

OF GOLD AND IRON: COLLABORATORS IN THE WINBURG DISTRICT

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Abstract

In Belgium, France and the Netherlands, state-induced punishments were inflicted on collaborators with the German occupation. In this article, Boer collaboration with the British is explored by recounting the careers of three high-profile officers of the Winburg commando, Commandants Harry Theunissen, Fanie Vilonel and Gerrie van der Merwe. There were hundreds of ordinary men and women in the district who also collaborated, but after the war there was no Boer state to bring them to book and the Dutch Reformed Church, as the only coherent social structure to survive the war was, unsurprisingly, more inclined to reconciliation than to retribution. Within post-war Afrikaner society there were furthermore social and political pressures for not settling accounts with those who had been disloyal. Consequently, collaborators were speedily re-integrated into society and the mythology of a united and heroic struggle against British imperialism could be sustained. Today the individualistic and pragmatic way in which Boers responded to occupation helps us to see the past and therefore also the present and the future in a different light.

Keywords: Anglo-Boer War, South African War, Winburg, Collaboration, Historiography

Introduction

In the months following the liberation of Belgium, France and the Netherlands, there was a powerful movement to exact speedy and severe retribution on those who had collaborated with the Germans occupying their countries. Swiftness was achieved by the use of ‘transitional justice’, which violated some of the basic canons of jurisprudence; severity by combining imprisonment with other sanctions including fines, confiscation of goods, residential restrictions, police supervision, exclusion from certain occupations and loss of nationality. State-induced punishments were suffered by 80 000 people in Belgium, 130 000 in France and 110 000 in the Netherlands.¹ The draconian measures stigmatised those acted against to such an extent that their children continued to pay the price of their parents’ transgressions.

This prompts the question: What happened to the Boers of the Winburg district who collaborated with the British occupation force? In answering this question the careers of three Boer officers will be reviewed. If officers could collaborate so conspicuously, one must assume that ordinary men and women were also complicit, though generally more surreptitiously, for ‘if gold ruste, what shal iren do?’² There may have been as many as 600 collaborators in the Winburg district,³ a figure that becomes really significant in the light of the fact that the Winburg commando (including Senekal) was estimated to comprise 1 616 men.⁴

¹ Luc Huyse, ‘Transitional Justice in Belgium, France and the Netherlands after World War II: Innovations, Transgressions, and Lessons to be Learned’, in Adam Czarnota, Martin Krygier and Wojciech Sadurski, eds., *Rethinking the Rule of Law after Communism* (Budapest, 2005), 135-6.

² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, General Prologue, line 500, in F.N. Robinson, ed., *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd edition (London, 1957), 22.

³ J. Boje, ‘Winburg’s War: an appraisal of the Anglo-Boer War as it was experienced by the people of a Free State district’, Unpublished D.Phil thesis, University of Pretoria, 2009.

⁴ L.S. Amery, *The Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902*, Vol. IV (London, 1906), 514.

Harry Theunissen

Helgaard Marthinus (Harry) Theunissen was a prominent and wealthy member of the Winburg community. He owned a number of farms and was the manager of the Jagersfontein Diamond Mine. He was elected to the Winburg church council in 1897 and became a field cornet and justice of the peace in 1889.⁵ On the outbreak of war, Theunissen went to the Natal front as field-cornet of the Winburg ward. When Marthinus Prinsloo, who was commandant of the Winburg commando, was chosen as Chief Commandant of the Free State forces on 9 October 1899, Theunissen took over as commandant.

Theunissen does not appear to have distinguished himself in Natal. In particular, the Winburgers made a poor showing on the occasion of the assault on Platrand (5-6 January 1900). J.D. Kestell, who was attached to the Harrismith commando as chaplain and was present at the battle, accused them of having failed their compatriots by lurking at the base of the hill they were supposed to attack.⁶ This passivity is confirmed by Anna Barry's account. She says that Jan de Villiers, field cornet of Senekal, and his men were able to watch it all from their positions on the slope.⁷ In his account of the battle, Johannes Hendrik Labuschagne of Harrismith also held the Winburgers to blame.⁸ The Dutch writer Louwrens Penning omits any mention of them, but comments significantly

⁵ M.G.W. de Kock, *Gister is Verby! 1910-1985: Verhaal van die Ned. Geref. Gemeente Theunissen*, (Theunissen, 1985), 7.

⁶ J.D. Kestell, *Met die Boere-Kommando's*, (Pretoria, 1999 [first published 1902]), 47.

⁷ Anna Barry, *Ons Japie: Dagboek gehou gedurende die Driejarige Oorlog*, (Johannesburg, 1960), 5.

⁸ P.H.S. van Zyl, *Waar en Trou: Waar en Trou as Afrikaners, Kinders van Suid-Afrika* (Johannesburg, 1948), 25; cf. J.H. Breytenbach, *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*, III (Pretoria, 1973), 27.

that the lack of cooperation between the commandos was never more painfully felt than in the attack on Platrand.⁹

On 14 February 1900, the 850 men of the Winburg commando were withdrawn from Natal and sent to the western front, where they were placed under the command of General Christiaan de Wet, who was trying to relieve the pressure on General P.A. (Piet) Cronjé, beleaguered at Paardeberg. To this end, De Wet entrusted General Philip Botha, assisted by Commandants Fick, De la Rey, Kriegler, Theunissen and Vilonel, with the task of retaking an eminence known as Oskoppies – or Kitchener's Kopje, as the British called it. A poorly coordinated attack by 500 Boers, mainly Heidelbergers and Winburgers came under heavy fire from the Yorkshires on the koppie, with support from the Scottish Borderers and the Buffs. The Boer initiative degenerated into headlong flight and only Theunissen and 87 Winburgers, their horses shot, held their ground until their compatriots were able to reach safety.¹⁰ The unsuccessful venture of trying to retake Oskoppies cost the lives of no fewer than fifteen Winburgers. After two to three hours' sniping fire, Theunissen and his men were captured.

As prisoner of war at the Green Point P.O.W. camp, Theunissen was elected camp commandant.¹¹ It is an accepted military convention that an officer performs this role without incurring blame. In this capacity, he presided over a court that dealt with criminal offences affecting the prisoner community.¹² Ironically, prosecutions in the camp court

⁹ L. Penning, *De Oorlog in Zuid-Afrika: De Strijd tussen Engeland en de verbonden Boeren-Republieken Transvaal en Oranje-Vrijstaat*, I (Rotterdam, 1899), 300.

¹⁰ Raymond Sibbald (ed), *The Boer War* (The War Correspondents), (Johannesburg, 1993), 164.

¹¹ National Archives, Pretoria (hereafter N.A.P.), Archives of the Central Judicial Commission (hereafter CJC) 697.272.

¹² M.C.E. van Schoor, ed., “Dagboek” van Rocco de Villiers en Bylaes’, *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 3, Pretoria, 1975, 11 Nov. 1901, 66-7; S.P.R. Oosthuizen, ‘Die Beheer, Behandeling en Lewe van die Krygsgevangenes gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902’, Unpublished DPhil thesis, University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein, 1975, 131-2.

were in the name of 'the State'.¹³ However, Theunissen's position was not unambiguous, as we can see from the fact that in November 1900 he frustrated an escape attempt by prisoners of war by reporting it to the military authorities.¹⁴ In 1901, Theunissen became involved in the peace movement. He met with Sir Hamilton Goold-Adams, the newly appointed Deputy Administrator of the Orange River Colony, in January of that year, and with the peace envoys, Christiaan Laurens Botha and Piet de Wet, a month later.¹⁵ He was lauded by the British authorities for his pro-British role in the Green Point and later the Simonstown camp.¹⁶

After the war, at a time when other Boer leaders were lying low, Theunissen had no difficulty in cooperating with the British authorities. An example of this is the appointment of a school committee for the Winburg district. Rev. J. Marquard, the moderator of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Free State, and Frederik (Frikkie) Cronjé, the last commandant of the Winburg commando, declined appointment, but Theunissen served with the Methodist minister George Henry Jacques, the merchant Edward Thomas Dobinson and the bank manager John Garden representing Winburg; Jacobus Lourens Lategan of Wynandsfontein, who was never on commando, Major A. Lyon of Kareefontein and Cecil Gerhardus van Heyningen of Leeuwarden, who had been assistant superintendent of the Winburg concentration camp, for Smaldeel, and Dr Esaias

¹³ Free State Provincial Archives, Bloemfontein (hereafter F.S.A), A 135 (Theunissen accession), Notulen Boek Landdrost en Heemraaden Hof.

¹⁴ M.C.E. van Schoor, ed., 'Dagboek van Hugo H van Niekerk', *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 1, Pretoria, 1972, 5 Nov. 1900, 100.

¹⁵ M.C.E. van Schoor, ed., 'The Diaries and Recollections of Jacob Abraham Jeremias de Villiers', *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 8, Pretoria, 1990, 2 Feb. and 3 March 1901, 49-50 and 55.

¹⁶ F.S.A., CJC 697.272.

Reinier Snyman and Peter Kahts, who had also not been on commando, for Ventersburg.¹⁷

The stance he adopted did not affect the esteem in which he was held within the Boer community, as is evident from his continued service on the Winburg church council, where he was the leading proponent of the establishment of a separate congregation at Smaldeel. In 1909 he was the chairman, and Van Heyningen the secretary, of a meeting at Smaldeel, which led, in time, to the implementation of this project. On 19 May 1910 a separate congregation was finally achieved and the first church council of four elders and eight deacons was elected, including Helgaard Theunissen and at least three other members whose wartime activities were, shall we say, suspect. In 1915, in the wake of a rebellion led by irreconcilables from the Anglo-Boer War, Theunissen was appointed to the office of church elder. In tandem with the striving for a separate congregation, moves were also afoot for the proclamation of a new township based on the Smaldeel siding. In this matter too, Theunissen was a key player. On 13 September 1907 the new town was proclaimed and was named Theunissen in his honour.¹⁸

Fanie Vilonel

Before the war, Stephanus Gerhardus (Fanie) Vilonel was a law agent and auctioneer and served as town clerk of Senekal. As an educated and wealthy man and, moreover, an incomparable marksman, who won the Free State championships held in Senekal in

¹⁷ F.S.A., Archives of the Colonial Secretary of the Orange River Colony, (hereafter CO) 187.4854, 4 July 1903, amended in CO 188.4854a and 4854b, dated 17 Oct. 1903.

¹⁸ De Kock, *Gister is Verby!*, 11-24.

1893,¹⁹ it is not surprising that he was elected field-cornet of Winburg's Onder-Wittebergen ward. On 3 October 1899, the 600 men under his command assembled in the Senekal church before setting off for the Natal border.

When the Winburg and Senekal commandos were recalled from Natal, Vilonel fell under the command of Christiaan de Wet. After the attempt to retake Oskoppies, in which Helgaard Theunissen was captured, De Wet had enough confidence in Vilonel to appoint him as commandant of the Winburg commando.²⁰ He distinguished himself as a brave, capable and respected leader who inspired his men to give of their best at the battle of Abrahamskraal.²¹ On 25 March 1900, the burghers returned from the leave they had been granted following the fall of Bloemfontein. From their meeting place on the Sand River, Christiaan de Wet moved south with 1 500 men and seven guns. Somewhere between Winburg and Brandfort, he fell out with Vilonel, whose Winburg commando was accompanied by about thirty wagons, in spite of the *krygsraad* decision of just a week before that commandos should no longer be thus encumbered. De Wet informed Vilonel in writing that the wagons must be sent home, whereupon Vilonel demanded in writing that the *krygsraad* decision should be reconsidered. He also insisted that De Wet's decision to attack Sannaspos should be delayed until he had the opportunity of reconnoitering the positions assigned to his men. De Wet offered Vilonel the choice of

¹⁹ Albert Grundlingh, 'Die Stigting van Senekal en Ontwikkeling in die Dorp en Wyk Onderwittebergen tot 1899', Unpublished BA Hons. mini-dissertation, University of the Orange Free State, 1971, 38.

²⁰ N.A.P., Leyds 717, Telegram 18, De Wet to President Kruger, 26 Feb. 1900, quoted in Breytenbach, *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*, IV (Pretoria, 1977), 485.

²¹ Brink, *Oorlog en Ballingskap*, (Kaapstad, 1940), 69.

resignation or dismissal and summarily appointed Gert Stephanus van der Merwe in his place.²²

Perhaps Vilonel's success had gone to his head;²³ perhaps the clash with De Wet had more to do with the chemistry between the two men, one a rough and irascible countryman, the other an urbane and sophisticated townsman, than with Vilonel's wagons.²⁴ The fact of the matter is that Vilonel had fought well, but after the fall of Bloemfontein, he clearly lost faith in the war.

When General A.I. de Villiers was severely wounded at the battle of Biddulphsberg on 29 May 1900, Vilonel offered to take him to Senekal for medical attention. Here Vilonel entered into negotiations with the British and it was agreed that should he surrender, he could remain in the town on parole. For the present, however, Vilonel returned to the commandos and when De Villiers died, he was offered the vacant position of combat general. Vilonel declined on the grounds that he had decided to surrender and this he did in the second week of June 1900.²⁵ He subsequently justified his decision to surrender on the grounds that 'our independence was hopelessly lost, ... and that it was absolute folly to continue the struggle, as it would only lead to total destruction of private property and ultimate destitution.'²⁶

²² Christiaan de Wet, *Three Years War (October 1899 – June 1902)* (London, 1902), 92. See also J. J. Oberholster and Jan Stemmet, *Senekal se Eerste Honderd Jaar* (Senekal, 1977), 69-70; M.C.E. van Schoor, *Christiaan Rudolph de Wet, Krygsman en Volksman* (Pretoria, 2007), 92.

²³ Michael Davitt, *The Boer Fight for Freedom* (New York, 1902), 563.

²⁴ Van Schoor's description of the scene in *Christiaan Rudolph de Wet, Krygsman en Volksman*, p. 92, includes the significant statement that De Wet's patience was at an end and his threat that he would shoot Vilonel like a dog. By contrast, Vilonel, although compromised by his wartime activities, had the sophistication and urbanity that fitted him to serve six terms as mayor of Senekal. Furthermore, others did not give up their wagons, and the Winburgers under Sarel Haasbroek lost no fewer than 34 of theirs to Hector MacDonald between 13 and 17 September 1900, fully five months after the dismissal of Vilonel.

²⁵ Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason*, 339.

²⁶ Letter dated 19 March 1901, quoted in Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason*, 340.

Shortly after surrendering, Vilonel wrote to Field-Cornet Hans van Rooyen of the Korannaberg ward of the Ladybrand commando, seeking to persuade him to surrender with his men. Vilonel's letter was intercepted and in a sting operation he was captured and brought to trial.²⁷ He was not arraigned before a krygsraad at Zuringkrans because it was feared that certain officers who were present there had already negotiated with the enemy in the vicinity of Ficksburg.²⁸

The trial took place at Reitz before Judge J.B.M. Hertzog and two assessors, Thomas Philip Brain and Johan Godfried Luyt. Vilonel was sentenced to five years' imprisonment with hard labour, the judge remarking that he was fortunate to escape a death sentence. On 11 July 1900, Vilonel's appeal was heard at Fouriesburg by the full bench of Hertzog as acting chief justice and Frederik Reinhardt (Frikkie) Cronjé and Hendrik Hugo as acting judges (Chief Justice Melius de Villiers and Judge Hendri Stuart having surrendered when Bloemfontein fell),²⁹ with J.A.J. de Villiers prosecuting. Vilonel asked that the trial be postponed until after the war to enable him to retain legal counsel but when this was refused, he conducted his own defence, insisting that he had acted throughout according to the dictates of his conscience. In upholding his previous sentence, Hertzog asserted that the name of S. J. Vilonel would remain an eternal blot on the history of the Free State.³⁰ Following the fall of Bethlehem, the Boers no longer had

²⁷ F.F. Pienaar, *Op Kommando met Steyn en De Wet* [originally published as *With Steyn and De Wet*, London, 1902], 113.

²⁸ J.N. Brink, *Oorlog en Ballingskap*, 76.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason*, 341-2; Pienaar, *Op Kommando met Steyn en De Wet*, 113; Van Schoor, ed., *The Diaries and Recollections of Jacob Abraham Jeremias de Villiers*, *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, vol. 8, 11 and 36; J.J. Oberholster, ed., 'Dagboek van Oskar Hintrager – Saam met Christiaan de Wet, Mei tot September 1900', *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 2 (Pretoria, 1973), 6 Julie 1900, 69-70; C.C.J. Badenhorst, *Uit den Boeren-Oorlog 1899-1902: Ervaringen en Aantekeningen*, (Amsterdam, 1903), 40. Van Schoor errs in saying that Vilonel was sentenced to six months' imprisonment – cf. Van Schoor, ed., 'The Diaries and Recollections ...', *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, vol. 8, 1 ln.

any prisons, so Vilonel was made to accompany the commandos into the Brandwater Basin where he was employed by Prinsloo to negotiate the Boer surrender to General Hunter.

At a meeting chaired by Meyer de Kock, a surrendered burgher of Belfast, Transvaal, the establishment of a Burgher Peace Committee was proposed.³¹ Before the end of December 1900, a central Burgher Peace Committee was established in Pretoria, and six local committees were in place in the Transvaal by end of January 1901. The same pattern was followed in the Free State. In December 1900, a main committee was set up in Kroonstad under Piet de Wet, brother of Christiaan de Wet, with sub-committees in Bloemfontein, Harrismith, Bethlehem and Winburg.³² The Winburg committee, which was chaired by George John Perry of Oatlands, consisted of H.S. Viljoen (erstwhile member of the Volksraad for Wittebergen, Bethlehem district), J.C. Pretorius, P.N. van der Merwe, and D.C. Botha, Frans Alwyn Smit Schimper of Bresler's Flat, Stephanus Gerhardus Vilonel of Senekal, Stephanus Petrus Erasmus Jacobs of Rietfontein and James Adendorff of Smaldeel.

In January 1902, Vilonel wrote to President Steyn threatening active intervention:

If you wish to proceed with the needless continuance of a devastating war, which can only result in the total decline and destruction of your own people, making ex-burghers of both Republics into hewers of wood and drawers of water, you will be the cause that I and other ex-officers and burghers take up arms against you in civil war, to thus accelerate the end.³³

Soon afterwards he began to give effect to this threat. On 18 February 1902, Vilonel wrote from Bloemfontein to the (British) Military Secretary in Pretoria: 'I have started to

³¹ S.B. Spies, *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer Republics January 1900 – May 1902* (Cape Town, 1977), 179-81.

³² Grundlingh, *Die 'Hendsoppers' en 'Joiners'*, 116-7.

³³ Idiomatically modified version of the translation in CO 417/348/2274, of Vilonel's letter dated 11 Jan. 1902, quoted in Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason*, 281.

bring my men together here. Should I not be able to raise a force sufficiently strong to take the field, I will suggest the best method to follow.’³⁴ He assembled more than 300 men and the Orange River Colony Volunteers, an armed and uniformed unit of the British army, corresponding to the National Scouts in the Transvaal, was established. There was a division under Piet de Wet at Heilbron and another under Vilonel at Winburg. By the end of the war the numbers had grown to 448 – 248 at Heilbron and 220 at Winburg.³⁵ These formations were of little use to the British on the battlefield but they played an important role as scouts and guides and they sapped Boer morale. In a skirmish on 18 April 1902, a number of members of the Orange River Colony Volunteers were captured at Spitskop near present-day Marquard, Vilonel himself escaping only because of the speed of his mount.³⁶

When peace was restored, Vilonel’s abilities as a law agent and auctioneer stood him in good stead. His law firm handled scores of claims for compensation submitted to the Central Judicial Commission (CJC). Deaths during the war led to the subdivision of farms between the heirs and the necessary re-registration of title. The non-viability of units resulting from such subdivision, lack of liquidity and the foreclosure of mortgages unpaid during the war meant that farms or portions of farms had to be sold off. With an eye to the main chance, Vilonel took out options on 3 000 morgen (2 500 hectares) of farmland at 30 shillings per morgen, with a view to resale to the Commission for Volunteer Repatriation at £2 per morgen.³⁷

³⁴ N.A.P., Archives of the Provost Marshal (PMO) 47.3172, Vilonel to Military Secretary, Pretoria, 18 Feb. 1902.

³⁵ Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason*, 281-2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 292.

³⁷ F.S.A., Archives of the Director of Land Settlement (DLS) 8.A957, Blakemore to Apthorpe.

In September 1902, Senekal got a board of management, comprising Oliver Edwards, Herman Opperman, Joseph Busschau, Robert Barnes and Charles Parker.³⁸ Vilonel, who became mayor in the following year, served on the council without interruption until his death in 1918.

Gerrie van der Merwe

As has been shown, Gert Stephanus (Gerrie) van der Merwe was a Senekal field-cornet, 'a courageous and amiable man',³⁹ who was appointed as commandant of the Winburg commando by De Wet when Vilonel was forced to resign the position. He was subsequently elected commandant of the Senekal commando.

At Jammersberg, the new commandant was involved in a shoot-out with Major A.W.C. Booth of the Northumberland Fusiliers, in which his adversary was killed and Van der Merwe himself severely wounded.⁴⁰ His command passed to Hendrik Lodewyk Willem (Henri) Cremer of Leeuwkuil,⁴¹ but Cremer died in battle less than a month later. Van der Merwe, who had recovered, resumed the rank of commandant and fought on until Prinsloo's surrender.

On 30 July 1900 the news broke in the Brandwater Basin that Marthinus Prinsloo, contentiously elected as Chief Commandant, had offered General Hunter the unconditional surrender of the Boer forces in the basin, comprising more than 4 000 men with their arms and ammunition, their commissariat livestock and other supplies.⁴²

³⁸ F.S.A., CO 99 3825/02; CO 117.5391/02.

³⁹ Christiaan de Wet, *Three Years War*, 70.

⁴⁰ F.S.A., Accession (A) 119.1215: Letter from Manie van Rooyen; cf. L.S. Amery, ed., *The Times History of the War in South Africa*, IV, 43; M.C.E. van Schoor, ed., *Die Stryd tussen Boer en Brit*, 84.

⁴¹ F.S.A. A 3 2/1 No. 3.1: Die Senekal-Kommando in die Eerste Ses Maande van die Boereoorlog.

⁴² J.N. Brink, *Ceylon en de Bannelingen* (Amsterdam, 1904), 88-9.

Sobbing like a child, Commandant Gerrie van der Merwe thanked the Senekallers for their loyal service and laid down his office, protesting that Prinsloo's action, by which he felt himself bound, was unsanctioned by a krygsraad.⁴³ After him, apparently, Paul Roux, the rival Chief Commandant, got on the wagon and, with tears rolling down his cheeks, told his burghers that they had been sold out.⁴⁴

Van der Merwe went as a prisoner of war to the Green Point camp. Captivity provided the British with the opportunity of systematically suborning their more influential prisoners. From the diarist Rocco de Villiers we know that all captured officers were invited to meet with officers of the British Intelligence Department. De Villiers's experience of being plied with whisky and soda, cigarettes and friendly persuasion⁴⁵ may well have been standard procedure. Green Point was the primary clearing house, with prisoners either going from there to Simonstown or rejoining their families in the concentration camps or being deported. Between February 1901 and the beginning of July, 1 564 prisoners of war were returned from Green Point to the Free State – 202 of them to the Winburg district.⁴⁶

On 8 January 1901, Van der Merwe was sent with other officers from Green Point to Simonstown, from where he returned on 19 March 1901. In Simonstown he attended a meeting addressed by the peace envoys, Christiaan Laurens Botha and Piet de Wet.⁴⁷ On 22 March, Jacob de Villiers noted in his diary: 'Comdt. J.P. van der Merwe has gone to

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁴ F.S.A., A 119.32: Letter from R.H. van de Wall, 4.

⁴⁵ Van Schoor, ed., "'Dagboek" van Rocco de Villiers', *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 3, 7 Des. 1901, 38-9. The defector P.J. du Toit had a couple of whiskies and a cigar with one British officer, a whisky with another and concluded that a third was 'a fine chap and a jolly good fellow'; see J.P. Brits, ed., *Diary of a National Scout, P.J. du Toit, 1900-1902* (Pretoria, 1974), 31 May, 2 June, 3 June, 51-3.

⁴⁶ Ploeger, *Lotgevalle van die Burgerlike Bevolking gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog* (Pretoria, 1990), II, 16:45.

⁴⁷ Van Schoor (ed), 'The Diaries and Recollections ...', *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 8, 20 March 1901, 56.

Bloemfontein-camp where his wife is.⁴⁸ Van Schoor notes that no commandant with the initials J.P. could be traced in the Green Point camp and suggests that P.F. van der Merwe might have been intended. As Gerrie van der Merwe, according to his own testimony, left Green Point on 20 March – the day after he returned from Simonstown – the reference is clearly to him.

Van der Merwe's confirmation of this date occurs in an affidavit dated 30 May 1901 that he submitted in an attempt to have missing cattle restored to him. In this he reveals that 'I was taken as P.O.W. to Green Point and was kept there until the 20th of March 1901, when I was sent on parole to the Refugee Camp, Bloemfontein, for a certain political purpose.'⁴⁹ And this, in turn, is confirmed by the instruction authorising his release from captivity in Green Point and the notification, dated 10 March 1901, of his being parolled to Bloemfontein along with other peace delegates.⁵⁰ He signed the oath of allegiance in the Bloemfontein concentration camp, where he joined his wife Cornelia Rosina and their four children.⁵¹

After the war the Van der Merwes returned to their farm, Kookfontein, and started rebuilding their lives. On 9 February 1903, a meeting for the election of church councillors took place in Senekal. In a noteworthy address, Rev. Paul Roux, who had been a Boer general during the war, laid down the criteria for election. He urged his hearers to distinguish between political and ecclesiastical matters, saying that a good

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 22 March 1901, 57.

⁴⁹ N.A.P., CJC 407.423.

⁵⁰ N.A.P., Archives of the Staff Officer, Prisoners of War, Cape Town (SO/POW) 14.PR/A1201/01; F.S.A., CO 7.456: Governor Cape Town to Deputy Administrator.

⁵¹ N.A.P., CJC 707.423; F. S. A., SRC 71.

Christian should not be denied election to the church council for political reasons.’⁵² This is remarkable because it contrasts so strikingly with the implacable attitude he adopted at the Free State synod, which opened on 30 April, when he insisted not only on confession of guilt but also on ‘the exposure of iniquities that have been committed.’⁵³ It is equally remarkable for its decisive foreclosing of the whole issue of collaboration in relation to church council membership.

There was no contention about such membership until 26 November 1904, when it came to light that two women, the wives of David du Buisson and Jan Malan, had objected to the election of ex-Commandant van der Merwe as a deacon. Only Elizabeth Maria du Buisson of the farm Tafelberg appeared before the council and testified that during the war she had seen Van der Merwe in the presence of British troops. Gerrie van der Merwe did not deny being seen in the company of British soldiers but asked her if she knew why he was there. The chairman then asked her to admit that the Boers had spies among the British. Next he read a letter from Christiaan de Wet, vouching for Van der Merwe’s integrity and saying he was convinced that his presence with British troops indicated that he was planning to escape. Mrs du Buisson remained unconvinced. Pressed to withdraw her objection, she declined and declared that she would refrain from taking communion if Van der Merwe was confirmed in office. She was asked if she desired the evidence of witnesses to Van der Merwe’s innocence, but replied, ‘No, because one can’t believe anybody.’ The church council unanimously concluded that there was no evidence whatever of disloyalty on Van der Merwe’s part and that his own statement and De Wet’s

⁵² Quoted in G. A. van der Merwe, ‘Die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in die Oranje-Vrystaat tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902, Unpublished D.Th thesis, University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein, 1988, 237; translated.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 217, with reference to *De Fakkel*, 14 Mei 1903; translated.

letter demonstrated that his presence with a British column had a totally different purpose from that imputed to him. They accordingly ratified his election.⁵⁴

Reading the minutes it is hard to escape the impression that Mrs du Buisson was not given a fair hearing. Perhaps her fellow protestor failed to attend the meeting precisely because she feared the sort of badgering Du Buisson received. Gerrie van der Merwe's only answer to the charge was to ask the witness if she knew why he was with a British column, without himself offering any credible explanation. The chairman, Paul Roux, pressed her to admit the existence of Boer spies, without categorically claiming that Van der Merwe was one. De Wet's suggestion – again no categorical claim – that an escape was being planned is absurd in the circumstances of a prisoner of war detained in Green Point being seen with British troops in the Free State. And if the charge against Van der Merwe was preposterous, why, one wonders, was Roux armed with a letter from De Wet?

If Roux knew of Van der Merwe's involvement in 'a certain political purpose', it is still necessary to ask why he sheltered him. They were, of course, old comrades in arms. More than that, though, their involvement at the time of Prinsloo's surrender was not unproblematic – and perhaps not blameless either. De Wet's criticism of Roux, that he acted like a child, is irrefutable; his behaviour was weak, indecisive and petulant.⁵⁵ Archibald Hunter confessed he found it oddly equivocal. Roux refused to send after the burghers who were escaping from the basin to advise them to abide by Prinsloo's surrender because '[h]e said he himself felt bound by Prinsloo's action but did not think

⁵⁴ Dutch Reformed Church Archives, Bloemfontein (hereafter D.R.C.A.), Minute book of the Church Council, Senekal, 26 Nov. 1904, 189-92.

⁵⁵ Roux defended his actions in a letter to De Wet dated 23 Feb.1903; see A.M. Heyns, *Lewenskets van Generaal Ds. Paul H. Roux*, [sl.: 1930?], 15-19; Brink, *Oorlog en Ballingskap*, 101-5.

the same applied to his men. I fail to follow his argument.’⁵⁶ According to J.N. Brink, it was not only Prinsloo who entered into negotiations with the British; other officers did so without the knowledge of Roux.⁵⁷ A.P.J. van Rensburg is emphatic that Roux himself was involved.⁵⁸

The role of Van der Merwe in the Brandwater Basin surrender is more obscure. His own account of his actions reads as follows:

Although I was at first firmly resolved to escape, I thought that as the Senekal commando, which fell under Winburg, had also been surrendered, I would get into trouble if I did not surrender. I was afraid that if the enemy subsequently caught me, they would deport me for seven or eight years. Apart from that, there was no longer much chance of escape as we were virtually surrounded. I was also fairly dispirited. Yet if I had known that I had the right to escape, I would probably have tried to do so. At first I refused to surrender but later I did it on the advice of Generals Roux and Crowther.⁵⁹

In contrast to Van der Merwe’s view that there was little chance of escape, General Archibald Hunter expressed surprise that the Boers ever thought of surrendering as, in his view, their military situation did not justify it.⁶⁰

Lieutenant Gerrit Boldingh, a Dutch volunteer with the Free State forces, found it disturbing that although the terms of the (unconditional) surrender were circulated among the officers on Sunday evening 29 July, the Senekal burghers believed to the last that they were going home, and not only the ordinary burghers but Lieutenant Keulemans, who was in charge of one of the guns.

If some of the men thought they were going home, that may be regarded as mere folly. But it is impossible to assume folly in the case of Lieutenant Keulemans, who informed me on the Monday morning that everyone would be allowed to go home. Was this treachery on the part of the Senekal commandant, Van der Merwe? I cannot believe it of him.⁶¹

⁵⁶ War Office 105/24: Archibald Hunter to Chief of Staff, 4 August 1900 (N.A.P., Photocopy (hereafter FK) 1900, 103).

⁵⁷ Brink, *Oorlog en Ballingskap*, 98.

⁵⁸ A.P.J. van Rensburg, Die Skandkol wat nie wou toegroei nie, *Huisgenoot*, 8 Aug. 1969, 20.

⁵⁹ Reminiscences of G.S. van der Merwe, quoted in Oberholster and Stemmet, *Senekal se Eerste Honderd Jaar*, 80; translated.

⁶⁰ See WO 105/24, Archibald Hunter to Chief of Staff, 4 August 1900, N.A.P., FK 1900, p. 103.

⁶¹ Gerrit Boldingh, *Een Hollandsch Officier in Zuid-Afrika: Nagelaten Geschriften van Luitenant Gerrit Boldingh* (Rotterdam, 1903), 42; translated.

As one peruses the church council minutes of the period, another impression begins to obtrude itself and that is that larger forces were at play. It is as if, in the Winburg district at any rate, there was an awareness that the problem of collaboration was so vast and so sensitive that it might be best to let sleeping dogs lie. The church dealt with cases with which it was confronted but was clearly reluctant to seek out offenders. In contrast to adultery, which figured prominently in the council minutes, we hear little of ‘political’ offences. Occasionally there were complaints about neighbours who would not reconcile, for example Commandant J.M. Maree and W.J. Kok of Hattinghskraal in the Winburg congregation; L.F.E. Erasmus of Harmonie and F.H. Bekker of Witpan in Ventersburg; and A.S. Eksteen of Deelkop and F.P. Senekal of Brakfontein in Senekal.⁶² Generally, a commission was appointed to deal expeditiously with such cases but sometimes they just trailed off into oblivion. In general, though, ‘they [the collaborators] just carried on as usual, living among their fellow citizens as though nothing had happened.’⁶³

A striking demonstration of the church’s greater willingness to confront sexual issues than wartime collaboration is provided by the case of Oloff Bergh, who during the war had commanded a black corps, officered by Boers, that served on the British side. On 16 July 1904, Bergh sought admission to church membership (*aanneming*) for his wife. The Senekal church council responded that although this could happen, her presentation to the congregation (*voorstelling*) would have to be deferred for a year in order that the matter of her having had a child within a month of her marriage could be

⁶² D.R.C.A., Church Council Minutes, Winburg, 2 Aug. 1903; Ventersburg, 28 Feb. 1903; Senekal, 30 July 1904.

⁶³ A.M. Jackson, ed., *Uit die Dagboek van 'n Wildeboer deur PS Lombard* [s.l., s.a.], 160.

addressed. At the same time Bergh would be required to submit his certificate of church membership so that ecclesiastical censure could be imposed on him in this regard. It was reported that Oloff Bergh was ‘willing to submit to church discipline and, with regard to his wife’s confirmation, to abide by the wishes of the church council’,⁶⁴ and nothing more was heard of the matter.

The man on the farm

At this stage we may venture an answer to the question posed in the introduction, ‘What happened to collaborators in the Winburg district?’ In the case of Gerrie van Wyk, his actions were covered up; in the case of Fanie Vilonel, he achieved commercial success and was prominent in civic affairs; in the case of Harry Theunissen, he had a town named after him. These are extreme cases, representing the ‘gold’ of the Winburg community, but even for ordinary folk, the ‘iron’, the answer is still: ‘Nothing much.’

In countries like the Netherlands where there was a determined settling of accounts with collaborators, the government took the lead against those who had aided the losing side. In the Free State, collaborators had backed the winning side, so the civil authorities were not available as agents of retaliation and redress. In the early post-war years the church was the only authority structure that could take on this role. In some districts, the church played a proactive but benevolent role; in Winburg, as we have seen, there was a reluctance to do so and, if the church did not pursue the matter, there was no other organisation that could.

If families were divided by the bitter consequences of different choices, they were also united by the perplexity surrounding those choices. It was as Anna Barry said:

⁶⁴ D.R.C.A., Minute Book of the Church Council, Senekal, 16 July 1904 and 6 Aug. 1904, 248, 251.

people resorted freely to name calling, but it was different if a member of one's own family was involved; then the issues were no longer so clear cut.⁶⁵ The leaders certainly had some harsh things to say and those who were directly affected by someone else's actions were inevitably embittered, but it would seem that those who chose the path of patriotism could also empathise with those who opted for pragmatism. This can be illustrated with reference to the musings of two prisoners of war.

Hermanus Gerhardus Pretorius of Cyferfontein, writing a letter from Diyatalawa P.O.W. camp, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), to his brother Johannes Christiaan Pretorius in the Winburg concentration camp, adopts an almost apologetic tone:

Dear Jan, I hope and trust that you will not hold it against me that I did not listen to you when you have always been right in the past. It was bitter for me to be here and even more bitter to bid my country and my people farewell, but in the end that is what I had to do. But let us forgive and forget what is past and try to work for progress in the future since you are free and I am only too glad that you have not had to endure a protracted exile in such a sad manner as I have.⁶⁶

He did what he had to do, but he goes on to ask his brother to use his privileged position to acquire livestock to secure a better future. As this brother was a wealthy Ficksburg farmer who, in March 1901, became secretary of Winburg's Burgher Peace Committee,⁶⁷ he was well placed to make provision for the future.

After the conclusion of peace, August Schulenburg contemplated the prospect of being reunited with his brothers and wrote in his diary:

How will the meeting with my brothers be? Our fate is so very different, they are free while I am a prisoner; they are on the side of the English, I on our side! Yet I know that we have all suffered severely and no one knows which of us chose the right road, so I don't mind how I am received. For my part, I will be happy to meet them again and will love them as much as before ...⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Anna Barry, *Ons Japie*, 22 Julie 1902, 62.

⁶⁶ War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, 1676/4, JC Pretorius Collection, Correspondence (translated).

⁶⁷ N.A.P., CJC 573.49.

⁶⁸ C.A.R. Schulenburg, *August Carl Schulenburg: Krygsgevangene, Medikus, Boer* (Pretoria, 1985), 19 July 1901, 65 (translated); cf. N.T. van der Walt, 'The Diaries of August Carl Schulenburg, P.O.W No. 20671, *Africana Journal*, 15 (1999), p. 18.

Apart from the actual ties of kinship between the people of a particular locality, the quasi-kinship of people who used family terms as a form of address also inhibited retaliatory actions. Local ties were stronger than national ties and, on the ground, the simple fact is that people needed one another. There is a poignant moment in Chris Schoeman's *Boer Boy* when the Winburger Philip du Preez of Wonderkop is returning to his devastated farm after the war. Overtaken by nightfall, he reluctantly turns to his neighbor, Flip Koekemoer of Rondehoek, a collaborator during the war, for hospitality, and is received by Koekemoer and his wife with warmth and generosity.⁶⁹ Du Preez's own involvement in the war was minimal,⁷⁰ but he stood higher in the hierarchy of esteem than Koekemoer, and thus, in the midst of muddle and ambiguity, 'hendsoppers' might help to bridge the gap between 'bittereinders' and 'joiners.'

The Boers were, furthermore, characterised by diffidence in social interaction. Oskar Hintrager, an astute observer of the Boers, commented on this indeterminacy in their dealing with one another, the unaffirmative handshake, followed by desultory conversation about non-controversial matters,⁷¹ and as late as the 1940s, the Afrikaans novelist Karel Schoeman, who grew up in a Dutch-speaking home, was aware of a striking ambivalence – a tendency to avoid confrontation, not to express opinions directly, to give guarded replies, which he and his mother regarded as 'typically

⁶⁹ Chris Schoeman, *Boer Boy: Memoirs of an Anglo-Boer War Youth* (Pretoria, 2010), 166-7.

⁷⁰ The Resident Magistrate's comment on his claim for compensation was that it was not sure that he had ever taken up arms; see N.A.P., CJC 1712.1610; although, ironically, he was awarded the 'Zuidafrikaanse Republiek en Oranje Vrijstaat Oorlogsmedalje'; see D.R. Forsyth, *The Medal Roll* (Johannesburg [1976]), 62.

⁷¹ Oberholster, ed., *Dagboek van Oskar Hintrager, Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 2, 10 Julie 1900, p. 62, and 17 en 26 Aug. 1900, 115 en 125.

Afrikaans.⁷² Linguistically, this equivocation is exemplified by the remarkable collocation *ja-nee*, which expresses complete accord with indisputable observations but also attitudes ranging from partial or qualified agreement to cautious rejection of an opinion expressed. Given this aspect of *mentalité*, it is not surprising that Piet Grobbelaar, a writer who recalled his Free State childhood, commented on the fact that the war was avoided as a topic of conversation. There were too many divided loyalties and that made it a dangerous subject.⁷³

Another reason why there was little follow-up of collaboration is that it was not conducive to political mobilisation. As a prisoner of war in India, the cultural entrepreneur Gustav Preller reflected on future relations with disloyal burghers. Although the term ‘conciliation’, which later became the watchword of Louis Botha’s first Union government, was unknown to him at the time, he concluded that the rejection of disloyal burghers could not continue after the war as Afrikaner unity and cooperation would be essential *vis-à-vis* the British.⁷⁴

By a curious turn of events, a group of ‘renegades’ initiated the national movement in the Free State that led to the political ascendancy of their adversaries. Johannes Vlotman had surrendered in Winburg on 19 May 1900. In spite of the fact that he had not violated his oath of neutrality, he was arrested and sent to the Green Point P.O.W. camp. He objected and was paroled to Stellenbosch. On his return to the Free State, Vlotman discovered that he was prejudiced, in that his claim for compensation was not being dealt with as that of a ‘protected burgher’. Vehemently indignant, he convened a meeting in Brandfort on 17 September 1904, at which nineteen aggrieved Free Staters,

⁷² Karel Schoeman, *Die Laaste Afrikaanse Boek: Outobiografiese aantekeninge* (Kaapstad, 2002), 142.

⁷³ Pieter W. Grobbelaar, *Die Vrystaat en sy Mense* (Kaapstad, 1980), 62.

⁷⁴ Gustav Preller, *Ons Parool: Dae uit die Dagboek van 'n Krygsgevangene* (Kaapstad 1943), 94.

whose primary concern was the way in which compensation claims were being handled, gave vent to their dissatisfaction with the colonial administration, opening up a variety of other issues. The ex-laager commandant of Winburg, Johannes Petrus Erwee of Olienfontein, for example, was aggrieved about members of the South African Constabulary who spoke only English.⁷⁵ A committee under Vlotman was appointed to pursue the matter of the compensation claims. On the advice of the Prime Minister of the Orange River Colony, Abraham Fischer, this committee included all categories of complainants: N.J. Vermaak, G.H. Erwee and G.J. van Graan, who were also hendsoppers, J.P. Marais, who had never been on commando, W.H. Maas, a collaborator, and a solitary bittereinder, J.J. van Rensburg.⁷⁶ The committee compiled a manifesto, which resonated widely because there was considerable dissatisfaction abroad.

During October and November 1904, meetings were held throughout the colony. At these meetings, grievances about compensation were interspersed with expressions of dissatisfaction from the bittereinder community relating to the language medium in schools, the South African Constabulary and the delay in implementing responsible government.

The outcome of these moves was a congress held in Brandfort on 1 and 2 December attended by 102 delegates. According to Goold-Adams, they were equally representative of the two factions.⁷⁷ Christiaan de Wet and J.B.M. Hertzog attended this congress and the latter was elected chairman – and, in the words of Oswald Pirow, ‘from

⁷⁵ Van Rensburg, ‘Die Ekonomiese Herstel van die Afrikaner in die Oranjerivier-Kolonie 1902-1907, *Archives Yearbook for South African History*, 30:2 (Pretoria, 1967), 195.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁷⁷ Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason*, 460.

that moment for over thirty-five years dictated the policy of the Free State.⁷⁸ Hertzog allowed the originators of the initiative ample opportunity to expatiate on their disillusionment with the government, because their alienation from the British authorities left them with nowhere to turn but to their compatriots and the ensuing *rapprochement* would strengthen his hand in the more important matters that were his concern. As Goold-Adams put it:

The result of the Congress has been to confirm my anticipation that, as soon as the actual business of the meeting commenced, the management of the proceedings would be taken out of the hands of the original movers of the Compensation question, and would pass into those of the more important politicians.⁷⁹

So, ironically, Vlotman's manifesto was the catalyst of a national movement that led to the establishment of an Afrikaner political party called the *Orangia Unie* in May 1906. Responsible government followed in June 1907. In the elections for the Legislative Assembly in November of that year, the *Orangia Unie* won no fewer than 31 of the 38 seats with 66 per cent of the votes cast.

Historical amnesia

The hue and cry against collaborators soon died down and although it surfaced again at the time of the 1914 rebellion, the identity of most of those who, in one way or another, had aided the British was not widely known, giving people the opportunity to re-invent themselves as sturdy patriots and supporters of the emergent National Party. During the post-war period there was a natural reluctance within families and in society at large to discuss collaboration in the interest of healing and reconciliation. This reticence fed into

⁷⁸ Oswald Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog*, (Cape Town, s.a.), 44.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason*, 462.

the construction of the myth of a united people heroically opposing a powerful enemy, precisely the same process as in post-war France, where the shame of collaboration was concealed and Resistance inflated to serve the Gaullist agenda of building national pride. This kind of construction is no mere fable; it is functional to society at a particular time; it is one of the ‘myths we live by.’

Collaboration was also avoided in traditional historiography, because it was perceived as discreditable to the Afrikaner and inconsistent with the heroic interpretation of the war that helped to reconcile the nation to defeat and provided a political mythology for building a national future.⁸⁰ In the mid-seventies the South African state helped to draw a veil of secrecy over collaboration by extending until 2000 the embargo on archival resources that listed Boers who had fought on the British side.⁸¹

In the three decades after the war only nine books were published based on reminiscences of the war; by contrast, the thirties and forties brought a multitude of books, glorifying the leaders and the bittereinders and excoriating the traitors.⁸² In Afrikaans fictional works such as Van Bruggen’s *Bittereinders* (1935) and TC Pienaar’s *’n Merk van die Eeue* (1939) burgeoning Afrikaner nationalism expressed itself with great virulence.⁸³ But by then it was too late: it was rhetoric that did not connect with reality; the real-life collaborators had gone to ground and there were only ideological straw men left to inveigh against.

⁸⁰ A recent work deals more specifically with the execution of Boer collaborators, a theme even more repugnant to national sentiment as it affected not only popular memory but also academic research; see Albert Blake, *Boereverraaier: Teregstellings tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog* (Kaapstad, 2010), 17, 19.

⁸¹ Albert Grundlingh, Foreword to the second edition of *Die ‘Hendsoppers’ en ‘Joiners’: Die Rasionaal en Verskynsel van Verraad* (Pretoria, 1999).

⁸² A Grundlingh, The Bitter Legacy of the Boer War, *History Today*, 49:2 (1999), 22.

⁸³ M. Rice, *From Dolly Gray to Sarie Marais*, 20.

Concluding perspective

Today, Afrikaner nationalist historiography has run its course and the fiction of its heyday is embarrassingly *passé*. Both historiography and creative writing have had to grapple with the ambiguities and complexities of the past and are the richer for it. Now, as we reflect dispassionately but empathetically on the agonising existential choices that confronted our forbears, we can begin to perceive that the acknowledgement that they were not a race of Titans but all too fallible human beings has important implications for identity construction and coexistence in a democratic, pluralistic South Africa.