

# Economies and Home Front (Union of South Africa)

By [Bill Nasson](#)

## Summary

This article provides a succinct overview of the impact of the war on the economy and the home front of the Union of South Africa and considers the main ways in which these domestic sectors responded to the strains of the war period. Its central aim is to illuminate the markedly uneven and ambivalent manner in which South Africa's economy and society intersected with the imperial world of the war and responded to its intrusive influences.

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## Introduction

At the outbreak of hostilities in 1914, the recently-formed Dominion of [South Africa](#) was almost entirely dominated by the imperial interests of [Britain](#) which towered over its economy and limited the sovereignty of its parliament by [dictating foreign policy](#). As an integral part of the British Empire, the Union of South Africa was automatically at war, despite a thick layer of domestic popular sentiment which favoured [neutrality](#). Consequently, although its distant geographical location shielded it from most of the direct and particularly the destructive effects of hostilities – including fighting further north on the African continent – at home its economy and society felt the impact of war in varied ways and at various levels.

The immediate effect of the conflict on economic life was mixed. On the one hand, international Anglo-South African trade was severely disrupted, creating acute shortages of industrial goods and staple household commodities. By 1916, there was a steep increase in inflation. Previously thriving agricultural export sectors were hit hard by the termination of business with [Germany](#). Gold mining, the bedrock of the Union's industrial economy and the strategic engine of its dependent imperial relationship with Britain, ran into difficulties, one

being that South African bullion could no longer be supplied on the open world market.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the drastic shipping disruption brought by the onset of war proved to be a major blessing for South Africa's hitherto moribund secondary industries. As [empire](#) and other foreign trade plummeted, shortages of manufactured goods stimulated import substitution and boosted the growth of a larger, more diversified and more dynamic secondary industrial sector. In effect, the war helped to put muscle on what had previously been a marginal arm of the Union's economy, thereby altering its overall character and balance. As prosperous new manufacturing and commercial sectors mushroomed, South Africa's economy acquired increased productive capacity and grew relatively more resilient, ending up comparatively less dependent on its colonial basis as a producer of primary products and an imbibor of cheap British goods. Largely insulated from wartime chaos, the economy emerged in a considerably stronger position than it had been in the earlier part of the decade.

At the same time, although remote from the raging theatres of war, the South African economy contributed to the war in some significant ways. While the volume of material and [finance](#) were a fraction of that which the British were able to secure from their more wholeheartedly loyalist settler Dominions like [Australia](#) or [New Zealand](#), the Union responded to the needs of the Allied war effort by not only guaranteeing the reserves of London's prime strategic asset, gold, but by supplying food and other produce to troops on faraway battlefields. As the *Agricultural Journal of South Africa* boasted a few months after the end of the war, "the consumption of food" had "increased enormously" because of "the vast armies in the field", which meant not merely "an increase in price", but the provision of "a glorious opportunity" for "we in South Africa" - namely its white commercial farmers - "to produce more."<sup>2</sup>

Although the economy was clearly exposed to the war's instabilities and pressures, a striking feature was that the country's orthodox *laissez-faire* market capitalist order remained virtually intact. With no emergency requisitioning and only limited price regulation of some essential goods and services, the touch of state intervention was light, especially in comparison with the strict wartime controls which colonial authorities exercised over other African economies.

As with the economy, the impact of the war on other spheres of the home front was what might best be called a very mixed bag. The most crucial consideration is that the Union did not join the war in August 1914 on the basis of a wave of pro-war sentiment or anything like an inclusive patriotic consensus. Only a minority of segregationist South Africa's dominant white minority supported involvement in the conflict, and only a proportionately even smaller

minority of its subordinate black majority backed participation in a European [imperialist](#) war. It is no surprise that the Union's pro-empire [government](#) steered clear of the political risk of trying to impose conscription.<sup>3</sup>

While there is an obvious need for caution in making sweeping generalisations, domestic attitudes to, and engagement with, the war were shaped by several crucial factors. These included the identities and geographical location of inhabitants. The strongest pockets of active support for the war were in [urban areas](#), especially in major English-dominated cities such as Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg. Here, many English-speakers and loyalist Afrikaners shared strident patriotic affinities, ready to serve an imperial war effort "without hesitation or reservation."<sup>4</sup>

In the [countryside](#) at large, the picture was very different. There, the rural Boer-Afrikaner populations of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal were squarely anti-war or, to be more exact, solidly opposed to a struggle which was viewed as a British imperialist war. Anti-military sentiment was widespread, particularly among ordinary Afrikaners, for whom [militarism](#) was, for all intents and purposes, bound up with anti-British feeling. Significantly, in the pro-British South African union which emerged in the aftermath of the loss of Boer independence in 1902, there was no compulsory peacetime military training for its white male citizenry.<sup>5</sup> The political establishment was all too aware that any imposition of national service would have provoked substantial resistance.

Within the country's political class, [nationalist](#) – including republican – Afrikaners were also disaffected, standing firm against any service in a war imposed on the Union by an imperial metropole that, only a little more than a decade earlier, had been responsible for the suffering of the Anglo-Boer War and the extinguishing of Afrikaner republican independence. A simmering home front boiled over into crisis in 1914-1915 when the Union's declared [invasion of the neighbouring colony of German South West Africa](#) provided a trigger for more hot-headed Afrikaners to stage a failed anti-government insurrection with the support of poorer landless men who considered themselves to have been marginalised by the new South African state. In the eyes of the English-speaking *Zululand Times*, they represented an "uneducated class" of "Dutch pro-Germans" who were not "much credit to the country."<sup>6</sup>

Nor were these the only strains within the white population. Throughout the war, there were divisions between Afrikaner Dutch Reformed churches, with some reminding urban congregations in cities like Pretoria and Johannesburg of loyal Christian duty in wartime, while others in far-flung rural districts were militantly anti-war, urging followers to repudiate its claims and influence. While the wartime internment of German immigrants as [enemy aliens](#)

was applauded by pro-war loyalists, Afrikaner communities with whom they had fraternal links, and who were appreciative of Berlin's earlier support of the Boer states against Britain in the 1899-1902 war, denounced the confinement and threat of deportation of people considered to be kindred European citizens.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere, although the fractious pre-war relationship between the state and the skilled white labour aristocracy was soothed when trade unions and the parliamentary Labour Party came out behind the war, a critical and noisy left-wing tributary of the labour movement campaigned against what was characterised as a foreign capitalist and imperialist war which the Marxist International Socialist League condemned as "Armageddon."<sup>8</sup>

This politically fractured landscape was also inhabited by the Union's black inhabitants. The tiny educated intelligentsia and other Westernised strata of African society were actively pro-war, as were some traditional chiefs, such as those in the country's eastern Ciskei and Transkei territories who organised donations to [Belgian refugee](#) funds and to the Prince of Wales's Fund.<sup>9</sup> Nailing their colour to the mast of white war patriotism, they nursed fond hopes that a loyal showing of volunteer sacrifice and service to the imperial cause might improve their lot and earn the reward of improved rights and civic recognition in a less racially discriminatory order.

Yet, here, too, the great mass of ordinary black inhabitants failed to rally to the war. For most peasants, farm labourers, mineworkers, and factory workers, the war at home was an absent presence. Few offered their bodies or their minds as a reserve contribution to the Union war effort. In a sluggish wartime country in which the remoteness of the war made it an insubstantial occurrence, many remained indifferent, while some who had no love for the British nursed millenarian visions of German power turning the world upside down, toppling English masters, and restoring land lost during earlier colonisation. Dispossessed of much of their land, forced ever more deeply into poverty, and consigned to a future of servile wage labour, in effect most black inhabitants – like the most marginal and poorest of unskilled Afrikaners – had little interest in the proclaimed cause or purpose of the war, and even less motivation to serve in it.<sup>10</sup>

What this all amounted to is that South Africa's expeditionary contribution to the First World War of just over [200,000 white combatants](#), coloured troops, and non-combatants and African auxiliary labourers was raised on, and despatched from, the home front of what was not the united country of a South African nation at war – for there was, in effect, no South African nation. Accordingly, nor was the essential message of the world war in South Africa – assisting the British cause – ever fully digested by a home front burdened by graphic

divisions over the conflict.

Generally, as South Africa's involvement in the First World War is covered fleetingly in its general [historiography](#), there are no substantial studies which focus exclusively on the Union's wartime economy or on its home front. Apart from a few national economic histories which take some account of the impact of the war period, there is only a tiny handful of local case studies of home front experience or the domestic aspects of wartime.<sup>11</sup> Based on the rather uneven available literature, this article attempts to provide a brief account of the ways in which the Union of South Africa's economy and domestic society were affected by the war and responded to its uneven presence.

## The Economy and Weathering the War

The outbreak of European hostilities meant the end of profitable trading with the enemy. Hamburg no longer received supplies of South African cereal crops, dried fruit, frozen beef, and wattle bark destined for German tanneries. The pre-war boom of the Union's ostrich farming industry also collapsed as the European luxury market for imported feathers closed. Always vulnerable to any kind of international crisis, the rich diamond industry was paralysed, cut off from the processing centres of Antwerp and Amsterdam. With the spread of a rash of bankruptcies, and rising unemployment among Coloured farm labourers and migrant African mineworkers, the outlook looked grim.<sup>12</sup>

To compound concerns, as Britain – the empire export country on which the South African economy was most heavily dependent – was unable to continue its regular supply of industrial goods and basic consumer items, local markets found themselves running short of a wide range of commodities, including clothing, leatherware, bicycles, blankets, and biscuits. Predictably, drastic shortages and soaring prices for everyday imports fuelled inflation. As the living standards of black and white workers were squeezed, labour restiveness intensified. White workers in increasingly militant trade unions turned a deaf ear to patriotic appeals from the government and employer associations to make do with less as a wartime duty.<sup>13</sup> With their bargaining position strengthened by skilled labour shortages after 1914, unionised mineworkers were able to secure improved wages as well as reduced working hours after 1915, a case of “abandoning patriotism” and holding employers “to ransom”, according to one leading Johannesburg newspaper.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the First World War did much to extend the lopsided industrial pattern of South Africa's economic structure in a newly productive direction. Prior to the conflict, its manufacturing sector had been diminutive and uncompetitive. Dwarfed by mining and

agriculture, secondary industries had been largely confined to the production of explosives, cement, and light equipment for gold mining, with some small-scale activity such as sugar-refining and soap-making.

Suddenly, the slashing of imports and the spiralling cost of goods became a bonanza for South Africa's fledgling manufacturing capitalists. Now competitive, and with a shortfall to fill, the production of textiles, furniture, ceramics, processed foods, and even capital goods surged after 1914. By 1916, South African forces participating in the East Africa campaign were being supplied with many of their staple requirements by domestic factories.<sup>15</sup> The gross value of secondary industry jumped from 20 million pounds in 1914 to over 60 million pounds by 1917, while factory employment more than doubled, with most new jobs going to migrant African workers drawn from impoverished rural areas. With new industrial works mushrooming around cities like Johannesburg, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, and East London, a wave of broader urbanisation was fertilised by significant advances in electrification and in expanded road and railway links. In these ways, the wartime economy increased the rate at which the Union's main urban centres were modernising.<sup>16</sup>

In the case of minerals, the situation was more complex. The war crisis kept the Kimberley diamond industry in the doldrums for most of this period, although it also produced a windfall. Following South Africa's 1915 conquest and annexation of German South West Africa, the colony's coastal diamond fields were picked up cheaply by the powerful local mining baron, [Ernest Oppenheimer \(1880-1957\)](#), aiding in the concentration by 1917 of South African gold and diamond interests into the immensely powerful Anglo-American corporation.<sup>17</sup>

The position of gold mining on the Witwatersrand presented a particular dilemma. With Britain dependent on the Union for over two-thirds of its gold reserves, London's survival through the war as a global financial hub depended on the continuing security and supply of bullion from Johannesburg's mine houses. Inevitably, an emergency arrangement had to be reached to replace peacetime business as usual. Accordingly, the Bank of England clinched a 1914 agreement with South Africa's Chamber of Mines in which all gold would be reserved exclusively for Britain at a guaranteed fixed price for the duration of hostilities which were initially anticipated to be short. At first, it appeared to be an advantageous deal, ensuring stable costs and continuing demand for local producers amidst the international turmoil of the war.

But the compact soon lost its shine. The Johannesburg mining industry was burdened by import shortages of essential equipment and stores and by a rocketing bill for materials. In

addition, a shortfall caused by the draining of its pool of skilled white labour as many English-speaking miners volunteered for military service, bolstered the strength of unionised workers who were able to extract substantial gains, including even new paid holidays. Saddled with a fixed gold price in the face of rapidly rising operating costs, the value of mining profits tumbled by more than half between 1915 and 1918, while wartime output also fell drastically. Recovery only came after the war had ended with the restoration in 1919 of a free market for South Africa's gold.<sup>18</sup>

Yet even then, the tense and troubled shadow cast over the industrial Witwatersrand by wartime difficulties continued to linger. Going on the offensive to try to slash labour costs, from 1916 the Chamber of Mines tried repeatedly to prise underpaid black workers into positions usually reserved for better-paid white miners by a job colour bar. Labour unions fiercely resisted any dilution of the privileged status of white mineworkers. In a sense, the squeeze imposed by the war brought to a boil the simmering relationship between Johannesburg's mining capitalists who were seeking to raise profitability through reducing costs and organised white labour aristocrats who dug in their heels against being dislodged by cheaper workers. Once the war ended, the mining companies resumed efforts to cheapen labour, provoking increasingly militant resistance from white workers. In this respect, the First World War might be viewed as the midwife of South Africa's Rand Revolt of 1922. Involving some returned miners who were veterans of the [Western Front](#), this armed [rebellion](#) brought home a taste of the ferocity of the trench warfare of 1916.<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, then, the conflict proved to be a mixed bag for the Union's economy. For the great mines of the Witwatersrand, the assurance of a guarantee from the Bank of England came at an uncomfortable price. In the northern Transvaal and Orange Free State countryside, widespread drought and harvest failure bit hard in many agricultural districts, blighting the livelihoods of African sharecroppers, tenants, and a remaining cluster of peasants. Impoverishment pushed some into non-combatant labouring service, with well over half of the South African Native Labour Corps recruited from dispossessed African rural dwellers. Enlisted as a British imperial unit, over 20,000 of these African recruits undertook manual labour in [France](#), either at ports or behind the lines on the Western Front.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, though, these were prosperous years for better-off white commercial farmers and associated agri-businesses which fed a voracious wartime appetite within and beyond the country's borders. The overall value of agricultural exports alone climbed by over sixty percent during the war years. Areas of major expansion included transport assembly works, woodworks and leatherworks, alcoholic spirits, food canning and dried fruit, and beef, wool, hides and skins.

## The Home Front or a House Divided

There were two overriding factors which shaped South African experience on the home front. One was the Union's immense distance from the heartlands of the hostilities, even on the African continent itself. Even when the empire loyalist government of Prime Minister [Louis Botha \(1862-1919\)](#) used the [propaganda](#) threat of a cross-border invasion from German South West Africa in 1914, this was a manufactured menace which did little to rouse serious popular support for entry into war and intervention on behalf of the British Empire. The absence of any palpable enemy threat to the home front meant that much of the population could either remain neutral rather than pro-war, or could remain indifferent to a conflict which was considered to be an irrelevant European affair. Even for some ultra-Empire English South African patriots there was no compulsion to sign up for war, and many men simply chose to sit it out for the duration of hostilities. In that fundamental sense, domestic involvement in the Union's war was a matter of choice.

A second consideration is that the war provided both an opportunity for, and a stage upon which, the Union's latent and unresolved conflicts and divisions could be thrown into stark relief. The coming of hostilities had very specific consequences for disaffected nationalist Afrikaners who detested the post-1902 absorption of a unified South African region into the British Empire as the basis of a common white South African nationality. The outbreak of the conflict even prompted a few to defect to German South West Africa, while a small group of other alienated Afrikaners staged a brief, republican-inspired rebellion. But these spurts of wartime defiance were disposed of fairly easily, having had no serious prospect of destabilising the Union. Yet they still served as fresh First World War ingredients to enrich the mythologies of victimhood and sacrifice which were nourishing the growth of Afrikaner nationalism which promised a future in which Afrikaners would be "free" to "stand up."<sup>21</sup>

On that score, the most potent political development in this period was the formation in 1914 of the National Party which took a firm stand in favour of neutrality. For its "South Africa first" nationalists, involvement in an unwanted war was not merely wrong in principle. It risked undermining the economic growth so essential to the stability of white supremacy and represented a distraction from the Union's most urgent economic and social imperative, the alleviation of the plight of poor white Afrikaners.<sup>22</sup>

In this and in many other ways, the war extended and amplified domestic rifts and animosities. Thus, as middle-class white English female volunteers threw themselves into the running of patriotic funds, war charities, and welfare services for visiting British, Australian and New Zealand troops, groups of nationalist Afrikaner women, self-consciously aloof from an imperial war, busied themselves with activities which backed a little civil war of their own,

bred within the world war. Mobilising in support of their rebellious menfolk from 1915, they established a coordinated web of self-help societies and welfare bodies to provide for imprisoned rebels and to prop up struggling rebel families which had lost their breadwinners.

Finally, there was the Union's overwhelming black majority of roughly two-thirds of its inhabitants, all of them subordinate in a state dictated by the premises of white politics and by the developing logic of segregation. A small educated middle class elite mobilised in support of the war effort through bodies such as the South African Native National Congress and the African Political Organisation. From these loyalist quarters there was a patriotic investment in the war effort, with fundraising activities and donations from a small string of war comforts committees. Here, the war represented a flash of opportunity to demonstrate that the country's black inhabitants were "not less worthy than any other sons of the British Empire."<sup>23</sup>

What this represented was, in large measure, a high-minded expression of loyalty that was directed not so much to the Union government but to the British Crown. What lay behind it was the hopeful - if deluded belief - that in the event of an imperial victory, a grateful Britain would use its liberal influence constitutionally to temper the rate at which remaining black rights were being confiscated by South Africa's rulers. Yet, even among the Christianised intelligentsia, there were some strident anti-war voices, while large bodies of ordinary rural Africans also spurned some meetings at which there were calls to come out in voluntary support of the war effort.

Ultimately, what weighed most heavily on the minds of the mass of South Africa's "Non-European" majority in these years was not so much the war, but what accompanied it. This was a tightening of the country's colonial order, enacted most powerfully by the vigorous unfolding in wartime of the land alienation of the 1913 Natives' Land Act, under which "about 87 percent of the country came to be considered white land."<sup>24</sup> The enforced eviction of relatively prosperous African peasant sharecroppers from white-owned rural land during the war years, and their conversion into cheap and rightless wage labour, symbolised the racist vision of the 1910 Union of South Africa. The war was a moment, when, in an essential sense, the seeds of later modern apartheid were sown.

## Conclusion

The Union of South Africa was not a country whose economy and society responded to the war crisis nor contributed to the First World War on straightforward terms, nor in tidy ways. The country's post-1918 peace celebrated "a bright and sunny country in which not a single inhabitant had had cause to fear for their personal safety because of threats from the land,

the sea or from the air.”<sup>25</sup> While essentially accurate, it also masked a tortuous spectrum of domestic wartime experiences. It overlooked the traumatic upheavals forced upon many rural Africans as harsh land segregation triggered an exodus of resisting peasant families from their lands in the northern interior. Conflict and contestation rather than consensus is, in many crucial ways, the most distinctive thing about what the war meant at home.

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## Notes

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- [Thompson, P. S.: The Natal home front in the Great War \(1914-1918\), in: Historia 56/1, 2011, pp. 101-137 \(Scientific Electronic Library Online\) \(Article\)](#)

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