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SOUTH AFRICA AND ITS DICHOTOMOUS VIEW ON THE INTERWAR COMMONWEALTH DEFENCE

ABSTRACT: The period between the World Wars is a relatively uncharted area in the study of South African security policy, often overlooked in the wider discussion of the nation's political and defence strategies. While recent scholarly work has attempted to shed light on this complex area, limitations in primary sources and a lack of a holistic approach have hindered a full understanding of the diverse political forces at play in the Union of South Africa at this time. This study seeks to fill these gaps by scrutinising South Africa's security policies across these two decades. Utilising a rich array of archival resources, the research meticulously outlines South Africa's rearmament strategy in the 1930s. It explores the driving factors behind this strategy and its impact on the international arena, especially in terms of diplomatic relations between Pretoria and London and South Africa's geopolitical position in Africa. Additionally, this research examines South Africa's ambivalent stance towards involvement in another major conflict, linking this reluctance to the rising tide of Afrikaner nationalism which significantly shaped the nation's socio-political framework. Overall, this study offers a thorough historical-political analysis to understand how internal and external political forces shaped South Africa's security policies in the years between the World Wars.

Keywords: South Africa, Union Defence Force, Imperial Defence, Commonwealth, Nationalism

INTRODUCTION

The epoch between the two World Wars, marked by South Africa's regional and imperial defence engagement, remains relatively uncharted territory in contemporary academic discourse. The more quiescent years of South Africa's interwar history are often overshadowed by the tumultuous and dynamic era of Apartheid, which tends to monopolise scholarly focus. The intellectual legacy in the realm of South African history and politics is replete with studies scrutinising the military evolution of post-1948 South Africa in Angola,[1] Rhodesia,[2] its diplomatic interactions with the more formidable powers,[3] and the regime's preoccupation with internal security.[4] Yet, the critical events of the 1920s and 1930s seldom feature in isolated academic investigations. Typically, the occurrences of these decades are frequently referenced within a broader narrative, accorded such a minimal portion of attention that they risk being obscured amidst dialogues devoted to subsequent years.

Nonetheless, this inequitable allocation of scholarly focus should not imply that the inter-war years of South Africa's history ought to remain obscured. From 1919 to 1939, the Union of South Africa, albeit nascent and evolving, grappled with a plethora of political and social dilemmas. The limited body of work that does explore this era predominantly centres on economic challenges, as South Africa, along with a substantial portion of the globe, endured the ravages of a crippling economic depression at the onset of the 1930s. As many intellectuals rightly assert, this adversity period profoundly influenced South Africa's subsequent trajectory.[5]

Simultaneously, other facets, such as the security, diplomatic and constitutional advancements, are often cursorily addressed despite their significant impact on shaping South African political identity and the principles that the nation and its populace would espouse for many ensuing decades. Although defence was not a priority for South Africa for an extended duration post the conclusion of World War I, this stance evolved with pivotal constitutional modifications within the Commonwealth.[6] By 1926, the Commonwealth and its constituent members had transitioned from relatively self-governing entities within the British Empire to autonomous units on par with the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, the close of the 1920s can be regarded as the zenith of the Dominions' quest for augmented autonomy.

1 W. Minter, *Apartheid's Contras: An Inquiry into the Roots of War in Angola and Mozambique*, Johannesburg 1994, pp. 161-162.

2 J. Brownell, *The Collapse of Rhodesia: Population Demographics and the Politics of Race*, New York 2011, pp. 88-89.

3 D. Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation: South African Foreign Policy Making*, Johannesburg 1984, pp. 12-13.

4 S.K. Ivkovic et al., *Police Integrity in South Africa*, London 2020, pp. 69-70.

5 D. O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party, 1948-1994*, Randburg 1996, pp. 38-42.

6 H.R. Gray, "The Sovereignty of the Imperial Parliament," *The Modern Law Review*, vol. 23, no. 6 (1960), pp. 647-652.

Initially articulated in the Balfour Declaration of 1926 and subsequently in the Statute of Westminster in 1931, these newfound liberties implied that the Dominions were now expected to operate almost entirely autonomously from their parent nation, the United Kingdom. Internal sovereignty begets external sovereignty, entailing the capacity to negotiate treaties independently of Britain and manage diplomatic relations as a sovereign state.[7] This autonomy also necessitated the recognition that an independent nation must be capable of self-defence; consequently, the Dominions were compelled to enhance and modernise their military capabilities, each adopting its own approach. Moreover, British politicians of the era swept up in the burgeoning popularity of a Federal Empire concept,[8] coupled with the looming threat of another potential conflict and the economic tribulations of the Depression, sought to diversify Imperial Defence. British officials undertook a comprehensive overhaul of the Committee for Imperial Defence (from now on called CID) to realise these strategic ambitions. This body had been instrumental during World War I. By the late 1920s, the CID had evolved into a more organised advisory entity capable of guiding the most pivotal decisions concerning the defence measures of the Colonies and Dominions.[9]

A select group of Commonwealth countries, notably the most influential ones - Australia, Canada, and South Africa - earnestly embraced these newfound opportunities, motivated by a quest for bolstered security against potential foreign adversaries.[10] While each had its unique rationale for augmenting its defensive capabilities, this article aims to delineate the Union of South Africa's trajectory to rearm and fortify its security apparatus. The highly politicised nature of defence matters in South Africa during this period,[11] compounded by Britain's aspiration to establish a robust imperial defence, rendered it exceedingly challenging for Union officials to navigate the tumultuous waters of political discourse. They were tasked with the delicate balancing act of maintaining their political foothold while simultaneously maximising the benefits derived from their collaboration with Britain.

This study seeks to provide an exhaustive exploration of the pivotal factors that have characterised the collaboration between South Africa, Britain, and the wider Commonwealth in fortifying their military capacities. It endeavours to elucidate South Africa's engagement in dialogue with its colonial progenitor and to discern the cultural and societal elements within the Union of South Africa that have significantly impacted this cooperation. This research integrates theoretical and empirical objectives within a singular scholarly pursuit, aligning with Katzenstein's perspective on how a distinct identity and political norms of a society influence its actions and decision-making in

7 Parliament of the United Kingdom, *Statute of Westminster*, London 1931.

8 A.P. Poley, *The Federal Systems of the United States and the British Empire: Their Origin, Nature, and Development*, London 1913, pp. 160-171.

9 "British Commonwealth Defence," *The Round Table*, vol. 28, no. 111 (1938), pp. 470-485.

10 "General Smuts and Imperial Policy," *The National Archives*, CAB 24/140/74, Devonshire, 27 December 1922.

11 "Letter from the High Commissioner for the Union of South Africa," *The National Archives*, CAB 63/69, Pretoria, 14 August 1934.

the global arena.[12] Additionally, it acknowledges Hedley Bull's view of South Africa as a microcosm of global issues prevalent during the Cold War era.[13]

Determining whether South Africa epitomises the interwar years remains challenging, yet its role as a key player in the shifting policies within the Commonwealth is undeniable. This inquiry aims to uncover the diplomatic dynamics and central challenges within the Commonwealth during the Interbellum rearmament period. It considers significant normative shifts within the British Empire, notably the rising national consciousness in the Dominions and the pressing question of their commitment to the Crown in a potential European conflict. The research probes the foundational postulates of the English School to comprehend the cultural origins of new norms transmitted from South Africa to Britain and the Commonwealth, and how these norms have redefined an entity grappling with national consciousness yet seeking military allies within the Empire.[14]

This intellectual endeavour questions the resilience of international society, founded on shared normative and interest-based pillars,[15] and seeks to understand the norms that underpin cooperation within the Commonwealth. This remains a persistent inquiry within the English School.[16] The perception of the Commonwealth alliance by the Dominions, and how a matrix of cultural values and national interests influences this perception, continues to be a subject for future debate, playing a central role in unravelling an ongoing intellectual puzzle in this work.

Lastly, while this investigation is framed within theoretical complexities, it is not confined to them. It strives to reveal a broader spectrum of empirical facts and details that have shaped the British-South African cooperation within the Commonwealth in security matters. As such, although the discussion is preoccupied with diplomacy, this article also positions itself as a historical inquiry, grounded in a plethora of archival materials and primary sources. These resources are utilised to reconstruct a sequential and factual narrative of the diplomatic interplay between South Africa and Britain and its ramifications on the overall dynamics within the Commonwealth.

CONTEMPORARY COMPREHENSION OF HISTORY

This section intends to meticulously examine the current state of the art and provide a comprehensive review of the existing academic contributions to studying South

[12] P.J. Katzenstein (ed.), "Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security," in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York 1996, pp. 1-32.

[13] H. Bull, "The West and South Africa," *Daedalus*, vol. 111, no. 2 (1982), pp. 255-270.

[14] H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, New York 2002, pp. 51-53.

[15] B. Buzan, "World Society and the English School: An 'International Society' Perspective on World Society," *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 7, no. 4 (2001), pp. 423-441.

[16] H. Bull, "What Is the Commonwealth," *World Politics*, vol. 11, no. 4 (1959), pp. 577-587; T. Shaw, L. Ashworth, "Commonwealth Perspectives on International Relations," *International Affairs*, vol. 86, no. 5 (2010), pp. 1149-1165; H. Bull, "European States and African Political Communities," in H. Bull, A. Watson (eds), *The Expansion of International Society*, Oxford 1984, pp. 112-113.

African relations with the Commonwealth in the defence domain and the country's role in the Imperial defence scheme.

Several relatively recent works attempt to comprehensively analyse the trends prevalent in pre-World War II South Africa. The writings of biographer FA Mouton and historian Johan Ellis can be regarded as the most epistemic contributions to the analysis of the role of Minister of Defence Oswald Pirow in the development of the South African rearmament plan.[17] Pirow, a prominent political figure in inter-war South Africa and a close ally of Prime Minister Hertzog and a potential Cabinet head initiated the extensive rearmament program known as the five-year plan. Regrettably, this political initiative did not yield the expected results for Pirow. Both Mouton and Ellis explore this program's internal political and technological repercussions for South Africa in their respective works.

Their analyses can be perceived as (a) a comprehensive comparative analysis of the Union Defence Force (UDF, as referred to hereafter) before and after the implementation of the five-year plan and (b) a profound investigation into the domestic reception of Pirow's plan in South Africa. However, both works overlook the significance of South African communications within the Empire in rebuilding the UDF. It is noteworthy that Mouton's analysis incorporates a considerable amount of diplomatic history to delineate the perspective of the more radical Afrikaner nationalists, who accused Pirow of perceiving the *Union Defence Force as a tool to serve British imperialism*.[18]

A notable diversity of scholarly works is evident in examining the diplomatic dimension of the issue. Eminent scholars such as Watt,[19] McKercher,[20] Trotter,[21] Darwin[22], and Grayson,[23] have made significant contributions to the study of inter-imperial relations in the realms of security and foreign policy, highlighting the significant weaknesses manifested by the Commonwealth.

Watt's study articulates British officials' ambivalent and somewhat paradoxical approach towards establishing the Imperial defence scheme. He posits that the primary focus consistently remained on addressing British needs and significant weaknesses,

[17] A.F. Mouton, *The Opportunist: The Political Life of Oswald Pirow, 1915-1959*, Pretoria 2022, pp. 12-14.

[18] I. van der Waag, "Smuts's Generals: Towards a First Portrait of the South African High Command, 1912-1948," *War in History*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2011), pp. 33-61.

[19] D.C. Watt, "Imperial Defence Policy and Imperial Foreign Policy, 1911-1939: A Neglected Paradox?," *Journal of Commonwealth and Political Studies*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1963), pp. 266-281.

[20] B.J.C. McKercher, "National Security and Imperial Defence: British Grand Strategy and Appeasement, 1930-1939," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 19 (2008), pp. 391-442.

[21] A. Trotter, "The Dominions and Imperial Defence: Hankey's Tour in 1934," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1974), pp. 318-332.

[22] J. Darwin, "Imperialism in Decline? Tendencies in British Imperial Policy between the Wars," *The Historical Journal*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1980), pp. 657-679; J. Darwin, "The Fear of Falling: British Politics and Imperial Decline since 1900," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 36 (1986), pp. 27-43.

[23] R.S. Grayson, "Imperialism in Conservative Defence and Foreign Policy: Leo Amery and the Chamberlains, 1903-39," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 34, no. 4 (2006), pp. 505-527.

while the Dominion was regarded as a valuable adjunct to Imperial security. A salient example is the CID meetings managing non-English-speaking populations in Canada and South Africa as potential sources of anti-British sentiment. Another pivotal issue was the inability of imperial institutions to encompass all aspects of the dialogue between the Dominions and the mother country. Despite the concerted efforts of Commonwealth countries, the CID epitomised the bilateral agreements between the autonomous parts of the Empire, lacking the requisite legal machinery to foster a genuinely multidimensional dialogue. Ultimately, Watt contends that Britain's failure to recognise the genuine aspirations of the Dominions for independence was the most critical issue. British officials, oblivious to the fact that Commonwealth countries now had their political establishments and electorates to satisfy advanced supranational ideas of standard foreign and defence policies, only to have these initiatives thwarted by Canadian and South African vetoes. Thus, Watt succinctly encapsulates the myriad issues afflicting the British Empire during the inter-war period, emphasising the British inability to treat the Dominions as equals. This insightful contribution undoubtedly provides a solid foundation for studying the implications of such problems in each Dominion individually.

The critical shortcomings of imperial defence and cooperation, highlighted by Watt, are further elucidated by Trotter through a detailed analysis of the 1934 imperial tour of Maurice Hankey, the Cabinet Secretary at the time. Hankey's tour, which excluded the Irish Free State, aimed to ascertain the positions of the Dominion governments regarding military cooperation with Britain. Hankey's findings revealed that, except for New Zealand, no Dominion was inclined towards extensive collaboration. South Africa, torn between cosmopolitan and nationalist political factions, struggled to forge a unified policy direction. Concurrently, Canada, succumbing to isolationism, prioritised its relations with the United States over those within the Commonwealth.[24] It became apparent that the people of the Dominions were faithful to Britain, but what they valued more remained obscure: the Crown or their distant and isolated countries.

Moreover, the internal debate within the British establishment was highly significant. The tension between Britain's peripheral and Europocentric visions was starkly illustrated in the discussion between the Secretary of State for Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, and the Lord of the Admiralty, Leo Amery.[25] Both advocated for a greater focus on European affairs and the necessity of building robust relations within the Empire. However, despite Amery later assuming the role of Secretary for Colonies, his stance was ultimately overshadowed by Chamberlain's influence, culminating in a disjointed colonial policy, the repercussions of which were later observed by Hankey.

A significant dilemma the Empire faced was its politicians' unwavering confidence in their ability to maintain Commonwealth cohesion, despite strained relations,

[24] C. Spittal, "The Transatlantic Romance in North Atlantic Triangle: Narratives of Autonomy and Empire in Canadian Foreign Relations," in R. Bothwell, J. Daudelin (eds), *Canada Among Nations 2008: 100 Years of Canadian Foreign Policy*, Montreal 2009, pp. 317-342; "Canadian Obligation under League (The Times)," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 12 March 1936.

[25] R.S. Grayson, "Imperialism in Conservative Defence...", p. 509.

through the ideals of unity and the anticipated benefits of keeping ties with the Crown.[26] However, the reality proved less sanguine. As illustrated by a study conducted by Żukowski,[27] South Africa, beset by political, cultural, and ideological divisions, emerged as the Commonwealth's most vulnerable link. Neither the ideals of unity nor allegiance to the Crown could deter the country from contemplating neutrality during potential conflicts or the escalating appeal of isolationism.

It is currently evident that while the academic legacy is replete with discussions on the paradoxes, errors, and diplomatic nuances of Imperial Defence during the inter-war period, there is a conspicuous absence of comprehensive case studies that delve into the diplomatic relationships between specific Dominions and Britain. Those undertaking this task either lack robustness in their sources or divert their focus from analysing domestic and international dynamics.[28] In the subsequent sections of this work, an attempt will be made to provide a thorough examination of the following facets of South African rearmament and its articulation within the Commonwealth: (a) the impact of the international system on South Africa's aspiration to rearm, (b) the fundamental principles and intricacies of South African-British cooperation, and (c) the influence of South African political and cultural values on its security relations with Britain.

UDF IN THE INTERBELLUM ERA: FROM CHAOS TO REFORM

By the late 1920s, South Africa and its fellow Dominions grappled with an evolving geopolitical milieu. The Balfour Declaration's adoption at the 1926 Imperial Conference and its subsequent ratification as the Statute of Westminster in 1931 bestowed upon each Dominion enhanced autonomy within the British Empire. This newfound independence granted them the latitude to sculpt their foreign policy, establish embassies, forge treaties, and essentially function as quasi-independent entities, united under a singular Crown with their Dominion counterparts.[29] Yet, this augmented autonomy was accompanied by heightened obligations. The erstwhile paradigm, wherein the 'mother country' bore the onus of defending the Commonwealth Nations, had shifted. Henceforth, each Dominion was entrusted with its distinct defence prerogative.[30]

Regrettably, South Africa's military apparatus during the inter-war years languished in pronounced stagnation. Following the culmination of the First World War and the establishment of the Versailles-sanctioned global order, the South African leadership,

[26] D.C. Watt, "Imperial Defence Policy...", p. 272.

[27] A. Żukowski, "The Union of South Africa towards the Outbreak of the Second World War," *Politeja*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2016), pp. 17-31.

[28] Ibid., p. 22.

[29] "Letter from Bodenstein to the High Commissioner for South Africa in London," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, Cape Town, 16 April 1931.

[30] "Aide-Memoire of a Statement on International Defence Policy Made by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 28 November 1930.

despite its fresh stewardship over South-West Africa, opted for a reduction in its military strength. Given the prevailing belief that the British Navy adequately safeguarded South Africa, the maintenance of a robust armed force was perceived as redundant and financially burdensome.[31] It is widely acknowledged that both the African continent, and particularly its southern regions, enjoyed substantial stability.[32] The adjacent territories in the continent's east and centre—namely Rhodesia, Kenya, and Tanganyika—did not ostensibly harbour any intrinsic threats towards the white settler communities therein.[33]

Subsequently, under the stewardship of Labour official Frederic Cresswell, appointed by Hertzog, the Ministry of Defence discerned that the Union Defence Force (UDF) necessitated substantial fiscal and personnel reductions, prioritising other domestic political and infrastructural endeavours.[34] By 1930, the Ministry opted to terminate training programmes for non-permanent forces—constituting the UDF's majority—citing fiscal constraints. At this juncture, the UDF's non-permanent segment encompassed three infantry brigades, four mounted rifle regiments, and five artillery batteries. Despite their somewhat antiquated arsenal, these units were integral to South Africa's defence matrix, comprising approximately 16,000 personnel and forty artillery pieces.[35]

From the late 1920s, South Africa faced an imperative need to recalibrate its defence strategies, spurred on by two salient developments. Firstly, the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, combined with the collapse of the South African wool market in 1932, exerted considerable economic pressure, evidenced by mounting unemployment and fiscal challenges.[36] The societal ramifications of such economic hardships were not unfamiliar to South Africa, having witnessed the tumultuous aftermath of the Rand Revolt a decade earlier.[37] It became vital to mitigate the burgeoning numbers of unemployed men, with the Armed Forces emerging as a plausible avenue for this endeavour.

Secondly, 1931 saw escalating tensions in the Far East culminate in Japan's full-scale incursion into Manchuria. Notwithstanding its geographical distance, Japan was perceived as a tangible threat to South Africa.[38] A considerable faction within the military

[31] "Letter from the Acting High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in the Union of South Africa to Malcolm Macdonald, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/164, Cape Town, 28 May 1936.

[32] "Report by Major A.N. Williams of an Interview between the Minister of Defence, Union of South Africa and the Staff Officer," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/18, Cape Town, 5 March 1934.

[33] C. Gillman, "White Colonization in East Africa: With Special Regard to Tanganyika Territory," *Geographical Review*, vol. 32, no. 4 (1942), pp. 585-597.

[34] "The Military Defence Situation in South Africa," *The National Archives*, CAB 63/69, London, July 1934.

[35] Ibid.

[36] "Report by Major A.N. Williams...".

[37] K. Breckenridge, "Fighting for a White South Africa: White Working-Class Racism and the 1922 Rand Revolt," *South African Historical Journal*, vol. 57, no. 1 (2007), pp. 288-243.

[38] "Paraphrase Telegram from the High Commissioner in the Union of South Africa to the Dominions Office," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/71, Cape Town, 27 April 1935.

echelons, predominantly championed by Jan Smuts, postulated that a successful Japanese consolidation in China might instigate further southward expansion, subsequently jeopardising the southern precincts of the Indian Ocean,[39] eventually planting their bases somewhere in Abyssinia or Mozambique.[40] For Smuts, the British bastions of Hong Kong and Singapore stood as primary deterrents to Japanese ambitions in Southeast Asia. However, their potential fall would elevate South Africa and Australia to pivotal roles within imperial defence. This perspective was vindicated by subsequent historical events when Japan, seeking to support Vichy forces, extended its operations to Madagascar, inevitably clashing with South African and British military units.[41]

South African policymakers, despite occasional emotional inclinations, retained a lucid understanding of both international and domestic threats. Consequently, by 1933, the so-called Fusion Government materialised. This political construct, borne out of an urgency to navigate the country through its economic predicament and ensure political cohesion, witnessed the merger of James Hertzog's National Party (henceforth NP) and Jan Smuts' South African Party (SAP) into the Union Party, thereby culminating in a composite Cabinet.[42] Within this Cabinet, ideological divergences notwithstanding, Smuts retained his role as Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs, while Hertzog assumed responsibilities as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Justice.[43]

In this potent political assemblage, the Defence portfolio was entrusted to Oswald Pirow.[44] Pirow, an ardent Afrikaner nationalist of German lineage, harboured reservations towards British dominion yet pragmatically recognised the imperative of security collaboration with Britain for South Africa's broader stability.[45] With Hertzog's endorsement, Pirow spearheaded an ambitious initiative to bolster the UDF in light of the increasingly uncertain global landscape. This endeavour, christened the 'Five-year Plan', secured parliamentary approval in May 1934, targeting an augmentation of the defence budget from £863,000 in 1934 to £1,000,000 by 1939.[46]

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39 "Report by Major A.N. Williams...".

40 "Letter from Maurice Hankey to Prime Minister Macdonald Describing His Meeting with Prime Minister Hertzog," *The National Archives*, CAB 63/69, Cape Town, 7 September 1934.

41 M. Thomas, "Imperial Backwater or Strategic Outpost? The British Takeover of Vichy Madagascar, 1942," *The Historical Journal*, vol. 39, no. 4 (1996), pp. 1049-1074.

42 "Letter from the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom to the Secretary for External Affairs Bodenstein," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 9 January 1930.

43 B. Freund, "South Africa: The Union Years, 1910-1948: Political and Economic Foundations," in R. Ross, A.K. Mager, B. Nasson (eds), *The Cambridge History of South Africa*, vol. 2: *1888-1994*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 211-253.

44 "Letter from the High Commissioner for South Africa to Prime Minister Hertzog on the British Air Force Expansion," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 19 July 1934.

45 "Biographical Note on the South African Minister of Defence Oswald Pirow," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/28, London, June 1936.

46 "Captain D.D. Plan's Report on the Union of South Africa Defence Policies," *National Library of Australia*, AIR 9/56, London, 26 April 1935.

Within his reformative framework, Pirow delineated a focus on several cardinal elements. Initially, he aimed to augment the size of the armed forces with a simultaneous emphasis on their mechanisation. Furthermore, there was a discernible intent to enhance the Union's coastal defences and foster the development of a proficient Air Force. An overarching element, underpinning the aforementioned objectives, was the imperative to allocate additional resources – both fiscal and in terms of effort – to elevate the quality of education for UDF personnel.[47]

Motivated by his ambitious vision, Pirow postulated that the optimal operation of the Defence Forces necessitated a twofold approach: a comprehensive restructuring of certain existing formations and the inception of new units. Concretely, he proposed the establishment of (a) Staff and Instruction Forces, (b) Coast Defence Corps, (c) Administration Corps, and (d) Special Service Battalion (or SSB). Concurrently, he envisioned a thorough reorganisation of the Air Force. Acutely aware of the nation's *inadequate preparedness for potential warfare*,[48] Pirow advocated for a substantive augmentation of the UDF, proposing that the standing forces be increased to 56,000 personnel, with an additional 100,000 held in reserve.[49]

To realise this challenging blueprint, Pirow heeded British advisories, particularly the counsel to eschew *ignorance in high places*.[50] To this end, he orchestrated a significant reshuffling within the military hierarchy, elevating the seasoned First World War officer, Lieutenant General George Brink, to the position of Secretary of Defence and appointing General Pierre van Ryneveld as Chief of the General Staff.[51] Strategically, Pirow aligned himself with figures emblematic of both the most experienced cadre of UDF officers, as exemplified by Brink, and luminaries from emergent, promising military sectors, epitomised by van Ryneveld. The latter, having honed his expertise within the Royal Air Force, was a fervent proponent of a highly proficient Air Force.

Within the ambit of terrestrial military reforms, a salient initiative was the establishment of the Special Service Battalion. Contrary to what its nomenclature might suggest, this unit was not dedicated to special operations. Rather, its inception was an innovative measure tailored to address dual exigencies that South Africa grappled with during the interwar period. Given the pronounced magnitude of unemployment among the youthful South African populace, the government envisaged the military as a conduit that could provisionally accommodate substantial numbers of these individuals.[52] The underlying strategy was to incorporate South African men into this bat-

47 "Results Anticipated by Mr. Pirow for the Union Defence Force at the End of Five Years Plan," *The National Archives*, CAB 63/69, London, July 1934.

48 "Letter from a British High Commissioner in South Africa to Sir Harry Batterbee," *National Library of Australia*, DO 2040B/18, Pretoria, 20 September 1935.

49 "Results Anticipated by Mr. Pirow...".

50 "The Military Defence Situation...".

51 Ibid.

52 "Letter from the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in South Africa," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/2/9, Pretoria, 5 August 1936.

talion, providing them with a temporary locus until alternative employment could be procured.

From its institution in 1934 until June 1935, when preliminary assessments were disseminated, the SSB witnessed a flux of approximately 5,007 recruits. Of this cohort, 3,225 were discharged, with 2,887 of those being released to assume employment.[53] Further disambiguation reveals that 272 were released on regimental grounds, whilst 589 were integrated into the permanent force.[54] Whilst the SSB did not epitomise a quintessential military entity, it nevertheless cultivated a fertile ground from which adept cadres for the UDF could emerge. Even British evaluators, initially sceptical of the feasibility of such an initiative, ultimately acknowledged the SSB's efficacy in both channelling the unemployed towards productive avenues and effectuating transformative adjustments within the Armed Forces.

While South Africa demonstrated commendable progress in the reformation of its ground forces, other facets of the Union Defence Force (UDF), notably coastal defence and the air force, trailed considerably. A significant catalyst propelling these reforms was the international tumult engendered by Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935.[55] This geopolitical instability, particularly perceived by Pirow, threatened the security equilibrium in East Africa.[56] The Pretoria administration's trepidations paralleled those elicited by Japan, stemming from an aversion to any brand of imperialism poised to disrupt the African status quo and thus imperil South African security. The magnitude of Italy's East African incursions was so pronounced that South Africa even contemplated severing ties with the League of Nations should the latter contemplate revoking sanctions on Italy.[57]

In addition, the expanding Nazi footprint in Africa further exacerbated South African apprehensions. The demise of the Locarno system, coupled with an escalating arms race, suggested the potential for National Socialist expansion into Africa.[58] Unlike the Italian situation, this looming threat was proximate, particularly with the ascendancy of the National-Socialist Party in Windhoek and its sway over the German populace in South-West Africa. The political echelons in Pretoria began to forecast a Nazi resurgence in their former colonial territories, encompassing regions such as South-West Africa, Tanganyika, Cameroon, and Togo. While certain quarters, exemplified by Hertzog, downplayed this German menace, more discerning perspectives like those of Pirow

53 Ibid.

54 "Letter from the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in South Africa to Harry Batterbee," *National Library of Australia*, DO 7040B/24, Cape Town, 21 January 1936.

55 "Memorandum by Malcolm Macdonald: Conversation with Mr Pirow about Abyssinia," *The National Archives*, FO 954/6A/1969, London, 8 June 1936.

56 "Report of Malcolm Macdonald to Sir E. Harding on His Informal Talks with Pirow," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/180, London, 25 June 1936.

57 "Memorandum by Malcolm Macdonald...".

58 "Telegram from Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs (Sir Malcolm Macdonald) to Minister of External Affairs (Prime Minister Hertzog)," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 3 March 1936.

and van Ryneveld concurred that any German attempt to annex territories in Africa would render diplomatic relations unpalatable.[59] Van Ryneveld also prophesied potential upheavals within the Union if diplomatic overtures were extended to Germany in the form of colonial concessions.[60]

The prevailing geopolitical currents underscored the imperative for expedited rearmament. Notwithstanding the complexities surrounding South African Dominionship, its resolution would need to be deferred. Both Smuts and Pirow concurred on the strategic placement of defence outposts along the Zambezi, maximising distance from the Union's frontiers. Such fortifications would be buttressed by a robust air force, enhancing connectivity with imperial bastions in Tanganyika, Kenya, Nyasaland, and the Rhodesias.[61] The Cape route's strategic significance, as a pivotal economic and military conduit linking Britain with key outposts in Southeast Asia, was also accentuated. Pirow championed substantial 'American-style' investments in bolstering coastal defences.[62]

These dynamics underscored the salience of the Simonstown Agreement of 1921, brokered between Smuts and Churchill. This accord obligated South Africa to ensure the defence of the British military enclave in Simonstown, whilst the British naval presence reciprocated by safeguarding South African shores.[63] Moreover, with Britain's anticipated naval reallocation to Singapore and Hong Kong due to escalating threats from the East, the onus on South African self-reliance was heightened.[64] Hence, as Hertzog articulated, South Africa could no longer 'rejoice' under the protective aegis of the British Navy.[65]

During the period 1934-1935, South Africa found itself bereft of a native naval force. As of 31st August 1933, the nation had divested itself of its primary vessel, the HMSAS Protea, and had repatriated two trawlers to Britain.[66] The inaugural pronouncement regarding the evolution of the South African naval component, subsequent to its extensive dismantling, was proffered by Pirow during his sojourn to Port Elizabeth for the inauguration of a novel harbour in October of the same year.[67] Pirow postulated that in the absence of establishing a renewed naval prowess, South Africa was duty-bound to fortify its maritime frontier. While there was conjecture that

[59] "Letter from Maurice Hankey to Prime Minister Macdonald...".

[60] "Note of Conversation with Brigadier Sir Pierre van Ryneveld," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/115, Cape Town, 9 March 1936.

[61] "Report by Major A.N. Williams...".

[62] "Record of an Informal Discussion at Admiralty House in Simonstown," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/153, Simonstown, 7 May 1936.

[63] "Captain D.D. Plan's Report...".

[64] "Imperial Defence: Statement of Policy of His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom," *The National Archives*, CAB/24/253/38, London, 1 February 1935.

[65] "Letter from the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom to J.H. Thomas, M.P.," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/35, Pretoria, 14 July 1934.

[66] "South Africa: Notes by Naval Staff," *The National Archives*, CAB 63/69, London, 2 August 1934.

[67] "Captain D.D. Plan's Report...".

Hertzog harboured ambitions of being hailed as the 'progenitor of the South African Navy', the prevailing wisdom dictated that the most judicious, politically and economically expedient course of action entailed the augmentation and modernisation of coastal defence mechanisms.[68]

A pivotal initiative undertaken by Union leadership was the conceptualisation and advancement of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR). As sanctioned by the CID, the South African volunteer cadre was earmarked for training under the aegis of the British Admiralty. Additionally, there was a prevailing sentiment advocating the fusion of Afrikaner and British volunteers into a unified military conglomerate, a strategy perceived as bolstering cohesion within the UDF.[69]

Nonetheless, despite the potential efficacy of the training regimen, inherent challenges remained palpable. A conspicuous deficit in seasoned naval personnel necessitated a heavy reliance on British expertise for training endeavours. Moreover, Britain's dilatory approach in furnishing requisite materials to South Africa did not go unnoticed, even by the London authorities. Furthermore, South Africa's expansive coastline, which is peppered with several pivotal urban centres, presented additional complexities.[70] Disregarding South-West Africa, the onus on South Africa to safeguard not merely Cape Town but also the integral ports of Durban and Port Elizabeth was significant. The latter two, in particular, stand out as indispensable harbours along South Africa's Indian Ocean coastline.[71]

The most recent modernisation of South Africa's coastal defence occurred in 1928. Collaboratively working under CID plan 309-c, the foundational framework for Cape Defence was established.[72] Regrettably, this initiative overlooked the strategic imperatives associated with other pivotal ports. Concurrently, this antecedent blueprint did not envisage potential advancements slated for future incorporation. The foundational strategy was predominantly predicated on the deployment of fifteen-inch guns which, in the assessment of van Ryneveld and senior South African military officers, while potent, were insufficient to assure the defence of the City.[73] Moreover, South Africa conspicuously lacked ancillary defensive apparatus such as mines, submarine nets, and searchlights that would bolster Cape Town's fortifications.

Three salient locales in the Cape region commanded South Africa's utmost attention. Initially, the urban expanse of Cape Town itself; subsequently, Robben Island, a crucial maritime bastion proximate to Cape Town; and finally, the Simonstown base. Among these, only Simonstown boasted comprehensive defence, furnished with apt

68 "Letter from the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom to J.H. Thomas...".

69 "Union of South Africa: Defence and Defence Forces: Note by Sir Maurice Hankey," *The National Archives*, CAB 63/69, Pretoria, 9 September 1934.

70 Ibid.

71 "Record of an Informal Discussion..."; "Paraphrase Telegram from the United Kingdom High Commissioner to Dominions Office," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/257, 2 November 1936.

72 "Union of South Africa...".

73 "Record of an Informal Discussion...".

artillery and trained personnel.[74] Notably, Robben Island was the singular facet of coastal defence endowed with fifteen-inch guns. However, of the trio of batteries fortifying Cape Town, none proffered satisfactory defence capabilities. The Lion Battery, the sole operational artillery near the urban precinct, was perilously juxtaposed with residential areas. Consequently, any maritime offensive targeting this battery could invariably result in civilian casualties. Meanwhile, the Wynyard Battery, though well-appointed, was primarily relegated to training exercises. In contrast, the King George V Battery lay dormant, bereft of its lights and weapons.[75] Furthermore, the operational batteries were armed with outdated six-inch and sixty-pounder guns that were manifestly ill-suited to the defence of a metropolis as expansive as Cape Town.

In grappling with its maritime security challenges, South Africa was confronted with two paramount objectives: (a) fortifying the Cape Defence as an immediate priority and (b) augmenting the safeguarding measures of other ports. To address these priorities, Union officials resolved to relocate the older six-inch and sixty-pounder guns to Port Elizabeth and Durban.[76] Concurrently, the Union Defence Force (UDF) proposed procuring a monitor from Britain to act as a mobile bastion, utilising its formidable fifteen-inch guns to bolster Cape defence.[77] This concept was inspired by Singapore, which had effectively employed a British monitor as a persistent maritime fortress.

The British presented two monitor alternatives: the HMS Erebus (a sister ship of HMS Terror utilised in Singapore) and the HMS Marshall Soult. Both vessels, constructed in 1915, had distinguished themselves during the First World War.[78] However, South Africa's assumptions regarding the servicing of these monitors appeared overly sanguine. Whereas the HMS Terror was operational and expected to be manned by an adept crew, the HMS Marshall Soult was not. Before a final decision could be reached, Pirow intimated a preference for procuring both vessels. He envisioned the Erebus patrolling between Cape Town and Robben Island, with the Marshall Soult stationed in Hout Bay, south of Cape Town.[79] Nevertheless, Britain's stipulation—that South Africa provide the crew and bear the transportation costs—combined with the UDF's personnel and budgetary constraints, ensured the proposal was stillborn.

Given the precarious state of South Africa's naval prowess, Pirow and UDF officials posited that bolstering the Air Force might compensate for maritime vulnerabilities.[80] As of 1934, the South African Air Force's size was conspicuously modest, boasting a mere 294 servicemen, twenty-six permanent officers, and a fleet of forty largely

74 Ibid.

75 "Union of South Africa...".

76 Ibid.

77 "Memorandum on the Proposed Transfer of a Monitor to the Union Government of South Africa," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/190, 29 June 1936.

78 Ibid.

79 "Paraphrase Telegram from the United Kingdom High Commissioner...".

80 "Captain D.D. Plan's Report...".

antiquated aircraft.[81] Pirow's aspirations for the Air Force were ambitious: he sought to inaugurate a new squadron in Pretoria, divide existing squadrons between Durban and Port Elizabeth, introduce a bomber squadron, and establish a singular training squadron.[82]

While the UDF harboured substantial technical ambitions, politically, the Union endeavoured to amplify its influence in Africa. They aimed to foster robust collaboration with Britain, thereby consolidating their foothold in regions such as Rhodesia and the Middle East, regions where British backing would be instrumental in nurturing a robust aerial force.[83] However, with Britain engrossed in its decade-long rearmament initiative, it remained uncertain if South Africa's aspirations would be realised. Consequently, Colonel John Holthouse was dispatched to Britain to supervise the aircraft production and assess the calibre of British military manufacturing.

Upon his return, Holthouse's revelations were disheartening. He remarked that even though South Africa hadn't sought Britain's most avant-garde aircraft, fulfilling even their modest requisitions seemed doubtful. For instance, two Hart aircraft ordered by South Africa languished unattended at the Hawker factory. Intriguingly, Holthouse's subsequent trip to Germany yielded a markedly different impression. He lauded the German industry's efficiency, noting that while Germany produced a staggering thousand engines monthly, Britain's output was but a fraction of that.[84]

Holthouse's overt appreciation of Nazi industrial prowess injected strains into the bilateral dynamic. While the British recognised South Africa's potential as an aerial ally, given its capacity to manufacture Vickers Vildebeest fighters, the UK's own production limitations were palpable.[85] This underscored a disconcerting trajectory for the Union's five-year plan. Hindered by its inability to safeguard its coastlines and airspace, and falling short of its lofty objectives while eschewing firm commitments to Imperial Defence, South Africa found itself perpetually ensnared in political discord with its fellow Dominions and the mother country.

THE IMPERIAL COMPONENT OF SOUTH AFRICAN REARMAMENT

Within the ambit of the South African rearmament programme during the inter-war period, a salient point of contention was undeniably the nation's position within the Commonwealth. This tension became particularly pronounced following the amalgamation of the South African Party and the National Party. In the aftermath of this

81 "Union of South Africa...".

82 "Captain D.D. Plan's Report...".

83 "Extract from Record of a Discussion in the Dominions Office Conference Room," *National Library of Australia*, DO 7040B/12, 4 June 1935; "Letter from the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom in South Africa to Harry Batterbee"...

84 "Note of Conversation with Brigadier...".

85 Ibid.

merger, the most ardent and republic-centric Afrikaner nationalists, spearheaded by Daniel Francois Malan, seceded from the mainstream National Party. This led to the formation of the Purified National Party (PNP), underpinned by a singular, pivotal objective: South Africa's secession from the Empire.

This political trajectory engendered a precarious equilibrium within the nation's political landscape. On one side, Malan's PNP fervently advocated for a radical republican direction for South Africa. In contrast, erstwhile representatives of the South African Party, now integral to Hertzog's Cabinet, championed the indispensability of maintaining robust Commonwealth ties. Informed by his overarching vision, Smuts posited the significance of an Anglo-Saxon global alliance, envisioning a prominent role for the Union of South Africa therein. Concurrently, Hertzog's seasoned Nationalists, who continued to be at the forefront of the political arena, grappled with the challenge of navigating this intricate and multifaceted political milieu.

Amidst the intricate internal dynamics, the Union confronted profound international shifts that, while not invariably detrimental, certainly jolted the political landscape. Concurrent with internal party amalgamations and divisions, the Dominions began to enjoy augmented autonomy, a development attributed to the Balfour Declaration, deliberated and ratified during the 1926 Imperial Conference. This pivotal document would subsequently be endorsed by the Dominion legislatures, culminating in the Statute of Westminster. This statute posited that Dominions now had the latitude to orchestrate their foreign policy, engage in warfare, ratify treaties, and establish their diplomatic channels, all while maintaining a robust affiliation with the Empire and the mother country, thereby preserving a shared ethos that unified all Dominions. The overarching rationale championing enhanced and nuanced principles of Commonwealth collaboration was underscored by a somewhat unconventional yet persuasive argument: independent nations, barring alliances, are invariably relegated to isolation, predominantly reliant on their own resources.[86] Yet, within the Commonwealth framework, each Dominion could anticipate support from its counterparts and, most crucially, from the United Kingdom, which undeniably remained a bastion of economic and military prowess.

From a British perspective, there was contemplation to broaden the purview of the CID by inducting permanent representatives from the Dominions.[87] Given the economic downturn of the 1930s coupled with escalating global volatility, which had somewhat eroded British military vigour, it seemed logical for London to contemplate delegating a substantial portion of its defence responsibilities to its Dominions. However, the reality proved more intricate. In 1931, when the prospect of a permanent CID seat was broached, Charles Theodore Te Water, the South African High Commissioner in London, received directives from South Africa. The correspondence, penned

[86] "The Position in South Africa: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs," *The National Archives*, CAB 24/189/46, London, 5 October 1927.

[87] "Telegram from the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to Minister of External Affairs (South Africa)," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 25 April 1928.

by the Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Hertzog's close confidant, HDJ Bodenstein, counselled Te Water to refrain from entering into any binding commitments with the Crown.[88]

While British officials were astute in their assessment that they could now apportion a considerable segment of defence responsibilities to the Dominions, they overlooked a salient point. The very liberties that facilitated this recalibration of defence strategies also endowed the Dominions with the prerogative to spurn such overtures.[89] Given the political flux in South Africa, it became evident that London's most optimistic expectation was the Union's strategic leveraging in defence, coupled with the procurement of avant-garde technologies from Britain.

A pivotal juncture in the intricate relationship between South Africa and the Commonwealth, more precisely with Britain, emerged with the inception of the five-year plan championed by Pirow. With the rearmament agenda at the forefront, Pirow, along with other key officials, grappled with discerning South Africa's paramount interests both regionally and globally.[90] Concurrently, South Africa's imperial ambitions became increasingly manifest, underscored by its intent to bolster its security perimeter by integrating the High Commission Territories (HCTs) - namely Basutoland, Swaziland, and Bechuanaland. Additionally, Southern Rhodesia was mooted as a prospective addition to the Union, thereby ensuring that, for the foreseeable future, South African defence would extend up to the Zambezi riverbanks.[91]

A driving force propelling this ambitious territorial augmentation was a profound apprehension of racial unrest. Contrarily, this perspective was not mirrored by British officialdom. During his 1934 Commonwealth sojourn, Maurice Hankey, a distinguished British Cabinet secretary, observed a somewhat skewed threat perception within the Union. While he concurred with Pirow that racial discord was plausible, he firmly contended that it was not the predominant security concern.[92]

Furthermore, there was a prevailing sentiment that South African Afrikaner nationalists posed a more pronounced racial threat compared to the Native Africans. While colonial administrators in London steadfastly adhered to imperialistic tenets, they perceived themselves as custodians of the welfare of the Native populations in the HCTs. However, should these territories fall under Union governance; they harboured reservations regarding the feasibility of upholding such protective measures. Moreover, there was a palpable lack of confidence in ensuring that the Afrikaners would adopt an equitable stance towards Africans in areas that might be annexed.

88 "Report of the High Commissioner for South Africa on the Metting of the Committee of Imperial Defence," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 19 March 1931.

89 "Report of the High Commissioner for South Africa on the Metting of the Committee of Imperial Defence," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 20 April 1933.

90 "Letter from Maurice Hankey to the High Commissioner for South Africa," *The National Archives*, CAB 63/69, London, 5 July 1934.

91 "Telegram from the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom to the Dominions Office," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/218, Cape Town, 19 August 1936.

92 "Letter from Maurice Hankey to the High Commissioner...".

The racial discourse emerged as a cardinal issue straining the ties between the Commonwealth and South Africa, particularly within the security domain. Haunted by the memories of the calamitous East African Campaign during the First World War, wherein European forces were thwarted by German detachments in present-day Tanzania, British policymakers were keen to augment the ranks of the King's African Rifles.[93] Given their demonstrated endurance in the challenging climatic conditions of East Africa, it was the conviction of British authorities that such a model could be emulated across the colonies. They posited that even direct African dependencies would benefit from a modest native force, supervised by British officers, ensuring efficacy in combat scenarios. However, such propositions were met with staunch resistance from Union Nationalists. Dominated by apprehensions of a native insurrection, the likes of Pirow and Hertzog could scarcely envisage collaborative military drills with such contingents.[94]

Yet, it wasn't solely deep-seated racial biases that exacerbated the rift between London and the Union. There was a pervasive anxiety in South Africa regarding Britain's ability, or lack thereof, to adequately safeguard the South African coastline, irrespective of the state-of-the-art coastal defences at South Africa's disposal.[95] Predominantly, the more zealous nationalists within the PNP were sceptical of Britain's commitment to South Africa's defence. They perceived South Africa as a potential Achilles' heel in the grand Imperial design, particularly in light of the Union's aspirations for neutrality.[96]

Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that the apprehensions harboured by South Africa were not entirely unfounded. Primarily, it was evident that British strategists prioritised Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaya as the Empire's paramount outposts, viewing them as critical conduits to India. Consequently, a significant portion of the British naval prowess was earmarked for these regions.[97] Additionally, South African policymakers were acutely aware of the precedent set during the First World War when the British Navy vacated the Pacific vicinity around Australia and New Zealand without prior notification. This historical context intensified South Africa's trepidation about potentially suffering a similar fate.

In light of these concerns, during the Fifth Imperial Press Conference in February 1935, Pirow articulated that the Union should be singularly focused on its indigenous objectives in relation to the Commonwealth defence strategy.[98] It's noteworthy that while South Africa wasn't the sole nation gravitating towards isolationism — Canada, for instance, also exhibited neutral tendencies — the Canadian stance wasn't

[93] "Stacke's Memorandum on a Lesson of the East African Campaign," *The National Archives*, CAB 63/69, 18 July 1934.

[94] "Letter from Maurice Hankey to the High Commissioner...".

[95] "Letter from Percivale Liesching to John Harding," *The National Archives*, CAB 63/69, 18 July 1934.

[96] "Memorandum by Malcolm Macdonald...".

[97] "Cabinet Meeting 31(34)," *The National Archives*, CAB 23/79/16, 31 July 1934.

[98] "Defence Policy of Empire (The Times)," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/54, London, 6 February 1935.

underscored by an anti-imperial agenda and lacked the secessionist undertones evident in South Africa.[99]

Prior to the mid-1930s, South African neutrality largely remained a nebulous concept. However, with geopolitical shifts such as the invasion of Abyssinia, the rise of Japanese expansionism, the disintegration of the Stresa Front in Europe, and the onset of an arms race, South Africa's disposition grew increasingly averse to direct military involvement within the Commonwealth framework.[100] Recognising its own limitations in countering external threats, and cognisant of the ongoing challenges in its rearmament initiative, High Commissioner Te Water frequently conveyed to the Secretary for the Colonies, MacDonald, that the Union made a clear distinction between 'military cooperation and a common defence formula.'[101]

In the defence realm, South Africa was willing to collaborate exclusively within the African continent. Pirow underscored the potential deployment of Union forces to the Suez region in Egypt, aiming to safeguard Africa's northern gateway.[102] He posited that such foundational cooperation could enhance the proficiency of South African military personnel. However, he cautioned London officials against harbouring grander expectations from the UDF.[103]

Compounding these external dynamics, South Africa grappled with internal divisions. The imperative of maintaining a stable equilibrium was paramount for domestic officials. The Fusion Government, struggling with internal cohesion, concurrently manifested dwindling trust in Britain.[104] Hertzog endeavoured to uphold the principle of defence free-riding within the Empire, whilst concurrently adopting a hawkish rhetoric to stymie the burgeoning popularity of the PFP.

In 1935, Hertzog delivered two seminal speeches, each conveying radical and somewhat startling messages. The first was during his visit to Upington on the 11th of October, a bastion of Daniel Malan in the Cape. The subsequent address occurred during his September tour of the Orange Free State.[105] In Upington, Hertzog drew a parallel between the status of the Simonstown naval base in South Africa during a major conflict and Gibraltar's position relative to Spain under similar circumstances. He contended that, in light of the 1931 Statute of Westminster and the 1934 Union Status Act (which largely echoed the provisions of the Statute of Westminster), South Africa retained the

99 Ibid.

100 "Telegram from Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs..."; "Notes of a Meeting Held at the Dominions Office," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 5 March 1936.

101 "Letter from the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom to Prime Minister Hertzog," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 13 March 1936.

102 "Letter from the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom to Prime Minister Hertzog," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 30 April 1936.

103 "Report on Oswald Pirow's Visit to London," *National Library of Australia*, DO 6984/191, London, 1 July 1936.

104 "Defence Policy of Empire...".

105 "Letter from the High Commissioner for South Africa to J.H. Thomas, M.P.," *National Library of Australia*, DO 35/108, Pretoria, 30 October 1934.

prerogative to reassess or unilaterally rescind any commitments made prior to 1931. He insinuated that such commitments were imposed upon the Union unilaterally by Britain. Concurrently, during his tour of the Orange Free State, Hertzog intimated his inclination to foster trade relations with any nation, irrespective of its wartime status with Britain.[106]

Unsurprisingly, Hertzog's pronouncements were met with consternation by British officials, who perceived the South African Prime Minister as a significant disruptor of Commonwealth unity.[107] Nonetheless, there was a palpable recognition that Hertzog might represent the lesser of two evils. Should the PFP ascend to power, the Union's continued status as a Dominion would be cast into uncertainty. As such, a sentiment emerged among British political circles: aligning with Hertzog was preferable to the alternatives. To encapsulate, Britain's perception of Hertzog shifted from viewing him as an equal collaborator to a figure with whom it was imperative to negotiate.

In 1926, both Malan and Hertzog exhibited pronounced support for the Balfour Declaration. However, as the years progressed, their stances diverged significantly.[108] By the 1930s, they found themselves embroiled in fervent debates over issues of neutrality and republicanism. Malan was unequivocal in his assertion that South Africa's path to independence lay in its transformation into a republic.[109] Conversely, Hertzog, with allies like Pirow, posited that while the aspiration for a republic remained pertinent, South Africa's current Dominion status offered more advantages than an isolated republic might.[110] Intriguingly, during public discourses, South African leaders employed rather simplistic rhetoric, suggesting that the enactment of the Kellogg Pact rendered war a remote possibility.[111]

In private dialogues, Pirow, clearly echoing the official South African stance, concurred with Hertzog and proposed a traditional appeasement strategy. Driven by an acute apprehension of war and cognisant of the UDF's defensive limitations, Pirow advocated for the cession of territories such as Poland and Czechoslovakia to Germany. He even contemplated acceding to German ambitions in Africa by potentially transferring territories like Togo or Cameroon.[112] Pirow's propositions were driven by a fervent desire to safeguard South Africa's interests, even if it meant making considerable concessions. These suggestions, however, appeared not only impassioned but also

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

108 "Memorandum on the Question of Neutrality and Secession in South Africa," *National Library of Australia*, DO 35/108, London, August 1935.

109 Ibid., p. 15.

110 Ibid., p. 12; "Letter to Hertzog on the Unity in the Commonwealth," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, Pretoria, 5 June 1937.

111 "Memorandum on the Question of Neutrality...", p. 11.

112 "Conversation between the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Hon. O. Pirow," *The National Archives*, CAB 24/262/54, London, 12 June 1936.

riddled with ambivalence.[113] On one hand, Pirow contended that it would be *strategically imprudent for South Africa not to align with Britain' in the event of a war*.[114] Almost concurrently, he would counter with a seemingly contradictory stance, asserting that the Union would resist being ensnared in a war that solely served Britain's imperialistic ambitions.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the tumultuous interwar period that South Africa endured, characterised by significant political upheaval, it is indeed remarkable that the nation managed to navigate its way to the onset of the Second World War. The Union officials deserve commendation for their adept handling of internal policies, ensuring that political discourse did not devolve into intense confrontations among South Africa's diverse communities. It is equally noteworthy that, despite grappling with economic downturns, the Government mustered both the funds and political resolve to rejuvenate a military that had languished since the conclusion of the First World War. Given the constraints, the Union Defence Force (UDF) underwent commendable enhancements, both in terms of personnel expansion and the initiation of training programmes. These developments could be perceived as foundational steps towards establishing a robust military. Moreover, in the 1930s, Union officials adeptly navigated the intricate labyrinth of British diplomacy, exemplified by their negotiations to procure monitors.

However, while the monitor acquisition might be hailed as a diplomatic triumph for South Africa, it also underscored a glaring deficiency in South Africa's strategic foresight on the global stage. The nation's rearmament initiative was arguably one of the most ambitious within the Commonwealth. Traditionally viewed as a model, even Australia did not undertake such a multifaceted endeavour. Yet, while ambitious planning is commendable, the successful execution of such plans is a distinct challenge. South Africa's overconfidence and inability to accurately gauge domestic capabilities and public willingness to invest in rearmament rendered its aspirations somewhat quixotic.

Public sentiment and motivation are pivotal in such endeavours. The ruling government's failure to lucidly articulate the benefits of military planning provided an opening for more radical political factions. Leveraging debates over cultural and historical heritage, isolationist tendencies, and the economic downturn, Malan's Purified National Party adeptly captured the South African zeitgeist, eventually overshadowing the once-dominant Hertzog-led forces. Hertzog's proponents, in their quest to maintain a semblance of political equilibrium, found themselves stretched thin. Their efforts to placate British allies, internal hardliners, and the UDF left them fragmented

[113] "Conversation between the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Sir Campbell Stuart," *The National Archives*, FO 954/10A/32, London, 19 June 1936.

[114] "Report Prepared by M. Hankey on the Dominions' Rearmament," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 1 December 1938; "Committee of Imperial Defence: The Cooperation of Colonial Empire in Imperial Defence," *National Archives of South Africa*, BTS 9/4/1, London, 8 June 1938.

and ineffectual. Consequently, by 1939, a mere few years post the timeline of this narrative, Hertzog's faction would suffer a parliamentary defeat on the neutrality debate. This setback would precipitate elections, culminating in Smuts' victory and the political sidelining of Hertzog and his allies. Yet, this political reshuffling would also set the stage for Malan's triumphant ascent in 1948, heralding a profound transformation in South Africa's political landscape.

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