

Version 1.0 | Last updated 02 March 2016

Union of South Africa

By Timothy J. Stapleton

In 1914, the Union of South Africa was four years old; its military only two. British supremacy in the South African War (1899-1902) provoked different responses from English and Afrikaner white South Africans to World War I. Prime Minister Botha, seeing global war as a chance for South African expansion, suppressed the 1914 Afrikaner rebellion. South Africa occupied German South West Africa and was proactive in German East Africa. A South African infantry brigade (mostly English-speaking whites), suffered appalling casualties in France and Belgium. Military service, previously reserved for whites, widened so that mixed race (Coloured) infantry fought in East Africa and the Middle East, and mixed race and black men formed military labour units in Western Europe. The hoped-for greater civil rights in recompense for the sacrifices were not forthcoming. The high-profile commemoration of the fallen at Delville, France focussed on whites, creating resentment and parallel commemorations elsewhere for non-whites.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Pre-War Planning](#)
- [3 War Aims](#)
- [4 Afrikaner Rebellion 1914](#)
- [5 Internal Politics, Labour Movements, African Nationalists](#)
- [6 South African Invasion of German South West Africa](#)
- [7 South Africa and the German East Africa Campaign](#)
- [8 South African Troops in Europe and the Middle East](#)
- [9 Economy and Home Front](#)
- [10 Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen](#)
- [11 Conclusion](#)

Introduction

Compared to other British dominions, South Africa's First World War experience did not attract much attention from [historians](#) until fairly recently. Among the most important works are Albert Grundlingh's *Fighting Their Own War: South African Blacks and the First World War* (1987) and *War and Society: Participation and Remembrance, South African Black and Coloured Troops in the First World War* (2014), and [Bill Nasson's](#) *Springboks on the Somme: South Africa and the Great War, 1914-1918* (2007) and *World War I and the People of South Africa* (2014). Articles on aspects of South Africa's First World War experience have appeared in the *South African Historical Journal*, the *Journal of African History*, *War and Society*, the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*.

Pre-War Planning

In 1910, in the wake of the South African War, the British colonies of the Cape and Natal combined with the subjugated former Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State to create the white minority dominated Union of South Africa as a [self-governing dominion](#) similar to [Canada](#) and [Australia](#). Since the British had abolished the Boer commando system and defence was assigned to the imperial garrison at the end of the South African War, the Union's new administration under [Louis Botha \(1862-1919\)](#) undertook the formation of a military establishment. The primary security concern was [Boer rebellion](#) with African resistance a distant second. Chaired by [Jan Smuts \(1870-1950\)](#), who became Minister of Defence in 1910, the committee that prepared the South African Defence Bill was heavily influenced by British officers [Lord Paul Methuen \(1886-1974\)](#), commander of military forces in South Africa, and [Colonel Henry Lukin \(1860-1925\)](#), Commandant-General of the Cape, who supported [Lord Herbert Horatio Kitchener's \(1850-1916\)](#) scheme that British settler dominions adopt a Swiss-style military system where all adult males were members of a part-time reserve that could be mobilized quickly when needed, particularly in defence of [Britain](#). Military volunteerism had grown in South Africa, particularly among English-speaking whites, and from 1908 to 1910 membership of rifle associations, clubs where white men practised military skills, had increased from 6,000 to 8,000, and by 1908, 11,250 white boys had received cadet training. Smuts believed that South Africa needed a 26,000-strong standing army but the cost was prohibitive.^[1]

The 1911 Imperial Conference decided, given tensions in Europe, that South Africa should become [responsible for its own defence](#). The Swiss model was partly copied given financial constraints. In 1912, the South African Defence Act created the Union Defence Force (UDF) with three commands: Permanent Force, Active Citizen Force and Cadets. General [Christian Beyers \(1869-1914\)](#), a Transvaal veteran of the South African War, became the first Commandant-General of the UDF,

Brigadier Lukin became Inspector-General of the Permanent Force and a core of fifty-one officers, trained in a new military school in Bloemfontein, assumed positions in thirteen military districts. While the Union decided to forego the expense of a navy, it made a financial contribution toward maintaining a local British naval presence. Compulsory cadet training was introduced for white boys between thirteen and seventeen years of age, and all white males between seventeen and twenty-five were eligible for obligatory military service but only about half, selected by lots, were to report for duty. During wartime all white males between seventeen and sixty were liable for military service. Blacks were excluded from the UDF without special permission from parliament, as it was feared this might serve as justification for granting them political rights and that a multi-racial army would erode racial segregation in civilian society. At the outbreak of the First World War, the UDF was all white and consisted of a small Permanent Force of 2,500 South African Mounted Riflemen with an artillery battery; an Active Citizen Force of around 23,000 volunteers and conscripts receiving part-time training; and a General Reserve of local rifle associations and recreated commandos. Although the UDF was meant to blend British and Boer military traditions, in practice it leaned strongly toward the former model and favoured the English language, which alienated Afrikaners.^[2]

War Aims

In the Union's early days many thought that it would eventually expand north to the Zambezi River. However, Britain refused to cede the small neighbouring territories of Basutoland (now Lesotho), Bechuanaland (now Botswana) and Swaziland. Botha's administration saw the First World War as a clear opportunity for South African territorial expansion. The adjacent German colony of South West Africa, which Britain asked South Africa to invade to secure radio stations and harbours, was an obvious target. After the failure of the first British invasion of German East Africa in 1914, London asked Pretoria to take a leading role in what was becoming a protracted campaign. Smuts imagined that Britain would give the southern half of German East Africa to [Portugal](#) in exchange for the southern half of Mozambique that would be transferred to Pretoria. This would give South Africa the ports of Beira and Lourenco Marques (today's Maputo), logical trade outlets for the Transvaal.^[3]

Afrikaner Rebellion 1914

South Africa, like other dominions, entered the Great War through London's declaration of hostilities against [Germany](#) in 1914. Botha and Smuts quickly began planning their [invasion of South West Africa](#). However, dissident Afrikaner [nationalist](#) republicans including Beyers and many UDF senior officers objected to helping Britain. They resigned their commissions and gathered around apocalyptic Christian prophet [Niklaas Van Rensburg \(1864-1926\)](#) to plan a rebellion to make South Africa independent. A planned 15 September military coup was derailed when Beyers and Boer military hero [Koos De La Rey \(1847-1914\)](#), travelling by car, ran a police road block and the latter was shot and killed. Botha now took personal command of the UDF. When the South African invasion of South West Africa began in early October, the Upington force under [Manie Maritz \(1876-](#)

1940) did not move as instructed which left another advancing column, "A Force" under Lukin, dangerously exposed. Maritz had been a coup plotter and now declared South Africa independent, disarmed loyalist soldiers, promoted himself to general and contacted the Germans. On 11 October, Smuts declared [martial law](#).

By late October around 11,500 armed Boer rebels had been mobilized by Christiaan De Wet (1854-1922) in the Orange Free State, and Beyers and Jan Kemp (1872-1946) in the Transvaal. They briefly occupied towns and ambushed trains but lacked coordination. Botha rejected imperial assistance and decided to crush the [rebels](#) with his force of 32,000 loyalists, mostly Afrikaners. Botha first concentrated on the Orange Free State and on 12 November attacked 5,000 rebels under De Wet at Winburg where most were encircled and surrendered. Botha then turned on Beyers and Kemp in the western Transvaal and in an attack on Rustenburg seized 400 prisoners. Beyers sent part of the force with Kemp to join Maritz and the Germans. On 16 November, near Bultfontein in the eastern Orange Free State, Botha's loyalists routed the rebels under Beyers who fled and later drowned in the Vaal River. With the apprehension of an insurgent group under Jopie Fourie (1879-1914) near Pretoria, the rebellion in the Orange Free State and Transvaal was over.

In early December, Kemp and several hundred rebels, after riding 1,300 kilometres across the Kalahari Desert, arrived in German territory. German governor Theodor Seitz (1863-1949) met Kemp and Maritz at the South West African town of Keetmanshoop and promised them [equipment](#) and [food](#). Just before Christmas, a combined German and rebel Boer offensive crossed the Orange River into South Africa and threatened Upington. Disagreements between Kemp and Maritz, and fear of UDF [artillery](#), prompted the former to lead his men back toward the Transvaal. The German commander, Joachim von Heydebreck (1861-1914), wanted to mount a two-pronged attack on Upington with Maritz's force to draw South African troops back from their invasion of South West Africa. However, Maritz declined to cooperate that closely with German troops as he believed it would damage the republican cause. The Germans then moved west 160 kilometres to attack Ramansdrift and Steinkopf. Leading 1,000 rebels supported by a small German artillery detachment, Maritz moved toward Upington in mid-January 1915. Maritz launched a badly coordinated attack that was repelled by a force under Jacobus "Jaap" Van Deventer (1874-1922). Although the Germans tried to take pressure off Maritz by redirecting their offensive toward nearby Kakamas, they encountered firm South African resistance. On 30 January 1915, Kemp and most remaining rebels surrendered. The rebellion fizzled with Maritz and the small German organized Afrikaner Free Corps seeking sanctuary in South West Africa.

Around 1,000 people were killed or wounded during the rebellion. Encouraging national reconciliation, the Botha administration showed mercy. Jopie Fourie, who had forgotten to resign his UDF commission, was the only rebel executed for treason. Of the 239 rebels tried and convicted, only around fifty remained in prison by the end of 1915. De Wet served six months of a six year sentence, Kemp served a year and nine months out of seven years and the prophet Van Rensburg received an eighteen-month sentence. Maritz fled to Angola, returned to South Africa in 1923 and served three years. English-speaking whites considered the lenient sentences disgraceful and emerging black

political leaders noticed a double standard compared to the cruel punishment of Zulu rebels in 1906. Afrikaner nationalists celebrated the rebels and in August 1915, 7,000 Afrikaner women marched in Pretoria to demand a blanket amnesty.^[4]

Internal Politics, Labour Movements, African Nationalists

The Union's first government was formed by Botha's South African Party (SAP) which pursued a conciliatory relationship with Britain. However, J.B.M. Hertzog (1866-1942), another veteran of Boer forces in the South African War, and other disillusioned Afrikaners began objecting to South African support for British imperialism during the First World War. These nationalists sympathized with the 1914 rebellion but avoided direct involvement. In 1915, Hertzog and others formed the National Party which gained twenty new seats in that October's election. The result was a minority government for Botha's SAP supported by the pro-British Unionist Party.

Before the First World War, the South African government routinely used force to suppress labour unrest. In July 1913, Smuts, as Minister of Mines, used imperial troops to crush a strike by white mine workers but this provoked wider industrial action to which the state had to make concessions as the new UDF Citizen Force was not ready. Later the same year Smuts used the South African Mounted Rifles and police to intimidate Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948) into calling off a strike by Indians in Natal. In January 1914, Smuts called out 10,000 UDF soldiers, with machine guns and artillery to suppress a general strike by white workers in Johannesburg over state plans to retrench railway and dock employees. Smuts then introduced the Riotous Assemblies Act, which outlawed coercive union recruitment, prohibited strikes by civil servants, authorized magistrates to outlaw public meetings and expanded police powers.^[5]

The Cape Town centred African Political Organization (APO), created in 1912 to advance the interests of Coloured people, called for the enlistment of Coloured soldiers and as early as December 1914 it had organized 10,000 potential volunteers. When Coloured men were enrolled in the new Cape Corps at the end of 1915 for the East Africa campaign, Botha did not take the issue to parliament where there would have been objections and he pointed out that the unit was paid for by imperial rather than South African funds. The South African Native National Congress (SANNC, later renamed African National Congress, or ANC) had been formed in 1912 as the first country-wide western-style African political organization and its mostly elite members engaged in legal campaigns against racial discrimination. In August 1914, the SANNC suspended protest against the Union's Native Land Act, which prevented Africans from buying land outside designated reserves, and pledged patriotic support for the war effort. An SANNC delegation visiting London to request imperial intervention rushed home so its members could enlist and African newspapers proposed the exchange of military service for increased civil rights. Walter Rubusana (1858-1936), the first black South African elected to the Cape provincial legislature in 1910 and an executive member of the SANNC, announced that he could raise 5,000 black volunteers to fight in South West Africa under his command. Denied permission to fight, black elites supported the creation of the unarmed South

African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC) as a way to participate in the conflict and were disproportionately represented in its ranks. The hopes of Coloured and black elites that the war represented an opportunity to assert claims on full citizenship were disappointed when conditions did not improve.^[6]

South African Invasion of German South West Africa

In South West Africa the Germans had around 2,000 mounted European [infantry](#) and a reserve of 3,000 volunteer infantry supported by artillery, machine guns, railway transport, and three [aeroplanes](#) but these forces were dispersed throughout the territory. The Germans had plenty of artillery and ample ammunition but they ran out of shells because there was no fodder for the draught animals to pull the wagons. Food supplies were limited as the settlers concentrated on cattle ranching and agricultural production among the Ovambo in the north was poor due to drought. German leadership was inconsistent as military commander Heydebreck was accidentally killed in November 1914; the new commander, [Viktor Franke \(1865-1936\)](#), was a reservist; and his chief of staff died after falling from a horse. The Germans communicated by [wireless](#) but this revealed their plans to the South Africans who were listening in. African participation in the defence of the colony was minimal given Germany's 1904-1907 genocide against the Herero and Nama. In 1915, the South African invasion force numbered 45,000 European soldiers supported by 33,000 African, Coloured and Indian unarmed volunteers who worked as transport drivers, railway workers and general labour. Despite Union regulations, some Coloureds familiar with South West Africa formed an armed scout detachment. The open and vast terrain meant that horse transportation became extremely important. Several South African pilots were recalled from the new Royal Flying Corps in Western Europe to provide aerial reconnaissance, which was also important for locating water sources in the arid environment.

The South African attack began on 14 September 1914, when the Royal Navy shelled the port of Swakopmund. With 5,000 soldiers with fourteen guns, the South African invasion force was divided into three small contingents. Five days after the naval bombardment South Africa's "C Force" under [Duncan McKenzie \(1859-1932\)](#) landed unopposed at Luderitz as the German defenders had withdrawn inland to focus on defending the Orange River border in the south. The 1,800 men of South African "A Force" under Lukin travelled by rail to Steinkopf, marched to crossing points on the Orange River and pushed quickly into German territory to secure water sources. Pretoria knew about the German move to the south but this information was sent to Lukin by post which he received too late. On 26 September, about 1,200 Germans with three artillery batteries under Heydebreck encircled Lukin's advance guard at Sandfontein and killed, wounded or captured all 300 men. This happened because the planned movement of Maritz's "B Force", now turned rebel, from Upington had not transpired. Simultaneously "C Force" pushed inland from Luderitz to Grasplatz but was slowed by German destruction of the railway and poisoning of wells, and soft sand. "C Force" eventually took Garub in February 1915 and used it as a base for an attack on the heavily defended Aus which the Germans abandoned just before it was captured at the end of March. On Christmas

Day 1914, South African trawlers landed soldiers and artillery at Walvis Bay, a South African administered enclave, and in mid-January 1915 this force occupied Swakopmund with the Germans withdrawing inland to Jakkalswater and Riet.

In February 1915, Botha took command of the northern contingent at Swakopmund and led an advance on the capital of Windhoek which was drastically slowed by railway reconstruction and problems acquiring water. The Germans gained time to establish new defensive positions and redirect their efforts from the southern to the central region. On 20 March, Botha's mounted troops enveloped four small German companies holding a defensive line in hills west of Jakkalswater and Riet. With Riet as a depot for supplies from the coast, Botha resumed the advance at the end of April supported by a dozen Royal Navy armoured cars that consumed less water than horses. Botha sent two mounted brigades – 4,300 men with artillery support – north under General Coen Brits (1868-1932) to take the railway junction at Karibib. Another two brigades, 4,600 mounted men and artillery, were sent east under General M.W. Myburgh to capture Okahandja. On 25 April, a German attack on Trekkopjes, intended to destroy the railway behind the South Africans, failed because German forces became lost in the dark and they were repelled by South African infantry and armoured cars. On 5 May, Botha's force captured Karibib railway junction, recently abandoned by the Germans, which brought together the territory's central, southern and northern rail systems. The South Africans occupied Windhoek in mid-May and captured its strategically important wireless station.

By the beginning of April 1915, the South Africans had secured all the Orange River crossings, and on 5 April, the southern force under Van Deventer seized the German railhead at Kalkfontein. In April, Botha sent Smuts to Luderitz to oversee operations in the south which robbed the defence ministry of its head. With McKenzie's "C Force" advancing quickly from Aus, the Germans under Captain Otto von Kleist at Keetmanshoop, a potentially strong mountainous position, feared encirclement and withdrew on 19 April, moving north to Gibeon. Kleist did not retreat fast enough, which enabled "C Force" to advance northeast cross country from Aus to Gibeon and on the night of 25 April they blew up the railway north of the Germans and shelled an ammunition train. However, a German counter-attack caught the South Africans in exposed ground illuminated by moonlight, and drove them off. Kleist's command escaped north to Rehoboth but 241 out of 800 men became casualties. When Baster communities around Rehoboth (mixed race migrants from the Cape), resisted German livestock seizure and labour conscription, the Germans retaliated by shooting [refugees](#). Baster leaders, in early April, had offered their military services to Botha who declined as it was a white man's war. With Botha's advance from the coast threatening to isolate them, the southern German force left Rehoboth on 8 May and retreated north.

German forces moved north along the railway, intending to make a stand at Otavi and Tsumeb. Since Governor Theodor Seitz (1863-1949) hoped his forces could remain active to claim the territory when the war in Europe ended, he proposed a ceasefire in which each side would occupy half the territory. Although imperial objectives had been achieved, Botha rejected the offer as he wanted to claim the colony. Botha took several weeks to muster a strong force of 13,000 troops, consisting of several mounted brigades and one infantry brigade with artillery, 20,000 horses and

oxen, and 500 wagons carrying three days' provisions. On 18 June 1915, the South Africans launched a four-pronged northward movement to encircle Otavi. Botha led the central column of two mounted brigades and McKenzie commanded the infantry brigade that marched up the railway toward Kalkveld. On the flanks, Myburgh led a mounted brigade in a right hook through Waterberg and toward Tsumeb to block a possible German escape to the northeast and Brits took his mounted brigade west of the rail toward Etosha Pan and Namutoni. The German defence of Otavi, entrusted to 1,000 men under Major Herman Ritter, was meant to delay the South Africans long enough for Francke to organize defences at Tsumeb. However, the speed of the South African advance caught the Germans unprepared as Ritter's positions were not mutually supporting and artillery not properly sited. On 1 July, Botha's central column, 3,500 men, attacked Otavi and within a few hours a flanking movement caused the Germans to withdraw away from the railway and further north to Gaub where they joined Kleist's contingent from the south. Had the Germans delayed Botha's column for two days it would have had to withdraw for lack of water.

The remaining Germans were trapped with South African forces converging from all sides and the Angolan border was blocked by an African rebellion against the Portuguese. Botha continued to refuse German ceasefire proposals and on 9 July the Germans surrendered. South African encircling tactics and German withdrawals produced few casualties. Within UDF ranks, 113 had been [killed](#) in action, 153 died through disease or accident and 263 had been wounded. Of 1,188 German casualties, 103 had died; 4,740 German soldiers, with thirty-seven field guns and twenty-two machine guns, capitulated. At the end of the war South West Africa became a South African administered mandate of the [League of Nations](#) and remained under Pretoria's control until 1989.^[7]

South Africa and the German East Africa Campaign

The main British imperial concern about [German East Africa](#) was to deny its Indian Ocean coast to German naval raiders. An amphibious landing by a British Indian Army contingent at [Tanga](#) in November 1914 proved disastrous: there were insufficient Allied forces to invade the German colony by land and German troops began to cross the Kenyan border to raid the Uganda railway. London then turned to Pretoria to lead a protracted campaign but South African involvement was delayed by the campaign in South West Africa and Botha's calculation that it would be politically problematic to mount another military adventure until after the elections of October 1915. Recruitment for an East African expeditionary force began in South Africa in November but results were slow as the excitement of the war's early days had waned, and white recruitment had always been slow compared to other dominions, and focused on specific campaigns rather than for the duration of the war. This led to the creation, in December, of the Cape Corps which consisted of 1,000 armed Coloured volunteers under white officers and represented a radical departure from the principle of an all-white UDF. These delays provided the German military commander in [East Africa](#), [Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck \(1870-1964\)](#), with time to prepare for the Allied offensive. In August 1914, the Germans had 218 European and 2,542 African soldiers in the colony and by January 1916 this had increased to 2,712 Europeans, 11,367 Africans and 2,591 auxiliaries.

While the South West African campaign had been an entirely South African operation, the British War Office played a stronger role in East Africa. In early February 1916, Smuts succeeded the ill Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien (1858-1930) as commander of British forces in East Africa. Replacing British officers with familiar South African colleagues Brits and Van Deventer, Smuts' approach to the offensive reflected his military experience in the South African War and German South West Africa campaign as well as his political career. He imagined large and fast-sweeping manoeuvres by mounted units to envelop the Germans and thus avoid the high numbers of casualties politically unpopular in South Africa. Smuts did not understand that much of German East Africa, with thick bush, and disease-carrying tsetse flies, was not suitable for horses. While Smith-Dorrien had planned extensive preparations and wanted to wait for the end of the rains, Smuts launched the offensive immediately, before all his forces had arrived. In early March, Smuts initiated an attack on a German position at Salaita just east of Kilimanjaro. Faced with an offensive by 40,000 mostly Indian and South African troops, Lettow's 4,000 men began a slow and tenacious fighting withdrawal southward from the Mount Kilimanjaro area on the Kenya border to Morogoro in the middle of the country, which Smuts' forces took in August 1916. In May, a force of 3,000 South African troops under Van Deventer threatened the central railway by seizing Kondoia Irangi which they defended from a major German counter-attack. By June, at Kondoia Irangi, 1,000 South Africans had succumbed to sickness and only 1,000 out of 4,000 horses were fit. The British advance was hampered by rains, thick bush, tropical disease and increasingly long lines of communication.

Elsewhere, Belgian forces were advancing from Congo in the west toward Tabora, the Rhodesia-Nyasaland Field Force was moving up between lakes Tanganyika and Nyasa, and the Portuguese to the south had just joined the Allied cause. Smuts' forces were more successful on the coast as during September they occupied the key port of Dar es Salaam and smaller ones such as Kilwa. Although the Germans had not sabotaged the railway, it took until the end of 1916 to establish a supply line between Dar es Salaam and Morogoro in the interior. Between June and September, 53,000 draught animals died from disease, and motor vehicles were of limited use. Within a few months of arriving in East Africa most South African units had lost around half their number to diseases such as malaria and dysentery, and by the end of 1916 around 12,000 white troops were invalided home because of disease, exhaustion and poor nutrition. In South Africa, the campaign became unpopular as wasted men returned after just six months and Smuts appointed an inquiry that dragged out proceedings for months to reduce the negative impact.

By January 1917, the campaign had stalled around the Rufigi River where Lettow deployed 4,000 men in defensive positions and Smuts launched attacks hampered by rain and thick bush. In late January, Smuts left his command for the Imperial War Cabinet and prematurely proclaimed victory in East Africa because the South African-led offensive had secured three quarters of the territory and its entire infrastructure. Smuts was replaced by British General Reginald Hoskins (1871-1942) who suspended operations until the weather cleared and reorganized the tattered imperial force. European and Coloured South African soldiers were replaced by Africans from a dramatically expanded [King's African Rifles](#) and West African units freed up by the conquest of German

Cameroon. Tens of thousands of additional African supply carriers from neighbouring colonies were conscripted. Hoskins requested more resources from London, warned that the campaign would continue and planned to trap the Germans in the south. However, at the end of May, as the rains ended and offensive became feasible, Hoskins was dismissed by the War Office because of fatigue and the intrigues of Smuts.

Van Deventer, who had returned home in January 1917, was recalled to East Africa to assume command and instructed to conclude the campaign quickly as resources were needed in Europe. Between July and August Van Deventer, with a mostly African and Indian army, launched a series of pincer movements against German positions that resulted in three dozen engagements for control of water supplies and food producing areas. The Germans withdrew further south. A serious battle took place at Mahiwa over several days in October and left 600 German and 2,000 Allied casualties. Van Deventer's advance was deferred several weeks but for Lettow the impact was much greater as he could not replace casualties and had to abandon scarce ammunition, supplies and field guns. In November, Lettow led his single column of 300 European and 1,800 African soldiers into Portuguese Mozambique, which was embroiled in an African rebellion, to acquire food. During this last phase of the campaign, the 52,000 Allied soldiers in the field included only 2,500 South Africans, mostly in support roles. Waiting until after the rains to pursue the Germans, Van Deventer consolidated his forces in German East Africa and then moved units into Mozambique during July and August 1918 trying to encircle the enemy. Lettow's elusive column re-entered German East Africa in late September and moved west toward lightly defended Northern Rhodesia to raid supply bases and the railway.

On 25 November 1918, two weeks after the armistice, Lettow surrendered at Abercorn near the southern end of Lake Tanganyika in the last German capitulation of the Great War. Britain had deployed 114,000 European, Indian and African soldiers of whom 10,000 died, mostly from disease, and conscripted 1 million African supply carriers of which 100,000 perished from sickness and exhaustion. Leadership of the East African campaign did not gain much for South Africa. Smuts had initially been dismissive of Germany's mostly black colonial force but white South African troops failed to defeat them and were replaced by British African troops. Pretoria's territorial hopes in the region were ignored by imperial authorities and most of German East Africa, renamed Tanganyika, became a British administered mandate of the League of Nations.^[8]

South African Troops in Europe and the Middle East

While Hertzog's nationalists opposed sending soldiers to Europe, patriotic English-speaking whites demanded an opportunity to serve the mother country within the context of a South African unit. In July 1915, a South African Overseas Expeditionary Force was created to raise an all-white volunteer infantry brigade for service in Europe. Volunteers tended to be English and middle-class with both officers and enlisted men coming from colleges, merchant houses, banks, law offices, engineering firms and mining company offices. The prevailing military culture was Scottish as many volunteers

came from Citizen Force units like the Cape Town Highlanders and Transvaal Scottish. The distinctively English Lukin, who had escaped blame for the Sandfontein disaster, commanded the brigade. The first contingents of the 1st South African Infantry Brigade departed Cape Town in August and within a few weeks there were 5,800 officers and men training in Britain.

In early 1916, the South African Brigade, given its many men with desert experience from South West Africa, was sent to Egypt to help suppress the Senussi rebellion on the western frontier. In mid-April the brigade was shipped to France for the anticipated Somme offensive. Attached to Britain's 9th (Scottish) Division where they emphasized a frontier fighting spirit by imitating Zulu war songs and dances, the South Africans occupied trench lines in May but were held in reserve until mid-July. After 1 July, the disastrous Somme offensive degenerated into a war of attrition and British attacks were concentrated on an arc of woods north of Montauban. On 12 July, Lukin was ordered to take Delville Wood from the Germans and hold it at all costs. At dawn on 15 July, 3,000 men of the South African brigade, led by Lieutenant Colonel William Tanner (1875-1943), captured most of Delville Wood. Almost surrounded by German positions, the South Africans were subjected to several days of determined German counter-attacks, and intense bombardment. Assaults by British units failed to relieve the pressure and British artillery support was ineffective, and sometimes shelled the South Africans. British troops finally broke through on 20 July and the South Africans were withdrawn. It was at Delville Wood that Private William Frederick Faulds (1895-1950), who twice exposed himself to shell-fire to rescue wounded comrades, became the first South African to earn the Victoria Cross. There were 750 South Africans dead and 1,500 wounded, captured or missing. Of 3,150 members of the brigade who had fought, only twenty-nine officers and 750 other ranks answered roll call on 21 July.

Some 2,900 newly arrived South African troops reconstituted the brigade which spent the next year in and out of action at places such as Vimy, Butte de Warlencourt, Arras, Fampoux and Menin Road. In May 1917, at Fampoux, the brigade suffered heavy casualties for a gain of just 200 metres: and dubbed themselves "suicide Springboks." In September 1917, the South African Brigade joined the British offensive in Flanders, eventually known as the Third Battle of Ypres or Passchendaele, which envisioned a push to the coast to drive the Germans out of Belgium. Instead of the massed shoulder-to-shoulder advance of the Somme, British infantry formed small and fast attack parties to eliminate specific German positions. During the early morning of 20 September, the 3rd and 4th South African battalions, preceded by a creeping artillery barrage, advanced over muddy and cratered ground and took a series of objectives from surprised German defenders. In this operation, 1,250 South Africans were killed, wounded or missing out of an original 2,600. At the beginning of 1918, the South African Brigade, now only 1,700 strong, was assigned to hold a defensive position at Gouzeaucourt, near Cambrai, in anticipation of a German spring offensive. On the morning of 21 March, artillery hammered the South Africans and German assaults overwhelmed their strongpoint at Gauche Wood. Over the next few days the brigade suffered 900 casualties and the remaining 700 men were withdrawn north to escape encirclement. When the war ended, the South Africans were on the eastern point of a general Allied advance with each of the three battalions having only 300 men.

Returning to South Africa by August 1919, veterans of the [Western Front](#) were [demobilized](#) at camps in Durban, Cape Town, Pretoria and Potchefstroom. A Demobilization Board and fifty "Returned Soldier Committees" in various towns were established to reintegrate white servicemen into civilian life, and many returned to jobs reserved by patriotic employers. While a handful of right-wing South African veterans joined the Allied Expeditionary Force in [Russia](#) that fought the Bolsheviks, some of the others who went home became part of a radicalized mineworkers' labour movement that staged the 1922 Rand Revolt.^[9]

In June 1916, the Imperial War Council, anxious about a shortage of military labour for the coming Somme offensive, requested African workers from South Africa. Botha responded positively and recruiting began for the SANLC. Since South African whites feared that blacks serving in Europe might return home with dangerous new ideas, Botha did not take the issue to parliament as the contingent was meant for imperial service. Recruiting in [rural areas](#) did not go well and authorities were surprised that after seven months only 300 of the supposedly martial Zulu had volunteered. Eventually, government officials threatened chiefs with loss of pay and position so they would force young men to enlist. Half the contingent came from the Northern Transvaal where drought made military wage labour attractive. Falling short of the imperial request for 40,000 workers, South Africa recruited 25,000 men for the SANLC. They served in France between September 1916 and January 1918 producing timber, loading and unloading ships, and maintaining roads and railways. Since it was politically unacceptable in South Africa for blacks to enter combat, the shelling of a SANLC camp by German artillery was covered up. In February 1917, over 600 black servicemen and a dozen white officers of the SANLC were lost when the S.S. Mendi, a troopship ferrying them across the English Channel, was accidentally rammed by another vessel and sank. A legend developed that these doomed men, eager to fight for freedom but knowing they would never get the chance, performed African war dances as the ship went down. White officers and NCOs, mostly recruited from the Native Department and Labour Bureau given their experience supervising Africans, minimized their black subordinates' contact with European civilians, particularly women, and soldiers by keeping them in closed compounds. African servicemen objected to being treated like German [prisoners](#) and in July 1917 there was a disturbance in which thirteen Africans were shot dead by their white South African officers. British officers eventually gave the black servicemen more liberties. In January 1918, Botha abruptly announced the disbanding of the SANLC and by May it had returned home where many veterans complained about poor compensation and government refusal to issue service medals. Although Botha claimed that the contingent was recalled because of the threat of enemy submarines to troop ships, it is likely that the breakdown of racial segregation in the camps became a political embarrassment. Westernized African elites considered this a betrayal. Two Cape Corps battalions, established in June 1916 and largely recruited from Cape Town dock workers, also provided military labour in France. These 2,000 men transported munitions and supplies from French ports to the nearest railway depot, and returned home in late 1919. The 3,500-strong Cape Auxiliary Horse Transport hauled goods inland from the ports and logged in French forests.^[10]

In April 1918, the 1,000-man 1st Cape Corps infantry battalion, which had fought in East Africa in

1916 and 1917, was shipped from Durban to Egypt to join General Sir [Edmund Allenby's \(1861-1936\)](#) coming British [offensive against the Turks in Palestine](#). At the end of June, the Cape Corps Battalion joined the British and Indian units of 160th Brigade deployed in forward positions north of Jerusalem and along the Jordan River. The [influenza pandemic](#) was beginning to take its toll and throughout the campaign the unit maintained only 70 percent active strength. In late September, the Cape Corps was part of an advance against Turkish positions northeast of Jerusalem. With the Turks weakened by desertion, disease and Allied artillery, the Cape Corps took a number of enemy positions including the well defended Square Hill. On 20 September, 400 Cape Corps men formed the vanguard of a frontal night assault on an elevated Turkish position. Allied shelling was late and inaccurate, messengers became lost and the Turks brought up reinforcement to repel the confused attackers. With over fifty killed and 100 wounded, the Cape Corps pulled back to Square Hill. In October, the battalion returned to Egypt where it received replacements from South Africa but saw no further combat. As part of the British garrison, the Cape Corps helped suppress an Egyptian nationalist revolt in 1919. Their horizons broadened, Coloured South African veterans perceived themselves as part of a British imperial citizenry of civilized men like those of Canada, Australia, [New Zealand](#) and [India](#).^[11]

Economy and Home Front

Disruption to international trade during the war caused a shortage of imported goods and a rise of inflation in South Africa. This, along with wartime demands for the enlarged UDF, stimulated the expansion of a hitherto small South African manufacturing sector which increased [urbanization](#) and electrification. In August 1914, Britain made an agreement with all mining companies operating in South Africa to buy all gold at a fixed rate of £4 per ounce for the duration of the conflict while the costs of imported mining machinery and labour increased. Britain maintained its position as the world's financial centre by purchasing gold from South Africa and storing it there to avoid the risks of wartime shipping. As militant white mine workers pushed for a 60 percent increase in wages during the war and reduced working hours, mining profits and production declined. The war changed the composition of the mining workforce as British immigrants enlisted and were replaced by Afrikaners from the rural Transvaal and Orange Free State. Although the mass of African mine labour received a minimal pay raise during the war, mine owners attempted to cut labour costs by moving blacks into vacant semi-skilled positions which prompted a strike by 3,000 white mine workers in early 1917. The government negotiated a compromise in which blacks retained their new positions but employers were forbidden to put them in other semi-skilled jobs. The departure of British workers for the war also opened new opportunities for Coloured artisans in the emerging light manufacturing sector.

As in other countries, the war increased the status and visibility of white women. They knitted socks and packed parcels for the troops, organized fundraising and morale-lifting events, and established recreation facilities for visiting Australian and New Zealand soldiers. Several hundred white women became military nurses in Britain and South Africa. Furthermore, white women often played a key

role in publicly pressuring able-bodied men to enlist. The introduction of women workers in manufacturing and elite fears about their cavorting with soldiers prompted the formation of a League of Honour in 1915 and volunteer women's police patrols. For impoverished black women, mostly in rural areas, the war brought few opportunities.^[12]

Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen

Delville Wood became the focus of South Africa's memorialization of its war dead before the conflict was over. In 1917 and 1918, South African soldiers in Western Europe began visiting the battlefield where they erected wooden crosses and stone cairns. In July 1917, Delville Wood commemorations began in South Africa. For Botha's supporters this symbolized the unification of English and Afrikaners into a white South African nation and helped heal the wounds of the South African War and Afrikaner rebellion. Conversely, Afrikaner nationalists saw Delville Wood as another example of British disregard for South African lives and emerging left-wing activists viewed it as a massacre meant to uphold the capitalist system. Furthermore, elite African newspapers pointed out that the focus on Delville Wood was concerned only with white sacrifice and that the black servicemen lost on the Mendi were forgotten. Although Smuts, who became prime minister in 1919 following Botha's death, preferred a South African location for a proposed national war memorial, political sensitivity over its location meant it was built at Deville Wood in France. Sir Percy Fitzpatrick (1862-1931), a wealthy South African businessman and author who had lost a son in the conflict, arranged for the purchase of the land from its French owner. Fitzpatrick chaired the Delville Wood Memorial Committee which raised funds in South Africa to construct the monument and cemetery designed by British architect Sir Herbert Baker (1862-1946) whose previous work included the Union Buildings in Pretoria. In October 1926, the Delville Wood South African National War Memorial was unveiled by Botha's widow at a ceremony attended by a reticent Hertzog who had become prime minister two years earlier. Replicas were constructed in Pretoria and Cape Town. During the late 1920s and 1930s, Delville Wood Days and Armistice Days in the Union and at the memorial were distinctly elitist and pro-British, and privileged the memory of those who died on the Western Front over those lost in the African or Middle East campaigns. During the apartheid era (1948-1994), the ruling National Party participated in Delville Wood memorial events to remind increasingly disapproving world powers that South Africa had fought for the ideals of freedom and democracy. Excluded from the main memorial structures and events, black South Africans staged Mendi commemorations involving church activities, marches and fund raising for student bursaries. The sacrifice of Coloured soldiers at Square Hill was honoured by a memorial in Kimberley and the naming of a working class Coloured community in the Western Cape.^[13]

Conclusion

South Africa's experience of the First World War was largely shaped by the recent history of the South African War (1899-1902), and the fact that the Union was a new country (1910) with an even

newer military (1912). Although the Botha government saw the global conflict as an opportunity for territorial expansion, South African participation was sensitive given Afrikaner resentment about supporting the British. As such, the South African invasion of German South West Africa was delayed by the Afrikaner Rebellion of 1914 and South African involvement in the German East Africa campaign had to await the results of the 1915 election. Given the nature of white minority rule in South Africa, the military recruitment of mixed race and black men was also controversial. Sensitivity about these issues also impacted how the war was remembered in South Africa: it notably sought to avoid friction by locating its national memorial in France, and largely forgetting its role in the African and Middle East campaigns and military service by those who were not white. Politically and economically, developments during the First World War set the stage for major events in South Africa such as the 1922 Rand Revolt in which white mine workers rebelled against the state, and the rise of Afrikaner nationalism which would eventually result in the implementation of apartheid in 1948.

Timothy J. Stapleton, University of Calgary

Reviewed by external referees on behalf of the General Editors

Notes

1. ↑ Seegers, Annette: *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, London 1996, pp. 12-22.
2. ↑ Nasson, Bill: *Springboks on the Somme: South Africa and the Great War, 1914-1918*, Johannesburg 2007, pp. 3, 37-39.
3. ↑ Samson, Anne: *World War I in Africa: The Forgotten Conflict Among the European Powers*, London 2013.
4. ↑ Nasson, *Springboks* 2007, pp. 35-59; Swart, S.: *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*, 24/2 (1998), pp. 737-751.
5. ↑ Seegers, *Military* 1996, pp. 25-28, 32-33.
6. ↑ Nasson, Bill: *War Opinion in South Africa 1914*, in: *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 23/2 (1995), pp. 255-57; Nasson, *Springboks* 2007, pp. 160-170.
7. ↑ Strachan, Hew: *The First World War in Africa*, Oxford 2004, pp. 61-92; Nasson, *Springboks* 2007, pp. 63-87.
8. ↑ Nasson, *Springboks* 2007, pp. 89-122. Strachan, *First World War in Africa* 2004, pp. 93-184; Sameson, Anne: *World War I in Africa: The Forgotten Conflict Among the European Powers*, London 2012, pp. 109-165; Anderson, Ross: *The Forgotten Front: The East African Campaign, 1914-1918*, Stroud 2004.
9. ↑ Nasson, *Springboks* 2007, pp. 123-156.

10. † Clothier, N.: *Black Valour: The South African Native Labour Contingent, 1916-1918 and the Sinking of the Mendi*, Pietermaritzburg 1987; Grundlingh, A.: *Fighting Their Own War: South African Blacks and the First World War*, Johannesburg 1987; Nasson, Springboks 2007, pp. 160-170.
11. † Nasson, Springboks 2007, pp. 157-160.
12. † Nasson, Springboks 2007, pp. 171-182; see also Ally, Russell: *Gold and Empire: The Bank of England and South Africa's Gold Producers, 1886-1926*, Johannesburg 1994; Johnstone, F.A.: *Class, Race and Gold: A Study of Class Relations and Racial Discrimination in South Africa*, London 1976.
13. † Nasson, Springboks 2007, pp. 219-242.

Selected Bibliography

Anderson, Ross: **The forgotten front. The East African campaign, 1914-1918**, Stroud 2004: Tempus.

Clothier, Norman: **Black valour. The South African Native Labour Contingent, 1916-1918, and the sinking of the Mendi**, Pietermaritzburg 1987: University of Natal Press.

Collyer, John Johnston: **The campaign in German South West Africa, 1914-1915**, Pretoria 1937: Government Printer.

Digby, Peter K. A.: **Pyramids and poppies. The 1st SA Infantry Brigade in Libya, France, and Flanders, 1915-1919**, Rivonia 1993: Ashanti.

Grundlingh, Albert M.: **Fighting their own war. South African Blacks and the First World War**, Johannesburg 1987: Ravan Press.

Grundlingh, Albert M.: **War and society. Participation and remembrance. South African Black and Coloured troops in the First World War, 1914-1918**, Stellenbosch 2014: SUN Media.

L'Ange, Gerald: **Urgent imperial service. South African forces in German South West Africa, 1914-1915**, Johannesburg 1991: Ashanti.

Nasson, Bill: **World War One and the people of South Africa**, Cape Town 2014: Tafelberg.

Nasson, Bill: **Springboks on the Somme. South Africa in the Great War, 1914-1918**, Johannesburg; New York 2007: Penguin.

Samson, Anne: **World War I in Africa. The forgotten conflict among the European powers**, London; New York 2013: I. B. Tauris.

Seegers, Annette: **The military in the making of modern South Africa**, London; New York 1996: Tauris Academic Studies.

Stapleton, Timothy J.: **A military history of South Africa**, Santa Barbara 2010: Praeger.

Strachan, Hew: **The First World War in Africa**, Oxford; New York 2004: Oxford University Press.

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, 1998, pp. 737-751.

Uys, Ian S.: **Rollcall. The Delville Wood story**, Johannesburg 1991: Uys Publishers.

Van der Waag, Ian: **A military history of modern South Africa**, Cape Town 2015: Jonathan Ball.

Van der Waag, Ian: **The battle of Sandfontein, 26 September 1914. South African military reform and the German South-West Africa campaign, 1914-1915**, in: *First World War Studies* 4/2, 2013, pp. 141-165.

Willan, Brian P.: **The South African Native Labour Contingent, 1916-1918**, in: *The Journal of African History* 19/1, 1978, pp. 61-86.

Citation

Stapleton, Timothy J.: Union of South Africa , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2016-03-02. **DOI:** [10.15463/ie1418.10848](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10848).

License

This text is licensed under: [CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/de/).