‘Motherhood and Otherhood’ – gendered citizenship and Afrikaner women in the South African 1914 Rebellion

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Little historiographical analysis exists on women and citizenship, and very little has been written on women’s historical relationship to the state in South Africa. Significant new inroads have been made, however, and this article seeks to contribute to this growing body of literature by using the 1914 Boer Rebellion as a lens through which gendered processes of citizenship and identity may be observed. Although no women engaged in active military service, there were women who considered themselves to be ‘rebels’. The article examines their role during the Rebellion and in its aftermath, a mass demonstration. The demonstration was couched in traditional, patriarchal discourse, but it was a radical development, an event solely engineered and participated in by women. It signifies an often-forgotten role of women in conflict, which is difficult to contain in simple stereotypes. The post-rebellion mass demonstration, was pro-active, women-lead, and was predicated on an ideology of ‘republican motherhood’. The discourse enabled some women to mobilise their domestic experience into a powerful political statement, allowing them to extend their culturally-sanctioned role to incorporate new – albeit constrained – public responsibilities. Just as in other contexts, this rhetoric and imagery of motherhood, as both a socially redemptive and politically persuasive concept, became a fundamental validation. It was an uneasy and ambivalent ‘republicanism’ – no call was made for female suffrage, their demands were couched in terms of their relative position to men – as wives, mothers and daughters of the state. The demonstration reflects the significant, although limited, role of Afrikaner women in the political arena. Their role was pro-active, vigorous involvement – an action difficult to contain in the one-dimensional dichotomy of ‘cheerleader’ or ‘anti-war Other’.

In 1914 there was an ill-fated uprising by Afrikaans-speaking rebels against the newly-forged South African state. In the rural south western Transvaal and northern Free State, farmers and sharecroppers who were alienated by the state’s failure to relieve the economic recession went into rebellion. They turned to their traditional leaders, the Boer generals, to...
re-establish a republic. Eleven thousand Afrikaner men rose against the state for varying reasons, ranging from desperate poverty to a nostalgic yearning for the old republican lifestyle. In a telling vignette, Hendrik de Wet – the youngest son of one of the rebel leaders – although still in short pants at the outbreak of the Rebellion, nevertheless expressed his desire to join the rebels. Believing him to be too young, his father, General de Wet, was reluctant. But the general’s wife, Cornelia ‘Tant [Aunt] Nelie’ de Wet, famously insisted on sending her son to war, saying publicly to her husband: ‘My old husband, if your life is not too good to offer up for your people, then neither is Hendrik’s.’

Cornelia de Wet self-consciously linked her discourse to a tradition of martial motherhood. It has been noted that the tradition of militarised citizenship, of which Boer republicanism was part, has promoted a narrative in which women are either ‘mirrors to male war’ (as civic cheerleaders) or a ‘collective Other’, embodying higher virtues and softer values, and as such, were either simply anti-war or, at least, subversive of realpolitik. Certainly in the Boer Rebellion, some women acted as ‘mirrors’ and some, while sympathetic to the rebel cause, called for an end to violence. There was, however, another, and separate, dimension to their participation.

Analyses of citizenship are generally tacitly masculine, the body politic normally male and...
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the narratives of nationalism are usually told by male voices. As Virginia Woolf famously declared, 'As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country'. Just as the metropolitan suffrage movement was connected to a long tradition of sometimes radical protest, and militants used the language of constitutionalism to support their case for active citizenship, the volksmoeders rebelled in a time of both imperial and colonial questioning of the category of 'citizen' as necessarily white, male and middle-class. As noted, the literature on 'nationalism' and 'citizenship' rarely addresses gender integratively. However, some scholars have begun opening up the ways in which gender and categories of ethnicity/nationality/race affect each other, and which explores their causal inter-connections. It is to this historiographical project that this paper seeks to contribute. Walby has suggested that there are five major ways in which women have been involved in national processes: as biological reproducers (literally 'mothers of the nation'), as reproducers of the 'boundaries' of ethnic/national groups; as being involved in ideological reproduction (transmitting 'culture'); as signifiers of difference (symbols in ideological discourse) and lastly, as participants in national (military, political and so on) struggles. Historiographical analyses are now being made on women and citizenship, and although very little has been written...
on women’s historical relationship to the state in South Africa, significant new inroads have been made. Manicom, for example, has called convincingly for analyses of women’s changing roles in relation to our understanding of the historical development of the state. Joan Scott notes that Western historians in the field of women studies began with descriptive work, but now look increasingly for theoretical formulations, as the surge in empirical case studies in women’s history now requires theoretical synthesis. Antithetically, historians of Boer women and, Walker suggests, of South African women in general, often reflect the dangers of trying to be relevant and merely repeating the formulaic conceptions of gender. This article offers a case-study as a contribution to the ongoing dialogue, using the Rebellion as a lens through which gendered processes of citizenship and identity may be observed. It examines the (female) body politic, to ask how gender lends meaning and materiality to such fundamental notions as citizenship and national identity. Unpacking such early manifestations is important in explaining why ethno-national projects in Afrikaner nationalism in South Africa and other places represented a celebration of these traditional gender codes. This paper looks at the ways in which women gave a physical dimension to their political agency, through the idioms of both femininity and republican freedom. They thus simultaneously demanded and performed citizenship.

MOTHERHOOD AND OTHERHOOD

The public ‘performance’ of republican womanhood was predicated largely on the discourse of civic ‘motherhood’. Grayzel and others have demonstrated the wide — trans-temporal and spatial — discursive pre-eminence of ‘motherhood’ as the standard of women’s gender role and national identity. Maternalist discourse has persistently connected women’s

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13 There are examples of gendered analyses. See, for example, A. McClintock, “‘No longer in a future heaven’: Women and Nationalism in South Africa”, Transition, 51 (1991), 104–23. Moreover, Wells, for example, has shown that some black women resisted more militantly than their men in anti-pass demonstrations under the apartheid state, in what was essentially a struggle against full proletarianisation. J. C. Wells, ‘Why Women Rebel: A Comparative Study of South African Women’s Resistance in Bloemfontein (1913) and Johannesburg (1958)’, Journal of Southern African Studies, 10, 1 (1983).


16 C. Walker ed., Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945 (Cape Town, David Philip, 1990), 1-32, and particularly 4–5.


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bodies to motherhood as a primary source of women’s patriotism and civic role. There are useful parallels with other colonial contexts: In the South African – and perhaps American (and other) – milieu, what has been left unanswered is the trajectory that many (Afrikaners) women followed from republican motherhood to early twentieth-century (for America, perhaps nineteenth-century) domesticity. In Linda Kerber’s potent formulation, the model ‘republican motherhood’ allowed historians to comprehend how, in the post-revolutionary years, Americans accommodated republican ideology within the sex hierarchy. Republican motherhood merged the ‘domestic domain’ with the new public ideology of civic virtue. Still, in both the American context, as described by Kerber and the South African (although chronologically far removed), it was a ‘deeply ambivalent’ ideology, with both progressive and conservative tendencies.

The flexibility of the discourse of motherhood – rather than its biological fixity – perhaps explains its mobilising power. When Cornelia de Wet insisted on Hendrik’s joining up, she was both validating and maintaining her social location as a civic republican mother. An Afrikaner Nationalist culture-broker, Harm Oost, noted of this incident that de Wet, known from the South African War (1899–1902) as a redoubtable Boer woman, was a laudable example for her volk (nation) sisters. Whether as a political publicity stunt or expression of genuine sentiment, her action is significant in what it reveals of the socio-political role played by Boer women and their relationship with the state. It is part of a frequently repeated theme. Kitchener, for example, who was in charge of British military operations in South Africa during the South African War, deplored ‘[t]he Boer woman in the refugee camp who slaps her protruding belly at you and shouts “When all our men are gone, these little Khakis will fight you…”’ Afrikaans women had served an important...


22 Oost, Skuldiges, 265. There has been no explicit unpacking of the distinction between volk sister and volk mother, the two seemed to be used interchangeably, although the latter term predominates.


24 It is not clear why she referred to the embryonic soldiers as ‘khakis’, as this was usually a term for British troops. In P. Warwick, and S.B. Spies, eds, The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902 (London, Longman, 1980), 174, S.B. Spies suggests helpfully that the republics would be conquered and the children would become British subjects (‘little Khakis’).
function in the South African War. While formal fighting was a male affair, the output and distribution needs incorporated a large number of women. Their tenacity was said to motivate and inspire their men. One combatant observed that after the Boer defeat by the British at Paardeberg, the despondent commandos ‘went home and came back fortified by the example of the heroism shown by the women’. Indeed the unyielding wall of women played a decisive political role in sustaining the republican war effort after the formal collapse of the Orange Free State and Transvaal. Yet there were many examples – albeit downplayed – of women, particularly of the bywoner (share-cropping) class (whose male counterparts joined the British-run National Scouts), who, for example, turned to prostitution for the British troops.

A decade later, women who identified themselves with the rebel side played three roles. First, many women adopted the attitude of republican ‘cheerleaders’, encouraging and inspiring their men to rebel. On the eve of the Rebellion, a contemporary noted that among the Boers, ‘women as well as men know how to approach extremes of national inflexibility and the intensely passionate patriotism’ of both genders was responsible for the 1914 Rebellion. He noted particularly, the power of the women’s encouragement: ‘How, then, could the young bloods turn a deaf ear to the seductive call of the veldt (“Freedom at hand!”), egged on as they were by the blandishments of their womenfolk’s language?’

The converse side of this cheerleading was a ‘white feather’ function, in which men who refused to rebel or volunteered for active service were publicly castigated by Afrikaner women.

Secondly, a small faction of women played a practical, auxiliary role in the physical rebellion itself, as go-betweens, providers of food, hoarders of weapons and maintainers of communication networks, purveyors of war news. Thirdly, a large group of women played a significant role in the post-Rebellion Women’s Demonstration of 1915.

25 There were, however, isolated reports of women fighting. See Warwick and Spies, South African War, 163.
26 Captain F.P. Fletcher-Vane, The War One Year After (Cape Town, South African Newspaper Company, 1903), 7.
29 F.V. Engelenburg, General Louis Botha (Pretoria, J. L. Van Schaik, 1928), 298.
30 Engelenburg, General Louis Botha, 299.
31 At the same time, in Britain women were literally handing out white feathers to young men still in civilian clothes. Perhaps this icon was drawn from the once popular sport of cock-fighting: a white feather in a fighting-cock’s tail was believed to be a sign of weakness or non-combativeness in the bird.
A WOMAN’S PLACE?

Historiographically, broad consensus exists among historians of southern Africa that there was a strong tradition of Boer women’s involvement in the political realm, although without formal rights.32 The historiographical schools differ only on the weight they grant this involvement. There has been a grudging acknowledgement of their political role by the liberal school, which concedes that Boer women exercised a ‘petticoat influence’ on their men.33 The Afrikaner nationalist historians have argued much the same, but in more depth, creating the idealised volksmoeder with her origins in apologetic Dutch-South African historical writings of the nineteenth century.34 Van Rensburg, who has articulated this ideology in a hagiographical work, notes that:

[... the noticeable womanliness with which they served their spouses andloyally stood by so that they could live their lives as volk leaders; loyal as housewife, perseverant as nurse, earnest in prayer, sensible in advice, brave in danger. That’s where their meaning lies [...]]35

Western suffragette feminism was not purportedly part of the Boer woman’s intellectual environment. Merriman noted that ‘Oddly enough in South Africa the women have always exercised a great influence. I say “oddly”, because they are so utterly opposed to the modern view of “women’s rights”’.36 Van Rensburg noted that Boer women would not assimilate overseas feminism, but did play an influential role in times of national crises.37 The Zuid-Afrikaansche Christelijke Vrouwen Vereniging (ACVV) had been formed in the Cape to uplift poor whites in the wake of the South African War and promote language issues, but was opposed to female suffrage. There were some Afrikaans-speaking women in the Vrouwen Kiesrecht Liga/Women’s Enfranchisement League.38 The ACVV resolved in 1906

33 E. Walker, History of Southern Africa (London, Longman, 1962), 200. There is a curious obsession with these undergarments from all schools, contemporary and historiographical. It seemed an appropriate title as it is redolent with contemporary images: H. Walpole referred to Mary Wollstonecroft as a ‘hyena in petticoats’ in the 1790s; Hendrina Joubert was called the ‘General in petticoats’; and Johanna Brandt organised the ‘Petticoat Commando’ during the South African War.
35 ‘... die begrypende vroulikheid waarmee hulle hul eggenote gedien en getrou bygestaan het sodat hulle as leiers van hul volk hul hoe roeping kon uitvoer; trou as huissvrou, teerhartig as verpleegster, ernstig in gebed, verstandig in raadgewing, moedig in stryd. Daarin lê hul betekenis’: van Rensburg, Moeders, 26.
36 J.X. Merriman quoted in Warwick and Spies, The South African War, 162.
37 Van Rensburg, Moeders, 110.
to ask that parliament not give women the vote. An outline has been sketched of Afrikaner women’s limited but purportedly morally powerful role in the political realm. A much cited 1843 deputation of Afrikaner women asked the British High Commissioner of Natal: ‘that in consideration of the Battles in which they have been engaged with their husbands, they had obtained a promise that they would be entitled to a voice in all matters concerning the state of this country. That they now claimed this privilege ...’ The women threatened to walk ‘barefoot over the Drakensberg [a formidable mountain range]’ rather than capitulate. A similar image of martyred Boer womanhood came from the white concentration camps of the South African War, in which 26,000 inmates (mainly women and children) are believed to have died. This image of Afrikaner womanhood – the volksmoeder – was further articulated and promoted through the erection of the Nasionale Vrouemonument in Bloemfontein (National Women’s Monument) in 1913, on the eve of the Rebellion. The monument represented the graphic icons of Afrikaner suffering: the emaciated child, incarceration in the concentration camps, ruins of burnt homesteads. The iconography drew heavily on the ideology martyrdom, stoicism, and loyalty.

Revisionist and radical South African scholars, however, like Louise Vincent, Elsabe Brink and Andrea Van Niekerk, have questioned the hegemony of the volksmoeder ideal, demonstrating that Afrikaner working class women did not automatically accept their prescribed role, and that battles over class and gender relations were inextricably connected to the creation of Afrikaner identity. Brink and Vincent show the very different trajectories of ideology between working-class and middle-class women. The role of the volksmoeder as part of the identity of Boer women in civil conflict is further explored. There is a new cognisance of gendered nature of historical agents in South African historiography. Helen Bradford, for example, has demonstrated that the omission of women from the examination of historical events may distort the very fabric of the South African reality.

40 Walker, Women and Gender, 318.
41 The promotion of a middle class, almost Victorian, domestic womanhood identity perhaps arguably helped to prevent early Afrikaner affiliation with the Labour movement.
that exist about immediate post-rebellion nationalist developments, concentrate on the rise of the Helpmekaar (help one another) movement to alleviate poverty, and the electoral gains of the National Party, but neither may be understood without tracing the ambitions and actions of women. Even gender sensitive scholars have not recognised the large civic space for women in civic unrest.

In discussing the Boer tradition, Walker observes: ‘The political culture that developed in the white settler societies of southern Africa was a thoroughly male one ... Settler society rested on a military foundation and war was the province of men.’ But war was not solely the province of men in the militarised republican state. The social historian, Meintjes notes that ‘At a time when European women had few rights and little say, the Boer woman had exceptional privileges which she had earned through fighting side by side with her menfolk.’ This is hyperbolic, as women usually adopted non-combative roles, but it was not necessarily a passive role. The hagiographer of the volksmoeder, Van Rensburg, for example, has drawn on the simplistic and teleological formula of past to present: ‘In truth, the Afrikaner woman is not, and has never been a political person’.

**WOMEN’S ROLES DURING THE REBELLION**

The primary physical role of women during the Rebellion was supportive and infrastructural. Just as in the South African War, women ‘kept the farms going’, while attempting to provide both physical and spiritual sustenance. Morale was kept high by symbolic acts, like the waving of hand-sewn vierkleurs (republican flags) at public gatherings and writing petitions against the war. Interestingly, explicit links were made and articulated by the women themselves between the rebels and previous Boer ‘martyrs’. Christina Joubert, of Frankfort, after having had her house searched by government troops, wrote to her husband:

> Now, my husband, don’t worry. The almighty God will protect me and my children. Whatever happens to you, yes, even if you die, like the five heroes of Slagtersnek, like Gideon Scheepers .... and all the martyrs who gave their lives for our beloved nation, then you will die like a man. I know you always fought and struggled like a man ... I will struggle even if I have to die, with my children.

45 Walker, *Women and Gender*, 317. She does qualify her statements with the suggestion that Boer women were not excluded from community affairs and played a strong role in holding society together; Van Rensburg, *Moeders*, 317.


47 Translated: ‘In wese is en was die Afrikanervrou nog nooit ‘n politieke mens nie.’: Van Rensburg, *Moeders*, 99.

48 Steyn, *MER*, 110.

49 Translated. Gideon Scheepers was shot during the South African War for wearing khaki (British uniform). Oost, *Skuldiges*, 318. Scheepers was executed by a British firing squad after being found guilty by a British military court of murder, arson and train-wrecking.
And it was not only immediate family but any rebel that received support. A rebel, Harm Oost, noted an oft-repeated phenomenon. After being separated from de Wet after a rebel – government clash at Mushroom Valley, he sought refuge in a local homestead at Doornfontein. He approached the woman who appeared to be in charge, saying with a defiance born of desperation: ‘I am a rebel. And you all?’ Martha Wolmarans replied simply: ‘We too.’ She was a woman who had lost a child in the concentration camps, and she would not tolerate ‘n kakie’ (a man wearing khaki uniform) in her house, be it Englishman or government soldier. In this incident, which anecdotal evidence suggests was not out of the ordinary, she looked after the rebel, although he was a stranger, with a strong emphasis on his being part of a collective (ethnic/republican) ‘family’.

Some women left their homes and joined the rebellion actively, though in a non-combative role. A Mrs van Alten, for example, was an interesting – if shadowy – figure during the Rebellion. She appears to have run a small-scale smuggling operation for the rebels, providing food and basic necessities. She helped one rebel escape to the relative safety of Natal, by supplying him with a train ticket and a pair of false spectacles. She also visited captured rebels in gaol, urging them to write down their thoughts. The support network of women extended into the post-Rebellion world. With their husbands in gaol, they smuggled food and medicine, cooked newspapers into cakes, and carried messages.

Eight years after the Rebellion, during the 1922 Strike on the Witwatersrand, women joined in the urban commando movement, assaulting the police and disciplining strike-breakers bodily. The Rebellion, however, saw few such incidents of physical violence by women. A ‘petticoat commando’ of rebellious women tried to disturb the peace in Bloemfontein, but a single fire engine hose was sufficient to dispel them. Government troops reported only one incident of a woman brandishing what they thought was a gun. Women did, however, initiate action that was not purely passive and supportive.

**THE WOMEN’S MASS DEMONSTRATION**

General de Wet was sentenced by the state to six years imprisonment and a fine of £2 000 for his role in the Rebellion. Two days after the pronouncement of sentence, two well-known Afrikaner women, Hendrina Joubert and F.G. ‘Nettie’ Eloff published an open letter in various newspapers calling for the women of all four provinces that made up the Union,
to take part in a ‘monster vrouwenbetoging’ [mass women’s demonstration] during which the governor-general would be asked to set aside de Wet’s sentence. The opening address was to the ‘fellow-sisters and daughters of South Africa’. In the letter the image of the volksmoeder is clearly articulated, with an iconical account that was doubtless intended to reflect the identity of a proto-volksmoeder: She is described as being ‘the first Afrikaner blood to flow on the breast of South Africa’. She purportedly ‘helped make bullets’ in the fight against the ‘barbarians’ (the black majority). She ‘knew the land when you could not leave your wagon without a gun’. She helped maintain ‘Boer manners’. She helped ‘exterminate the wild animals to help prepare the way for civilisation’. She was often ‘the only woman in the war lager’. More than once she was able to ‘give a soldier coffee and food, and care for his wounds’. She saw the 1881 war (the first liberation war against the British) through from ‘beginning to end’.

The ideology of the young nation was being formed by actions and models such as these. The Mass Women’s Demonstration of 1915 was an active, women-led demonstration against the state. It is hard to correlate it with the simple dichotomy of cheerleader or Other. The women who organised the demonstration were powerful, older women, who formed part of a leadership network that paralleled that of the men’s. Indeed age was explicitly mentioned in the first sentence of the open letter. The leaders of the demonstration were not average Boer women. It would be too bold to impute a regnant world view, predicated on their iconic position; theirs was not a demotic weltanschauung and they cannot be read as a sociologically representative slice of Afrikaner womenhood. Instead they represented the ‘first families of the land’. This leadership network was an old guard of Boer matriarchs, wives of generals for the most part. They did not have a clearly articulated network like that of their male counterparts in the commando system, but women had begun to organise in a number of ways. The previously mentioned A.C.V.V., for example, was established in 1904 for the ‘preservation of our nation, of our language and the support of our church.’ The Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie (South African Women’s Federation, S.A.V.F) was initiated a month later in 1904, by the wife of Louis Botha, president of the young Union of South Africa. The wife of South African War leader Steyn started the Oranje Vroue-Vereniging in Bloemfontein in 1908. The

55 ‘[m]ede-susters en dogters van Suid Afrika’, Die Spectator, Aug. 1915. Quotes included: ‘die eerste Afrikaner bloed op die bodem van Suid Afrika ... vloei’.
56 ‘The older of the two of us who write this letter will be 85 in a few months.’ Translated, Die Spectator, Aug. 1915.
organisations concentrated on welfare work, charity and education. Women, like their male counterparts, were local leaders by virtue of their class, kinship links, possession of land, age, wealth, and renown – the latter often based on the war record of their husband coupled with their own war effort during the South African conflict.

The leadership figures had biographies integral to republican struggles. Stern, bespectacled Hendrina Joubert, earned the sobriquet ‘the general in petticoats’. The biographer of her husband, General Piet Joubert, has noted that ‘the true spirit of a Commandant-General was not in Joubert but in his wife’, as Hendrina loved ‘fire-arms, the bustle of horses and soldiers, commando life and the odd battle’. Like her husband, Hendrina was a child of the Voortrekkers and ‘nobody was allowed to forget this’. She accompanied her husband and shared his war experiences, while rearing a family. At the age of 85 she was redoubtable, visiting rebel leaders in gaol, bearing pancakes. During the Rebellion she had wanted to travel by ambulance and join the rebel leader General Beyers; permission was refused by the state premier, Louis Botha, himself.

Similarly forceful, though more idiosyncratic, Johanna Brandt played a role, having recently had her part in the South African War serialised in the Brandwag. Brandt was an eccentric, a visionary, later in life she replaced conventional nationalism with millenarian feminism. In 1936 she wrote The Paraclete or Coming World Mother, an astonishing book for its time that recast the Holy Trinity as God the Father, God the Mother, God the Comforter. Another, more conventional, leader was Nettie Eloff, who was from a well-connected family and widely considered to be the former republic’s President Paul Kruger’s favourite grandchild.

Joubert and Eloff placed advertisements in the newspapers calling for the ‘mothers and daughters of South Africa’ to gather in Pretoria, to plead with the government for the release of General de Wet and his fellow prisoners. Almost 4 000 women arrived in Pretoria on 4 August, collecting in Church Square. They marched in rows of seven, silently, to the Union Buildings. Young men walked on the outskirts of the rows in case of violence. They marched, divided by their provinces, the Cape Province first, then the Orange Free State,
then Natal, and finally the Transvaal. They gathered in the amphitheatre of the Union Buildings, for a prayer. Then a deputation of Joubert, Eloff, Mrs Kestell, Mrs Steyn (of the Free State), Mrs Muller, Mrs Roos (of the Cape), Mrs Poen and Mrs Spies (of Natal), Mrs Armstrong, Mrs van Broekhuizen, Mrs GA Neetling (of the Transvaal) presented a petition to Lord Buxton, the governor-general. Buxton received them cordially and promised to hand the petition to the government.

In total 11 000 men took part in the Rebellion, but a proportionally astonishing 4 000 women gathered for this single march. Joubert noted proudly: ‘The daughters of South Africa have awakened’.67 Moreover, in the little towns and villages of the Transvaal and Free State, the demonstration was enacted in microcosm.68 The rhetoric implied that women should stand by their fatherland, just as they would by their father or husband69 The young nationalist mouthpiece Die Brandwag noted:

As a flood invades an area of land, slowly, confident that it is irresistible, so the crowd invaded the semi-circle in front of the Union Buildings and powerless, mute, the mockery and hate retreated and dared not utter a disruptive sound.70

The Nasionale Vrouwevereniging was created in Pretoria to stand by the rebel leaders and ease their lot, and in July 1915 the Vrouwen Nasionale Partij (Women’s National Party) was established in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, by Johanna Brandt. The Transvaal committees united in October 1915 to form the Nasionale Vroueparty (National Women’s Party) to work for freeing the rebels, caring for the families of the rebels, raising bursaries for children, and to support the newly created National Party, which focused more exclusively on Afrikaner political advancement. The first congress was held in 1916 in Johannesburg, with the wife of the rebel Van Broekhuizen as chairperson, and Johanna Brandt as secretary. (This functioned until 1931 when the women’s and men’s groups united.) The constitution of 1916 included: ‘the development of our national life following the best tradition of our ancestors to guard over the national education of our children and to influence the improvement of national laws’. It was international in perspective, drawing perhaps self-consciously on shared republicanism, even sending a telegram to USA’s President Woodrow Wilson, thanking him for his stand towards small nations.

In 1923, similar organisations were established in the Cape and Orange Free State, to raise political awareness. The National Party politician D.F. Malan noted grudgingly of these

69 Ibid.
70 Translated, Die Brandwag, 1 Sep. 1915.
efforts that there were areas, like education, health, housing and the poor white problem about which ‘a women knew as much as a man’.71 The Women’s Demonstration reflects the significant, albeit highly circumscribed, role of Afrikaner women in the political arena. Afrikaner nationalism was ‘imagined’, to use Anderson’s term, in terms of maleness: but this operated on two levels. ‘All nationalisms are gendered ...’ but as Enloe remarked, ‘nationalisms have typically sprung up from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope’.72 Here a burgeoning nationalism was articulated by women – admittedly only uneasily republican and certainly not egalitarian. Their positions were framed in the discourse of their role as women rather than citizens, but they were nonetheless acting in their own right. In a significant move for one category of Afrikaner Nationalist woman, she began to define her nation: ‘those who call themselves rebels are my people’.73 Significantly, nationalist icon D.F. Malan declared later that this demonstration answered the question as to whether the Afrikaner ‘should persevere and stay a nation’.74 Future research on the relationship between citizenship and Boer women, should perhaps examine the socio-familial context of her positioning as citizen: her rights as a mother, wife and daughter – relational to men rather than an individual right as citizen. A possible starting point could be an investigation of the journal Die Burgeres (The Female Citizen). Further examination could usefully focus on the women’s motivations and roles, in terms of their specific social circumstances, including demographic analyses of their age, marital status, class, and their relationships with rebels, particularly as the rebellion cut across classes.75

Twenty five years after the Rebellion, in the midst of the Second World War, the demonstration came to life again. Linking the Rebellion with the 22 June 1940 Protesoptog (protest march) to the Union Buildings, 7 000 women handed a petition to the premier Jan Smuts.76 This petition noted, in the name of ‘Afrikaans Mothers, Wives and Daughters’, against forced military service outside the Union, and an immediate and honourable peace with the countries with which the Union was at war. The pamphlet ended with a quote from the Afrikaner Nationalist poet Jan Celliers, from a poem written about the original Women’s Demonstration in 1915:

I see her wait, patient, without word.
I see her win, for husband and son and brother,
Because her name is Wife and Mother!!77

Over the quarter century that had passed the rhetoric had remained the same.

73 ‘die wat hulle rebelle noem, is my mense.’
74 ‘ ‘n volk moes bly’. Van Rensburg, Moeders van ons Volk, 115.
75 As done for the male rebels in Swart, ‘Desperate men’; and Swart, ‘Men of Influence’.
76 TAD, A 1528, My Herinneringe, Helena Catharina Grobler, 65–66.
77 Translated; a poem by Afrikaner Nationalist, Jan Celliers: ‘By die Vrouebetoging’.

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CONCLUSION

While there were no women who went on commando against the state, there were, however, women who considered themselves ‘rebels’. After the Rebellion, with the mass demonstration, they couched their actions in traditional, patriarchal, volksmoeder, suffering, martyred discourse – but their post-Rebellion actions were radical, albeit limited. The discourse of this Women’s Demonstration is highly revealing. It was a specific post-rebellion development, an event solely engineered by women, largely participated in by women alone and with ramifications for the entire nationalist movement of both Afrikaner men and women. The demonstration was pro-active, women-led, and appealed, with its militant nationalism, to higher, but not ‘softer’ values. In essence: they had come to free a man.

The rhetoric used enabled some women to mobilise their domestic experience into a powerful political statement, allowing them to extend their culturally-sanctioned role to incorporate new – albeit constrained – public responsibilities. This ‘vocabulary of motherhood’ functioned as both a socially redemptive and politically persuasive concept. ‘Motherhood’ was cast in a republican mould, but it was an awkward and ambivalent ‘republicanism’. No call was made for female suffrage and the women’s demands were couched in terms of their relative position to men – as wives, mothers and daughters of the state. Yet, inarguably, a large group of women played a significant role in the post-Rebellion Women’s Demonstration of 1915, which defies characterisation in the usual dichotomy, helping to define in a small part Afrikaner Nationalism in their own way. It signifies an often forgotten role of women in conflict, which is hard to contain in simple dyads of ‘cheerleader’ or ‘anti-war Other’. A burgeoning nationalism was articulated by women. It was only quasi-republican and their positions remained framed by their role as women rather than their position as citizens, but they were able to lend a physical dimension to their political agency, through the idioms of both femininity and republican freedom, simultaneously insisting on and performing citizenship. Thus in an important step for the Afrikaner Nationalist woman, she began to self-consciously help to define her nation.

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