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### 'Desperate Men': The 1914 Rebellion and the Politics of Poverty

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## **'Desperate Men': The 1914 Rebellion and the Politics of Poverty\***

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'Rebellion does not seem such a serious thing to desperate men ...' (Patrick Duncan)<sup>1</sup>

The year 1914 saw ordinary men go into rebellion against their government.<sup>2</sup> Twelve years after the end of the South African War, a handful of men in the rural backwaters of the south-western Transvaal and north-eastern Free State tried to overthrow the young South African state. The rebel leaders mobilised their followers with the rhetoric of Republican nostalgia, using the seductively refashioned images of the Republican struggle in the South African War to foster rebellion. Out of the almost 12 000 men who took part in the uprising, only 281 were prosecuted as leaders, the rest were considered rank and file. The leadership was composed of wealthy landowners, comfortable farmers, a few civil servants, a few builders and contractors. The bulk of the rebels, however, was made up of poor whites. Previous historiographical discussions of the Rebellion have tended to focus largely on the upper echelon and extrapolated a narrow view of rebel motivation from this source.<sup>3</sup> This article explores the motives of the rank and file for going into rebellion, particularly the 'desperate classes'. It traces the

\* My thanks to Catherine Burns and Robert Morrell of the University of Natal for advice and encouragement.

1. Central Archives Depot, Pretoria (hereafter CAD), Patrick Duncan Collection, S.63, D5.8.47, Patrick Duncan to Lady Selborne, 9 Dec. 1914, quoted in A. Grundlingh, 'Die Rebellie van 1914: 'n Historiografiese Verkenning', *Kleio*, 11, 1 & 2 (1979), 29.
2. The nomenclature of war is beset by political and ideological partisanship. The 1899-1902 war has been called Die Tweede Vryheids Oorlog (the Second Freedom War); Die Engelse Oorlog; the Boer War; the Anglo-Boer War and the 'South African War'. The term 'South African War', while good in not explicitly denying the war-time involvement of blacks and Indians, still has obvious problems. It is a term imposed from the metropole. To the British it was 'the war in South Africa'; to the indigenous populations it was simply 'The War', and its names were legion.
3. The exception is J. Bottomley, *Public Policy and White Rural Poverty in South Africa, 1881-1924* (Kingston, 1991). Tim Keegan also notes how Poor Whitism contributed to the state but never made the identity of rebels clear or examined whether or not it was a spontaneous or directed uprising: T. Keegan, 'The Restructuring of Agrarian Class Relations in a Colonial Economy: The Orange River Colony, 1902-1910', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5, 2 (1979).

economic crisis of the years prior to 1914 that led to the creation of a class of poor whites, and their increasing loss of faith in the state's efforts towards amelioration. The discussion delineates the way in which the economic crisis impacted on their identity as fathers, as patriarchs, as farmers, as men and what they hoped to regain by this rebellion.

From the very beginning, the Rebellion has been explained by recourse to economic motivations. On the eve of the Rebellion, the government feared a possible uprising. The fears of this dangerous underclass may be seen, for example, in the tenets of the 1913 Land Act, which attempted to placate the platteland.<sup>4</sup> There were recurrent 'moral panics', concerning the poor white, the 'supposed degeneration of the [white] race' and the perceived dangers of a 'lumpen-proletariat army of white indigents'.<sup>5</sup> Especially when poor whites started forging an alliance with the Labour Party, the government feared the widespread adoption of the Creswellite vision.<sup>6</sup> W.H. Andrews, Labour member, outlined the economic basis of the Rebellion: he had heard of men

being dispossessed of land which they and their fathers before them had had for years. They had been sought out by the banks and moneylenders of this country, and their lands had been taken away from them ... if they traced the underlying causes, they would find economic causes [as well as others].<sup>7</sup>

The contemporary economic analysis, however, has been subsequently obscured, from two directions: first, by the Botha-Smuts government which, anxious to avoid alienating the poor whites further and to deflect the focus from the economics behind the incident, changed the accent to the leadership and the republican cause, and secondly, by the predominant Afrikaner Nationalist and subsequent liberal school, which saw the incident solely in terms of Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>8</sup> The poor whites' role in the Rebellion has received only cursory attention. Rodney Davenport noted it literally in a footnote.<sup>9</sup> This curious anomaly has received notice by a non-guild historian,

4. P.L. Wickens has pointed out the *portmanteau* nature of the Land Act, that it was a mixture of different ideas: P.L. Wickens, 'The Natives Land Act of 1913: A Cautionary Essay on Simple Explanations of Complex Change', *South African Journal of Economics*, 49, 2 (1981).
5. This is examined in S. Swart, 'The Rebels of 1914: Masculinity, Republicanism and the Social Forces that Shaped the Boer Rebellion' (MA thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 1997), esp. ch. 6, 'Black Peril, White Rebel: The Rebellion and the Platteland Peril'; see also T. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrialising South Africa: The Southern Highveld to 1914* (Braamfontein, 1986), 182.
6. Creswell was the leader of the Labour Party who espoused radical measures to reform the white unemployment problem.
7. Hansard (1915), col. 50.
8. See Swart, 'The Rebels of 1914', ch. 1, 'Regarding the Rebellion'.
9. T.R.H. Davenport, 'The South African Rebellion', *English Historical Review*, 78 (1963), fn. 2.

Johannes Meintjies.<sup>10</sup> Over time an entire class has been excluded from the historiography of the Rebellion, because Afrikaner nationalist historiography conflated the motives of rebellion with the results: emphasising the idealistic rather than the desperate side. In this paradigm, the poor white contingent and their motives simply lowers the tone of the revolution.

The economic interpretation can be taken to extremes, however. Bottomley and Keegan, for example, have relied solely on economic reasons as causative.<sup>11</sup> This raises certain questions. If only economic motives underpinned the Rebellion, why, for example, did the wealthy class making up the leadership rebel? Perhaps, the answer lies in seeing how economics impacted on social identity. Economics must be married to its social ramifications to find out what was in the hearts and minds, not just the pockets, of the rebels. Simple economic determinism – liberal or Marxist – does not explain the reality of what took place, the irrationality of hopes, complicated identities and dreams – the meeting up of bread-and-butter issues and rusk-and-biltong concerns. As Georg Hegel noted: ‘Poverty in itself does not make men into a rabble; a rabble is created only when there is joined to poverty a disposition of mind, an inner indignation against the rich, against society, against the government.’<sup>12</sup>

One must also be aware of the dangers of imputing a shared class consciousness on the ‘poor white’.<sup>13</sup> It was really only from the 1920s that the Afrikaner nationalist politicians, recognising the power of the poor white as a voting bloc, began to stimulate the idea of this common cause among those so categorised.<sup>14</sup> The historiography of the poor white reflects the changing views of the connection between poverty and class and race.<sup>15</sup> The agency of the poor white has been questioned: to what extent could the *bywoner* act independently?<sup>16</sup> Poor whites rarely spoke for themselves and there were high levels of illiteracy.<sup>17</sup> Certainly populist leaders manipulated the mob. Rebel leaders

10. ‘It is not usually mentioned that a large number of the poor white element was drawn into the Rebellion, the misfits, the rolling stones, the defeated – as well as the idealists and conscientious objectors’: J. Meintjies, *President Steyn: A Biography* (Cape Town, 1969), 248.
11. These are, however, penetrating and thorough analyses.
12. G. Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, “The State”, Add. 149, (1821) 1942.
13. Robert Morrell has shown that the term ‘poor white’ is elusive through the varieties of poor white experience: R. Morrell, *White But Poor* (Pretoria, 1991).
14. C. Saunders, ‘Putting the History of White Poverty in South Africa on the Agenda’, *South African Historical Journal*, 28 (1993).
15. S. van der Horst, *Native Labour in South Africa* (London, 1939); C.W. de Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa: Social and Economic* (Oxford, 1941); G.V. Doxey, *The Industrial Colour Bar in South Africa* (London, 1961); C.M. Tatz, *Shadow and Substance: A Study in Land and Franchise Policies Affecting Africans, 1910-1960* (Pietermaritzburg, 1962); R. Horwitz, *The Political Economy of South Africa* (London, 1967). See also R. Davies, D. Kaplan, M. Morris and D. O’Meara, ‘Class Struggle and the Periodisation of the State’, *RAPE*, 7 (1976).
16. Keegan, for example, although noting the poor white predicament in *Rural Transformations*, did not make the connection between their identity and a motive for rebellion.
17. See *The Friend*, 2 Apr. 1921.

spurred on the crowd by references to the twin threats of big capital and black competition.<sup>18</sup> Poor whites were not, however, necessarily the pawns of the dominant classes, and were capable of initiating social transformation in their own right.<sup>19</sup>

There are several precedents to this rebellion by poor whites. In 1865 J.G. Fourie of Pretoria wrote to the president asking him to delay sending out a commando because there was a great deal of poverty and thus dissatisfaction with the government and he feared his men would balk at the state's command.<sup>20</sup> In 1876, during the Sekhukhuni war, commandos lost confidence in President Burghers and simply refused to fight. In 1895, the *veldkornet* of Potgietersrust sent a telegram to the government telling it that his men were poor and refused to go on commando unless their families received support in their absence.<sup>21</sup> These incidents were at odds with popular ideology about commando life as being 'in the blood of every Boer male'.<sup>22</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, owning land became important for the first time in the process of class formation in Boer society. Once a neutral term, after the mineral revolution 'bywoner' became a perjorative label. By the last decade of the nineteenth century class differentiation was becoming increasingly rigid and the 'poor white' problem became an important issue for the first time. The construction of railways meant the end of transport-riding and drought, disease, war and the growing reluctance of the capitalising landholding class began to restrict *bywoners'* access to the land.<sup>23</sup> Despite its repeal in 1901, the Roman Dutch law of division among heirs was widely implemented.<sup>24</sup> Land was also often divided and sold to raise ready cash. But these smaller units proved impractical for marginal farmers who still employed traditional methods. Labour was hard to come by too, drawn by the wages the larger farmers and land companies could offer. With landownership tenuous, men often turned to sharecropping – but white bywoners were increasingly being displaced by black labourers.<sup>25</sup> Fears of proletarianisation and forced migration to wage labour in urban

18. See Swart, 'The Rebels of 1914', ch. 6, for a closer look at this rhetoric and its ramifications.

19. Trapido, 'Reflections on Land, Office and Wealth in the South African Republic, 1850-1900', in S. Marks and A. Atmore, eds, *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1987), 359.

20. Bottomley, *Public Policy*, 92.

21. Transvaal Archives Depot (hereafter TAD), KG 119, File CR 2404/1895.

22. A contradiction explored in S. Swart, "'A Boer and his Gun and his Wife are Three Things Always Together": Republican Masculinity and the 1914 Rebellion', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 4 (Dec. 1998).

23. *Bywoners* could earn more money than their absentee landlords. It was only following the mineral revolutions and the increased need for arable produce that regular rent in the form of a share of the *bywoner's* crop and possibly his labour and that of his family: Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 21. There is a distinction to be made between *bewoners* and *bywoners*: the former were usually relatives of the landowner: Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 227.

24. This process was lent impetus by the war deaths of landowners: J.F.W. Grosskopf, *Rural Impoverishment and Rural Exodus*, Report of the Carnegie Commission, vol. 1 (Stellenbosch, 1932).

25. See Swart, 'The Rebels of 1914', ch. 6, for a discussion of this development and its psychological and economic effects.

areas, coincided amongst marginal landowners and the landless.<sup>26</sup> Ubiquitous fear, increasingly coupled with growing resentment at the government's failure to ameliorate the conditions, played an important part in rebellion.<sup>27</sup>

The epicentre of Rebellion was in the northern Free State and south western Transvaal. The geography of Rebellion was largely a result of the economic situation. The historian needs to find the answer as to why the Rebellion was limited to only a few northern Free State districts and to fewer western Transvaal districts and to Kenhardt in the north-western Cape.<sup>28</sup> There is no one single answer to this, but one of the most powerful factors may be found in the economic situation and its ramifications. Perhaps the explanation lies in the regionally uneven process of rural transformation. The Free State was divided into three regions: separated by differing rainfalls and soil fertility and therefore offering very disparate agricultural opportunities. The first was the pastoral southern Free State (Bethulie; Boshoff; most of the Bloemfontein district; Edenburg; Fauresmith; Jacobsdal; Philippolis); the second region was that area in the East, along the Caledon River, the so-called 'Conquered territory' (Ficksburg; Ladybrand; Rouxville; Smithfield; Wepener; Thaba 'Nchu).<sup>29</sup> In contrast, the third region, the northern Free State, was a primarily arable region and includes such districts as Bethlehem, the other parts of the Bloemfontein district, Frankfort; Harrismith; Heilbron; Hoopstad; Kroonstad; Lindley; Senekal; Vrede; Vredefort and Winburg.

The northern Free State saw the capitalisation of agriculture occur only after the South African War. This area lagged behind the developing areas around it. The area had to compete with cheaper produce from Basutoland, which it found difficult with its poorly developed transportation infrastructure. The capitalisation of agriculture compelled both marginal farmers – vulnerable to price fluctuations and heavily dependent on credit – and *bywoners* – who had lived on the pre-capitalisation estates of large farmers – to move to peripheral areas. The stream of dispossessed farmers drifted into stagnant little pools of resentment in the arid northern regions. Kenhardt, in

26. See S. Trapido, 'Landlord and Tenant in a Colonial Economy: The Transvaal 1880-1910', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5, 1 (1978) and Keegan, 'The Restructuring of Agrarian Class Relations in a Colonial Economy: The Orange River Colony, 1902-1910', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 5, 2 (1979).
27. Morrell, *White But Poor*, 33.
28. Hertzog noted that rebellion was limited to 'those six or seven districts in the north [of the Free State]', *Select Committee on the Rebellion*, SC 1-1915, 247. Bottomley has explained this phenomenon in economic terms in a thorough analysis, that nevertheless concentrates on economics to the neglect of other factors, like the same distribution for republican *bittereinder* positions at the end of the South African War, highlighted in ch. 3 of my thesis, 'Republican Masculinity and the Modernising State'. This chapter draws heavily on Bottomley's analysis. The traditional view was recently reiterated in S.B. Spies, 'Unity and Disunity, 1910-1924', in T. Cameron and S.B. Spies, eds, *An Illustrated History of South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1986), 236-7. Spies does not attempt to explain why the rebellion in the Free State was a northern phenomenon, although stating that it was so.
29. C.C. Eloff, *Oos-Vrystaatse Grensgordel: 'n Streekshistoriese Voorstudie en Bronneverkenning* (Pretoria, 1981).

the north-western Cape, for example, increased in population by 78 per cent and the population of the south-western Transvaal, including the rebel hotspots of Lichtenburg and Wolmaransstad, increased by 40 per cent.<sup>30</sup>

The most pronounced disparity was that the eastern Free State, with its the fertile grainlands, allowed some to accumulate capital, while others were quickly dispossessed. Here land was the most expensive, which meant that farms were smaller and more closely settled than elsewhere in the Free State. The Dutch socialist, J. Visscher, later editor of *The Friend*, described the process of class formation in this region in *De Ondergang van Een Wereld* (1903). He noted the emergence a generation before the South African War, of a class of wealthy farmers – the *heerenboeren* or gentlemen farmers. According to Visscher, the agricultural fecundity of the east led to a class distinguished from other Free Staters: a group with an overseas education, who often adopted the English language as their own.<sup>31</sup> But pastoral farming required capital – which favoured the larger farmer over the little man.<sup>32</sup> After the war, there was an exodus from the southern Free State.<sup>33</sup> *Bywoners* and marginal farmers were forced into the barren, outlying regions where land was cheaper. These thirsty, marginalised areas were to become hotbeds of dissent – people alienated and desperate enough to risk what little they had left in rebellion. Between 1904 and 1911, for example, the population of the south-western Transvaal, including areas like Lichtenburg and Wolmaransstad, increased by 40 per cent.<sup>34</sup> The postmaster of the Lichtenburg district noted:

About that time a number of Free Staters trekked into the Lichtenburg district, and greatly influenced political opinion there. That was in 1914. Ground was then being sold at unprecedented high prices [in the Free State] ... and they were selling out and buying twice as much land with the money in Lichtenburg as they had in the Free State. They also brought their Free State ideas with them of course ... I think the influx of Free Staters brought the people over to the rebels' side. Of course, every Free Stater brought into the district was against the Botha government.<sup>35</sup>

One reason why rebellion did not erupt on a significant scale in the south and east, was because the economic changes had been gradually taking place for fifty years before the war. In the north the changes were rapid – and concomitantly more overt and terrifying. The north had faced competition from Basutoland producers and white farmers in the

30. Grosskopf, *Rural Impoverishment*, 66, quoted in Bottomley, *Public Policy*, 301.

31. This phenomenon has been hushed up both by Afrikaans writings which insist on the egalitarian nature of their society and English writers who saw boers as a homogeneous *bloc*.

32. Only the larger, wealthy farmer had the resources with which to expand to the Witwatersrand and Kimberley markets.

33. Between 1911 and 1921 each of the southern districts recorded a decrease of more than 10 per cent of their white population: Grosskopf, *Rural Impoverishment*, 65-7.

34. Grosskopf, *Rural Impoverishment*, 66.

35. Union Government Report, UG 42-1916, p. 201, cited in Morrell, *White But Poor*, 36.

Conquered Territories, and poor roads – limiting the market opportunities afforded by the diamond fields. This meant an almost inert socio-economic situation: a society without either *heemraden* or proletariat. Most people were simply *bywoners*.<sup>36</sup> Post-war, however, the process of rural transformation in the north accelerated: the nearby Witwatersrand market caused land values to rise and the region began to be capitalised. This in turn led to the crystallisation of classes and to increasing dispossession. A.M. Baumann, a law agent in Winburg, noted that very few of the larger landowners joined the rebellion and the rebels were people in debt and youngsters, ‘but not people of substance and standing’.<sup>37</sup> A.J. Brand, magistrate of Lindley, remarked: ‘the class of people who joined the rebels did not bother much about politics they [concentrated] on the "loot": that was their object. They were not people of standing or responsibility.’<sup>38</sup>

The magistrate of Winburg, Raymond Hartley, told the Judicial Commission on the rebellion that:

Conroy [a rebel leader] had been canvassing very acutely for recruits in the northern part of the district ... most of his recruits were gentlemen whom he found it necessary to equip with new clothes and boots. At that time he had half a dozen men with him who could be called wealthy and influential, but the great majority of his followers were of the bywoner class.<sup>39</sup>

The forces of nature itself drove the poor white to desperation.<sup>40</sup> Poor White farmers and *bywoners*, already forced into arid regions, now faced an almost biblical succession of plagues. Locust, stock disease – anthrax, *gallamziekte*, *lamziekte* and *sponsziekte*. People began to make anxious comparisons with the devastating 1896 rinderpest epidemic. In 1910, a five-year drought set in. With the drought and the plagues, farmers were unable to make their debt repayments. The 1913/14 labour agitation and fear of war in Europe caused the economy to decline, causing the money market to call in unserviced bonds. People began to call vainly for a moratorium on debt. Labourers were beginning to work for 2s 6d a day, where previously a *bywoner* would have laughed scornfully at less than 5s a day.<sup>41</sup> A winter of discontent found no relief in the spring, as the drought worsened and crops withered. Impoverished rural

36. They were also perhaps more committed to Republican notions, with far fewer ‘protected burghers’ during the war. Vredefort, for example, had the smallest number in the Republic, only 9 per cent: Morrell, *White But Poor*, 37.

37. UG 42-1916, p. 313.

38. UG 42-1916, p. 298.

39. UG 42-1916, p. 127.

40. An ecological approach was advocated by Leipoldt in 1937: ‘For no historian of the Transvaal can afford to neglect the influence of disease and climate upon the men who played a conspicuous part in shaping that history’: C.L. Leipoldt, *Bushveld Doctor, 1880-1947* (Braamfontein, 1987), 103.

41. *Land and Agricultural Bank Report*, UG 20-1915, 1914, p. 177, cited in Morrell, *White But Poor*, 39.



areas suffered malnutrition and disease.<sup>42</sup> Malaria and bilharzia caused debilitating tiredness, impaired kidney functioning – sufferers had an anaemic look. The children of poor families were pallid and listless. Disease became seen as inevitable, something ‘boys were bound to get’.<sup>43</sup> Leipoldt recorded a case that was not rare, of a father compelled to send his son to school with only a cup of coffee and a twist of tobacco to still his hunger.<sup>44</sup>

## Visions of Hope

Messianic visions that come to people in times of desperation permeated the rebel rhetoric.<sup>45</sup> There was a strong messianic flavour to the rank and file involvement in the Rebellion. It was a time of signs and wonders: both black and white had reported aircraft overhead in the far western Transvaal, notably in the Taung and Vryburg districts.<sup>46</sup> The ‘Siener of Lichtenburg’, Nicholas van Rensburg, achieved fame as the prophet of the Rebellion.<sup>47</sup> Van Rensburg was a poor man, a farmer who sometimes produced two mealie bags in a bad year. Fifty-one at the outbreak of the Rebellion, he had the look of an Old Testament prophet: old, with a wild greying beard.<sup>48</sup> Although the Siener’s influence has been overestimated, particularly in newspaper reports, and what influence he did have was restricted to the south-western Transvaal, rebel demagogues were able to incorporate millennial discourse with republicanism and sheer

42. Leipoldt, a medical doctor who toured impoverished bushveld schools in 1914, is a remarkable source on social and medical problems of the area at that exact time. Leipoldt found a similar thing when he presented his findings. He was accused of political bias: ‘As if one needed to be a Botha-man or a Nationalist ... to detect malnutrition so glaringly apparent, feeble-mindedness so obvious, and physical deterioration so evident!’ Leipoldt, *Bushveld Doctor*, 14.

43. *Ibid.*, 94.

44. *Ibid.*, 39.

45. The advent of the First World War accelerated several nationalisms, particularly in southern Africa. In Nyasaland, for example, a Baptist minister led a rebellion. The ‘rising’ was a short-lived attempt by John Chilembwe to publicise black feelings – it later became a focal point of nationalism in central Africa. See E. Katzenellenbogen, ‘Southern Africa and the War of 1914-18’, in M.R.D. Foot, ed., *War and Society* (London, 1973).

46. See Union of South Africa, *Annual Report of the Department of Justice* (Pretoria, 1914), UG 28 - 1915, p. 9.

47. The Siener had a powerful record of inspired guesses. It was maintained that he had foretold the capture of Methuen during the South African War, and foreseen the coming of the First World War. He believed strongly in a return to Republican rule, and his visions were interpreted as such a prophecy. The history and historiography of the Siener is a study in itself. Snyman attempts to give Van Rensburg a new relevancy, but errs on the side of exaggeration: A. Snyman, *Siener van Rensburg: Boodskapper van God* (Mossel Bay, 1995). Grundlingh offers a medical explanation, epilepsy, and possible psychological factors for his condition and places his visions in their socio-economic milieu: A. Grundlingh, ‘Probing the Prophet: The Psychology and Politics of the Siener van Rensburg Phenomenon’, *South African Historical Journal*, 34 (1996).

48. Snyman, *Siener*, 101.

anti-government muttering.<sup>49</sup> It is hard to establish just how much influence the Siener really had. His influence over De la Rey and De Wet was likened to Rasputin's influence over Tsarina Alexandra.<sup>50</sup> The Siener's visions were invested with the twin virtues of bulk and ambiguity. He never attempted to interpret them himself. They were couched in familiar metaphors of rural symbolism: farm implements and animals, boer clothing and everyday rituals, with an overwhelmingly biblical *leitmotif*. This last may have served as theological justification for the Rebellion. The rebels perceived their struggle in terms of Moses and the Israelites in Canaan. This proved useful because it served as a mobilising device for the more religious, and as a theological justification. When challenged by religious leaders from Stellenbosch, on the basis of Romans 13: 'Laat elke mens hom onderwerp aan die magte wat oor hom gestel is, want daar is geen mag behalwe van God nie, en die wat daar is, is deur God ingestel.'<sup>51</sup> Siener replied simply, 'En wie het [Jesus] doodgemaak? Die *owerhede*.'<sup>52</sup>

### Government Inaction

It was the growing lack of faith in State relief efforts that proved for many the final inducement toward rebellion. Increasing alienation helped link poverty with Hegel's rebellious 'disposition of mind'. Contemporary reports of the Rebellion often questioned the irony that the rebels would go into rebellion not against the colonial government but after union, against a 'government of their own choosing'.<sup>53</sup> The answer is of course that neither the state nor its actions was of their choosing – a fact they came increasingly to belabour.

From 1907 to 1914, there was a struggle over how to treat poor whites. The Smuts-Botha government followed an unsteady path of moderation, between conflicting

49. Albert Grundlingh, personal communication.

50. Snyman, *Siener*, 106. U.G. Report on the outbreak of the Rebellion. 'Hy skyn 'n onbegrensde invloed onder die boere in die distrik te hê'. Rapport van Rechterlike Kommissie van Onderzoek, testimony of A.P. Visser, pp. 184-5. Magistrate Juta, of Lichtenburg, found his influence especially powerful among the ill-educated sector. UG 42-16, Juta, pp. 118-19. It is worth noting that the State clearly feared his influence. Van Rensburg was sentenced to 18 months and £50 – although no witness could be found to testify whether he carried a gun. Clearly, the government feared his influence following the Rebellion, as Smuts placed him under farm arrest. Snyman records that for the following eight years, Van Rensburg could not even attend a church service without permission from a magistrate: Snyman, *Siener*, 102.

51. 'Everyone must obey the State, because no government can exist without God's permission, and the existing authorities have been put there by God.'

52. 'And who killed Jesus? The *government*.'

53. '[T]housands of Dutch South Africans living under constitutions of their own making were prepared to take up arms against a government composed almost exclusively of men of their own blood, leaders of their own party, placed in power by their own people.' Dube all but paraphrases the Government Blue Book report on the Rebellion, Fouche's report: Blue *Izwe la Kiti*, 10 Mar. 1915 (Letter from 'Anti-Rebellion'). See Hansard (1915), col. 41. Book, Dube.

cries for more or less intervention.<sup>54</sup> The influential 1908 Transvaal Indigency Commission, largely dominated by ex-Milnerite personnel, was opposed to government intervention on behalf of poor whites.<sup>55</sup> It emphasised the 'wise principle' of the English Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which argued that 'care should be taken that the condition of the necessitous person is not made more desirable than that of the poor labourer existing on the fruits of his own efforts'. *Het Volk* accepted these conclusions, preferring them to more radical alternatives, like the Creswellite reform programme, which include job fixing. Compelled to walk an uneasy road between two extremes, the government did not take decisive action on the poor white issue. After 1910, the Botha-Smuts government appear to have been 'disturbed, mystified and ultimately frightened' by the extremist rhetoric, and with regard to state intervention in the poor white problem followed a path which supporters saw as moderate and detractors saw as simply ineffectual.<sup>56</sup>

There was conflict between champions of rural capitalism and those favouring social reclamation, which came to crisis point in March 1914. The MP for Pretoria South urged that relief be provided along the lines of the old South African Republic government, and emphasised that dispossessed farmers should be replaced on the land. Hertzog supported the idea of the return to the land, through government grants of cash and cattle. J.W. Jagger, however, put forward the antithetical view, condemning efforts to return burghers to the land. Arguing from a position of free trade advocacy, he contended that the process actually served to further impoverish these people. In this, he was supported by the MP for Potchefstroom, J.J. Hartley, who maintained that the evil of poor whiteism was exacerbated by the fact that the white man looks 'to the government for assistance'.<sup>57</sup> It was this line of thinking that was to take the majority vote. Repeated appeals were made to the government, asking that loans be made available to the farming community and even calling for a debt moratorium until after the World War. It is significant that J.C. Juta, the magistrate of Lichtenburg – prime rebel country – appealed to the government for a postponement for payment of debts. 'People who are in debt and cannot pay become quite desperate when sued and this creates a great deal of dissatisfaction.'<sup>58</sup>

From 1907, poor whites were employed on the railways, and it became policy after Union to employ poor whites.<sup>59</sup> The post-war Relief Works Department was established to provide employment for indigent burghers and to establish irrigation

54. Bottomley has completed a very thorough analysis of state policy towards poor whites: Bottomley, *Public Policy and White Rural Poverty*, 256.

55. *Ibid.*, 266. Some steps were taken, however, like the introduction of free, compulsory schooling for all white children in 1907.

56. A. Jeeves, *Migrant Labour in South Africa's Mining Economy* (Johannesburg, 1985), 72.

57. *Debates of the House of Assembly*, 31 Mar. 1914, col. 1668.

58. Quoted in Bottomley, *Public Policy and White Rural Poverty*, 305.

59. UG 14-1926, *Economic and Wage Commission*, 1925.

projects. There was widespread feeling against entering such relief projects because it meant sacrificing all rights to the land.<sup>60</sup> A large number of the people in rebel areas were dependent on poor relief schemes.<sup>61</sup> Kopjes, the scene of much rebel activity, was also the scene of a poor white agricultural settlement established in 1912.<sup>62</sup> When in 1912 the Land Bank Act deleted all provisions for loans to non-landowners it proved a major blow to poor white hopes.<sup>63</sup> Farming was more than merely a livelihood. A Boer's identity was wrapped up in the concept.<sup>64</sup> The very semantic meaning of his label was 'farmer'. Leipoldt, who toured the platteland extensively at the time, observed what remains of the traditional conception of farming, a conception that modern civilization is rapidly blotting out. It is there for man's fundamental work, to gain from the soil a livelihood for himself and his family.<sup>65</sup>

The capitalization and commercialization of farming affected more than the livelihood of the *bywoner* – his sense of identity was challenged. Even those men who had not owned land before felt their identities under threat. There was originally no shame in being a *bywoner*. He and his family were welcomed by landowners for a share in their crops, for their service on commando, for the status they lent him. Although the complete egalitarianism of Boer society was a myth, there had been a rhetoric of equality, the form of republican *gelykheid* between white adult men, purportedly unaffected by class.<sup>66</sup> It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that landlessness became a decisive determining factor in the process of class differentiation.<sup>67</sup> Following the economic changes, however, the status of the *bywoner* declined, not because of the land shortage, but because of the commercialization of farming – he changed from status symbol to albatross around the neck of capitalizing farmer.<sup>68</sup> Rev. J.D. Kestell noted to the 1938 Peoples Economic Congress how the position of *bywoners* had changed over time:

Our forefathers had time for *bywoners*. The children learnt to respect the *bywoner*. He ate at the same table as the landowner and he could feel that blood crawls where it cannot run. After the

60. Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 28.

61. Cape Archives Depot, Department of Lands, LDE 321/3650, 'List of Applications for Indigent People', Lichtenburg, 1909.

62. R.W. Willcocks, *The Poor White*, Report of the Carnegie Commission, vol. 2 (1932), 107.

63. Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 35.

64. An illustrative parallel may be made with late nineteenth-century England, when the industrialization of traditional work-shop trades not only made earnings precarious, it also destroyed the father's ability to endow his son with a craft or a job and was resented because of it: see E. Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918* (New York, 1993).

65. Leipoldt, *Bushveld Doctor*, 17.

66. *Volkseenheid* was a teleological imposition, born out of the need for political unity at specific times. Quite the opposite of this mystical unity existed: the group was historically prone to factionalism, divided on lines of class, region, province, ideology, and personal ambition.

67. Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 20.

68. Trapido, 'Reflections on Land, Office and Wealth', 359.

[South African War] a new spirit was abroad, a spirit of each for himself ... Then we had no more time for *bywoners*.<sup>69</sup>

After Union, the little man felt increasingly aggrieved by the State's actions. There were initiatives to revive work as transport-riders or self-employed work on the salt-pans and diamond diggings. Poor whites often had to capitulate, at a cost to their traditional lifestyle. Urbanisation was a part of the poor white's new life: in 1899, 2.6 per cent of people who could crudely be classified as Afrikaners lived in urban areas; by 1911, the figure had reached 24 per cent.<sup>70</sup> The trek to the cities was a journey to the mines, railways, and factories where they saw themselves working at unfamiliar jobs, taking orders like black people, living in squalid conditions adjacent to black shanty towns, and having to speak a foreign language – English – like a conquered race. Poverty was to have an enormous influence on the outlook and political ambitions of the rural Afrikaner.<sup>71</sup> The stigma of poverty was attached to the Afrikaans family with English social discourse portraying the Afrikaner male as the backward railway worker, the crude policeman and illiterate station-master.<sup>72</sup> State relief measures only served to compound these stereotypes and visit further shame and resentment upon those facing such a fate. To replace this, Afrikaners had to build a new identity, a new image of themselves. Poverty meant more than merely a low self-esteem. Poverty became part of the political discourse and a powerful mobilising factor, for both National Party and for Rebellion. The notion of the *achteruitgang* [regression] of the Afrikaner relative to English-speakers and blacks was variously a grim prophecy, a political weapon, a social evil and a routine method of drawing an angry crowd in any rural constituency.

Poor white men tried to resist efforts to change their life-style and that of their families. The imperialist overgroup wished to see a proletarian work ethic instilled in the poor white. It was repeatedly bemoaned that *bywoners* were not prepared to do 'Kaffir work': the depressed class were still reluctant to let their daughters enter domestic labour and their sons to take up agricultural labour.<sup>73</sup> The rebel male was faced with the loss of his identity through the undermining of his status of patriarch. This had resulted from his removal from the land, being forced to become an urban labourer or becoming a marginalised and scorned *bywoner* obsolete in capitalist farming, his inability to set his sons up with a farm of their own, and the apparent lack of expected aid from the state. The power of the ideology of the family has been demonstrated, for

69. Quoted in Trapido, 'Reflections on Land, Office and Wealth', 359.

70. Bottomley, *Public Policy and White Rural Poverty*, 248.

71. Bottomley makes this point well in his analysis of public policy: *ibid.*, 250.

72. *Ibid.*, 250; L. Salomon, 'Socio-Economic Aspects of South African History, 1870-1962' (PhD thesis, Boston University, 1962), 107. The stereotypes persist today in jokes about ignorant, naive 'Van der Merwe'.

73. The Orange River Colony Minister of Public Works told the legislature in 1908: 'There is unfortunately a foolish pride to be met with which prevents parents from allowing their children to work'. See Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 32.

example, in work on slavery – it has been shown that slaves were incorporated as ‘the most junior members of the patriarchal family’.<sup>74</sup> Much has been written on two things to do with paternalism and patriarchy – firstly, in connection with eighteenth and nineteenth-century Cape Colony and, secondly, with white farmers and their black slaves or workers. Little has been said about late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century relations, especially with the connection between white farmers and *white* workers, *bywoners*, and smaller farmers.<sup>75</sup> The urbanisation process undermined the cultural mores, particularly undermining the sense of rural family life on both symbolic and practical levels. One commentator noted poignantly: “Oom” en “tante” moet plek maak vir “Meneer” en “Mevrou” as dit nie “mister” en “missis” is nie.<sup>76</sup> Although often the male head of the family would move to centres like the Rand in search of work, it was frequently the unmarried female members of the family who moved first to the urban areas, further undermining the poor white father as bread winner.<sup>77</sup>

Probably many who took part in the government schemes and trek to the city planted their ‘sole hopes for the future in the possibility of returning to the past ...’.<sup>78</sup> This nostalgic *ubi sunt* motif was a powerful element of populist rhetoric.<sup>79</sup> Many poor whites increasingly believed that a return to the Republican lifestyle could be achieved if smaller farmers and poor whites were re-instated on the land. It was believed that this should be accompanied by traditional means of relief: doles of cash and animals.<sup>80</sup>

74. R. Shell, ‘The Family and Slavery at the Cape, 1680-1808’, in W.G. James and M. Simons, eds, *The Angry Divide: Social and Economic History of the Western Cape* (Cape Town, 1989), 29. Patriarchal refers to a family structure in which fathers control the lives and labour of family members, children, slaves, servants, and wives: J.E. Mason, ‘The Slaves and their Protectors: Reforming Resistance in a Slave-Society, the Cape Colony, 1826-1834’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 19, 1 (1991). Robert Ross has shown with an etymological analysis that the terms ‘paternalism’ and ‘patriarchy’ both derive from Latin and Greek words for ‘father’, and are loaded with assumptions inherent to the terms: R. Ross, ‘Paternalism, Patriarchy and Afrikaans’, *South African Historical Journal*, 32 (1995).
75. See, for example, Shell, ‘The Family and Slavery at the Cape’ and C. Crais, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance in Pre-Industrial South Africa: The Making of the Colonial Order in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865* (Cambridge, 1992).
76. G. Cronje, ‘Die Huisgesin in die Afrikaanse Kultuurgemeenskap’, in C.H. van der Heever, *Kultuurgeskiedenis van die Afrikaner* (Cape Town, 1945), 273.
77. This reverse of the usual pattern of black migrant labour may be explained by the sexual division of labour. Control over black women’s labour within black societies by the bridewealth system meant male migrant labour could occur without the household collapsing and rural production carrying on much as before. The Boer traditional household was less flexible in the face of industrialisation. Female heads of families seldom stayed on in the rural areas. Young women would move to the towns on a permanent basis and send back a little money to their families: see Grosskopf, *Rural Impoverishment*, 214-29.
78. Salomon, ‘Socio-Economic Aspects’, 116, quoted in Bottomley, *Public Policy and White Rural Poverty*, 236.
79. A ‘where-are?’ formula for lamenting the vanished past.
80. Such a reclamation agenda was adopted by the Free State government: the Land Bank, established in 1908, loaned money to the landless on the security of promissory notes signed by two landowners. As many as 884 loans were granted to poor whites by 1912 when the Union Land Bank was

O'Connor, writing immediately after the Rebellion, noted that the majority of rebels were men who had not 'an acre of ground or a decent flock of sheep to their names', to whom 'on commando' means 'a happy time of riding around on horseback from town to town, living on the country as they proceed'.<sup>81</sup> Now many Afrikaners hankered after the Republican lifestyle which they hoped could be recreated if poor whites returned to the land.

The strikes of 1913 and early 1914 had helped exacerbate the commercial depression – land, stock and produce prices decreased while the price of basic foodstuffs soared. It is a measure of their desperation that plattelanders turned to the urban, English-speaking Labour Party (LP).<sup>82</sup> The LP was quick to capitalise on this turn of events and stressed the mutual interest of the small landowner and the white worker against those finance capitalists of the Unionist Party and the land capitalists of the South African Party.<sup>83</sup>

Although the decision of the LP to join the war effort ended this alliance, the link forged between these different groups may be found in the Rebellion itself when the LP offered to intervene.<sup>84</sup> This seems to discredit the hypothesis that there was a distinct separation between Labour and Afrikaner at the time.<sup>85</sup> There has been a strict historiographical dichotomy in dealing with strikes and rebellion.<sup>86</sup> Although the strikes of 1913 and 1914 were sparked by issues like the forty-hour working week and recognition of trade unions, behind this lay the growing insecurity of white miners

established. The Transvaal Land Bank was leary of cash loans without collateral, but did provide cattle and donkeys to those threatened by dispossession.

81. O'Connor, *The Rebellion*, 12. Many discouraged men must have remembered the old Republican days when they could receive a *gouvernements geweer* on receipt of a certificate of poverty. While on campaign, burghers had been fed and clothed by the state, and their families received support. This nostalgia is discussed in Swart, 'The Rebels of 1914', ch. 3, 'A Conservative Revolution: Republican Masculinity and the Rebellion'.
82. D. Ticktin, 'The War Issue and the Collapse of the South African Labour Party 1914-15', *South African Historical Journal*, 1 (1969), 60.
83. *Ibid.*, 68.
84. South African Archives Bureau 600, Office of the Governor-General, 9/59/39.
85. After the Rebellion, the Labour Party split. The one camp, under Mr Andrews, wanted to co-operate with Hertzog. 'Britain Overseas', *The Morning Post*, 5 Mar. 1915.
86. Yudelman, for example, argued explicitly that there was no link between urban and rural upheaval: D. Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital, and the Incorporation of Organized Labour on the South African Gold Fields, 1902-1939* (Westport, 1983), 83. Bottomley goes so far as to suggest that one could view the strikes and the Rebellion as being merely 'the town and countryside dimensions of the discontent caused by occupational insecurity and the growing poor white question'. This powerful but extreme analysis neglects other important factors in the Rebellion, like the alienation of former leaders from the state and the importance of the mythopoeic Republican aspirations. It does, however, serve to emphasise the importance of the politics of poverty. See Bottomley, *Public Policy and White Rural Poverty*, 296.

because of mechanisation and work fragmentation.<sup>87</sup> Since 1907, when Afrikaans scab labour was introduced during a strike, the white work force had changed. By the end of the 1907 strike, fewer than a quarter of white miners were locally born; by 1913 one-third were Afrikaans men. The majority came from the poor white class, who manifested their grievances in an urban arena much as the rebels were to do in a rural context.<sup>88</sup>

## Conclusion

The Rebellion was, in part, the reaction of marginal farmers, *bywoners* and poor whites to post-war economic changes and dispossession and urbanisation. The existing socio-economic climate certainly proved a factor in rebellion. Poverty meant change, affecting both class and gender. The rural poor white saw his manhood seeping away. His daughters no longer got married to the young men of his approval, instead they were off to the city to work and send a little money back home. His sons were leaving to look for degrading work in the police or railways, or underground working to bring up gold for the English. He was no longer welcome at the table of wealthier farmers. He was becoming a patriarch without a family. Worse still, he was being removed from the land: the land that gave his life structure. While he suffered, his government debated. The Labour Party, which had briefly offered hope in terms of radical reform measures, now turned jingoistic in defence of the war effort. Inspired by a messianic profit and the *ubi sunt* motif of the populist demagogue's speeches, these men went into rebellion to preserve their life-style, to avoid having to sell-up and migrate to the cities and become labourers. They rebelled to remain Boers.

87. The low-grade mine made little profit and in 1913 attempted to boost productivity by dividing skilled work into semi-skilled work for black men.
88. R.K. Cope, *Comrade Bill: The Life and Times of W.H. Andrews, Workers' Leader* (Cape Town, 1944); I.L. Walker and B. Weinbrein, *2 000 Casualties: A History of the Trade Unions and the Labour Movement in the Union of South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1961); and Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa*, 100.