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The Road to War

The running of the Union is no easy task indeed!
Botha to Leyds[1]

Louis Botha's and Jan Smuts's commitment to Empire became a burden in 1914. The road to war started in 1902 – the year marked the milestone of complete British victory over Boer republicanism. Botha somehow managed to remain an optimist – his vision for a new White South Africa, comprised of Afrikaans and British societies. Accepted by some, it was limited, imperfect and racist, with the Black, Coloured and Indian majority ignored. Yet somehow and certainly in its time many thought it ingenious. Without holding power, he would mobilise Smuts.

Smuts was down and out and after becoming 'plain J.C Smuts', as he told his dear Isie, after the end of the Anglo-Boer War, a man of tremendous ability, he was soon to become General Smuts again. In the throes of a mild depression, Botha's vision gave Smuts an aim – this was all he needed to restart his powerhouse intellect. The second ingredient was an adversary – and Lord Milner became his nemesis, and that of the Boer people. Alfred Milner, once described as having Prussian efficiency, was a hard-boiled imperialist with a moustache too – smartly turned out, with dark features – his ample forehead held the contemplation of his policies for Southern Africa. It would take all Smuts's savvy and legal ability to fence with Milner – the first matter on the agenda was the case of the Cape Boer rebels. Botha wrote to Smuts, in September 1902, 'Stand fast, man, and keep up your courage. But if Lord Milner does not take care he will become the most hated man in the world.'[2] They would eventually find a way to save their Boer brothers in the Cape.

1 NARSSA: Leyds Archive, 262, Part II, Botha to Leyds, 18 August 1913.
2 Botha to Smuts, 25 September 1902 in Hancock and Van der Poel, *Selections*, vol.I, p.34.

The Road to Union

A modern wave of Afrikaner leadership emerged after the Second Anglo-Boer War – the pair of generals were at the helm in Pretoria.[3] Botha and Smuts – through *Het Volk*, created their first political platform for achieving their vision:

> The fundamental object of '*Het Volk*' is a policy of racial reconciliation, the avoidance of causes of distrust and division, the prevention of the ascendancy of one white race over the other, and the union of all white inhabitants of the State into a great South African nation, contented, prosperous and united, regarding South Africa with common patriotism and pride as its home, and working with united forces for its future greatness and glory.[4]

Later *Het Volk* would be reincarnated as the South African Party, mobilising voters in the Transvaal, the Cape, Free State and Natal. Botha and Smuts combined complementary personal skills. Botha, a man with a large heart, was sympathetic and human. His blue eyes were pensive and engaging – his moustache lifted when he deployed his disarming smile. A political player, he listened keenly, he was patient and could mobilise opinion – according to Jack Collyer, his chief of staff in South West Africa – he had a sixth sense of his opponent's intentions. Smuts was cut from very different cloth. His boyish face was hidden behind a moustache and beard, his eyes focussed intently at one subject at a time. Impatient and moody, he suffered fools lightly, and was dismissive when in thought – something that chimed with the upper classes of England. He was captivated by intellectual pursuits and in day-to-day tasks he was the epitome of competence. The two men had met before the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War, but their mutual admiration developed over the years. After 1902, they combined personal ambition in a common drive to re-create South Africa. Louis Esselen, a close associate of Botha and then Smuts, warned a young Piet van der Byl never to leave with either man – whether by horse or vehicle – 'without a rifle and full magazine and iron rations in one's pocket, for one never knew what the old fellows would be up to; or on what job they would suddenly send you. Life was never dull when you were with them on active service.'[5] Botha and Smuts were men in a hurry.

Their concerns after the Anglo-Boer War were amnesty for the colonial rebels; the repatriation of internees of the concentration camps; and the absence of Afrikaans in the school curriculum. Botha communicated these concerns to Joseph Chamberlain in his 1903 visit, but the secretary of state for the colonies was satisfied with the

3 Ian van der Waag, 'Boer generalship and the politics of command', *War in History*, vol.12, no.1 (2005), pp.15-43.
4 University of South Africa (UNISA) Archives and Special Collections, Pretoria: Programme of the 'People's Union', 1907, United Party Archives, Transvaal Head Office.
5 Piet van der Byl, *From Playgrounds to Battlefields* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1971), pp.186–187.

status quo. An imperialist, he had full confidence in Milner and his group of young, imperial-minded staffers that came to be known as Milner's 'Kindergarten'.[6] These bright young men were Oxbridge graduates and although intelligent, had relatively little experience. Milner groomed them to assist him with the growing administrative burdens.[7] Robert Brand, one of Lord Milner's kindergarten, described Transvaal Boers and British settlers as: 'two nations exist[ing] side by side … absolutely divided in language, customs, and ideals from the men governing them.'[8] The shapes did not match, the sizes were wrong, but Botha envisioned a united White South Africa. Perhaps an easy solution to a complex question.

Botha returned to South Africa from Europe in December 1902 after positioning himself strategically for the future and making friends and alliances. Smuts was also building his networks in England, and he and Botha were energised and brimming with ideas on uniting South Africa. At the heart of the issue Botha and Smuts believed that they could convince the White populations to live together – they had underestimated the anti-British sentiment of the Afrikaner people.[9]

Botha and Smuts evolved with the changing political situation, tackling the issues of resettlement (those who had been in the concentration camps and prisoners of war); Chinese labour in the Transvaal mines (engineered by Milner and having consequences in British politics); schooling; agriculture and economic development all of which fell under the umbrella of self-government. Botha's letter to Leyds in November 1903, gives the feeling of frustration, describing the sad state of prisoners of war who sacrificed so much and those who were still being held captive. Botha asked that De la Rey be sent to India to ensure the return of the prisoners – most of whom refused to acknowledge the peace settlement and swear allegiance to Britain.[10] The note was not in Botha's customary methodical style, sharing ideas or putting forward logistical or operational questions or answers in a logical manner. In this letter, he gives a flurry of emotion-filled phrases, painting the situation through the lens of a disenfranchised war leader. Smuts echoed Botha's disappointment in the lack of agency. In a note about dealing with Milner, Smuts discussed the difficulty in getting the necessary permissions for President Kruger's return – something that was not to be – Milner feared that Boer republicans would rally around the old stalwart.[11]

Paul Kruger, was the stubborn, and zealous leader of the Transvaal – with a face like a pile of rocks, outlined by a long beard, he embodied the tough Boer spirit.

6 Meintjes, *Botha*, p.121; Engelenburg, *Botha*, p.115.
7 Van der Waag, 'Hugh Archibald Wyndham: His Life and Times in South Africa,', pp.31–33.
8 Queen's University Archives, Kingston, Ontario (QUA): fonds 2110, box 1, correspondence general, John Buchan, Robert Brand to John Buchan, 18 December 1904.
9 Meintjes, *Botha*, p.121.
10 NARSSA: Leyds Archive, 262, Part I Botha to Leyds, 23 November 1903.
11 Smuts to Bredell, 15 August 1903 in Hancock and Van der Poel (eds.), *Selections*, vol.I, pp.123–124.

His death in 1904 signalled the end of a previous era and the coming of a new Boer moment – a moment of transition. It also allowed for the ascension of a new leader.

A large crowd gathered in Pretoria on 'Blood River Day' in 1904. They arrived for Kruger's state funeral. The Executive Council of the Transvaal Colony was present, together with a small detachment of Transvaal Police and the South African Constabulary. On closer inspection, initial impressions of British strength and magnanimity – the giving of a state funeral to the exiled former head of the Boer state – is belied by the circumstance. The crowd, picturesque if not impressive, was preponderantly Dutch, perhaps as many as 10,000 or 12,000, and controlled by what one British observer called an 'amateur Boer police'. Several Boer leaders, all former generals – Schalk Burger, Christiaan de Wet and Louis Botha – addressed the crowd.

His speech at the funeral of Kruger, was by way of the Transvaal's Mark Anthony oration to Julius Caesar. Olive Schreiner described the scene as something that she had never seen before, not even in Europe:

> The solemn rows of burghers in their old fighting clothes were very touching to me but the scene in the dim hall lit by electric lights, and the hundreds & hundreds of wreaths covering floor and walls to the far end where the old hero lay in his coffin, was moving beyond words. In the room behind were huge books in which all who came wrote their names.[12]

Smuts said that, 'Botha spoke with such feeling that I saw tears in many eyes. The Afrikaner people are going through deep waters, and he, to whom we all look up as our leader, speaks of himself as a worn-out horse. However, I have a feeling that, in spite of everything, we must go on clenching our teeth and persevering through everything until the dawn breaks.'[13] Engelenburg said Botha was the 'heart and soul' of Kruger's funeral procession – he transformed into the pre-eminent Transvaal leader.[14]

The death of Kruger passed the torch to Botha and by association to Smuts. Botha and Smuts held a series of meetings, rallying support for Boer interests in the Transvaal. Also reaching out to the governor of Natal, Botha thanked him for pardoning the colonial rebels and urged Leander Starr Jameson to do the same in the Cape. Jameson was a controversial figure, charismatic and inspirational to some, he also harboured delusions of military ability – soon dispelled by the commandos that put down his Raid – the Jameson Raid, an attempt in 1896, to inspire insurrection in the Transvaal. His large brow and big dark eyes carried the burden of the failed attempt – he now saw South Africa differently – Botha and Smuts were there to stay.

12 University of Cape Town Libraries, Cape Town (UCT): Olive Schreiner BC16/Box3, Olive Schreiner to Alice Greene, 24 December 1904.
13 Smuts to M.T. Steyn, 4 May 1906 in Hancock and Van der Poel (eds.), *Selections*, vol.II, p.270.
14 Engelenburg, *Botha*, pp.132–135.