'Segregation has fallen on evil days': Smuts' South Africa, global war, and transnational politics, 1939–46

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Abstract

South African state policy in the 1940s moved in significantly new political directions that were not simply the prelude to apartheid. This shift, under the leadership of Jan Smuts, towards a welfarist management of black urbanization, can only be understood by focusing on transnational dimensions of the period that have been neglected by historians of South Africa. The reorganization of the state was made possible as a consequence of the business of fighting a global war. South African policy changes were intimately linked to the evolution of British colonial policy. And the South African interventions in world politics to support the creation of the United Nations and to reconfigure the southern African subcontinent were to have drastic and unforeseen consequences.

In January 1942, Field Marshal Jan Christian Smuts, Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa and Commander in Chief of its armed forces, was leading his country through a new phase of the Second World War. He was facing considerable dangers from without and within. South African troops were participating in the difficult, fluctuating British campaign against the German and Italian forces in North Africa. Victorious Japanese armies were advancing through Southeast Asia, which opened the possibility of a threat to the east coast of Africa by the imperial navy, fresh from its triumphs against the Americans at Pearl Harbour and the British in the Indian Ocean. Militant Afrikaner nationalists were agitating and plotting against Smuts' regime, in the hope that a victory for Hitler would give the country into their control. Although mainstream African nationalists were supporting the war effort, communists were successfully organizing community and labour protests amongst the vote-less African workers of the country's urban locations and slums. And even politically enfranchised white workers were demonstrating a considerable labour militancy.

In this moment of high drama, Smuts made a remarkable speech to the South African Institute of Race Relations. Despite the distinction to which he had risen in the councils of

the British empire, he had always appeared to stand for unqualified white control of the South African polity. He consistently presented himself as presiding over a benevolent paternalism towards South Africa's black population. Smuts was associated with policies of segregation, in which Africans would live in a rural world of chiefly governance and customary law but would never have access to the political levers of the state, nor become an integral part of the modern urban social order. Yet suddenly, in his speech Smuts seemed to declare the failure of this approach. He noted that with urbanization the old ethnic and racial distinctions were eroding: 'there has been an intermixture of the various Native tribes and races, and of the population generally in South Africa which was never dreamt of before'. Then he announced what seemed to be a dramatic shift in South African racial policy: 'Isolation has gone and segregation has fallen on evil days, too'.[1] The hidebound segregationist seemed to be turning in a new direction.

There is a standard account of the 1940s in South Africa in the historiography that would appear to explain this moment, and dismiss it as a mere rhetorical flourish. In this version, the decade was the inevitable lead-up to the victory of D. F. Malan's Afrikaner nationalists in 1948. The growth of local industries stimulated African urbanization. The Smuts government failed to respond to this situation, developing no new initiatives to address the social and political conditions of African people. Although superficially flirting with change in order to placate the black population in 1942, Smuts quickly backed down once the Allies gained the upper hand in the war. Smuts, as a lifelong segregationist, became increasingly out of step with British and world opinion on racial questions, and it was inevitable that South Africa would find itself isolated after the war. Thus the 'evil days' speech appears simply as a hypocritical, temporary attempt to rally black support, and of no larger significance.

In contrast, I argue in this article that South Africa in the 1940s did move in significantly new political directions that cannot sensibly be understood as merely the prelude to apartheid. The policies of these years represent the direct opposite of the attempt to drive the black working class out of the urban areas, which was to be the central feature of apartheid. Instead, they moved toward a strategy based on acceptance of black urbanization. Moreover, I suggest that the direction of the state under Smuts can only be understood by focusing on two dimensions that have been neglected by South African historians: military power and spatiality. We need to give an autonomous significance to the political and social impact of fighting a global war. And we need to situate what happened inside the country within the much broader framework of the region, the British empire, and the emerging post-war global order. The demands of war unleashed a radical, and in some respects quite effective, reorganization of the South African state, economy, and racial arrangements. Contingent events in the military struggle had a huge impact on South African policy. Smuts' internal political direction evolved in the context of continuous intervention by him in international discussion about the shape of the post-war world, in which he wielded extraordinary power. He allowed significant groups of white liberal and social democratic officials to create a programme of rather sweeping welfarist and reformist initiatives, some of which were implemented.

I will argue that his approach was not out of line with that of British colonial policy, which rather paralleled the evolution of South African 'native administration'. It coincided

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1   Jean van der Poel, ed., *Selections From the Smuts papers, volume VI: December 1934–August 1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 335, 336.

with and was linked to a British turn during the early 1940s away from the passive and decentralized colonial rule of the 1920s and 1930s, towards a strongly developmentalist and interventionist – although still undemocratic and authoritarian – form of governance. Like Smuts, British colonial administrators embraced urbanization in Africa, and supported the policies necessary to underpin it.

The speech also provokes an important question about Smuts' part in the creation of post-war global institutions. How was it that the prime minister of a state based on a racial franchise became one of the initiators of the United Nations and the discourse of human rights? Smuts helped to smooth the diplomatic way for the UN, and was among the key drafters of the UN Charter's preamble. It appears to have been he who introduced the phrase 'human rights' into the document. This moment in history has been very variously interpreted. Mark Mazower sees the UN as less respectful of law and minority rights than the League of Nations had been.[2] On the other hand, Bruce Mazlish argues that, in the ideology of the UN, and especially through its Charter, a new symbolic sovereign was created, namely a common humanity.[3] An understanding of Smuts' role may give us an insight into the political ambiguities that make it possible for scholars to have such divergent perceptions of that moment. Smuts managed to combine a humanist faith in historical evolution with a belief that world politics would and should continue to be dictated by a conclave of the major powers. Far from representing his personal eccentricity, this combination of high-minded rhetoric and faith in big-power dominance was common in the British, American, French, and Soviet leaderships, none of which had yet grasped how dramatically the imminent anti-colonial revolution was to transform world politics.

The South African 1940s reconsidered

Although international military imperatives, military power, military organization, and military culture were primary forces in shaping the South Africa of the 1940s, with the exception of a few impressive contributions by social historians[4] this whole dimension of the South African 1940s has largely been left to myopic versions of military history. Historians seeking to explain the evolution of South African racial policy tend to look inwards for explanations and to produce a teleological history in which the rise of apartheid becomes inevitable. Both these features of the national historiography are apt to reinforce its notorious tendency toward 'exceptionalism', in which South Africa comes to be regarded as utterly different from and entirely unconnected with the histories of the rest of the world.

Instead, our understanding of 'internal' South African developments in these years needs to be inserted within a transnational framework, informed by the spatial turn in historiography.

2   Mark Mazower, *No enchanted palace: the end of empire and the ideological origins of the United Nations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

3   Bruce Mazlish, *The idea of humanity in a global era*, New York: Palgrave, 2009.

4   Albert 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, 1999, pp. 351–65; Michael Cardo, '"Fighting a worse imperialism": white South African loyalism and the Army Education Scheme (AES) during the Second World War', *South African Historical Journal*, 46, 1, 2002, pp. 141–74; Neil Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: white servicemen and social justice in South Africa, 1939–1951*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.

In the context of global war, the territorial organization of southern Africa, the British empire, and indeed the world was at stake. This had massive effects on the internal political evolution of the country. It threatened the collapse of the existing order, but it also created a need for drastic political restructuring. And it offered real possibilities for the South African state to play a new role in the global order, which Smuts was determined to seize.

In an important intervention in the historical literature, Saul Dubow has pointed out that, contrary to conventional historical wisdom, 'apartheid was only one of several competing visions of the future … In no sense was the triumph of apartheid preordained'.[5] Dubow rightly identifies one such vision as a 'liberal or social democratic South Africanism …. Inspired by liberal and left-wing internationalist thought and championed by opponents of fascism and supporters of the war effort, its supporters included intellectuals, reform-minded officials check and servicemen and women'.[6] This, he suggests, was a powerful trend under the 1939–45 Smuts government. My analysis strongly supports Dubow's contentions, and the portrait of the period that emerges from the excellent book on the period which he has edited with Alan Jeeves.[7] But I also want to suggest that this new picture of the decade only makes sense when a much greater emphasis is placed on the dynamics of war, and South African policy is situated in a broader spatial–political framework than Dubow, Jeeves, and their contributors allow for.

World wars are surely the moments at which the rival imaginaries of the future are most able to come into play. Because battle makes the future radically uncertain, it opens up a space for powerful political actors to put forward their visions for a post-war order. And as the outcome of the conflict becomes more clear, some of these imaginaries, which appear to accord with the emerging realities of power, gain traction. Far from being left behind by global politics, Smuts' government, at least until the end of hostilities in 1945, appeared to be positioning itself to take advantage of the political possibilities of the post-war world.

The article will show how a series of military, political, and intellectual interventions by Smuts between 1906 and 1939 enabled South Africa to play a role out of all proportion to its economic power in the politics of the Second World War. Smuts had had significant success in Paris in 1919 in the battles around the configuration of the world order in the wake of the First World War. He was, quite reasonably, convinced that he could do so again, for (as we shall see) he had developed a unique position within the politics of the British empire, which he was actually able to strengthen in the early years of the Second World War. He sought to take the opportunity of war to shape a new relationship between South Africa and the wider world, but one in which the country was still to be situated within the boundaries of the British commonwealth, which itself would still play a central role in world politics.

The spatial politics of Jan Smuts

Before proceeding to the 1940s, it is important to explain how Smuts, as the leader of a country of rather modest military and political power, and limited wealth, was able to

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5   Saul Dubow, 'Introduction: South Africa's 1940s', in Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves, eds., *South Africa's 1940s: worlds of possibilities*, Johannesburg: Double Storey, 2005, pp. 1–2.

6   *Ibid.*, p. 2.

7   Dubow and Jeeves, *South Africa's 1940s*.

project himself and his nation into the global arena. What was crucial here was that he was able to establish himself as a key figure in the minds of British elites as a promoter of the transmutation of the empire into commonwealth. He backed up his personal ideological virtuosity in advocating this project with making himself indispensable to metropolitan power by consistently delivering the military support of South Africa to the imperial cause.

Smuts' early life is important for an understanding of the role that he was able to play in the future of the British empire.[8] The son of a moderately prosperous Afrikaner farming family in the western part of the Cape Colony, he had been an academic prodigy at Victoria College in Stellenbosch and subsequently at Cambridge. Like many elite Cape Afrikaners of the late nineteenth century, Smuts was somewhat Anglophile in his cultural attitudes, and was initially attracted to Cecil Rhodes's imperialism. However, the unsuccessful attack by Rhodes's men on the sovereignty of the Boer republic in the Transvaal in 1895 tipped Smuts violently toward Afrikaner nationalism. In 1898 he accepted the post of attorney general in the Transvaal republic. War between Britain and the Boers broke out the next year, and after the republics were overrun by Lord Roberts' army in mid 1900, Smuts turned guerrilla commander, leading a spectacular raid along the length of the Cape Colony. Following the return of the Liberals to government in the United Kingdom in 1905, the willingness of Campbell-Bannerman's government to reinstate white rule in the Transvaal won Smuts back to imperial loyalism, a position from which he never subsequently wavered. But his role as a Boer fighter left him with a sensitiveness to the position of 'small nations' that was to be important in his role as a founder of the League of Nations and a proponent of the Commonwealth idea. And in his future dealings with the United States of America, this personal history gave him a strategic position in catering to the 'anti-colonial' sentiment that was a part of many American politicians' self-image.

The first foundation of Smuts' international political success was his extraordinary centrality in the creation of the South African state as part of the British empire. He, personally, was largely responsible for writing its constitution in 1910, for founding its army in 1912, for shaping many of its key institutions, and for drafting much of its key legislation. One would probably have to look to a figure such as Ataturk to find a case of an early twentieth-century leader as central to the formation of a modern state.

Smuts consistently sought to build South Africa as a power in a re-territorialized region. The country was a very recent creation, composed of the two former Boer republics and two British colonies in 1910. Smuts had never envisaged it as a finished work. He had always aspired to incorporate the British protectorates of Bechuanaland, Basutoland, and Swaziland. South Africa gained control over South-West Africa after conquering it from the Germans in 1914, and, although the country was held under a League of Nations mandate, Smuts hoped to annex it. He had been disappointed by the rejection of incorporation into the Union by the British settlers of southern Rhodesia in a 1922 referendum. Moreover, his military campaign in the German colony of Tanganyika had expanded his continental vision. Smuts had a utopian idea of an expansion of South Africa into the region, and the Pretoria–Witwatersrand–Vaal region provided the socioeconomic engine that could power this development. The mines of Johannesburg and the east and west Rand, the huge military

8   W. K. Hancock, *Smuts: the sanguine years 1870–1919*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962.

base at Roberts Heights, the emergent steel industry, the established capacity for electricity generation, and sophisticated financial institutions were a combination unparalleled elsewhere in Africa. African migrant workers flowed into the area, not only from within the country's borders but from the whole of southern Africa. South African goods dominated regional markets. Johannesburg had a dense network of connections with New York, London, and pre-war Europe that far exceeded that of any other metropolis below the Sahara. Smuts, as a rural romantic, detested Johannesburg, which he had once referred to as 'the mecca of the hooligan'; however, as a hard-headed strategist he knew that it was the indispensable regional engine of processes of re-territorialization. He aimed to seize the opportunity of the war crisis to change South Africa's position in the world.

Yet he could only hope to attain his regional objectives because he astutely situated them within a much wider understanding of British and global power. Smuts had been one of the primary shapers of the spatial–political order that emerged from the First World War. He was expert in finding equipoise between the specific South African interests that he represented and those of greater powers. Following his political and military successes in 1915–17, he was elevated to the imperial war cabinet. While pursuing a frenetic schedule of administrative and political tasks, over the years 1917–19 he set about the persuading the British leadership of the need for a more egalitarian political relationship between the white settler-governed dominions and Westminster, and also of the benefits of a new shape of international organization. He conducted a clever propaganda campaign refiguring the global British polity as a morally pristine 'commonwealth' rather than as a rapacious empire.[9]

There was a close interaction between Smuts' ideas of British and of world organization. Whereas the most dedicated British intellectuals of empire, the followers of Lord Milner in the Round Table group, advocated a centralized polity, Smuts saw things differently. Mazower points out that Smuts used his presence in the British leadership during the military crisis of 1917–18 to 'transform the constitutional relations between the Dominions and London, boosting the power of the former within an essentially informal organizational framework'.[10] Ideologically and politically, this was a crucial moment in the constitutional developments, which led to the Statute of Westminster of 1931, giving full legal autonomy, under the crown, to the dominions.

Simultaneously, Smuts launched a major push to convince the Cabinet that the British interest would actually be strengthened by an international organization that would keep the peace and fully engage the US with Britain. Smuts and Lord Robert Cecil were the only really committed supporters of the League of Nations idea among the top British leadership, but Smuts eventually won out in his advocacy of such a structure, both through persuasion of his colleagues and by outflanking them with the support of President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson was committed to some form of international organization, but was hazy on specifics. It was Smuts who, through a pamphlet sketching a set of 'practical' proposals and through subsequent personal discussions with the President in Paris, had shaped the constitutional form of the League.[11]

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9   *Ibid.*

10   Mazower, *No enchanted palace*, p. 36.

11   George Curry, 'Woodrow Wilson, Jan Smuts, and the Versailles Settlement', *American Historical Review*, 66, 4, 1961, pp. 968–86.

Smuts held a remarkably commanding position in British public life when war broke out in 1939, even though he had not visited the country in several years. It is sometimes considered a mystery why he was so successful in gaining the ear and the adulation of the British public, and especially of the establishment, which showered honours upon him. Part of the answer was that he thought and spoke in a way that was perfectly attuned to the register in which debate about the future was conducted during the 1920s and 1930s, but that at the same time provided an exit from its pessimism. Richard Overy has persuasively argued that 'The thesis of civilization in danger won a broad popular audience in inter-war Britain, receptive to anxiety as one of the defining features of contemporary culture, cohabiting uneasily with the glittering promise of mass consumption … the language of menacing catastrophe surfaces in most areas of public debate and discussion'.[12] Yet he claims that, when the war came in 1939, it was able to garner broad support because the fact that dictators had not been stopped by peaceful methods enabled the British people to rationalize the war as 'the only way either to save existing civilization or to construct a better and higher future'.[13]

The notion of civilization was at the core of Smuts' thought. He became an expert at playing on this discourse of civilizational crisis, while at the same time reassuringly affirming the capacity of the British empire to escape from it. He had an unshakeable faith in the mission of the British commonwealth and presented himself as the advocate and main protagonist of Britain's progressive mission in Africa. Yet his message appeared as a relatively non-jingoistic one because it harped on the need for African ethnicities to be granted their own cultural space in that dispensation. Smuts was able to formulate a voice that spoke to apocalyptic fears and yet was able to reassure the listener that, if bold action were taken, the universe favoured the triumph of light over darkness. He was also, as an advocate of the League of Nations, able to tap into a powerful wave of popularity of the international idea – the League of Nations Union became a major force in British politics in the late 1920s and early 1930s, under the leadership of Smuts' former Cabinet colleague, Robert Cecil.[14]

Key to this rhetorical performance was Smuts' personal philosophical development. He was a late Victorian liberal, fully intellectually formed during his student days in the Cambridge of the early 1890s. Oxbridge philosophy in this era was dominated by a school of neo-Hegelians led by T. H. Green, who believed that the governing elite needed to transcend self-interest. The free individual realizes himself through moral responsibility toward his own community. He (necessarily) rises above sectional interests to seek the good of the whole. He gives leadership in a gradual unfolding of the historical process. This English version of Hegel did not, however, put its trust in state power, instead incorporating Kant's linking of reason, virtue, and freedom.[15] Smuts' ideas continued to reflect his early immersion in this milieu throughout his life. In 1926 he published his book *Holism*, which drew on Anglo-Hegelian themes and combined them with evolutionism to see the world as a progressive process of development in which small units combine into greater wholes.

12   Richard Overy, *The twilight years: the paradox of Britain between the wars*, New York: Penguin, 2010, pp. 2–3.

13   *Ibid*., pp. 360–1.

14   *Ibid*.

15   Mazower, *No enchanted palace*, p. 73.

Although Smuts' holism dispenses with traditional notions of God, it does envisage a basically beneficent universe, in which both biological processes and human organization are moving toward higher forms and greater unity. This also allows him to deal with the question of difference, by envisaging special roles for smaller units within the whole.[16]

Smuts' fusion of biological and political themes provided a strange, calm centre for his political discourse. He was able to suggest to his anxious audiences that they needed to look for progress over very long stretches of historical time. A catastrophe such as the First World War could set back humanity, but they should be assured that, ultimately, advance toward a better world was imminent in the very nature of the universe. And the British were to play a special role in this process. The commonwealth was the essential bearer of freedom and progress, and was the union in which different nations and ethnicities could retain their individuality while combining into a greater whole – eventually, into a unified and peaceful world. Such Olympian certainty, and such a flattering view of the British destiny, was irresistible to the British elite. Moreover, Smuts saw international law as an instrument of the greatest value in moving toward peace. And this, combined with his strongly felt advocacy of the League and of resistance to the European dictators, made him widely admired as a principled statesman. Moreover, as a man who called for peace but was a military leader ready for war as a last resort, he was perfectly attuned to the British public's turn toward recognition of the inevitability of war at the end of the 1930s, and yet also able to empathize with and express their desire for the conflict to open a way to a better life. Indeed, a wartime collection of Smuts' speeches was published in Britain under the title *Plans for a better world*.[17]

These ideas affected Smuts' view of South Africa in a number of ways that are important to understand.[18] Freedom, for the Anglo-Hegelians, was about creating the capacity for personal self-development, ethical conduct, and a law-governed community, and the forms of those realizations could be culturally various. This partly explains Smuts' apparent obtuseness about the question of the black franchise in South Africa. Anglo-Hegelians were elitists; Smuts believed in power in the hands of a small number of talented people. He did not believe in the vote for Africans, but his opinion of the political capacity of the white working class on the Rand was little higher. Finally, the notion of retaining a distinct identity while becoming part of a larger whole enabled him to reconcile his Afrikaner identification with his role in the British empire; and to envisage South Africa as a separate power centre within that empire.

Reinforcing Smuts' British credibility was his prominence in the natural science world. Overy makes the very important point that, in the 1920s and 1930s, the British public's faith in the ability of science and technology to solve political and economic problems through scientific planning was at its height, while belief in political leaders slumped.[19] Smuts had a wide knowledge of contemporary scientific literature, was a serious botanist in his spare time, and was invited to be President of the Royal Society.[20] He was also a very active patron

16   Saul Dubow, 'Smuts, The United Nations and the rhetoric of race and rights', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43, 1, 2008, pp. 45–74.

17   Jan Christiaan Smuts, *Plans for a better world*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1942.

18   Dubow, 'Smuts'.

19   Overy, *Twilight years*, p. 372.

20   Peder Anker, *Imperial ecology: environmental order in the British empire 1895–1945*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

of the South African scientific community. All of this enabled him to present himself as a figure who transcended politics by bringing the authority of science to his political pronouncements. There was a close connection between his scientific interests, his travels, and his rhetorical vision of South Africa's central position both in Africa and in the wider world. As a botanist, Smuts' speciality was veld grasses, and he was very aware of the great grasslands that stretched across Africa all the way to the north of Kenya. In 1930 he had led a botanical expedition across southern and northern Rhodesia.[21] And in the years of the Second World War he spent many hours during the war flying over these same grasslands, in military aircraft at low altitude, on his visits to North Africa and Europe. The grandeur of the landscape, as seen from the air, made a deep impression on Smuts. To him, these immense plains were a vacant space into which the logic of historical development cried out for South African intervention.

Further support for such a vision came from the new 'science' of geopolitics. In his influential 1919 book *Democratic ideals and reality*, the geopolitical theorist Sir Halford Mackinder gave the African savannah a particular global strategic significance as the 'Southern Heartland'.[22] Although it was not as important in world strategy, in Mackinder's vision, as the European–Asian borderland, it represented an important region for control within the European–Asian–African 'World Island'. Smuts was an acquaintance of Mackinder (he received two favourable mentions in *Democratic ideals*) and was a close friend and frequent wartime correspondent of Leo Amery, the Secretary for India, who was a leading Mackinder disciple.[23] Moreover, Smuts was intrigued by the implications of Raymond Dart's paleontological research, which was pointing to the first emergence of hominids as taking place in Africa. It is worth remembering here that the South African finds were much resisted by the British scientific establishment, who favoured the Piltdown fossil, subsequently exposed as a fraud, as the key to human evolution; needless to say, the notion that the *ur*-human was an Englishman with a big brain was appealing to them. Smuts loved the idea that Africa had some kind of priority in human development, and was intrigued by the rhetorical possibilities that this opened up for his projects.[24] His science thus entered into his imperial imaginary.

To war

In 1939, when war broke out, Smuts ended his political alliance with the Afrikaner nationalists of J. B. M. Hertzog, led South Africa into the war on Britain's side, and took over as prime minister. Smuts had always been hostile to Hitler and felt a moral obligation to Britain. But there was also a strong element of political self-interest. Smuts genuinely believed that South Africa was strategically threatened by the Italian presence in the Horn of

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21 J. Hutchinson, 'General Smuts' botanical expedition to northern Rhodesia, 1930', *Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew*, 5, 1931, pp. 225–54.

22 Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic ideals and reality: the politics of reconstruction*, New York: Holt, 1942, pp. 74–82; on Smuts, pp. 29, 157.

23 Robin A. Butlin, 'The pivot and imperial defence', in Brian W. Blouet, ed., *Global geostrategy: Mackinder and the defence of the West*, London: Frank Cass, 2005, p. 36–54; Gary Kearns, *Geopolitics and empire: the legacy of Halford Mackinder*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

24 Nathan Schlanger, 'Making the past for South Africa's future: the pre-history of Field Marshal Smuts (1920s–1940s)', *Antiquity*, 76, 2002, pp. 200–9.

Africa and possible future German expansion. For him, the war was also an opportunity to strengthen the South African position in the polity of the British empire and to further the country's territorial claims in the sub-Saharan region.

The pre-war army had been severely run down, and Smuts' first task was to create a credible military force. He was constrained in doing this by complicated ethnic and racial politics. He could not impose conscription on whites because of the intensity of Afrikaner anti-British feeling. And white racism prevented him from arming African troops, whose access to weapons would be regarded as a security threat. In the circumstances, Smuts was reasonably successful in recruiting. Overall about 190,000 out of a possible 570,000 white males of military age volunteered. Smuts also recruited about 60,000 black soldiers to serve in non-combat units.[25]

Extensive measures were also taken to gear the economy for war. That South African manufacturing industry expanded dramatically in the war years is widely recognized by historians. However, the extent to which this was enabled by the exigencies of war is much less acknowledged. The wartime emergency created a situation where the state, highly centralized around the person of the prime minister, was able to hold sweeping economic, and planning powers that would have been inconceivable in any other situation. Smuts provided funds and political support for a massive programme of military production. As Nancy Clark has pointed out, 'in order to produce the necessary war goods, South African industry [was] transformed from one based on craft to one based on mechanization'.[26] This implied a great increase in the number of semi-skilled workers. And, given the drain of white men to the armed forces, it opened up jobs on a large scale for black workers and white women workers.

With the entry of Italy into the war in June 1940, Smuts felt able to make a major commitment to combat. In September 1939 he had already begun planning to assemble a South African force to confront the Italians in Ethiopia and Somalia. A month after Italy declared war, South African infantry and aircraft were sent to the northern border of Kenya. Smuts projected a strategic vision that emphasized the need to prevent Hitler gaining control of large areas of Africa and Asia, which, he argued, would give the Germans the capacity to continue the war indefinitely. Churchill tried to dampen South African urgency to take on the Italians.[27] In October, however, Smuts returned to his theme, warning Churchill of the dire potential consequences of an Axis offensive in the Middle East, in terms of control of sea routes and oil, and advocating that the region was a more favourable terrain than Europe on which to fight the Germans.[28] At the end of 1940, the British finally agreed to launch an attack in the Horn, using British, Indian, and African imperial troops, as well as local guerrillas. The campaign was quickly successful, culminating in the imperial forces' entry into Addis Ababa on 8 May. Smuts' propaganda machine played the occasion to the full, as a military triumph that demonstrated South Africa's capacity to project its force into Africa. With the Italian surrender in the region in May, two South African divisions were transferred to Egypt.

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25 Grundlingh, 'The king's Afrikaners'.

26 Nancy Clark, 'Gendering production in wartime South Africa', *American Historical Review*, 106, 4, 2001, p. 1187.

27 John Colville, *The fringes of power: Downing Street diaries 1939–1955*, New York: Norton, 1985, pp. 171–2.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 269–70.

There were other factors that gave Smuts strategic leverage with the British. After the entry of Italy into the war, the Mediterranean became almost impassable for British shipping, making the Cape sea route of crucial importance. The number of ships calling at Cape Town rose dramatically, despite the disappearance of normal passenger trade and major declines in many categories of imports and exports. From March 1938 to March 1939, 1,484 ships called at the port; for March 1940–March 1941, the number was 2,778.[29] Second, the peculiarities of South Africa's geopolitical position could allow her to be particularly cooperative to Britain, and in a sense to play the favoured child among the dominions. As the governments of Canada's MacKenzie King and Australia's John Curtin turned to the United States for military and economic support, their relations with Downing Street soured.[30] The South Africans, on the other hand, could – as long as North Africa held – rely on the British navy to defend their shores out of self-interest; and they were far from the huge centripetal forces of the American economy. Thus they could appear as the blue-eyed boys of the commonwealth, who were not overfamiliar with the USA. This was underpinned by the close personal relationship between Smuts and Churchill. Smuts' credibility in Churchill's circle was quite extraordinary. In 1940, Churchill's aristocratic but able private secretary, John Colville, floated with the royal family the idea that Smuts could become British prime minister should anything happen to Churchill, and King George responded favourably to the idea.[31]

Another reason for Churchill's strong bond with Smuts was the latter's great enthusiasm for Churchill's 'Mediterranean strategy', of fighting the Axis on its southern flank. This was important once the British began coming under pressure from the American military leadership for an early invasion of France. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff tended to believe that Churchill was avoiding this option for reasons of imperial self-interest. Leftist proponents of a 'second front' in France similarly accused Churchill of being willing to let the Soviet Union bleed. Many subsequent military historians supported such views. Recently, however, historical opinion has shifted toward the view that an Anglo-American cross channel invasion in 1942 or 1943 would have been catastrophically defeated by the Germans, and that the campaigns in North Africa and Italy did significantly weaken Hitler and buy the Western allies time to strengthen their forces.[32] So Smuts' advice, while self-interested, may well also have been sage.

South Africa and the Japanese war

The South African military position following the outbreak of war with Japan on 7 December 1941 became very fragile. The British battleships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse* had been sent east in November, in anticipation of a Japanese threat. Smuts had been concerned about the relative weakness of the British force and its lack of coordination with

29 L. C. Turner, H. R. Gordon-Cumming, and J. E. Beltzer, *War in the southern ocean*, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 258.

30 John Darwin, *The empire project: the rise and fall of the British world-system 1830–1970*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 501–10; David Day, *John Curtin: a life*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 2002, pp. 438–56.

31 Colville, *Fringes of power*, pp. 270–1.

32 Douglas Porch, *The path of victory: the Mediterranean theater in World War II*, New York: Farar, Straus and Giroux, 2004; Andrew Roberts, *Masters and commanders*, London: Penguin, 2008.

the US fleet. On 18 November he cabled Churchill prophesying 'an opening for a first class disaster'.[33] The two ships were sunk on 10 December, leaving no major warships between the Japanese navy and the east coast of Africa. There was, as of December 1941, not a single fighter squadron in South Africa, and appeals to London for planes yielded nothing. There was also only one infantry division in the country, allocated to the north-eastern border, and a handful of infantry battalions guarding the ports.[34]

The first half of 1942 saw an apparently unstoppable advance by the Japanese armies through Southeast Asia, and of the German armies across North Africa and into the Caucasus. This was a situation that put the whole shape of the post-war world into question. Smuts developed a particular strategic vision that was concerned with the possibility that the Japanese moving west and the Germans moving east would be able to lock hands over India, Afghanistan, and Persia.[35] This would give them total control over the Indian Ocean and the Middle Eastern oilfields, and enable them to shut down the British sea route around the Cape, which would probably mean the collapse of the British empire in southern Africa.

Far from being a paranoid fantasy, this view mirrored the thinking of important elements of the Japanese and German high commands, and particularly their naval leaders. In February and March 1942, Vice-Admiral Nomura, the Japanese naval attaché in Berlin, urged the Germans to attack in the Middle East, thus creating favourable conditions for Japan to launch an offensive on allied shipping in the western Indian Ocean. At a meeting on 14 March, Admiral Raeder informed Hitler that the Japanese planned to take the island of Madagascar, with a view to establishing the ability to raid as far as Cape Town. On 27 June Germany's Admiral Fricke told Nomura that 'the focal point of the war today lies in the western Indian Ocean, as the crushing of the British position in the Near East and the establishment of direct contact with Japan will decide the war'.[36]

In May the Japanese began a campaign by five huge, 2000-ton I-class submarines in the Mozambique Channel, north-east of South Africa. In the course of June and July they sank twenty merchant ships and a battleship.[37] On 1 August Admiral Donitz ordered a U-boat attack on the Cape of Good Hope. By 4 October a group of four submarines were operating off the Cape, sometimes within sight of the lights of Cape Town's Green Point suburb. They were to sink twenty-five ships over the course of their two-month campaign, losing just one of their number. Another group of U-boats operated successfully off the Natal and Cape coasts in November.[38]

Smuts explained his strategic fears in a letter that he wrote to Franklin Roosevelt from Cairo on 19 May:

> There is an area which we cannot afford to lose, without the greatest danger to our future victory. That is the Indian Ocean and the lands bordering on it, from the Middle East through Iran and Iraq to India and Ceylon. Their loss would put us in

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33   Turner, Gordon-Cumming, and Beltzer, *War*, p. 108.

34   *Ibid.*, pp. 109–10.

35   *Ibid.*; Andre Wessels, 'South Africa and the war against Japan 1941–1945', *South African Military History Journal*, 10, 3, 1996, http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol103aw.html (consulted 30 July 2012).

36   Turner, Gordon-Cumming, and Beltzer, *War*, p. 142.

37   *Ibid.*, pp. 135–41.

38   *Ibid.*, pp. 158–9.

such an unfavourable position for defence and eventual offensive and the enemy in such a powerful position for the future, that we dare not risk such a loss …. We must hold this area in 1942, just as it will be the enemy's plan to obtain control of it and so paralyse our future effort, whatever our resources may be … we must prepare for … the advance of Germany across the Caucasus and the outflanking of the position we are now holding in Egypt, Syria and Iraq …. The case seems to me imperative for the [British and American] navies joining hands and delivering a smashing blow at the earliest opportunity. Our naval dominance of the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal would put an end to Japanese advance westwards and keep open our communications with the Middle East around the Cape.[39]

But there was no prospect at that time, when the US carrier fleet was still facing a largely intact Japanese Navy, that Roosevelt could responsibly have moved his ships outside the Pacific.

In June came a catastrophe, when the Libyan fortress of Tobruk fell to the Germans, with the capture of an entire South African division. Smuts was severely shaken: 'a thunderbolt from the north … you can imagine our concern and the possible reactions in this country',[40] he wrote to a friend. On 21 July 1942 he wrote to his representative in the Middle East, Brigadier-General Frank Theron. He had been horrified to hear that the imperial Commander in Chief in the Middle East, General Claude Auchinleck, was making contingency plans for the fall of Egypt. Smuts saw no justification for this, asserting that 'I know of nothing that should make us fear a knock-out by Rommel'. But then his thoughts took an apocalyptic turn:

> Let there be no mistake, the loss of Egypt may, probably will, lose us the war. This has been my outlook from the beginning and has largely determined my decision to defend the Union in the Middle East. If the Axis get Egypt they pass into the Red Sea, they will recover Eritrea and possibly Abyssinia, and once more threaten east and South Africa. They will pass on to Iraq and establish contact by land and by sea with India. They will join hands with Japan and, whatever happens to Britain, the British Empire will be looked on as lost. There will be a political change in South Africa, which will cease to be a line of Empire communication.[41]

In such a contingency, Smuts argued, the South Africans would have to take responsibility for organizing a force to hold East Africa, if the German and Italian armies were not to overrun the African continent. Somewhat recovering his usual equipoise, Smuts then went on to make some practical proposals for assembling such a force.

The configuration of forces did begin to turn towards the end of the southern hemisphere winter of 1942, although Smuts may not have realized it fully. In May, Churchill had yielded to months of badgering by Smuts by agreeing to the allied seizure of the main port of Madagascar, which headed off Japanese intentions to use it as a base. The Japanese gradually came to the realization that naval operations in the western Indian Ocean were unsustainable, given the vast distances. A further German submarine offensive off the South African coast in January–February 1943 was checked by improved coastal defences, and the introduction of a

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39   Smuts to Roosevelt, 19 May 1942, in van der Poel, *Selections*, p. 567.

40   Smuts to M. C. Gillet, 23 June 1942, in *ibid.*, p. 368.

41   Smuts to F. H. Theron, 21 July 1942, in *ibid.*, p. 374.

convoy system.[42] Although there continued to be occasional submarine attacks thereafter, the threat to shipping fell away.

The critical juncture of war and the future of Africa: 1942

Smuts' Institue of Race Relations speech, delivered at a critical moment – January 1942 – began with his standard ideological boilerplate, with his advocacy of white trusteeship, and with the observation that blacks were not the equals of whites in 'the level of cultural advance'.[43] But then the talk took a new turn. Smuts had been a consistent opponent of Nazism, but he had always proceeded from the point of denouncing its divisive effect within European civilization. This time, though, there was a new slippage from the old South African political use of the term 'race' to refer to Afrikaner–English relations, and towards its contemporary use in the context of black and white. 'Race in the Nazi ideology becomes something divine: your race is your God', said Smuts. Lunging against hard-core Afrikaner nationalists who accepted this ideology, he continued, 'you have in Germany as an immediate by-product of this new ideology of race, the idea of a master people, the Herrenvolk .... That is going back to an old discarded idea of slavery'.[44] To raise the issue of slavery was, surely, to move into the terrain of race in a contemporary sense, and to suggest the need to reframe racial ideologies. The war, in the shape of Nazism, was invoked by Smuts as posing a question mark over the morality of white South African ideas of race.

Smuts said that the policy of segregation had resulted in 'very great disappointment at the results which have been achieved. Our fervent hope that fears would be allayed and that everybody would find his place – that whites and blacks would live happily in the country has not been realized yet'. He then moved straight into the need for a new policy, and immediately located it in the idea of a socially changing Africa, which required territorial reconfiguration. 'How could it be otherwise?' he asked.

> The whole trend both in this country and throughout Africa has been in the opposite direction. The whole movement of development here on this continent has been for closer contacts to be established between the various sections of the community. Isolation has gone in South Africa and it has gone for good. Today, if you discuss a question like the Native question … you cannot look at it merely from a South African point of view. If you touch this question, you touch Africa, because in this generation this continent has made enormous strides …. We have opened up communications: we have interstate trade. We have movement from one part of Africa to the other and much of it to South Africa.[45]

Smuts was not exaggerating: South Africa's industrial heartland had indeed become a real 'portal of globalization'.[46] The direction of his argument was that the future of the country

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42   Turner, Gordon-Cumming, and Beltzer, *War*, p. 215.

43   Smuts, Address to the SA Institute of Race Relations, Cape Town, 21 January 1942', in van der Poel, *Selections*, p. 334.

44   *Ibid*.

45   Smuts, 'Address', p. 335.

46   The phrase is from Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, 'Global history and the spatial turn: from the impact of area studies to the study of critical junctures of globalization', *Journal of Global History*, 5, 1,

could not be solved within its own borders, but only through a process of re-territorialization, in accepting its role in a world economy, and in reconfiguring sociopolitical boundaries. Thus it was via further discussion of how Africans from all over the continent had come to South Africa that he reached the centre of his speech. The project that he was advocating was a solution to South Africa's internal problems by becoming a regional imperial power.

Smuts never fully followed through on the implications of these dramatic words. He had indeed been largely responsible for the construction of a system of segregation, and he never really let go of it. But the turn was remarkable because it legitimated and gave space to liberals and social democrats advocating new developments in welfarist policy that were starting to come out of the South African state. By throwing doubt on the continued usefulness of the separation of Africans into rigid 'tribal' categories, Smuts was also allowing bureaucrats to accept the reality of permanent African urbanization, and to plan for it. Moreover, the idea of intermixture of 'the population generally' allowed South Africa to be thought of as something more complex than an arrangement of separate racial units living side by side. Smuts never fully abandoned his paternalist racism, but he certainly was not the 'father of apartheid' either. On the contrary, he was, in fact, destabilizing the basic assumptions that would underlie that policy.

Smuts, however, had no intention of incorporating Africans into a single polity with whites. What he *did* go on to advocate were major government interventions to address the education, health, and housing conditions of the African people. This marked a quite different way of thinking from a recent past in which education and health provision for African people had largely been left to missionaries, and public housing projects had been almost exclusively for whites.

The speech corresponded to a new response by the state to the changing nature of urban South Africa. Urbanization had increased throughout the 1930s, but it had received little coherent response from the Hertzog government. Smuts' break with Hertzog, together with the strengthening of the power of the state in the wartime context, allowed a much more creative and energetic range of policies to develop. Smuts' position as war leader enabled him to command extraordinary legal powers to reorganize the bureaucracy and to intervene in the market.[47] Moreover, during the war, the government worked hard to attempt to educate white citizens on the need to improve the social conditions of people of colour.[48]

These developments were accompanied by a flourishing of definite initiatives that aimed to address the social conditions of black people. By 1942, the Department of Native Affairs had recognized the importance of pass law grievances, and convictions under these laws declined massively during the war years. Industrial conditions for black workers improved substantially and black real wages in industry rose dramatically in this period. This was partly because of the compulsory arbitration of disputes, which was established during the war and tended to produce rulings in favour of black employees.[49] The period saw planning

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2010, pp. 149–70. My use of the terms 'critical juncture of globalization', 'de-territorialization', and 're-territorialization' also draws on their article.

47 Nicoli Nattrass, 'Economic growth and transformation in the 1940s', in Dubow and Jeeves, *South Africa's 1940s*, 2005, pp. 20–43.

48 Cardo, '"Fighting a worse imperialism"'.

49 Nattrass, 'Economic growth'.

for a national health service and the flourishing of a number of local public health initiatives, with South African exponents of 'social medicine' becoming global leaders in their field.[50] In 1944, a social security committee proposed a comprehensive scheme of benefits for all South Africans. Amazingly, non-contributory pensions for African people were implemented, albeit on a racially differentiated rate.[51] The key point about these developments is that they were to a large extent premised on a recognition of the breakdown of the African reserve system and the need to address the social conditions of a permanent black proletariat. This was only possible to attempt because the war had both broken Smuts' alliance with the Hertzogite segregationists and opened the space for a new planning-oriented approach to social policy.

Smuts did turn in a more repressive direction after the war, tightening up on pass laws again and toughly repressing the 1946 miners' strike. Where his regime remained strikingly different from the apartheid government that followed, however, was that it continued to give space to initiatives pursuing the line opened up in 1942 of accepting black urbanization and attempting to create adequate urban social conditions for the new urbanized working class.[52] It of course goes without saying that these were measures within a paternalist framework. Smuts as a nineteenth-century liberal did not see the franchise as the most central issue politically, and his more liberal and leftish colleagues never came up with a formula for black enfranchisement that they could sell to whites.

Smuts was by no means out of step with British colonial policy in Africa at the time. Too often South Africa is seen as exceptional within the empire, but that is really only the case post-1948. South Africa's building of a native reserve system in the 1920s and 1930s, heavily reliant on the role of chiefs and starved of social spending and government services, closely paralleled the British interwar reliance in Africa on indirect rule via tribal authorities, and the extreme parsimony of the Exchequer towards Africa. The rhetoric may have been different – paternalist and protective on the part of the Colonial Office and harshly racist in the case of white South African politicians – but the practice was much less different. Smuts' new turn in the early war years equally closely paralleled British colonial policy changes. The Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1940 marked, as Frederick Cooper points out, a move by Britain to a vision of developmentalist colonialism focused on bringing about social and economic advancement, and particularly on dealing with the social problems of urbanizing labour forces.[53] At the end of the 1930s and into the 1940s, British anthropologists, bureaucrats and pundits suddenly discovered the virtues of promoting a stable, non-migrant African workforce. This approach strongly resembles Smuts' SAIRR speech, and the subsequent direction of liberal and social democratic South African officials (and a few leading capitalists) for the rest of the decade.

Nor was there to be a great divergence between British Conservatives and their Labour successors in relation to South Africa. Although, as prime minister, Clement Attlee was

50 Alan Jeeves, 'Delivering primary health care in impoverished urban and rural communities', in Dubow and Jeeves, *South Africa's 1940s*, pp. 87–107; Howard Phillips, 'The Grassy Park Health Centre: a peri-urban Pholela?', in *ibid.*, pp. 108–28.

51 Jeremy Seekings, 'Visions, hopes, and views about the future: the radical movement in South African welfare reform', in Dubow and Jeeves, *South Africa's 1940s*, pp. 44–63.

52 Nattrass, 'Economic growth', pp. 38–9.

53 Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in question: theory, knowledge, power*, Berkeley, CA: California University Press, 2005, pp. 186–90.

anxious to rid the country of the political burdens of India and Palestine, in the rest of the empire the post-1945 Labour government pursued a long-term policy of what Peter Clarke has accurately called 'welfare-state colonialism'.[54] There was a strong emphasis on large-scale economic development projects. Many initiatives in transport, health, education, and housing across the continent did have a real impact on daily life.[55] It is true that the more enlightened elements of the British leadership were coming to prefer the term 'partnership' as opposed to Smuts' favoured 'trusteeship' as the key ideological term for the colonial relationship, but one may beg leave to doubt how much difference there was in practice.

In seeing why Smuts' internal policies remained acceptable to British leaders, it is also important to understand that Africa occupied a different space in the intellectual schemes of British policy-makers than the Asian colonies did, and this was as true for liberals and centrist social democrats as it was for Tories. British and dominion mainstream political opinion shared the view that African independence, even if desirable, could not be a short-term proposition. Although there were certainly differences between Whitehall and the South Africans, in retrospect they appear secondary compared with the common fear in London and Pretoria of American anti-colonial pressures. Many of those in London who could contemplate Indian dominion status or even independence with equanimity simply saw it as impractical to extend the same principle to African countries. Margery Perham, Britain's leading academic expert on colonial questions, and a liberal critic of Smuts' racial policies, nevertheless began a wartime defence of British policy by telling her American readers that they did not understand 'the backwardness of tropical Africa'.[56]

Smuts and the making of the post-war world

In late 1942 came the famous turn of the tide in the war. The defeat of the Germans at the Battle of El Alamein and the successful Torch landings by the Western allies on the coasts of the Mahgreb ensured that Germany would lose control of North Africa and be unable to break through from there into the Middle East. Japanese forward momentum, checked at sea in the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway, halted in the face of the beginnings of an allied counter-attack. And the German advance into the southern USSR foundered at Stalingrad.

It was clear that the Allies, backed by the overwhelming power of American industry, now generating more than half of all the industrial production on the planet, would win. But what shape would the economic and political arrangements of the post-war world take? The key question was, of course, the way in which British power would accommodate the new rise of the US, which the war had turned away from isolationism, and the Soviet Union, which could no longer be treated as a renegade nation. Smuts believed that, in a new global order, an international organization that incorporated these two great powers would be essential to global peace. He thus became a major advocate for the United Nations. But, within this framework, he was even more dedicated to preserving the British commonwealth. In his vision, however, the commonwealth would have to adopt a less centralized structure, with the stronger countries within it playing a greater role.

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54   Peter Clarke, *The last thousand days of the British empire*, London: Penguin, 2008, pp. 365–6.

55   R. D. Pearce, *The turning point in Africa: British colonial policy 1938–1948*, London: Frank Cass, 1982.

56   Margery Perham, 'African facts and American criticisms', *Foreign Affairs*, 22, 3, 1944, p. 445.

Victory in the Western Desert strengthened Smuts' strategy of firming up the position of the Dominions in relation to the metropolitan centre of the empire in important ways. About half of Montgomery's troops at El Alamein were South Africans, Australians, New Zealanders, and Indians, and the South Africans provided about a quarter of the squadrons in the desert air force. The role that the South Africans had played in east and north Africa gave Smuts much moral capital in Britain and the dominions, which he intended to use to pursue his post-war goals, both high-minded and self-interested.

The Roosevelt administration, however, had a strong investment in anti-colonial ideas, and this posed some serious problems for the British and for Smuts. There was genuine egalitarian feeling behind this in Roosevelt's liberal circles, but there was also a strong element of economic ambition. The United States was largely responsible for bringing on itself the British World's protectionist Ottawa Agreement of 1932. The US had attempted to deal with the Depression through the high-tariff Smoot–Hawley Act of 1930, and Ottawa was a defensive commonwealth response to this move. But that did not stop the American leadership in general, and President Roosevelt in particular, from deeply resenting American exclusion from British empire markets. Moreover, the US annoyed Britain and infuriated the dominions through their assumption that Britain could simply agree on its own to end Ottawa, thus ignoring the implications of the self-governing status of the dominions.[57] An important development in the last years of the war was the intensified pressure on the empire to open up its airports to American airlines, something against which the UK and the dominions had a fairly united front.

Smuts became a key intellectual broker in dealing with American critics of British imperialism. The Roosevelt administration was immensely frustrated with Churchill's intransigence on colonial questions, and especially with his unwillingness to move on decolonizing India. In contrast to Churchill's unapologetic imperialism, Smuts became the face of a vision of a progressive commonwealth for the American market. On 12 October 1942, America's most popular magazine, *Life*, addressed an 'Open letter' to the British people, which made it clear that the US would not fight for the defence of the British empire.[58] The article reflected the views of the periodical's publisher, Henry Luce, who was determined that, in his vision of the 'American century', Britain would yield to American power. This piece provoked an infuriated British reaction.[59] At the end of December 1942, Smuts replied in an article in *Life* that astutely countered Luce's views.[60] He emphasized that the door was now open to India obtaining full dominion status, and pinned the blame for the failure to attain this on the Indian leaders. He reframed the British imperium to his American readers as 'the widest system of human freedom in human history'. He also floated a system of regional councils of the major powers for colonial administration after the war, with an eye to drawing the US into a compromising role on a council for the West Indies. The regional council idea fitted exactly with Smuts' aims because it would put South Africa in the position of the commanding country in a council controlling the Southern African region.

57   Clarke, *Last thousand days*, pp. 13–14; Darwin, *Empire project*, pp. 509–10.

58   *Life*, 12 October 1942.

59   Alan Brinkley, *The publisher: Henry Luce and his American century*, New York: Vintage, 2010, p. 287.

60   *Life*, 28 December 1942.

Luce did not change his fundamental views on British imperialism, but certainly seems to have warmed to Smuts. *Life* and *Time* both gave Smuts a great deal of favourable coverage in the next two years, including laudatory cover stories.[61]

Smuts played a very careful hand in terms of British politics. He had some difficulties with the Colonial Office, which tended to be rather suspicious of South African intentions elsewhere in Africa. But he was most successful in winning over other sections of the Whitehall bureaucracy, and even at persuading key members of the Labour Party within the Churchill government of his good intentions. In the early stages of the war, the Colonial Office was worried that the Kenya settlers were looking south for leadership, but Smuts did nothing to take advantage of this opportunity. In 1942–43 there was a rumour circulating that Smuts might call a conference on the future of tropical Africa, which alarmed the Colonial Office because of the potential for offending the Belgians and the Portuguese. The Colonial Office was relieved when he did not do so.[62] Smuts returned to the pursuit of territorial expansion in his November 1943 speech to the British parliament, advocating the breaking of African colonies into a number of larger territorial units, obviously a useful formula for a South African incorporation of the Protectorates.

The May 1944 meeting of dominion prime ministers with Churchill in London was probably the high-water mark of Smuts' influence on imperial policy. British policy was significantly shaped by the idea propounded by Labour's Ernest Bevin of regional zones of military responsibility. This accorded closely with Smuts' ideas, especially as it envisaged South Africa having responsibility for military questions as far north as Kenya. The Dominion Office was less enthusiastic about Bevin's proposals, but nevertheless accepted the idea of South Africa as the leading power in the region.[63] The Colonial Office, although not keen on an international body, advocated strong regional councils, from which South Africa could not be excluded as the dominant power in the southern African context. Smuts thus had a wide base of support within British government for an expanded South African role in the subcontinent, notwithstanding Whitehall fears about African interests.[64]

What is most remarkable about Smuts' expansionist plans at the end of the Second World War is how close he got to fulfilling them. He had seen the war as his opportunity to expand, counting on Britain's gratitude to ensure that he would get satisfaction. In mid 1945 he actually secured the new Attlee government's support for the idea that the UN should give up the League mandate on South-West Africa, enabling South Africa to incorporate the territory.[65]

In addition, it was at the 1944 dominion prime ministers' meeting that Smuts won support from his commonwealth colleagues for his conceptions of how the UN would function. Most importantly, the four dominion prime ministers held out against Churchill's idea that they should be represented as a unitary British empire delegation at the UN, instead

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61 *Life*, 8 November 1943; *Time*, 22 May 1944.

62 W. R. Louis, *Imperialism at bay: the United States and the decolonization of the British empire 1941–1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 318–21.

63 Andrew Stewart, *Empire lost: Britain, the dominions and the Second World War*, London: Condominium, 2008, p. 132.

64 Richard Toye, *Churchill's empire: the world that made him and the world he made*, London: Macmillan, 2010, p. 246.

65 Mazower, *No enchanted place*, pp. 153–6.

staking out their claim to representation as countries in their own right. The dominion alliance appeared strong, especially as Curtin appeared to have repented of his earlier flirtation with the Americans.[66] Smuts' view was that the commonwealth would be better protected by being part of a higher-level international organization, which would bring in the two new titans, the US and USSR. This notion fitted well with a holist doctrine of the coexistence of smaller and greater entities. Smuts was no proponent of mergers with the United States though: he argued that a post-war commonwealth should strengthen itself through inviting the established democracies of Scandinavia and the Low Countries to join it.[67]

Smuts and the UN

Smuts played a central role at the founding conference of the United Nations in San Francisco in June 1945. But the new structure rapidly blew up in his face. It quickly became apparent that the 'single pattern' of global arrangements that he was pursuing had some unforeseen consequences. The symbolic power of Asian, Latin American, and Soviet-aligned nations in the UN, and the prospect of African nations being represented there in the future, quickly made his position uncomfortable. The possibility of incorporating South Africa and other countries in the region rapidly became unviable.

Smuts is often cast in this process as a myopic reactionary, who, unlike the major statesmen of the world, did not see that everything would change after the war. But this is very much the view of hindsight. The big three powers largely expected that the world after the war would be arbitrated between themselves. Even Stalin was initially optimistic about a long-term détente with his two Western allies. Churchill famously intended to preserve the British *empire*, and, though many of his colleagues were less fanatical than he on the question, most expected that, with the exceptions of India and Palestine, the British colonial administrations would continue. They did not foresee the rapidity of the break-up of the colonial world, nor the importance that the United Nations would take on. Nor did many foresee how radically the war would destabilize the racial ideologies on which the imperial world relied for support. Smuts was thus by no means out on a limb in his position among Allied leaders in understanding what the post-war world would be like. The irony was that he was, among senior Allied statesmen, perhaps the most important single shaper of the United Nations, an organization that would be at the forefront of challenging white South African power.

Though Smuts was certainly pursuing his version of South Africa's interests, he had a genuine commitment to and idealism about the UN. Like the leaders of the major countries, however, he never contemplated that the General Assembly would become a political free-for-all. With the British, American, and, indeed, Soviet leaderships, he envisaged that the UN would be dominated by the great powers and their closest allies. This was typical of his paternalist understanding of power: great and wise statesmen would guide the weaker brethren. He told his friend, the Wall Street banker Tom Lamont, that, in the UN: 'There will be a nucleus, an outer circle, and a fringe around that, signifying varying grades of responsibility and power. No council of gate-crashers as in the League'.[68]

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66 Toye, *Churchill's empire*, p. 247.

67 Stewart, *Empire lost*, p. 111.

68 Smuts to Lamont, 14 August 1942, in van der Poel, *Selections*, p. 380.

A major hitch for Smuts was Churchill's agreement with Stalin and Roosevelt at the Yalta conference that, in the United Nations system, League of Nations-mandated territories would be placed under UN supervision as trusteeships. The 1944 dominion premiers meeting had rejected the idea of UN trusteeships, raised by New Zealand's Peter Fraser, *tout court*. The Yalta decision was not consistent with Churchill's pro-colonial policy and was probably a product of the many greater demands on his attention.[69] The consequences for Smuts were serious, however. He had held back from annexing South-West Africa during the war, for fear of embarrassing Britain, on the expectation that he would be allowed to do so afterwards. But the existence of a trusteeship mechanism would give the UN the ability to block any such move.

There was a remarkably contingent character to Smuts' ultimate collapse at the UN. It is a commonplace in the historiography that he began to lose his grip during the late 1940s, culminating in a disastrous set of political mistakes leading to his defeat by D. F. Malan's National Party in 1948. This is certainly true; as a man entering his late seventies it would have been surprising had Smuts retained all the intellectual acuity of an earlier time. Moreover, he lacked good advice, because of his autocratic tendencies. But the impact of the anti-colonial revolution on world affairs was sudden and dramatic, and Smuts was not alone among world statesmen in failing to guess its consequences. During the war, he was under considerable pressure from the rabidly racist whites of Natal Province, who resented the growth in Indian business competition and wanted stricter segregation from the Indian community. Smuts had a very tenuous influence among these ultra-British loyalists. So it was for reasons of white electoral politics, rather than because of any deep ideological conviction, that in 1944 he introduced the 'Pegging' Act, preventing expansion of Indian property ownership. This move tilted the leadership in the Indian community out of the hands of moderate respectables and into those of young communists. Nevertheless, in 1946 Smuts blinkeredly introduced the discriminatory Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Acts. Given Britain's delicate situation in India, he ought to have been able to see that this would be an embarrassment to the imperial power. However, when asked by Viceroy Lord Wavell to hold the bill, he pressed on. The Natal Indian Congress then asked the Government of India to take up the issue, and the Viceroy's Council (not yet including the major nationalists) referred the matter to the UN. When the transitional interim government was formed in September 1946, Nehru saw the opportunity to position himself as leader of global resistance against colonialism, and asked his sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the nation's representative at the UN, to take on the issue. The meeting of the UN in upstate New York was a catastrophe for Smuts. He was smashed on the floor of the General Assembly by Pandit, and plagued by the presence as a lobbyist of the ANC leader, A. B. Xuma.[70]

However, it should be noted that there was still no attempt to bring the UN to the point of challenging South Africa's purely internal policies, because of the strength of the taboo on overstepping the bounds of national sovereignty. Pandit could legitimately claim to be representing South Africa's Indians because the South African state had never granted them citizenship, and thus in international law the Government of India was able to speak for them.

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69   Toye, *Churchill's empire*, p. 245.

70   Mazower, *No enchanted palace*, pp. 170–7.

Xuma focused his energies on shoring up resistance to any concession to Pretoria on the South-West Africa question, a legitimate concern of the UN because of the organization's takeover of the League's mandate system. Clearly, newly independent nations and South African radicals would have liked the world body to attack South Africa officially on its policy towards its African people, but they realized that they were still a long way from this being a political possibility. In this sense, seeing the beginning of South African isolation in this moment is inadequate. It was not until the 1950s that the UN tackled South African racial policies as a whole, and that tendency was immensely strengthened by the much clearer issues posed by the implementation of apartheid.[71]

If, as Mazlish suggests, the UN as it emerged at the end of the Second World War did propose a new sovereign in humanity, this in a sense both confirmed and confuted Smuts' outlook. Smuts did indeed believe in the linkages between all people, and in their common political development as discrete individuals and collectivities into parts of a greater whole. But, as a nineteenth-century liberal and paternalist, he viewed this as a long-term process and neither saw the franchise as very important, nor viewed national self-determination as a value that should override other aspirations. 'Civilization', for him, was about wise leadership, order, and gradual social improvement, not about participation. Thus, at home he could preside over strongly interventionist and quite egalitarian social policies, while imagining a future in which blacks would continue to be deprived of the vote; and internationally he could look toward an idea of international brotherhood, while at the same time believing that the great powers would continue to make all the major decisions for small countries and colonized peoples. He prepared the way for notions of common human rights without anticipating that the systematized racism and imperial aspirations of his own country would quickly come to be seen internationally as the prime example of the violation of those rights.

Conclusion

For South Africa, the business of war-fighting and the country's engagement in global struggles over territiorialization were far more central to the social and political evolution of the 1940s than most historians allow. The imperatives of war dislodged the existing South African institutional, social, and economic structures and its dominant racial and political discourses. Smuts was a major actor in world politics, with a distinctive political vision that he was attempting to impose on the critical juncture of globalization that was constituted in the aftermath of the Second World War. Participating in the global politics of the war, he envisaged South Africa as using the leverage it won in the conflict within the British empire to reconfigure the whole southern African region around itself. Military effectiveness would be parlayed into political power within the commonwealth and the UN. The southern Transvaal would become the hub of a new kind of articulation of the country with the region and with the world political system.

Smuts attempted to seize a moment of crisis of global integration to launch a new form of global and regional re-territorialization. His strategy was not a doomed one. Rather, his project was impossible because he did not understand that the reconfiguration of the

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71   Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace*, pp. 59–60, 152–3.

post-war world would be one that would completely destroy the British imperial project on which he had built his political life.

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