

*The Springbok and the Skunk: War Veterans and the Politics of Whiteness in South Africa
During the 1940s and 1950s* *

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This article draws on oral and written sources to explore the wartime and post-war experiences of white South African men who volunteered to serve in the Second World War. By examining the meaning of war service for these men, I argue that their history offers a critical perspective of the production of popular whiteness in mid-twentieth-century South Africa. The act of volunteering created a sense of entitlement among these men and, for them, the Allied war objective of ‘social justice’ converged around their hopes for ‘homes fit for heroes’ – an ideal loaded with a range of assumptions about race, class and gender. During the war, the Springbok Legion, a type of ‘trade union of the ranks’, attracted a substantial membership of white male soldiers although, by the end of the war, most were alienated by its increasingly radical politics. After the war, there was widespread disappointment and ‘restlessness’ among volunteers, which helped to consolidate their identity as ‘comrades’. However after the advent of the National Party government in 1948, veterans realised that they would have to stake their claim to the privileges of apartheid society, not as heroes who had served their country, but as white men. War service remained a crucial part of their identity, and many joined the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTHs), a veterans’ movement which represented a ‘political’ response to a party political culture that failed to appreciate their service. I argue that the MOTH helps to explain how white veterans negotiated the shift from segregation to apartheid, and suggests that we need to look beyond the political realm for insight into ways that whiteness was reproduced and its dominant forms ‘contested’.

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In the late 1970s radical social history emerged as a significant trend in scholarship on South Africa. Social historians, anthropologists and sociologists focused on ‘marginal’ and ‘marginalised’ groups, hitherto unnoticed, or deemed unworthy of academic investigation. While some scholars did focus on whites – especially workers and ‘poor whites’ – the thrust of this enquiry was directed toward elucidating the dynamics of black society in industrialising South Africa.¹ ‘White’ history and the history of whiteness as a system of power, privilege and exclusion,² as opposed to racist histories that fail to ‘see’ blacks, thus remain relatively under-researched in the radical historiography of South Africa. Yet as Frederick Cooper and Ann Stoler caution, if we afford an unwarranted and, at best, oversimplified coherence to colonialism and its modes of domination, we risk misreading colonial societies and the complexities of colonial power.³ Colonialism, for Cooper and Stoler, is not an ‘abstract process’, and they urge scholars to ‘take apart the shifts and tensions within colonial projects with the same precision devoted to analysing the actions of those who were made their objects’.⁴ Their arguments apply equally to the history of modern South Africa.

This article addresses aspects of the social history of white South African men who served in South Africa’s Union Defence Force (UDF) during the Second World War. In so doing it will not only move along some less travelled paths in the radical historiography of

¹ The published collections of conference papers from the History Workshop offer a comprehensive insight into the work of the radical social historians during the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. See B. Bozzoli (ed.), *Labour Townships and Protest: Studies in the Social History of the Witwatersrand* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1979); B. Bozzoli (ed.), *Town and Countryside in the Transvaal* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1983); B. Bozzoli (ed.), *Class, Community and Conflict: South African Perspectives* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1987); P. Bonner, P. Delius and D. Posel (eds), *Apartheid’s Genesis, 1935–1963* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1993).

² T.C. Holt comments on the multiple ways in which ‘whiteness’ has been deployed in recent scholarly discourse. See ‘The Power of Whiteness: Comment on James Barrett/David Roediger’, *WerkstattGeschichte*, 39 (2005), pp. 35–6.

³ A. Stoler and F. Cooper, ‘Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda’, in F. Cooper and A. Stoler (eds), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California and London, England, University of California Press, 1997), pp. 6, 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

South Africa, but will also seek to address some of the challenges raised by Stoler and Cooper. Benjamin Disraeli's aphorism that 'all is race' holds true for the history of white volunteers: it is difficult to comprehend their experience without acknowledging the anxieties and convictions of entitlement that arose from their status as white men in a colonial society. As David Roediger asserts, 'the most pressing task for historians of race and class is not to draw precise lines separating race and class, but to draw lines connecting race and class.'⁵ The article also confronts what Theodore W. Allen has described, in a slightly different context, as a 'white blind spot' in Marxist historiography.⁶

Despite a historiographic shift that gives a central place to representation,⁷ social history still has much to offer in elucidating contradictions in social structures.⁸ Locating the history of white South African volunteers and veterans within the broader domain of everyday life in wartime and post-war South Africa reveals a consensus on the political, social and cultural primacy of whiteness and the colonial project it sustained. However, white servicemen's history also serves as a reminder that dominant forms of whiteness could be challenged by white subalterns. In exploring these conflicts this article seeks to avoid some of the analytic dead ends that derive from assuming that white power in a colonial society like segregationist and apartheid South Africa was monolithic or omnipotent. Recognizing a hegemonic but malleable whiteness, containing multiple and at times competing interests bound up in the preservation of white power, also helps to account for the ironies and apparent contradictions in white veterans' relationships with the National Party (NP) regime after 1948.

⁵ D. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London and New York, Verso, 1991), pp. 8 – 11.

⁶ T.W. Allen, 'On Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness*', available at <http://eserver.org/clogic4-2/allen.html>, retrieved on 11 May 2005.

⁷ R. Greenstein, 'The Future of the South African Past', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, 2 (June 1996), p. 330.

⁸ S. Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

Methodology

The project of which this paper forms part draws on interviews with ex-servicemen and women, and on extensive archival research. Over more than 12 years, I have conducted open-ended interviews with 50-odd volunteers, mostly in the city of Durban.⁹ The majority were white and male, although I also interviewed white women and black and coloured veterans. Here I have relied primarily on the testimony of about ten white ex-servicemen whose narratives illustrate veterans' post-war experiences, showing how these cut across conventional lines of class and ethnicity. Reliance on personal narratives raises questions of representivity, and the extent to which generalisations may validly be drawn from a limited number of interviews. My response is that my informants were from a range of localities, regiments, MOTH shellholes, generations and social backgrounds. More importantly, the task of the historian (or ethnographer) is to take particular phenomena and elucidate their more general meanings. As Claude Levi-Strauss observes in his classic *Structural Anthropology*, all that historian or ethnographer can do, and all we can expect of them, is to enlarge a specific experience to the dimensions of a more general one.¹⁰ As critics like Gaytri Spivak have made clear, it is impossible anyway to 'capture' the full reality of subaltern consciousness and memory across barriers of class and colonialism.¹¹ So too the present study cannot imaginatively or empirically capture the full reality of white (ex)service experience. More modestly, it can draw upon a disparate group of white veterans' experiences to speak *about* this history.

⁹ Most were members of the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (MOTH). Although outside Durban the Order included a larger number of Afrikaans-speaking veterans, I did not encounter major regional variations in MOTH discourse and practice. Nevertheless, the elucidation of regional differences in the post-war experience of white veterans – in the MOTH and beyond – remains fairly uncharted.

¹⁰ C. Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York, Basic Books, 1963), pp.16 – 17.

¹¹ G.C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 217–313.

White Men go to War

The outbreak of war in Europe on 3 September 1939 immediately generated intense public interest in South Africa. J.B.M Hertzog's government fell, succeeded by that of Jan Smuts, his erstwhile deputy, who was acutely aware that participation in 'Britain's war' would open deep divisions among South Africans.¹² Black opinion ranged from outright opposition to lukewarm support.¹³ However, hostility from sections of white Afrikanerdom posed a far more significant political (and military) threat to Smuts. A number of prominent Afrikaner political figures, civil servants and military officers felt that they could not support Smuts' war policy. The popular discord generated by South Africa's declaration of war was evident when 70,000 Afrikaners attended an anti-war rally organised by the *Herenigde* (Re-united) National Party on 8 September 1939 at Monumentkoppie near Pretoria.¹⁴

Alert to the extent to which the declaration of war had divided white South Africans, Smuts decided against conscription, choosing instead to rely on volunteers. Smuts, and Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Major General W.H.E. Poole, believed the UDF's needs could best be met by recruiting and arming black volunteers, who would be organised separately in the Cape Corps and the Native Military Corps.¹⁵ However, Chief of the General Staff, Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, opposed the idea of arming black soldiers. His opinion prevailed, and as in the Great War, armed service was formally restricted to white men. That

¹² For an account of the events that led to Smuts' installation as Prime Minister, see L.A. Reeves, 'The War Issue and the Demise of the Fusion Government in 1939' (Master of Arts thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 1984).

¹³ The African National Congress (ANC), for example, supported the war effort despite misgivings about the non-combatant role accorded to blacks. See A. Drew, *Discordant Comrades: Identities and Loyalties on the South African Left* (Pretoria, Unisa Press, 2002), p. 226; B. Hirson, *Yours for the Union: Class and Community Struggles in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1990), pp. 76–8; J. Pampallis, *Foundations of the New South Africa* (Cape Town, Maskew Miller Longman, 1991), pp. 155–60.

¹⁴ H. van Rensburg, *Their Paths Crossed Mine: Memoirs of the Commandant-General of the Ossewa-Brandwag* (n.p., Central New Agency, 1956), pp. 151–5.

¹⁵ H.J. Martin and N. Orpen, *South Africa at War: Military and Industrial Organization and Operations in Connection with the Conduct of the War, 1939–1945* (Cape Town, Johannesburg and London, Purnell, 1979), p.v.

only white men were armed symbolically reinforced the status of white volunteers in the colonial order.

Between 190,000 and 250,000 of the 570,000 white men eligible for military service enlisted during the war.¹⁶ Approximately 110,000 white women and 80,000 black men also volunteered, although neither group was permitted to carry arms.¹⁷ While this article concentrates on the social history of white servicemen, it goes without saying that other volunteer categories played an important role in the war effort, and in the social and political processes under discussion.

The UDF generated very little socio-economic data about its white male volunteers, especially during the early part of the war. Though perhaps a consequence of bureaucratic systems struggling under the pressures of mobilisation and war, Albert Grundlingh wonders whether the UDF's care not to differentiate on the basis of language was a reflection of the ruling UP's 'South Africanist' stance, which sought to minimise ethnic tensions in the white community.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Director of Military Intelligence, E.G. Malherbe, estimated that 50 to 70 per cent of male volunteers were Afrikaans-speakers,¹⁹ most drawn from the poorer sections of white society.²⁰

Other sources suggest that notwithstanding Malherbe's belief that most who volunteered in the first two years of the war were poor Afrikaans-speakers, there were in fact two distinct waves. At the outbreak of

¹⁶ *The Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa* estimates 190,000 while Cock goes for the higher figure. See *The Official Yearbook of the Union of South Africa* (Pretoria, Government Printers, 1946), p. 20; J. Cock, 'Demobilization and Democracy: The Relevance of the 1944 Soldiers' Charter To Southern Africa Today' (Paper presented to the University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, July 1994), p. 2.

¹⁷ For an overview of the role of African volunteers in the UDF during the Second World War, see L. Grundlingh, 'The Recruitment of South African Blacks for Participation in the Second World War', in D. Killingray and R. Rathbone (eds), *Africa And The Second World War* (London, Macmillan, 1986), pp. 181–203. See also N. Cowling (ed.), 'Historical Survey of the Non European Army Services outside of the Union of South Africa', *Militaria*, 24, 1 (1994).

¹⁸ A. Grundlingh, 'The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity In The Union of South Africa's Defence Force During The Second World War, 1939–1945', *Journal of African History*, 40, 3 (October 1999).

¹⁹ *Official Yearbook* (1946).

²⁰ *Wat Die Soldaat Dink* (Pretoria, Hoofstafkwatier, 1945), pp. 4–18; 31–5.

war in 1939, the UDF sought to enlist as many white soldiers as possible without disrupting industry. Indeed, skilled industrial workers discovered trying to enlist were sent back to their jobs, while civil servants in more specialised positions were refused leave of absence to volunteer. Before the Second World War most white men from the *platteland* (countryside), as well as the majority of unemployed white men and those in lower occupational bands, were Afrikaners. Numerically, they represented the bulk of the UDF's white male recruits. It is unlikely that the majority were motivated wholly by idealistic concerns. As Grundlingh writes, many enlisted because of 'more prosaic pecuniary considerations'.²¹ Small-scale farmers, for instance, enlisted to avoid creditors. Destitute whites who approached welfare and aid societies were often told to enlist rather than beg for assistance. When the alluvial diamond diggings at Barkly West – a byword for both poverty and fortune²² – were flooded by the Vaal River, many diggers exchanged the uncertainty of prospecting for the greater financial security of armed service.²³

However, by the end of 1941 this pool of less skilled, often rural, white volunteers had begun to dry up. Simultaneously, the changing character of the UDF's military effort required recruits who could be trained quickly to operate tanks, artillery and other sophisticated military hardware. The UDF also needed more technically competent men such as mechanics, electricians and ship repair artisans. Thus, from about 1942 the men targeted were drawn increasingly from the urban working and middle classes.

White veterans' stories about volunteering were diverse. Writing in 1991, James Ambrose Brown, a South African infantryman in the 8th Army in North Africa, reflected that he and his comrades enlisted on a wave of naïvety and light heartedness, 'without the vaguest inkling'²⁴ about the significance of the war or of their decision to volunteer. Michael de

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²² See for example T.P. Clynick, 'Romance and Reality on the Vaal River Diggings: Race and Class in a South African Rural Community, 1905–1914', *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, 9 (1994), pp. 401–18.

²³ Grundlingh, 'The King's Afrikaners?', p. 11.

²⁴ J.A. Brown, *Retreat to Victory. A Springbok's Diary in North Africa: Gazala to El Alamein 1942* (Johannesburg, Ashanti, 1991), pp. xiii, 1.

Lisle's memories of volunteering for the Second Anti-Aircraft Brigade – mustered in Cape Town and then captured at Tobruk in 1942 – are filled with a mood of schoolboy adventure. '[W]e found ourselves among friends from school and university', he wrote, and 'everyone was young and eager for war service against Hitler and the Nazi aggressors'.²⁵ Willie Grobler, an infantryman with the Natal Mounted Rifles, joined because he 'didn't want to be left behind'. Recounting his decision to enlist nearly 60 years later, he stated somewhat emphatically that his volunteering had nothing to do with 'king and country and all that shit'.²⁶ Similarly, while Pieter Loubser felt 'bound to join,' he maintained that his decision was 'not patriotic'.²⁷

Such stories might appear banal. However, their meaning and significance must be interrogated with reference to the experience and concerns of poorer whites in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, while notions of duty like those offered by Loubser might not have been patriotic in the overtly 'political' and nationalistic sense, they derived from and underscored his status as a white South African man. Common to all white volunteers was that volunteering added layers of duty, obligation and privilege to the social contract that they, like their fathers before them, were negotiating with the state.

Struggles for a Square Deal

From the moment they enlisted, white servicemen had expectations about their place in post-war society. A survey conducted towards the end of the war by the Civil Re-Employment Board illustrates their hopes for employment. It found that about 60 per cent of white

²⁵ M. De Lisle, *Over the Hills and Far Away: My Twenties in the Forties* (Cape Town, the author, 1999), pp. 2–3.

²⁶ Interview with W. Grobler, transcript, Durban, 3 June 1997. In some instances, the names of informants have been changed.

²⁷ Interview with P. Loubser, transcript, Johannesburg, 16 July 1997.

servicemen had some form of pre-enlistment income. Out of a sample of 55,000 servicemen, roughly 7 per cent indicated that they would seek employment in agriculture; 5 per cent in mining; 42 per cent in industry; 9 per cent in transport; 11 per cent in commerce; 2 per cent in the professions; 4 per cent in the public service; 11–13 per cent in the Defence Force or police; 4 per cent as students; and the remainder, about 3 per cent, in ‘other’ fields of employment.²⁸ These figures were silent on precisely what employment servicemen anticipated within each sector, although it is likely that the majority foresaw blue- or white-collar work of some kind, given the fact of widespread previous unemployment and the scarcity of post-school training at the time.²⁹ There is no doubt that the volunteers expected to find jobs amongst the better paid wage-earners, given the extent to which South African labour was organised around racial hierarchies.

Although volunteering and a uniform created a special, albeit precarious, relationship of obligation and entitlement between soldiers and state, white servicemen were continually fearful that the state would not honour its debts to them. As early as 1940, soldiers still in South Africa were beginning to articulate expectations centred on their place as white men in South African society. Their fears were encapsulated in wartime debates about a ‘square deal for soldiers’, which for most white servicemen meant jobs and housing.

During the Second World War, the Springbok Legion, a type of trade union for South African volunteers, appropriated the idea of a ‘square deal for soldiers’. Critical of the ‘shameful state of affairs’ after the First World War, the Legion rejected charity for ex-soldiers and insisted upon the right to political action to safeguard ‘returning heroes from

²⁸ *Report of the South African National Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1944), pp. 105–106.

²⁹ In 1930–31, the number of whites receiving industrial and vocational training was less than one per cent of those receiving primary and secondary education. E.G. Malherbe, best known for his work as an educationist, noted that industrial and vocational training bore a stigma among whites. See D. Welsh, ‘The Growth of Towns’, in M. Wilson and L. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford History of South Africa, Volume II: South Africa 1870–1966* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 223.

exploitation in any shape or form'.³⁰ It is notable that the Legion's concerns for the welfare of servicemen and women during and after the war were formulated in the idiom of organised wage labour.

By 1944 the Legion had 55,000 members, most of them white men.³¹ Fearful that the state would forget the 'blokes who'd done their bit', these men believed that vigilance was necessary to secure a square deal after the war. They were attracted to the Legion by its militancy, its ability to represent the interests of ordinary volunteers, and its willingness to take on military authorities and, by implication, the state.³²

Communists dominated the leadership of the Legion, which they hoped might nurture a more 'progressive' outlook among white volunteers.³³ Particularly towards the end of the war, these radicals criticised South African racial and class structures, using the columns of *Fighting Talk*, the Legion's monthly journal, as well as a series of pamphlets. They also began to demand a square deal for *all* veterans, and to enunciate a range of egalitarian arguments about social justice.³⁴

The Legion's rank and file, however, derived their idea of a square deal explicitly from their understanding of the state's obligation to white veterans. For example, in August

³⁰ *Springbok Legion: The History and Policy* (Johannesburg, Springbok Legion, 1944), p. 16.

³¹ Interview with V. Clapham, transcript, Botha's Hill, 12 March 1987; University of the Witwatersrand, CPSA collection (hereafter Cullen), A617, Secretary's Report, Presented to the Second National Conference of the Springbok Legion held in Cape Town on 10–11 February 1945. Formally, the Legion welcomed women into its ranks and, unlike other South African service organisations, black volunteers. However, few women joined and Joe Podbrey, a wartime member of the Legion's Executive Committee, thought there were never more than about a thousand black Legionnaires. Interview with Joe Podbrey, tape and transcript, Johannesburg, 2 October 2002.

³² For accounts of the suspicion of the white poor and white workers of the state, see C. van Onselen, 'The Main Reef Road into the Working Class: Proletarianization, Unemployment and Class Consciousness Amongst Johannesburg's Afrikaner Poor, 1890–1914', in C. van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914, Volume One, New Babylon*, and *Volume Two, New Nineveh* (Ravan, Johannesburg, 1982), pp. 132–3; T.P. Clynick, 'Afrikaner Political Mobilization in the Western Transvaal: Popular Consciousness and the State, 1920–1930' (D.Phil. thesis, Queen's University, 1996).

³³ L. Bernstein, *Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics, 1938–1964* (London, Viking, 1999), p. 66.

³⁴ For an account of the history of the Springbok Legion, see N. Roos, 'A History of the Springbok Legion, 1941–1953' (Master of Arts thesis, University of Natal, Durban, 1990).

1945, three months after the war had come to an end, rioting broke out amongst white troops awaiting repatriation at Helwan camp in Egypt. As the riot subsided after incidents of arson, looting and a rape scare, all in the space of an afternoon,³⁵ troops gathered on the parade ground. To the acclaim of some 9,000 troops, a Private Levin stood up and appealed to the UP government. He asserted that the troops – especially those under arms – had done their duty, and the state must now fulfil its side of the contract. He declared:

We are tired of broken promises. The government which prosecuted the war with such energy must understand that we expect the same efforts to be made in the comparatively small task of getting us home. Promises have been made which we expect and demand should be kept. Shipping must be found, and when we get home, we want houses to live in. The government has talked about them for two years. They must stop talking and do some building.³⁶

What Homes for (White) Heroes?

Returning soldiers faced a very different world from the one they had left several years earlier. How they responded to changes at home helped to determine how they defined ‘whiteness’ after the war.

The workplace, the city and housing were all areas of bitter disappointment for white servicemen, and symbols of the state’s failure to provide for them as returned white heroes. The 1944 survey by the Civil Re-Employment Board indicated that few ex-servicemen envisaged a future on the land.³⁷ Most volunteers returned to the cities where they sought jobs in industry. The exigencies of wartime production had, however, reconfigured the labour

³⁵ Interview with T. Velleman, transcript, Mafikeng, 8 April 1998.

³⁶ *Fighting Talk*, September 1945.

³⁷ *Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work*, p. 106.

process on the Witwatersrand, and elsewhere, and the place of white men within it.³⁸ The war accelerated the deskilling in mining and industry that had been proceeding from the early twentieth century, and wartime mass production led to an increase of semi-skilled work, thereby altering the racial and gender composition of the workforce. As Eddie Webster notes, the expansion of semi-skilled work took place mainly at the expense of white male workers.³⁹ Those who were not trained artisans, as were the majority of white servicemen, were particularly vulnerable since it was cheaper to employ black men and white women. In particular, as Nancy Clark argues, many industrial jobs were transformed into poorly paid ‘women’s work’.⁴⁰

Race and gender-based changes at the workplace had implications far beyond the factory floor. As women left home to join the war effort – many joining engineering firms, especially on the Witwatersrand, as semi-skilled operatives – servicemen were confronted with images of possible shifts in the balance of domestic power. Like the white men who volunteered, most of these women were propelled into industry, in Clark’s words, ‘not from patriotism, but from necessity’.⁴¹

Other women responded to appeals to join the armed services.⁴² More than 45,000 white women enlisted in the Women’s Defence Corps. An additional 65,000 joined the South African Women’s Auxiliary Services, working in clubs and recreation centres, and running post

³⁸ Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, pp. 76–121; 165–95. See also I. Edwards, ‘Recollections: the Communist Party and Worker Militancy in Durban, Early 1940s’, *South African Labour Bulletin*, 11, 4 (1986), pp. 65–84.

³⁹ E. Webster, *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1985), p. 16.

⁴⁰ N. Clark, ‘Regendering Production: White Women and Black Men in World War Two’ (Paper presented to University of the Witwatersrand History Workshop, July 1994). Lewis examines how trade unions tried to subject female and black labour to trade union discipline so that they could not be used to undercut established wage-rates. J. Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation in South Africa, 1924–1955: The Rise and Fall of the South African Trades and Labour Council* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 101–10.

⁴¹ Clark, ‘Regendering Production’, p. 15.

⁴² M. Bryant, *As We Were. South Africa, 1939–1945* (Johannesburg, Keatland, 1974), p. 10.

offices and recruiting campaigns.⁴³ The role of white women in the war effort received widespread media attention: for instance, *African Mirror*, a current affairs newsreel shown in most South African cinemas before the feature film, often ran stories on the wartime contributions of white women.⁴⁴

White women were not the only workers with newfound mobility. Manufacturers demanded relaxation of influx control for the duration of hostilities. The state acceded, and during the war years the urban black population increased by about half a million to at least 1,689,000.⁴⁵ Black workers and their families were segregated, but despite attempts to control movement and settlement, in-migration of blacks caused considerable opposition, often expressed in the idiom of slum clearance, health and hygiene.⁴⁶

David Goldberg argues that power in the city reflects and refines the spatial relations of its inhabitants, and is in turn a microcosm of the strengths and weaknesses of the state. Dwelling in the city is therefore not just a matter of physical location, but may also be taken as a 'trope . . . in terms of which identity is fashioned'. As South Africa became more urbanised, the state struggled to confine blacks to space segregated from their Europeanised masters.⁴⁷ Henry Judin developed this theme, commenting that in South Africa 'invasion is the dominant metaphor for the white experience of urban integration, defining it as hostile and contaminating'.⁴⁸ For returning white servicemen, anxious about their status in the post-

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 59–62.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴⁵ A. Stadler, *The Political Economy of Modern South Africa* (Cape Town and Johannesburg, David Philip and London, Croon Helm, 1987), pp. 59, 91.

⁴⁶ D. van Tonder. 'First Win the War and then Clear the Slums: The Genesis of the Western Areas Removal Scheme, 1942, 1949', in Bonner, Delius, and Posel (eds), *Apartheid's Genesis*, p. 322. See also M. Swanson, 'The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900–1909', in W. Beinart and S. Dubow (eds), *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London and New York, Routledge, 1995), pp. 25–42.

⁴⁷ D.T. Goldberg, "'Polluting the Body Politic:": Racist Discourses and Urban Location', in M. Cross and M. Keith (eds), *Racism, the City and the State* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993), p. 45.

⁴⁸ H. Judin, 'blank: Architecture, Apartheid and After', *Mail and Guardian* (Johannesburg), 8–14 January 1999, *Friday* supplement.

war world, black urbanisation undoubtedly registered as an invasion – or *oorstroming* (inundation) – of the city, itself a strange and alienating social landscape for many newly urbanised white veterans. As ex-serviceman Willie Grobler commented, ‘Durban was full of blacks after the War. Blacks were all over the show, more than before the War.’⁴⁹ Despite efforts at control, this influx seemed a dismal metaphor for the weakness of the state and its inability to protect white veterans’ interests.

Such images unsettled white servicemen, fostering ‘restlessness’ as the war drew to a close.⁵⁰ In the words of ex-serviceman Wally Robinson, ‘you didn’t know what to do with yourself’.⁵¹ The narratives of white veterans suggest that some took refuge in conspicuous consumption often deliberately beyond their means, a phenomenon that has also been noted in post-war Britain and other societies undergoing or emerging from wartime privation.⁵² One veteran spoke of renting a mansion on the shores of Lake Como on the proceeds of black-market petrol and cigarettes.⁵³ Another bought a watch and a 1938 Chevrolet.⁵⁴ Yet another, who suffered a damaged left ear after an explosion, promptly spent his £150 disability grant on new golf clubs.⁵⁵

White South Africa suffered far less material privation than Britain. Nevertheless, addressing a government-sponsored conference on Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work in 1944, a delegate predicted that:

It is practically certain that we shall be anxious to return to our pre-war habits of consumption. Modern man does not live by

⁴⁹ Interview with W. Grobler, transcript, Durban, 5 June 1997.

⁵⁰ All of my fifty-odd informants used this term to describe their sense of disjuncture and displacement after the war.

⁵¹ Interview with W. Robinson, transcript, Kimberley, 28 June 2000.

⁵² See, for example, D. Hughes ‘The Spivs’, in M. Sissons and P. French (eds), *Age of Austerity* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963), p. 92.

⁵³ Interview with G. Wyley, tapes and transcript, Durban, 18 June 1997.

⁵⁴ Interview with P. Loubser, tapes and transcript, 16 July 1997.

⁵⁵ B.G. Hobbs, *Recollections of Italy: The Memoirs of a Trooper in Prince Alfred’s Guard* (Port Elizabeth, self-published by the author, 1996), p. 87.

bread alone, but by visits to the cinema and the races, and his partner by visits to the beauty parlour It is doubtful if habits of consumption will change appreciably, or at any rate in the absence of compulsion.⁵⁶

A glance through the September 1944 issue of *Fighting Talk*, a magazine for servicemen published by the Springbok Legion, shows advertisements testifying to a formidable will to consume taking up more than half the edition: Gloria fashions; the Butterworth Hotel; 'Buy your plot now at South Africa's Inland Sea: Denysville'; Standard Furnishing; Frederick Motors, and so on.⁵⁷ Such consumption testified symbolically to veterans' status as white men, marked not only by their location within the system of productive relations but also by their ability to consume goods symbolising middle class respectability. They wished for and expected the means to buy goods and services which, in Stoler's phrase, helped to 'define the distinctions of a white, western bourgeois self'.⁵⁸ Yet the spoils of peace were simply beyond the reach of poorer white soldiers. Ben Scheepers was obliged to contribute monthly towards the purchase of his tools and pay hostel fees when he resumed his railway apprenticeship after the war. This left him with 3s.6d. per month – enough for one visit to the cinema.⁵⁹ My father, Dick Roos, earned £10 a month as a clerical assistant, but two-thirds of this went to support his parents' household. Ex-servicemen's frustration was captured in a *Fighting Talk* cartoon portraying a plump merchant from the 'Get-Rich-Quick' Clothing Industry raising his prices in anticipation of a rush of ex-service customers. The caption says starkly that

⁵⁶ *Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work*, pp. 43–4.

⁵⁷ *Fighting Talk*, September 1944.

⁵⁸ A. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire. Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham NC and London, Duke University Press, 1995), p. 11.

⁵⁹ Interview with B. Scheepers, transcript, Durban, 17 September 1996.

‘soldiers complain that clothing prices are exorbitant and that they cannot dress themselves’.⁶⁰

The ruling UP was certainly aware of the hazards inherent in this discord. The spectre of poor whiteism remained. Prime Minister Smuts surely remembered the lessons of 1924, when, in the second general election after the First World War, he and his South African Party (SAP) government were ousted from office by a coalition of Afrikaner nationalists, white workers and the white poor.

From as early as 1943, there was growing state concern that the wartime support of white soldiers be carried over into the altogether more demanding peace. In a February 1943 debate in the House of Assembly, Smuts located the state’s duty to returned veterans within the logic of white servicemen’s understanding of a ‘square deal for soldiers’. He declared: ‘There is no doubt that we are in honour bound, and in duty bound, to do everything we can do for the man who volunteered to support the honour of his country and the cause of freedom for which he fought.’⁶¹

In April 1944, a Soldiers’ Charter was announced. It aimed to provide a framework for the social integration of soldiers, and to ensure that ‘there will be no forgotten men’.⁶² The Charter acknowledged the state’s responsibility for assisting white ex-servicemen to readjust to civilian life. To this end, a Ministry of Welfare and Demobilisation was established in mid-1944. ‘Besides monetary benefits such as war gratuities and civilian clothing grants’, went its mandate,

⁶⁰ *Fighting Talk*, September 1945.

⁶¹ Cited in F. Oosthuizen, ‘Changes and Expectations: The White Union Defence Force Soldier Prior to and During the Second World War’, *Militaria*, 23, 3 (1993), p. 39.

⁶² Minister of Welfare and Demobilisation Harry Lawrence regularly used the phrase ‘there will be no forgotten men’ when referring to the Soldier’s Charter. Cited in F. Oosthuizen, ‘The Demobilisation of the White Union Defence Force Soldiers During and After the Second World War’ (Master of Arts thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, 1993), p. 30.

the government plans include provision for post-discharge employment for all classes of [white] ex-soldier, financial assistance to re-establish the soldier in civilian life, such as by sending him to a university or technical college for technical training; training for the disabled soldier; the provision of temporary housing . . . the cost of transporting families and effects.⁶³

The Soldiers' Charter aimed to restore each volunteer 'in the quickest possible time, to the position and status that he would have enjoyed had he not gone away'.⁶⁴ All veterans (including white women and black men) were paid a modest gratuity. These disbursements were differentiated by length of service, race and gender; military rank and type of military activity were not considered. For white males, the gratuity was 30 shillings for each month of active service, payable as a Union Loan Certificate that the soldier could invest or cash. The cornerstone of the scheme was recognition of the white male volunteer's right to employment. As Colonel E.F. Rendell, an honorary demobilisation officer, commented at the 1944 Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work:

Many of the soldiers have lost five years of their civilian careers by the service they are rendering to the country, and the purpose of any demobilisation plan must be to bring them back and restore to them as far as possible those five years or less, which they have lost from their normal careers.⁶⁵

⁶³ *House of Assembly Debates*, Vol. 49 (1944), Cols. 6,048–6,081.

⁶⁴ *Conference On The Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work*, p. 83.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

The state recognised the need to control demobilisation in order to minimise disruption to the labour market, and prevent rampant unemployment among white ex-servicemen. Thus the Directorate of Demobilisation decided that volunteers would be demobilised on the principle of ‘first in, first out’. In addition, the 1944 Soldiers and War Workers Employment Act compelled ‘employers to re-employ men to whom they [had] granted permission to join the forces provided they notified their employer prior to enlisting’.⁶⁶ A year later the government announced vacancies for 11,000 white veterans in government departments.⁶⁷

Before authorising discharge, the UDF established whether the individual had pre-war employment, wished to return to his job, intended going into business, and so on. According to Major Len Manson, responsible for interviewing white soldiers awaiting release from the armed services, servicemen without jobs or other source of income were ‘kept on strength’, that is, allocated the appropriate military pay until they found suitable employment. In addition, the Directorate of Demobilisation operated as a labour bureau: businesses would inform the Directorate of their requirements, and Demobilisation Officers would present a short list of suitable candidates. Altogether 155,330 white veterans were placed in this fashion, most going to industry or commerce.⁶⁸ Depending upon estimates of the total number of volunteers, this figure suggests that the Directorate of Demobilisation helped between 62 and 82 percent of white veterans to find work.

White soldiers were also assisted in acquiring housing and agricultural land.

Presenting the Soldiers’ Charter to Parliament in 1944, Minister of Welfare and

Demobilisation Harry Lawrence emphasised the importance of ensuring that when ‘our men

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ F. Oosthuizen, ‘Demobilisation and the Post-War Employment of White Union Defence Force Soldiers’, *Militaria*, 23, 4 (1993), p. 34.

⁶⁸ L. Manson, interview by author, tapes and transcript, Johannesburg, 8 July 1998. See also Cock, ‘Demobilization and Democracy’, p. 4; Oosthuizen, ‘Demobilisation and the Post-War Employment of the Union Defence Force Soldier,’ pp. 34–7.

return from war service . . . they and their families will not be harassed by housing needs, and that suitable accommodation is available for them'.⁶⁹ Later that year, however, Colonel Rendell had to qualify the Minister's assurances. It appears there was a common belief amongst returned soldiers that they were entitled to a grant-in-aid to buy a house. Rendell declared this was not so, and recommended that the state assist ex-servicemen to rent a house at a 'reasonable' rate, which would allow them to 'settle down and look around'.⁷⁰ This ambiguous promise of assistance undoubtedly contributed to the 'restlessness' experienced by many ex-servicemen.

Clearly, the Soldiers' Charter was for white male soldiers. Louis Grundlingh notes that the demobilisation apparatus did little for black ex-servicemen, many of whom were destined to 'live in abject conditions after they had been discharged'.⁷¹ The conditions under which women volunteers were demobilised are equally revealing of state concerns. Until at least 1945 – by which time many men had already been discharged – 'compassionate reasons' were the only grounds upon which members of the Women's Army Defence Corps could request demobilisation. If granted, female veterans forfeited all benefits.⁷²

Disappointment and the Imperatives of Whiteness

By 1949, according to the Johannesburg *Sunday Times*, £60 million had been spent on South Africa's demobilisation programme, which the editor claimed was 'probably the best in the world'.⁷³ The hopes of the majority of white servicemen for a square deal involved compelling assumptions about their entitlements as volunteers and white men. Yet, though

⁶⁹ *House of Assembly Debates*, Vol. 49 (1944), Col. 6,072.

⁷⁰ *Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work*, pp. 83–4.

⁷¹ L.W.F. Grundlingh, 'The Participation of South African Blacks in the Second World War' (D.Litt. et Phil. thesis, Rand Afrikaans University, 1986).

⁷² *Fighting Talk*, September 1945.

⁷³ Cock, 'Demobilization and Democracy', p. 1.

veterans in the upper- and middle-income brackets generally had less cause for complaint,⁷⁴ working class veterans greeted the implementation of the Soldiers' Charter with little enthusiasm. 'Van' van Rensburg, who worked as a Durban petrol attendant, thought the Charter was a 'lot of crap'.⁷⁵ Dick Roos was adamant that he had never heard of it. In short, the benevolent liberal paternalism of the Soldiers' Charter disappointed veterans' expectations. This was most obvious in the state's inability to provide suitable work and housing for returning white servicemen, particularly those who, as C.W De Kiewiet said in describing poor whiteism in the 1920s and 1930s, presumed they were entitled to a standard of living 'higher than the wage warranted by their lack of skill'.⁷⁶

Most of those in employment before the war returned to their previous jobs.⁷⁷ Dick Roos, for instance, returned to a clerical position at Randle Brothers & Hudson, a Durban wholesaler. Gerald Wyley resumed his position as a sales representative for Stewart & Lloyds, a manufacturer of windmills and pumps.⁷⁸ Some ex-servicemen were even promoted in their absence. In 1944, the government announced that it would give white veterans returning to the civil service salary and seniority rights in respect of their full period of military service.⁷⁹ For ex-servicemen like Willie Grobler, this was an unexpected boon: upon return to the *Spoorweg* [South African Railways], he found he had been promoted from messenger 'boy' to a graded clerical position.⁸⁰ This practice was not limited to the civil service. In early 1945, the National Union of Distributive Workers agreed with the Commercial Employers Organisation on the Rand that the military service of those in the commercial distributive sector would 'be reckoned as experience for the purpose of

⁷⁴ F. Oosthuizen, 'Soldiers and Politics: Political Ramifications of the White Union Defence Force Soldiers' Demobilisation after the Second World War', *Militaria*, 24, 1 (1994), p. 21.

⁷⁵ Interview with V. van Rensburg, tapes and transcript, Pinetown, 15 July 1998.

⁷⁶ C.W. De Kiewiet, *A History of South Africa Social & Economic* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 221.

⁷⁷ Interview with Manson.

⁷⁸ Interview with Wyley.

⁷⁹ *Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work*, p. 106.

⁸⁰ Interview with Grobler.

computing wages, upon their return to civilian employment in the trade'.⁸¹ Pieter Loubser, a representative for Mosenthal Wholesalers in Johannesburg, found his salary nearly doubled, to about £25 per month as a consequence.⁸²

The state and soldiers' organisations tried to help volunteers who had no previous employment to find work, as well as those who did not wish to return to their former jobs. The civil service, a 'traditional avenue of employment for whites', reserved thousands of posts for ex-soldiers, such as the 2,000 to 3,000 on the railways, while the Post Office devised a job scheme for disabled veterans.⁸³ Again, it was only white men who benefited from this preferential employment policy.⁸⁴

The Springbok Legion also tried to secure jobs for its members. During the first half of 1945, it handled 1,143 employment cases for white men, and placed 642.⁸⁵ The following year, it registered 4,302 and found jobs for 1,607.⁸⁶ The Legion's successes usually came from approaching small enterprises – often those owned or managed by First World War veterans – with requests that they employ white servicemen.⁸⁷

Government efforts and those of organisations like the Springbok Legion, coupled with the stipulations of the 1944 Soldiers and War Workers Employment Act, ensured that there was no major post-war unemployment problem among white ex-servicemen.⁸⁸ However, the ways in which they were re-incorporated into the labour market did not always meet their expectations. A comment at the 1944 Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work, that the state 'must provide for the boy who went away, coming back

⁸¹ *Fighting Talk*, January 1946.

⁸² Interview with Loubser.

⁸³ *Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work*, p. 106.

⁸⁴ Cock, 'Demobilization and Democracy', p. 4.

⁸⁵ *Fighting Talk*, August 1945.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, April 1946.

⁸⁷ Interview with G. Routh, transcript, Durban, 16 March 1987.

⁸⁸ P. Alexander, *War, Workers & the Origins of Apartheid* (Oxford, James Currey; Athens, Ohio, Ohio University Press; and Cape Town, David Philip, 2000), pp. 99–100.

to us as a grown man’⁸⁹ reveals some of the limitations of demobilisation. Firstly, the state failed to acknowledge the liminality and transformative nature of war. Secondly, whether they entered new fields or returned to pre-war employment, the jobs available to ex-servicemen did not provide them with the means to enjoy their new status as returned heroes and mature men. After the war the state was centrally concerned to hold down inflation. This policy was particularly burdensome for those workers whose wartime pay increases had not kept pace with rising prices.⁹⁰ Although Grobler and Loubser were pleasantly surprised when they were awarded promotions upon their return to work, cases such as theirs seem to have been exceptional. The Soldiers and War Workers Employment Act only obliged employers to re-employ veterans at the wages they had been paid on enlistment. These invariably lagged behind inflation, especially for those in lower paid jobs who had enlisted early in the war.

White ex-servicemen’s dissatisfaction with prospects in the labour market, and in society more generally, was fanned by a popular myth that ‘keymen’ and ‘traitors’ had prospered during the war at veterans’ expense. Keymen were skilled artisans who had volunteered, but were prohibited from enlisting because of their importance for wartime production or essential services. They were allowed to wear uniforms or small badges to indicate their status. A vitriolic pamphlet by ‘Springbok’ circulated towards the end of the war amongst troops at Crown Mines Demobilisation Depot, denounced keymen as ‘skunks in uniform’ for their unpatriotic jockeying for position and promotion. The pamphlet demanded that ‘keymen should be sent to the front instead of enriching themselves at the cost of our blood’.⁹¹ Not all servicemen felt as strongly about keymen as the anonymous Springbok. Nonetheless, there was fairly widespread unhappiness amongst troops that those who had

⁸⁹ *Conference on the Post-War Planning of Social Welfare Work*, p. 83.

⁹⁰ Alexander, *War, Workers & the Origins of Apartheid*, p. 102.

⁹¹ *Skunks in Uniform*, U.P. Central Head Office: Grievances, 1943–1945, Sanlam United Party Archives, University of South Africa [pamphlet].

stayed behind seemed to have benefited the most. In a similar vein, *Fighting Talk* expressed outrage at Smuts' decision to reinstate civil servants interned for pro-Nazi activities.

White working class veterans saw themselves at a relative disadvantage *vis-à-vis* those who had stayed at home, or worse still, betrayed the war effort. Expensive to employ and inappropriately skilled, their lack of occupational versatility made them vulnerable. Although many had acquired technical skills during the war, closed shop union practices barred them from putting their new skills to work. Vic Roos, for instance, trained as an aircraft mechanic during the war, but his lack of formal apprenticeship excluded him from the engineering sector. He remained underemployed throughout his life, working mostly as a clerk and later a barman.⁹²

Similar arguments apply to housing. During the war, sustained urbanisation, the priority of war production and a shortage of skilled artisans contributed to a massive housing backlog. It was estimated that by 1945, 130,000 houses were needed nationally for whites alone. This became a scandal, leading to the passage of the 1945 Housing (Emergency Powers) Act, which permitted public authorities to expropriate land and materials, conscript workers and build houses. Yet, by the end of that year, less than one thousand houses for whites had been built.⁹³

The state's failure to provide mass housing for white veterans necessitated a less ambitious and costly strategy. This involved facilitating the provision of land to ex-servicemen who could then build their own houses. For example, in late 1944, Johannesburg City Council announced that it would make sites available to white male veterans by lottery, without discrimination by marital status or rank.⁹⁴ Land was provided at about £120 per stand

⁹² Interview with V. Roos, transcript, Scottburgh, 19 April 1995.

⁹³ *Reef Barb*, February 1946; H.J. Simons and R. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850–1950* (Lusaka, IDAF, 1983), p. 561.

⁹⁴ *Reef Barb*, October 1944.

in 1945, although increasing within five years to £300.⁹⁵ The government further guaranteed building society loans of £2,500 at a fixed interest of 4.5 per cent, the going rate being 9 per cent. For Loubser, this translated in 1950 to a £300 deposit and £15 monthly instalments.⁹⁶ Significantly, the costs involved in this scheme were beyond the means of most ex-servicemen who relied more on state assistance to (re-)establish themselves in civilian life. In addition, some municipalities, for instance NP-controlled Bloemfontein, were not prepared to give white veterans special dispensations of any sort.⁹⁷

As a temporary solution to housing needs, the national Housing Board proposed to convert unused military camps into ‘model townships’.⁹⁸ Although some of these camps were subsequently used as university residences, the notion that they should substitute for more suitable housing was universally unpopular amongst ex-servicemen.⁹⁹ Cheaper accommodation – for white ex-servicemen, about £10 per month all-inclusive¹⁰⁰ – could be had at the boarding houses (‘residential hotels’) that dotted the cities. Ex-servicemen, usually single, were allocated a room with the use of a communal bathroom. A landlady would provide meals and, with greater or lesser vigilance, supervise the lounge and other shared space.

For white ex-servicemen, the importance of housing extended far beyond the provision of land and building materials. Until they married, most lived with their parents or in boarding houses or hostels. Once married, a man was expected to establish his own home.¹⁰¹ A house or flat with a wife to tend it was the prevailing, gendered model of the

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*; interview with Loubser.

⁹⁶ Interview with Loubser.

⁹⁷ *Fighting Talk*, August 1945.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, October 1944.

⁹⁹ Interview with D. Lourens, tapes and transcript, Pinetown, 15 July 1998.

¹⁰⁰ *Fighting Talk*, June 1946; van Rensburg and Lourens agree with this estimate.

¹⁰¹ In interviews with Loubser, Grobler and Wyley as well as with S. Gibson, tapes and transcript, Pinetown, 15 July 1997, this point was raised by all those interviewed.

white home.¹⁰² Loubser, for instance, collected keys to his new home in Roosevelt Park, Johannesburg, on his wedding morning. Similarly, when Gerald Wyley and his wife decided to marry in 1950, they chose their wedding day to coincide with the completion of their new house in Durban. Dick Roos lived with his parents until his marriage in 1951, when he and his wife moved into a small Durban flat. All these examples poignantly illustrate how, for white ex-servicemen, a wife enabled the establishment of a home.

While few white ex-servicemen were left without a roof over their heads, their accommodation was often far from ideal. In July 1945, *Forum* magazine reported ex-soldiers and their families living in passages or bathrooms in Johannesburg.¹⁰³ An ex-soldier stated that it was commonplace to find white veterans living in garages in Johannesburg's southern suburbs.¹⁰⁴ This is the context of an urban squatters' movement that took root amongst white veterans in the immediate post-war years. In late 1945, *Fighting Talk* reported that 23 ex-volunteers and their families had 'expropriated' empty houses in Johannesburg, Krugersdorp and Randfontein.¹⁰⁵ By mid-1946, houses and flats had been 'commandeered' by white ex-servicemen in Durban, Bloemfontein, Pretoria and the West Rand.¹⁰⁶ The desire of these returned soldiers for marriage and domesticity, incorporating gendered notions of the home, and of control of domestic space, underlie the desperation that characterised this protest.

¹⁰² Bradford makes a similar point in her discussion of Afrikaner homesteads during the South African War. See H. Bradford, 'Gentlemen and Boers: Afrikaner Nationalism, Gender and Colonial Warfare in the South African War' (Paper presented to conference on Rethinking the South African War, UNISA, August 1998). The employment of black domestic servants was important in white South African households. However as Cock and van Onselen have shown, the extent to which domestic servants were employed by whites was shaped by such factors as social class among whites, and trajectories of urbanisation among blacks. See J. Cock, *Maids and Madams: A Study in the Politics of Exploitation* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1980), and C. van Onselen, 'The Witches of Suburbia: Domestic Service on the Witwatersrand, 1890–1914', in van Onselen, *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, Volume 2, New Nineveh*.

¹⁰³ *Forum*, 7 July 1945.

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Oosthuizen, 'The Demobilisation of the White Union Defence Force Soldiers', p. 99.

¹⁰⁵ *Fighting Talk*, December 1945.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, June 1946.

Comfort in the Shellholes of Home

The majority of white servicemen did not return to homes fit for heroes. Though jobs, housing and issues of social readjustment were concerns shared by returning troops in other parts of the Commonwealth and allied world, in South Africa they were exacerbated and overlaid by tensions arising from the subordinate position of most white troops within the colonial ruling class. While not all veterans were poor, even the better off experienced a type of ‘marginalisation’, especially after the advent of NP rule in 1948. The Nationalists pointedly ignored their service or held it up to contempt. Sharing the privileges of whiteness though they did, veterans suffered vindictive hostility on account of their war service. Among white ex-servicemen, for instance, it was believed that the NP denied promotion in the civil service to those who had volunteered.¹⁰⁷ Wally Robinson claimed that during a lifetime of work on the railways, he was often overlooked for promotion, largely on account of his war service, and had to ‘take what jobs he was given’. Veterans on the railways even organised themselves into a War Services Union – while the UP was still in office – to fight possible discrimination against ex-servicemen.¹⁰⁸ White ex-servicemen commonly believed that after 1948 NP supporters received preferential allocation of farming land. For instance Bob Davidson, a Kimberley war veteran and supplier of farm hardware, claims that when blocks of land on the Vaal-Harts irrigation scheme were released for settlement by white farmers in the early years of NP rule, ‘Nats’ got those closest to Kimberley – and markets – while ex-servicemen tended to be allocated plots in the vicinity of distant Taung.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the new government terminated various grants and rebates that had assisted ex-service organisations,

¹⁰⁷ O’Meara writes that after the NP came to power, the secret *Afrikaner Broederbond* (‘Afrikaner Brotherhood’) exercised its influence over the NP to secure senior civil service positions for *Broederbond* members. D. O’Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948–1994* (Johannesburg, Ravan; Athens, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 1996), pp. 61–2.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Robinson.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with B. Davidson, tapes and transcript, Kimberley, 28 June 2000.

including the MOTH, in charitable work.¹¹⁰ Loubser, a Johannesburg veteran, recalled how his MOTH shellhole (unit) used to invite the local MP, a Nationalist, to formal dinners. To maintain the MP's goodwill, he and his colleagues felt obliged to remove all Allied memorabilia from their clubhouse on such occasions – especially the Union Jack.¹¹¹ Such situations helped create a social category bound not only by class, race and gender, but also by generation and the shared experience of war.

Despite its aspirations to be a 'trade union of the ranks', after the war the Springbok Legion was unable to articulate the concerns of most white ex-servicemen; in particular, it had virtually no power in the civilian job market. Moreover, radicals were beginning to dominate the Legion, and their idea of a unified, non-racial South African working class was anathema to most white ex-servicemen, whose hopes for the post-war world were premised on a range of racialised assumptions.¹¹² And although the idea of a soldiers' party was entertained in some ex-service circles, it never gained much support from ordinary white veterans.¹¹³

A substantial number of white ex-servicemen did, however, join the Memorable Order of the Tin Hats (MOTH). The MOTH, an organisation of white South African veterans, was founded in 1927 by survivors of the Great War to sustain that 'personal, intimate comradeship which the frontline had generated and venerated'.¹¹⁴ The Second World War provided the MOTH with fresh recruits, and by late 1947, membership exceeded 100,000 men organised into local branches known as 'shellholes'.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Interviews with Grobler and Loubser.

¹¹¹ Interview with Loubser.

¹¹² On the radicalisation of the Springbok Legion see Roos, 'A History of the Springbok Legion'.

¹¹³ All the ex-servicemen I interviewed greeted the notion of a soldiers' party with incredulity.

¹¹⁴ C.A. Evenden, *Old Soldiers Never Die: The Story of MOTH 0* (Durban, MOTH, 1975 5th edition), p. 124. A few shellholes (branches) were established in neighbouring parts of southern Africa and in England, possibly by veterans with South African links. Comparative histories of veterans' movements remain largely unexplored.

¹¹⁵ Evenden, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, p. 302. See also *Fifty Years of the Memorable Order of The Tin Hats, 1927–1977* (commemorative brochure-MOTH, 1977).

Founder of the order Charles Evenden (or ‘MOTH O’, as he was usually known in MOTH circles) claimed that the organisation was apolitical, and could break down ‘racial barriers’ in South Africa.¹¹⁶ He was undoubtedly referring to an assumed antagonism between English- and Afrikaans-speaking whites, as the ‘race question’ was often framed in early and mid-twentieth century white discourse. In this sense, the MOTH was indeed ‘apolitical’, and its emphasis on volunteering and frontline service obscured ethnic differences between English- and Afrikaans-speaking veterans. However, as Jean Comaroff and others have argued, the realities of social and political power determine that political activity, and especially resistance, can be expressed in seemingly apolitical domains. Moreover, simple dichotomies between resistance and compliance should be avoided.¹¹⁷ The MOTH is thus best viewed as a ‘political’ response by men united not only by service but also by often limited access to state power. In particular, MOTH membership was a response to a post-war society that neither understood nor adequately acknowledged veterans’ experience as white men who had served their country.

After the War, MOTHs supported each other materially. The MOTH principle of Mutual Help included not only assisting comrades who were unemployed or in distress, but also providing networks, introductions, loans and other forms of support needed to help secure jobs, contracts and business success. The MOTH established district employment bureaus to find employment for white ex-servicemen, often with fellow-MOTHs who were already employed or established in business. In 1945 an unnamed shellhole announced that in one month, it had been able to secure work for 19 veterans.¹¹⁸ The following year, a Johannesburg shellhole reported it had found jobs for four of the five veterans from whom it

¹¹⁶ Evenden, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, p. 175.

¹¹⁷ J. Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: the Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 261. See also J. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1990).

¹¹⁸ *The Home Front*, December 1945.

had received applications in the previous month.¹¹⁹ Shellhole notes in *The Home Front* indicate that concentrated efforts to place veterans in employment tailed off from the late 1940s.

Networks of friendship and acquaintance within the Order continued to operate long after most MOTHs had found work or set up businesses. For example, in the early 1950s my father, Dick Roos, and his brother Vic were recommended for clerking positions at a sugar mill by a fellow MOTH who was a First World War veteran already employed by the company. The informal character of such networks makes it difficult to comment on their extent, or modes of operation. A letter written to *The Home Front* in May 1953 offers a rare glimpse of the ways in which ties forged within the Order facilitated upward social mobility. MOTH Ralph 'Hymki' Erlston, a member of Admiral shellhole based at Austerity Flats, a sub-economic housing project for whites in Durban, wrote resigning from the shellhole. He was about to take up a position as manager of a 'native' trading store on the Natal north coast, and thanked 'comrades' who had helped him during 'dark days', and had also helped him to get his new job. Erlston added that he would, of course, join another shellhole near his new home.¹²⁰ It is likely that the MOTH practice of 'raiding', when a shellhole would 'attack' another (usually, but not always, by prearrangement) helped to extend these circles of friendship and acquaintance, thereby increasing the size and efficacy of MOTH networks.

If such networks operated informally to advance MOTHs, the Order sometimes intervened directly when members were threatened by poverty. In 1946 the MOTH General Headquarters set up an Aid Fund to help indigent MOTHs.¹²¹ After urging MOTHs not to 'forget the possibility of comrades falling on evil times', the editor of *The Home Front* urged them to set aside a monthly amount for the Fund, and to consider contributing to it before

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, July 1946.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, May 1953.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, November 1946.

giving money to other charities.¹²² Individual shellholes also provided relief for unemployed and impoverished MOTHs, usually on a short-term basis. The monthly report submitted to *The Home Front* by a Cape Town shellhole indicates how seriously MOTHs took the practice of supporting needy comrades: ‘. . . we are giving assistance to two ex-soldiers and their families. As we are but a small shellhole it comes heavy on the blokes, but there are no grouses as our motto “Mutual Help” still holds true.’¹²³ Veteran Willie Grobler testified that it was common practice among Durban shellholes to ‘help guys to get ahead in life’. Food parcels were provided for indigent members, and others were assisted with school and university fees.¹²⁴

Dissatisfied with the ‘ungrateful’ UP government’s plans for the social re-integration of white veterans after the war, MOTHs rather drew on the comradeship developed during war service. Through the MOTH they helped each other establish the material conditions that underscored the respect they believed was their due. The bonds of ordinary white comradeship, which the MOTH emphasised at every turn, enabled the organisation to consolidate its membership across classes, ranks, generations and language. In the words of MOTH 0, the MOTH did not recognize ‘rank and swank’.¹²⁵

While the Springbok Legion emphasised the universal character of war experience and attempted to mobilise black veterans, the MOTH ideal of Mutual Help was limited to white veterans: the MOTH had no place for black ex-servicemen. Non-racial membership was simply beyond the imagination of veterans who joined the Order in the years following the Second World War. ‘RTU’, who wrote a regular *Home Front* column during the late 1940s, articulated the MOTH position on black veterans. While insisting that ‘Coloured,

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, June 1951.

¹²⁴ Interview with Grobler. My own high school education was subsidised by the MOTH.

¹²⁵ Evenden, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, p. 142.

Indian and Native Corps [should] be given fair and adequate treatment on demobilization’, RTU asked rhetorically whether there was ‘any MOTH who would seriously suggest that the Door of our Order should be thrown open to Coloured Ex-Servicemen?’¹²⁶ For him as for most MOTHs, it was ‘totally erroneous to suggest that associating with people of different standards and outlooks makes for tolerance and co-operation’.¹²⁷

Formally, white women veterans were welcome to join the Order, as members of predominantly male shellholes, or of shellholes established exclusively for white ex-servicewomen, for instance ‘Glory Bag’ and ‘Florence Nightingale’.¹²⁸ However, it seems women were excluded from the webs of patronage and assistance developed by their male comrades. Women are completely absent from the narratives of male veterans reflecting on the ways MOTHs helped each other. A reading of shellhole reports in *The Home Front* confirms the impression that MOTH networks were not only white, but emphatically male. The MOTH therefore demonstrated the bonds of comradeship among white South African veterans, but also the circumscription of that comradeship by gender and race.

On one level then, the MOTH mirrored and helped to reproduce segregated South African society. At the same time, it kept its distance from party politics and vigorously affirmed the service identity of white veterans, representing, though it did not challenge the post-war racial dispensation, profound disillusion with a state that seemed at best indifferent to their concerns. It was a conservative organisation that upheld not only the racial, but also the class and gender *status quo*. If anything, the consolidation of NP electoral support through the 1950s and 1960s suggests that MOTHs were among those white South Africans who favoured emphatic racial distinction and separation. However, the MOTH did represent an

¹²⁶ *The Home Front*, November 1947.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ From 1935, wives of male MOTHs were sometimes organised into MOTH Women’s Associations (MOTHWAs), which helped MOTH shellholes with catering and fund-raising tasks. *Fifty Years, 1927–1977*, pp. 50–51, 71.

alternative – albeit in symbolic form¹²⁹ – to a party political culture that was insensitive to the concerns of white servicemen. Suggestively, the early years of NP rule saw the MOTH's most rapid growth.¹³⁰

Conclusion

As this article has suggested, class and English/Afrikaans-speaking 'ethnicity', binary categories widely used by social scientists to analyse South African society, do not account adequately for the history of the white men who volunteered to serve in the UDF during the Second World War. I have argued instead that their history is better explained in the context of an underlying consensus on the social, political and cultural primacy of whiteness. In deploying whiteness as a term of analysis David Goldberg's observations on the shape and operation of racist culture are useful. For Goldberg, while racially predicated exclusions lie at the heart of such a culture, there is no generic 'racism'. A range of racisms may exist concurrently, and it follows that different racisms serve different purposes.¹³¹ In other words, within the racial order, competing modes of racialisation are asserted and contested, for various reasons. While white servicemen and veterans represented traditions of whiteness generally distant from the loci of party political power, they were nonetheless historical agents in their own right. Their history should be understood in the context of ongoing political and cultural struggles to define what it meant to be white in segregated South African society and to try to shape the colonial order.

What, then, did war service mean to white South African veterans? Most obviously, volunteering and fighting for their country generated a sense of pride and entitlement among

¹²⁹ See Comaroff, *Body of Power*, p. 11.

¹³⁰ 'MOTH Membership, 1946–1994', Graph produced by MOTH General Headquarters, n.d.

¹³¹ D. Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, US, Blackwell, 1993), pp. 90–95.

veterans. Volunteers' post-war material and cultural concerns, and the conceptions of racial, class and gender identity from which they derived, were not very different from those of men of similar background who remained at home. Servicemen were aware that it was as white men that they would have to stake their claim in post-war society. The privileges of whiteness helped white veterans to re-enter civilian life. After the war, they fled the Springbok Legion, thereby tacitly acknowledging that a 'square deal' would have to be won by means other than asserting their service identity.

Yet veterans *were* different to other white men in South Africa. They stood out as a social category, and the bonds of comradeship they developed on active service were, for most, lifelong.¹³² As Jean Comaroff reminds us, veterans' relative silence in the arena of 'big' party politics does not indicate that ex-servicemen were politically inactive. Particularly, their involvement in the MOTH prompts a more cautious and fine-grained reading of the post-war politics of whiteness as well as of questions of domination and subordination, compliance and resistance within the structures of colonial power.

Critics of the MOTH, particularly radical veterans who challenged the very precepts of racialised South African society, dismissed the MOTH as little more than a 'convivial' organisation. However, while 'conviviality' did feature prominently in MOTH comradeship, it also represented a tradition of whiteness among ex-servicemen that helped mediate some of the disappointment and alienation that they encountered in post-war society, as well as contradictions occasioned by the onset of NP rule. The MOTH provided a framework for public and private rituals that emphasised their status as white men who had served their country; it offered friendship and gave veterans access to cross-class and cross-generational

¹³² I have argued elsewhere that their involvement in the War Veterans' Torch Commando between 1951 and 1953 demonstrated that white veterans' ideas about social justice incorporated visceral 'anti-fascist' convictions and, at least during the early 1950s, opposition to the 'Malanazis' in the NP almost to the point of insurrection. See Roos, *Ordinary Springboks*, pp. 129–57.

networks that sometimes assisted them materially. The ‘apolitical’ MOTH is thus central to understanding how and why ordinary white veterans made the shift from segregation to apartheid. This suggests the need to look beyond the ‘political’ arena toward social, cultural and domestic institutions and associations, for insight into the (re)production and contestation of whiteness, or indeed any hegemonic order.

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