured Afrikaner [masculinity](#) and still prevalent nostalgic republicanism to motivate Afrikaner men.⁷

From Protest to Rebellion

By October 1914, tension in the Union moved towards a breaking-point.⁸ Rumours, misinformation, and general confusion were prevalent among many South Africans. As early as 23 September 1914 the well-known Orange Free State guerrilla commander of the Anglo-Boer War, De Wet, led a meeting at the small Northern Free State town of Koppies, where he criticised the government's planned invasion of German South-West Africa. Other meetings followed at Koppies. At the meeting on 13 October 1914 it was decided to send a deputation to Botha, but nothing was achieved. Those who opposed the government's plans could, at this stage, not unanimously decide on a course of action. According to De Wet, the time had now come to take up arms against the government. Another meeting took place at Koppies on 22 October 1914; Beyers was entrusted to lead the protest in the Transvaal and De Wet in the Free State.

In the meantime, at Van Rooisvlei in the barren north-west of the Cape Province, Lieutenant-

Colonel [Manie Maritz \(1876-1940\)](#), the former Second Anglo-Boer War general and commander of a Union Defence Forces unit, resigned his commission in protest of the action against Germany. He openly rebelled on 9 October, taking at least 500 of his soldiers with him when he went over to the Germans. In response, on 12 October, the Union government imposed martial law across the whole of South Africa. On 22 October, Maritz, with the support of German troops, attacked the town of Keimoes, but they were driven back. His actions were dramatic, but led to no widespread revolt in the Cape Province. Of the 11,476 Afrikaners who took up arms against their lawful government, only 1,215 (12 percent) came from South Africa's largest province.

In the Transvaal, several Union Defence Forces officers also resigned their commission and either instigated or joined what seemed to have been a spontaneous rebellion. Eventually 2,998 (26 percent) of the rebels came from the country's most populous province. Beyers went to the Magaliesberg, north of Pretoria, and armed men joined him. The first shots of the rebellion in the Transvaal were fired on 27 October 1914 when Beyers's rebels engaged a government force at Kommissiedrif. Near Bronkhorstspuit General [Chris Muller \(1865-1945\)](#) took to the field with a rebel commando, but was defeated and captured on 7 November 1914. Captain [Jopie Fourie \(1879-1914\)](#) was a Union Defence Forces officer who rebelled without resigning his commission. He took up arms on 25 October 1914, mostly operating to the north of Pretoria, but was captured on 16 December 1914, court-martialled, and executed on 20 December 1914. Smuts, who ignored many pleas for clemency, would be haunted politically by these events for the rest of his life.

Christiaan De Wet and the Rebellion in the Orange Free State

Of the 11,476 Afrikaners who took up arms, 7,123 (62 percent) came from the Orange Free State. Were it not for the firebrand De Wet, the extent of the revolt in the Union's central province would probably have been much smaller. Nonetheless, the Afrikaner rebellion in the Free State was limited to no more than seven districts, mostly in the northern part of the province. As in the Transvaal, most of the rebels had been *bittereinders* in the Second Anglo-Boer War and many were members of the poorer section of the Afrikaner community. The rebellion also primarily took place in areas that had been ravaged by drought since 1911.⁹

The rebels occupied several towns, but the rebels were too few, and their actions too uncoordinated, to maintain control over "conquered" areas. On 27 October, De Wet departed from Memel accompanied by some seventy rebels, intent on joining Maritz near the Orange River from where they planned to advance to Pretoria and proclaim an independent South African republic. On 8 November 1914, De Wet's rebels clashed with a government force at

Doornberg. The next day, De Wet [occupied](#) Winburg.^{[10](#)}

Louis Botha knew that De Wet was held in high esteem and that the actions of this charismatic military leader could cause the government much harm; consequently, the prime minister left Pretoria on 10 November 1914 to personally lead government forces against his former comrade-in-arms. The next day, shortly after De Wet's commando withdrew from the town, Botha's forces re-established government control over Winburg and then followed the rebels southwards. On 12 November 1914, Botha's forces surprised De Wet's commando at Mushroom Valley (about fifty kilometers south-east of Winburg) and defeated and scattered the rebels. New technological developments played an important role. De Wet's presence on the farm was relayed to Botha by telephone; the rebels failed to cut the telephone wires. Furthermore, two of Botha's motor vehicles had been fitted with [machine-guns](#) and consequently it was one of the first armed clashes that involved motorised machine-guns. That same day, the government issued a proclamation promising amnesty to all rebels who laid down their arms before 21 November. Soon many rebels handed themselves over and the rebellion imploded.^{[11](#)}

By 19 November 1914, De Wet admitted that the rebellion had failed. With only twenty-five men left at his side, he now fled westwards in an effort to reach German South-West Africa and evade capture. Against mounted, and in some instances motorised government troops, De Wet and his rebels stood no chance. Although De Wet succeeded in evading his pursuers on more than one occasion, as he did during the Second Anglo-Boer War, he was now unable to keep up the pace. On 1 December 1914, on Waterbury Farm, some twenty kilometers from Morokweng, government forces surrounded De Wet's small rebel commando and they surrendered without resistance. A South African military unit under the command of an Afrikaner had managed to capture De Wet, who in an earlier war had evaded dozens of British mobile columns.^{[12](#)} It was an inglorious end to a military career, which, in years gone by, had made De Wet famous. A week later, more than 1,000 rebels surrendered between Bethlehem and Reitz. Thus ended the armed resistance in the Free State.

The Rebellion in the Western Transvaal - and Kemp's "Great Trek"

During the Second Anglo-Boer War, General Jan Kemp had distinguished himself as a guerrilla commander in the Western Transvaal. When the Great War broke out, he was a Major in the Union Defence Forces. He resigned his commission on 13 September 1914 and then withdrew it two days later, but Minister of Defence Smuts did not accept the withdrawal. Kemp consequently took to the field, intent on taking action against the government. He joined

forces with Beyers, who, after lying low for about a month after De la Rey's death, took to the field on 19 October. Several rebels soon joined him. On 29 October 1914, Beyers issued a manifesto in which he urged the *volk* (Afrikaner people) to resist the government's aggression against German territory, but did so in such a way that the rebels would not themselves become the aggressors. On 2 November 1914, Beyers and Kemp separated, with Beyers taking his commando across the Vaal River to the Orange Free State. On 16 November 1914, government forces scattered Beyers's force. Continually harassed by government forces, Beyers decided to flee back to the Transvaal. While trying to cross the Vaal River, he died of heart failure on 8 December 1914.¹³

In the meantime, Kemp and his commando of some 610 men embarked on a trek westwards to join up with Maritz. They trekked through the inhospitable Kalahari Desert, suffering from a scarcity of water and food and continued skirmishes with government forces. On 18 November 1914, Kemp's force reached Kheis on the banks of the Orange River. Louis Botha, having defeated most rebel forces in the Free State, now travelled to the Northern Cape in an effort to prevent Kemp from crossing the border into German South-West Africa. Having linked up with some of Maritz's men the previous day, Kemp succeeded in beating back the government forces on 27 November 1914. Taken in isolation, Kemp's "Great Trek" of approximately 1,300 kilometers mostly through the Kalahari Desert, can be viewed as an epic event, but militarily it was a futile effort. His battered rebel "army" crossed into German South-West Africa on 28 November 1914 and soon joined Maritz's main force.¹⁴

On 21 December 1914, Maritz and Kemp's rebel forces, with the support of German troops, defeated a Union Defence Forces column at Nours inside South African territory. But when Maritz, Kemp, and the German troops attacked the Northern Cape town of Upington on 24 January 1915, they were repulsed at heavy cost. Consequently, Maritz and Kemp negotiated with the commanding officer of the government forces and former comrade-in-arms, Colonel [Jaap van Deventer \(1874-1922\)](#). The surrender document was signed on 30 January 1915, and on 2 February 1915 the rebels laid down their arms at Upington. Kemp, depressed by the military failure and suffering from Blackwater Fever, went into captivity, later to stand trial.¹⁵ Maritz and some of his followers returned to the German colony and when the Union Defence Forces completed their conquest of that territory on 9 July 1915, he fled to Angola then later to [Portugal](#), [Spain](#), and Germany. When he eventually returned to South Africa in 1924, he was given a prison sentence, but the newly-elected National Party government soon set him free.¹⁶

Aftermath: Consequences and Impact

The Union Defence Forces deployed approximately 32,000 soldiers, including about 20,000 Afrikaners, in the field against the 11,476 rebels. Approximately two-thirds of the government forces came from the Transvaal. No Imperial troops were needed to suppress the rebellion. On the government side, 132 were killed or died of wounds and another 242 were wounded, while 190 rebels died and approximately 325 were wounded.^{[17](#)}

The defeated Afrikaner rebels of 1914-1915 came off lightly. Before the middle of 1915, thanks to Botha's reconciliation policy, most of the ordinary rebels were free again, although for ten years they were barred from public office. Special courts which could not impose the death penalty were used to try the rebel leaders and officers. Jail sentences ranged from two to seven years, but before the end of 1916 all prisoners were set free, on the condition that they would not take part in political activities, including De Wet, who was sentenced to six years in prison and fined £2,000 and Kemp, who was sentenced to seven years and fined £1,000. To pay for the fines the Bloemfontein newspaper *Het Volksblad* established the *Halfkroonfonds* (Half-a-Crown Fund). Shop owners and other people whose property had been damaged during the rebellion were able to claim compensation, leading to the establishment of the *Helpmekaar Beweging* ("Help One Another Movement"). By the end of 1917, all the debts were paid.^{[18](#)}

The failed rebellion had several long-term consequences. It stimulated Afrikaner nationalism as well as republicanism, and led to a rightward swing South African white politics. The National Party's spectacular growth and its coming to power in 1924 can, to some extent, be attributed to the rebellion.^{[19](#)}

Conclusion

The Afrikaner rebellion of 1914-1915 led to the most comprehensive civil war between whites in the history of South Africa. Moderate views in 1914 South Africa had to yield to the emotional pronouncements of people such as De Wet. The result was a farce in the veld.^{[20](#)} Many of the rank-and-file rebels came from the poorer classes who, in many instances, had hoped to use the opportunity to reclaim their land. In that sense, the Afrikaner revolt could at least in part be regarded as a social or class rebellion. But most of the leaders were prominent members of the community who, to a greater or lesser extent, had since 1910 lost out in status and political authority to Botha and Smuts' new Union establishment. Those who had served in the Anglo-Boer War had acquired excellent military experience, but since then technological developments, including motor vehicles and [aircraft](#), had radically changed the

nature and implications of warfare. The days when armed horsemen had set the pace in war was irrevocably lost to the past. The rebels were not trained in [modern warfare](#) and their revolt was doomed to fail.

Misunderstandings, a lack of good communication between the South African government and those opposed to the planned invasion of German South-West Africa, as well as a lack of communication among the protesters themselves characterised the period between August and December 1914. Many rebels were uninformed. Thus, the 1914-1915 Afrikaner rebellion was a misplaced and ill-fated revolt; one that was triggered by a range of impulses ranging from pro-German and anti-Union (and in particular anti-Smuts and anti-Botha) feelings to material grievances over landlessness and impoverishment.

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Notes

1. The Union Defence Forces (plural) were established in 1912. Since 1922 known as the Union Defence Force (singular). [↑](#)
2. For an excellent historiographical review of publications (until 1979) on the rebellion, see Grundlingh, A.M.: Die Rebelle van 1914: 'n Historiografiese Verkenning, in Kleio 11/1-2 (1979), pp. 18-30. [↑](#)
3. See the Selected Bibliography for particulars. [↑](#)
4. Geyser, O./Marais, A.H. (eds.): Die Nasionale Party, Part 1: Agtergrond, Stigting en Konsolidasie, Pretoria 1975, pp. 133-186. [↑](#)
5. Raath, A.W.G.: Niklaas van Rensburg. Die Siener, Pretoria 2011, pp. 93-333. [↑](#)
6. Union of South Africa: Judicial Commission of Inquiry into the Circumstances Leading up to and Attending upon the Deaths of Senator General the Honourable J.H. De la Rey and Dr. G. Grace, U.G. 48-'14, Cape Town 1914. [↑](#)
7. Swart, Sandra: A 'Boer and His Gun and His Wife are Three Things Always Together'. Republican Masculinity and the 1914 Rebellion, in: Journal of Southern African Studies 24/4 (1988), pp. 737-751. [↑](#)
8. For the course of events, see, for example, Langner, D.J./Raath, A.W.G. (eds.): Die Afrikanerrebellie 1914-1915 [The Afrikaner rebellion, 1914-1915], Pretoria 2014; Scholtz, Gert D.: Die Rebelle 1914-1915 [The rebellion, 1914-1915], Pretoria 2013; Bothma, L.J.: Rebelspoor. Die Aanloop, Verloop en Afloop van die Boereopstand van 1914-15 [Rebel track. The run-up to, course and aftermath of the Boer revolt of 1914-15], Bloemfontein 2014. [↑](#)

9. See, for example, Union of South Africa: Report on the Outbreak of the Rebellion and the Policy of the Government with Regard to Its Suppression, U.G. 10-'15, Pretoria 1915, pp. 51-52. ↑
10. Ibid., pp 28-45, 66-78; Van Schoor, M.C.E.: Christiaan Rudolph de Wet. Krygsman en Volksman, Pretoria 2007, pp. 264-273. ↑
11. Scholtz, Rebelle 2013, p. 265; Van Schoor, De Wet 2007, p. 274; Ritchie, M.: With Botha in the Field, London 1915, pp. 1-10; Bothma, Rebelspoor [Rebel track] 2014, pp. 272-297. ↑
12. Oost, Harm: Wie is die Skuldiges? [Who are the guilty ones?], Johannesburg 1956, pp. 322-348; Sampson, P.J.: The Capture of De Wet. The South African Rebellion, London 1915, pp. 195-205; Van Schoor, De Wet 2007, pp. 275-278; Bothma, Rebelspoor [Rebel track] 2014, pp. 329-337. ↑
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14. Van Schoor, M.C.E.: Generaal J.C.G. Kemp en die Epiese Woestyntog, Pretoria 2006, pp. 56-135. ↑
15. Ibid., pp. 135-171; Union of South Africa: The Union of South Africa and the Great War 1914-1918. Official History, Pretoria 1924, pp. 23-24. ↑
16. Maritz, S.G.: My Lewe en Strewe, Pretoria 1939. ↑
17. Union of South Africa, Official History, p. 25. ↑
18. Ehlers, A./Van Zyl, D.J.: Die Invloed van die Helpmekaarbeweging in Suid-Afrika 1915-1920, in: Historia 35/1 (1990), pp. 73-90. ↑
19. Geyser/Marais (eds.), Nasionale Party 1975, pp. 242-586. ↑
20. Veld is Afrikaans for the treeless, open grasslands of Southern Africa. ↑

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[Africa](#) > [Union of South Africa](#)

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