

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “If your ox does not pull, what are you going to do?”: Persistent Violence in South Africa’s Deep-Level Gold Mines and Its Contribution to the 1922 Rand Rebellion

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## Abstract

The 1922 Rand Rebellion was the only instance of worker protest in the twentieth century in which a modern state used tanks and military airplanes, as well as mounted infantry, to suppress striking workers. These circumstances were unprecedented in their own time and for most of the century. The compressed and intensely violent rebellion of twenty thousand white mineworkers in South Africa’s gold mines had several overlapping features. Within a matter of days—from 6 to 12 March—it went from a general strike to a racial pogrom and insurrection against the government of Prime Minister Jan Smuts. Throughout all these twists and turns, the battle standard remained, “Workers of the world unite and fight for a White South Africa!” Race and violence were integral features of South Africa’s industrial history, but they do not explain the moments when discrete groups of people chose to use them as weapons or bargaining tools. At the close of the First World War, for instance, South Africa’s white mine workers demanded a more comprehensive distribution of the privileges of white supremacy, but in a manner that was both violent and contentious. Consequently, South Africa’s immediate postwar period became one of the most violent moments in its history.

**Keywords:** white supremacy; engineers; workers; inflation; gold; African drill men; Afrikaners; working costs; collective violence; rebellion

## Introduction

But as soon as people, whose production still moves within the lower forms of slave-labour, *corvée*-labour, *et cetera*, are drawn into the whirlpool of the

international market...., the civilized horrors of overwork are grafted on the barbaric horrors of slavery, serfdom *et cetera*.

———Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume 1, 236.<sup>1</sup>

If your ox does not pull, what are you going to do?

———Rhetorical question posed by African “boss boys”  
in South Africa’s gold mines ca. 1920s or 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In 2007, the *Journal of the Historical Society* published my review essay of Jeremy Krikler’s important book on the 1922 uprising of white South African mine workers known as the Rand Rebellion.<sup>3</sup> It was the only workers’ protest in the twentieth century during which a modern state used tanks and military airplanes, as well as mounted infantry, to suppress strikers. Within a matter of days—from 6 to 12 March—the compressed and intensely violent white rebellion went from a general strike to a racist pogrom and insurrection against the government of Prime Minister Jan Smuts. At every turn the battle standard remained, “Workers of the world unite and fight for a White South Africa!”<sup>4</sup>

Much like the late Elaine Katz, Krikler claimed that work a mile or two under the earth in search of plentiful but low-grade gold ore was “ceaseless and violent.”<sup>5</sup> And indeed it was, but the greatest shock absorbers of violence underground were the hundreds of thousands of African workers. However, during the hyperinflationary post-First World War era, the twenty thousand or so white mine workers believed their circumstances were deteriorating because of the increasing prominence of black “drill boys” at the point of production. Runaway inflation and the engineers demand that a greater portion of the white workforce remain underground as long as the mass of African workers became a catalyst for the uprising. The engineers’ demands became more poignant once a third of the white workforce was declared redundant. The winning of gold ore now fell largely on the shoulders of African drill men.

White workers actively contributed to the violence and inequities underground. Given the dangerous working conditions and the near certainty of workers contracting silicosis, white workers were quick to assault African workers underground, believing them to be a threat to their livelihoods and families. People rarely commit violence for abstractions such as white supremacy, colonialism, socialism, or nationalism. Rather such ideals become normative standards for continuously assessing material needs and actual capacities. Can I ensure my family’s welfare now and in the future? Am I self-sufficient? Am I powerful in my own right, or in relation to others who are less

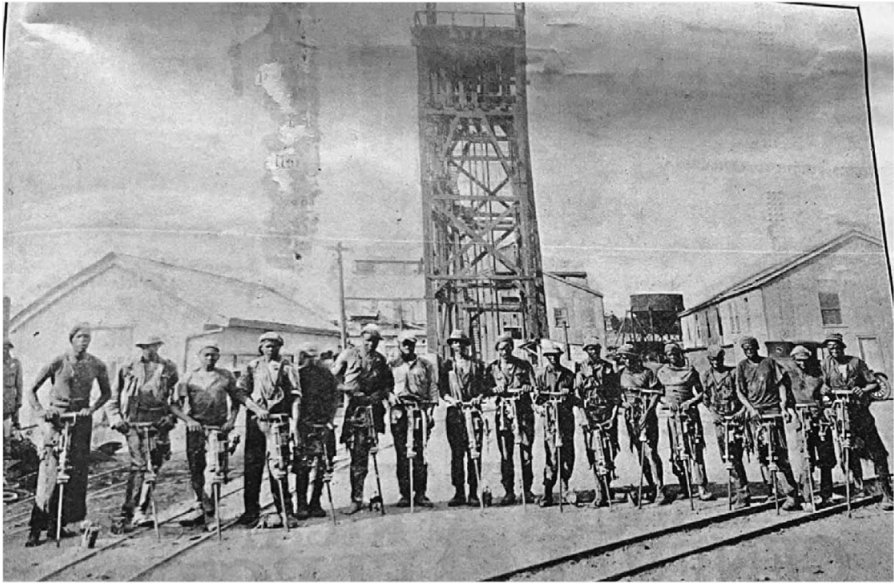
<sup>1</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (New York: International Publishers, 1979), 236.

<sup>2</sup>As quoted in T. Dunbar Moodie’s *Going for Gold: Men, Mines, and Migration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 59.

<sup>3</sup>See John Higginson, “A World Briefly Upended: An Examination of Jeremy Krikler’s *White Rising: The 1922 Insurrection and Racial Killing in South Africa*,” *Journal of the Historical Society* 7 (2007): 1–34.

<sup>4</sup>Jeremy Krikler, *White Rising: The 1922 Insurrection and Racial Killing in South Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 90–113.

<sup>5</sup>Elaine Katz, “The Underground Route to Mining: Afrikaners and the Witwatersrand Gold Mining Industry from 1902 to the 1907 Miners’ Strike,” *Journal of African History* 36 (1995): 467–89.



**Figure 1.** African Drill Men, ca. 1923. *South African Mining and Engineering Journal*, 23 February 1924, vol. 34, pt. II, no.1691, 611.

powerful and secure? The footpaths leading to sustained activism in extreme causes are usually strewn with mundane preoccupations and short-term calculations about life chances.<sup>6</sup> It makes sense, therefore, to take at face value the testimony of insurgent white workers during the hearings and court cases that followed the suppression of the rebellion. They were not simply a series of alibis and rationalizations offered to escape a long prison sentence or execution (see [figure 1](#)).<sup>7</sup>

Even though race and violence were integral to South Africa's industrial history, they do not account for moments when discrete groups of people chose to use them as weapons or bargaining tools.<sup>8</sup> At the close of the First World War, for instance,

<sup>6</sup>For an exposition of such calculations in other settings, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 6–10. See also William T. Vollmann's voluminous, eccentric, but perceptive *Rising Up and Rising Down*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: McSweeney's, 2003), 241–42; Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (White Plains: M. E. Sharpe, 1978), 458–80.

<sup>7</sup>See *Historical Papers*, AH646, South African Industrial Federation Papers, William Cullen Library, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (henceforth SAIF), Bd 6.3.16, "Criminal Cases of Public Violence Associated with the Rand Rebellion of 1922: The Case of Joseph Kuvelis, Phillip Johannes Rietief, Richard George Randall, Gerrard Ashdown and Johannes Petrus Venter."

<sup>8</sup>See Belinda Bozzoli, *The Political Nature of a Ruling Class* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977); Patrick Harries, *Work, Culture and Identity: Migrant Laborers in Mozambique and South Africa* (Portsmouth: Heineman, 1994); Alan H. Jeeves, *Migrant Labour in South Africa's Mining Economy: The Struggle for the Gold Mines' Labour Supply, 1890–1920* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985); Frederick Johnstone, *Class, Race and Gold* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); Norman Herd, *1922: The Revolt on the Rand* (Johannesburg: Blue Crane Books, 1966); Elaine Katz, *A Trade Union Aristocracy: A History of White Workers in the Transvaal and the General Strike of 1913* (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 1976); A. G. Oberholster, *Die Mynwerkerstaking: Witwatersrand, 1922* (Pretoria: Raad

South Africa's white mine workers demanded more of the privileges of white supremacy for themselves, but in a manner that was as disconcerting as it was contentious, especially since South Africa had become the largest single producer of gold in the world. The issue of the compressed and intensely violent rebellion of the white mineworkers in South Africa's gold mines was not so much about white supremacy per se, but rather which whites should be supreme. Consequently, the immediate postwar period became one of the most violent moments in the country's history.

Historians who have attempted to account for the timing and likely causes of the general strike and rebellion have often resorted to what I call a "volcanic vocabulary"—for example, "erupt," "stampede," "indiscriminate attacks"—that substitutes participants' immediate reactions for considered historical analysis. After all, volcanoes give warnings before they erupt, even if the warnings go unrecognized until after the fact. With the passage of time, participants in events such as the 1922 Rand Rebellion recall patterns and antecedents that in fact presaged events that, in the moments of their occurrence, appear to have erupted out of nowhere. For example, white female working-class women remembered that one of the false triggers of the rebellion was their male kin telling them that a black insurrection was looming.

During the court cases and Martial Law Commission that followed the suppression of the rebellion, they stated that they asked their men repeatedly, "Where are the Kaffirs?" or "When are the Kaffirs coming?" Violence of this kind requires the cultivation of an audience as well as protagonists. Hence, taking into account the testimony of insurgent white workers during the hearings and court cases that followed the suppression of the rebellion also makes sense because they offer a path into the conflict's grammar of motives.<sup>9</sup> Even people with long-standing grievances do not act if they themselves feel terrorized.<sup>10</sup>

The connections between the collective state of mind of the white workforce and mining companies' demand for increased profitable tonnage were murky, but the disorganized nature of work underground clearly undermined the humanity of African mineworkers.<sup>11</sup> Management and the engineers perceived African workers as a natural resource. White workers perceived them as a set of tools or instruments of

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vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing, 1982); Charles van Onselen, *Essays in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886–1914*, vols. 1 and 2 (London: Longman, 1982).

<sup>9</sup>See *Historical Papers*, AH646 SAIF, Bd6.3.22, "Criminal Cases of Public Violence": "Testimonies of Mr. Levy, Mrs. Martha Maria Mack and Terry Snider, plainclothes policeman." See also Deryck Humphries, David G. Thomas, Audrey Cowley, and James Edward Mathewson, *Benoni* (Benoni: Cape and Transvaal Printers, 1968), 191–93; and W. A. Murray, *The Poor White Problem in South Africa*, New York: Carnegie Commission: Health Report, vol. IV (Stellenbosch: Pro Ecclesia-Drukkery, 1932), 107–19.

<sup>10</sup>See *Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd6.3.22, "Criminal Cases of Public Violence": "Testimonies of Mr. Levy, Mrs. Martha Maria Mack and Terry Snider, plainclothes policeman;" see also AH646 SAIF, Bd6.3.21, "Names of Accused: Preparatory Examination"; Roderick Aya, "Theories of Revolution Reconsidered: Against the Volcanic Model," and "When Revolution Fails: Revolutionary Situations without Revolutionary Outcomes," in *Rethinking Revolutions and Collective Violence: Studies on Concept, Theory, and Method* (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1990), 21–49, 67–89.

<sup>11</sup>*Native Grievances Commission*, Magistrate's Court, Johannesburg, 3 Mar. 1914, "Testimony of Charles Walter Villiers," 1–7.

production that could be shifted from drilling in the stopes or quarries to loading the ore cars without any studied consideration of their seniority or skill.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, white gangers in charge of lashing or loading the ore trucks, contractors or developers, and shift supervisors fought each other for more black workers. Dragooning unsuspecting groups of black workers tended to enhance the violence and disorganization underground.<sup>13</sup> White drill men particularly resisted any kind of innovation underground—especially once the principal winning of gold shifted way from large steam drills to Africans using pneumatic hand drills. As a result, white worker redundancy underground became even more pronounced.<sup>14</sup> Between 1914 and 1924, for example, the number of whites at work underground per thousand tons of ore went from 109 to 78. Violence underground was not caused by the occasional white sociopath or “bad apple.”<sup>15</sup> Rather white assaults on Africans who appeared to stand outside of the chaotic situation underground were an inherent feature of the work routine.<sup>16</sup>

Some hint of the scale of violence underground and the disregard for black workers was on display six months before the rebellion, during a 5 July 1921 joint conference between the Chamber of Mines and the all-white South African Industrial Federation (SAIF). When the discussion turned to closing sub-economic deep-level gold mines, J. George of the Reduction Workers’ Union posed what he believed was the crucial question: “Has there been one mine closed down that has now worked out its normal life, and whose ground could not be worked better from the adjoining mine?”<sup>17</sup> George was attempting to make a case for the white unions to take control of the mines that were considered a risk. His conclusions underscored the view of African workers as mere tools of production: “It depends on how much the worker will accept as reduction. If you got natives to labor for their keep only, you could include a vast deal more low-grade ore into the reserves.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd 3.7, “Copies of Memoranda and Correspondence Exchanged between Chamber of Mines and the Federated Trade Unions during the Negotiations of July–August 1918,” appendix C.

<sup>13</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 See SAIF, Bd 3.13 (Disputes 1921), “Conference between the Transvaal Chamber of Mines and the South African Industrial Federation Held at the Chamber of Mines, Johannesburg, on Tuesday, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921,” 59–62. See also A. Cooper Key, “Rand Results in 1920,” *Engineering and Mining Journal* 109, 17 (1920): 663–65; and Native Grievances Commission 1914, “Testimony of Alfred Weston Stockett,” 6 Feb. 1914, before H. O. Buckle, Magistrates’ Court, Johannesburg, 6.

<sup>14</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, “South African Mine Workers’ Union, Statement ‘C’: Apprentice Scheme,” 22 June 1922. See also William Lincoln Honnold Papers, Honnold-Mudd Library, Claremont University Center, Claremont, California (henceforth WLHP), box V, folder 2, General Report, Anglo American Corporation of South Africa, 14 Feb. 1922 (F. A. Unger), 1–5.

<sup>15</sup>See T. Dunbar Moodie, “Maximum Average Violence: Underground Assaults on the South African Gold Mines, 1913–1965,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31, 1 (2005), 547–67, 548, 553. See also Jeremy Krikler, *White Rising*, 156; and Native Grievances Commission 1914, Magistrates’ Court, Johannesburg, 26 Jan. 1914, before H. O. Buckle, “Testimony of Stanley Archibald Markham Pritchard,” 2–3.

<sup>16</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd 6.3.16, “Criminal Cases of Public Violence”: “The Case of Joseph Kuvelis, Phillip Johannes Retief, Richard George Randell, Jury Gerrard Ashdown and Johannes Petrus Venter.”

<sup>17</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd 3.13 (Disputes 1921), “Conference between the Transvaal Chamber of Mines and the South African Industrial Federation Held at the Chamber of Mines, Johannesburg, on Tuesday, July 5<sup>th</sup> 1921,” 59–62.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

Post-First World War economic conjuncture deflated the white working class's sense of self-sufficiency like no other previous bout of economic uncertainty—to the point that they began to feel that their status as white people was being called into question.<sup>19</sup> White mine workers and their wives complained that they and their families were treated with visibly less respect in Johannesburg and the smaller towns of the Witwatersrand. As early as 1917, when a large contingent of white workers who had enlisted to fight in the war returned from France, many of them complained of being “treated like Kaffirs” on Johannesburg's streetcars and trams.<sup>20</sup>

Working people are oftentimes just as much prisoners of custom and tradition as are other classes in society. In fact, the aims of working people at certain periods of history may be marked more by a backward glance than a radiant future. Such aims may also reveal how they have withstood especially harsh experiences. In so doing, they give us a glimpse of how and what they remember about the past. What they remember may coincide with a set of conventional relationships expressed in conventional terms—the data of the professional historian—but its arrangement and packaging may be disconcerting if one does not share similar experiences.<sup>21</sup> In the case of South Africa's white mine workers this arrangement and packaging was forged largely out of their experiences with African workers underground.

### Remaking White Supremacy

The Rand Rebellion had been building for at least a generation after the British military victory over the Boer republics in the 1899–1902 South African War. The war destroyed the largest and most productive farms of the Orange Free State and Transvaal. These farms had provided the main institutional justification for the prewar Boer republics and the version of white supremacy that they sustained.<sup>22</sup> Tens of thousands of Africans participated in the destruction of many such farms as stevedores, teamsters and armed irregular soldiers.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, well over fifty thousand African mine workers left the gold mines in 1902, when the Randlords or mine owners slashed their wages to half of what they had been prior to the war. The mine owners and Lord Alfred Milner, the imperial taskmaster of the postwar state, could not assemble willing African hands in numbers comparable to those before the

<sup>19</sup>See WLHP, box 1, Letter Book A, “Honold to Hoover, 26 July 1902.” See also SAIF, AH 646, Bd 3.16 (Disputes 1921), “Conference between the Chamber of Mines and the South African Federation of Industrial Unions Regarding Reduction of Wages, 2 Aug. 1921.”

<sup>20</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH646 SAIF, Bd 6.3.17 to Bd 6.3.22, “Criminal Cases of Public Violence”: “Instructions to Counsel on Defence, Testimony of William Jacobus Stoltz (accused), Testimony of Pieter Jacobus Nel (policeman).”

<sup>21</sup>See Eric Hobsbawm, “Custom, Wages and Workload,” and “Labour Traditions,” in *Labouring Men* (New York: Vintage Press, 1963). See also Michelle Perrot, *Les ouvriers en grève* (Paris: Mouton, 1974), 7–9; Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3–21.

<sup>22</sup>See Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (New York: Avon Books, 1979), xxv–ix. See also Bill Nasson, *The South African War 1899–1902* (London: Arnold Press, 1999), 30.

<sup>23</sup>See W. K. Hancock and Jean van der Poel, eds., *Selections from the Smuts Papers*, vol. I, “Smuts to W. T. Stead,” Van Rhynsdorp, Cape Colony, 4 Jan. 1902 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 486. See also John Higginson, “Making Sense of ‘Senseless Violence’: Thoughts on Agrarian Elites and Collective Violence during ‘Reconstruction’ in South Africa and the American South,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 63, 4 (2021): 1–30.

war. The brief of the engineers on the gold mines, most of who were Americans, also changed: the mine owners required the engineers and technical experts to take an active part in constructing a new plan of work and a new kind of white supremacy.<sup>24</sup> The catalyst for this new phase of white supremacy began with the transporting of close to seventy thousand Chinese indentured servants to the gold mines between 1904 and 1907 to make up for the shortfall created by a de facto African general strike at the close of the war.<sup>25</sup>

Although the mine owners were desperate to get gold output back to prewar levels and to lower the white wage component of overall working costs, not all were sold on the new plan for reorganizing work on the mines, which had been the brainchild of American engineers.<sup>26</sup> Despite the high regard mining executives had for individual American engineers, skepticism about their aspirations and motives as a group persisted for some time. In 1907, Lionel Phillips, the chief executive mining officer of the Central Mining Trust (formerly Werhner Beit and Company) wrote to Fredrich Eckstein, one of the company's senior partners in this vein: "The American element in our mines is very strong, and it would not be a bad thing to have a chief engineer of another nationality.... It is important that the man be technically qualified and of unimpeachable character..."<sup>27</sup> Three years earlier, in 1904, on the eve of the first wave of indentured Chinese workers at South Africa's gold mines, Hamilton Smith, one of the first American engineers to work in South Africa, took a rather different view of American engineers: "Well, in South Africa the American never lets up. He works from daylight until dark and is thinking about his job in the evening. Our European engineers want to stop at four; the Englishmen to play tennis, the Germans for their beer."<sup>28</sup> Smith's observations were more than a random collection of asides. In fact, they amounted to a series of provisional conclusions about how far discrete groups of mining engineers were willing to compel the entire workforce to conform to the pace of new machinery and techniques.

Hennen Jennings, the American engineer who first convinced the mine owners of the efficacy of the MacArthur-Forrest cyanide method for processing pyritic gold ore, insisted that the "principals"—that is the mine owners—were the ones in need of instruction about the work routine: "It was for the conscientious engineers who first

<sup>24</sup>See WLHP, box II, folder II, 21 June 1907, "Notes on Labour Reorganization on the Rand (W. L. Honnold). See also Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido, "Lord Milner and the South African State," *History Workshop* 8 (1979): 50–80.

<sup>25</sup>See Peter Richardson, *Chinese Mine Labour in the Transvaal* (London: Macmillan, 1982). See also John Higginson, "Privileging the Machines: American Engineers, Indentured Chinese and White Workers in South Africa's Deep-Level Gold Mines, 1902–1907," *International Review of Social History* 52 (2007): 1–34; and Tu Huynh, "'We Are Not a Docile People': Chinese Resistance and Exclusion in the Re-Imagining of Whiteness in South Africa, 1903–1910," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 8, 2 (2011): 1–98.

<sup>26</sup>African wages went from 25 to 11 percent as a portion of overall working costs, while white wages hovered between 50 and 60 percent of working costs until the mid-twentieth century. See Ruth First et al., *O Mineiro Moçambicano: Um estudo sobre a exportação de mão de obra* (Maputo: Centro de Estudos Africanos, 1977), 2–19. See also Charles van Onselen, *The Night Trains: Moving Mozambican Miners to and from South Africa* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2019), 39–41.

<sup>27</sup>See *Historical Papers*, Barlow Rand Archives, HE 154, "L. Phillips. Private London Letters, 1907–1909."

<sup>28</sup>As quoted in A. R. Ledoux's "The American Engineer," *Engineering and Mining Journal*, 25 Feb. 1904: 310. Ledoux was the president of the American Institute of Mining Engineers at the time.

came on the Rand to educate first themselves, then their principals.... The education of the engineer was far easier and more rapid than that of the principals....<sup>29</sup>

Imparting this “education” was protracted at best. As committed Social Darwinists, American engineers in South Africa were convinced that Lord Milner’s reconstruction administration would be doomed if it allowed adult African men to participate in the new society on an equal footing with whites, and if white workers and their nascent trade unions could not be made to conform to the demands of mining capital.<sup>30</sup> When William Honnold assumed the position of consulting engineer at Consolidated Mines Selection in July 1902, he put the twin problems of working costs and labor supply in crude but succinct terms.<sup>31</sup> Writing to Herbert Hoover, then a senior engineer at Bewick Moreing and Company in Australia and two years before Hoover himself arrived in South Africa, Honnold warned: “Niggers can be used to a large extent, but I think the sooner whites are used as workers not as lazy bones, the better. There is no reason why none of this ground can be broken as cheaply and as satisfactorily with the one-man machines used in the states as with niggers....”<sup>32</sup>

### Toward a White Workers’ Insurrection

Decades of assaults against nonwhite workers underground shaped the context for the racial pogrom of 1922. Moreover, the number of accidents in the gold mines of the Witwatersrand rose sharply and continuously after 1904.<sup>33</sup> From 1906, at the beginning of the amalgamation and absorption of the smaller mining companies by the larger deep-level enterprises, until the fraught circumstances of the post-Second World War period, there were numerous terrifying accidents.<sup>34</sup> In the course of these accidents, the mining industry and the government’s various commissions became wide-ranging “theaters of power” for the mine owners, the engineers, and the mining companies.<sup>35</sup> The commissions plumbed the dark side of economic risk in the form of dangerous working conditions, frequent mining accidents, and white assaults upon African workers underground. White workers frequently doused African workers with corrosive or flammable chemicals or plunged their faces into latrines full of feces. Newspaper reporting of these incidents and the appalling accidents and mortality provided the grim evidence of management’s refusal to ameliorate the aggregate difficulties of exploiting the deep-level mines.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Hennen Jennings, “The Witwatersrand Gold Fields,” *Engineering and Mining Journal*, 11 Apr. 1903: 562.

<sup>30</sup>Higginson, “Privileging the Machines,” 11–14.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>See WLHP, box 1, Letter Book A, “Honnold to Hoover, 26 July 1902.”

<sup>33</sup>See *Annual Reports of the Government Mining Engineer 1904–1918* (Pretoria: Government Printing and Stationery Office, 1904–1918); such reports were usually published in September, a month after the peak of the recruiting season for African mine workers.

<sup>34</sup>See the narrative accounts of accidents and mortality for African workers at Ferreira Deep, Village Deep and Village Main Mines from 1915–1921 in the South African National Archives, GLNB 229, 592/15/097 (Ferreira Deep); 593/15/012 (Village Main); and 578/15/97 (Village Deep).

<sup>35</sup>Adam Ashforth, *The Politics of Official Discourse in Twentieth-Century South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1990), 2–8.

<sup>36</sup>Assaults of this kind were especially prominent in gold mines where African workers extracted ore from the stopes with a chisel and hammer rather than Leyner or Atlas drills. See Native Grievances Commission:



No single factor compelled white workers to act as violently and with as much deliberation as they did. White workers and their families were driven toward a general strike and insurrection by a combination of the Chamber of Mines' general hostility to the aspirations of white workers, persisting but incoherent desires for a "white republic," and the engineers' readiness to replace as much as a fifth of the white workforce in the midst of rising living costs.<sup>37</sup> By the time the government demanded they return to work during the second week of February 1922, many white workers felt that the strike had become ineffectual.<sup>38</sup> As early as mid-January, and perhaps earlier, white working men and women coalesced to form two unprecedented auxiliary organizations that, after mid-February, supplanted the established unions: the Council for Action and the commandos (see figure 2).<sup>39</sup>

English-speaking workers such as Percy Fisher and Harry Spendiff composed the most radical leadership of the general strike and rebellion.<sup>40</sup> However, once the general strike began to flame out in early February, the mass of Afrikaans-speaking white workers—the "Old Johnnys" as English-speaking workers called them and "backveld artisans" as they called themselves—began to make up the core of the commando's *voetgangers*, or foot soldiers, especially in the mines and towns of the Far East Rand. Those who had made their way to the gold mines after the suppression of the failed 1914 white rural rebellion were particularly prominent in the commandos. Belsazar van Zyl, who was taken prisoner just before the declaration of martial law on 10 March 1922, told the Martial Law Commission: "I claim the privilege of knowing ... that the underground workers are approximately 80% Dutchmen, and I will [put] the figures down that 70% are Nationalists, ... how and where do all these Nationalists and young Dutchmen come from who are working in the mines. Since the great war started a lot of Dutchmen were trapped on the corners with a cup in hand and induced to go to the mines."<sup>41</sup>

There were also those English-speaking workers with a visceral hatred of the engineers and mine owners. They also dreamed of turning South Africa into a "white republic." Most had been soldiers in the First World War and had soured on Jan Smuts' government once they returned to a South Africa convulsed by galloping inflation and the influenza pandemic. Many perceived their postwar existence as little

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Minutes of Evidence (Buckle Commission), Magistrates' Court, Johannesburg, 28 Jan. 1914, "Testimony of Stanley Archibald Markham Pritchard."

<sup>37</sup>See WLHP, box V, folder 2, General Report, Anglo American Corporation of South Africa, 21 Feb. 1923 (F. A. Unger), 4.

<sup>38</sup>See *Historical Papers*, A 3310f, J. L van Eyssen, "Strike Cables, 1922." See also Herd, 1922: *The Revolt on the Rand*, 27–28; T. A. Rickard, "Strike on the Rand," *Engineering and Mining Journal*, 6 May 1922: 757–59, 757; and Krikler, *White Rising*, 119.

<sup>39</sup>According to the testimony of Thomas Caldwell, a South African police sergeant in the Far East mining town of Springs, the commandos there began to have meetings separate from regular union officials and the Strike Committee as early as 7 February 1922 at the "Orderly Room" on Fourth Avenue; see *Historical Papers*, A1201, Martial Law Commission, "Testimony of Sergeant Thomas Caldwell," 12 May 1922, no. 163 (May 1999), 501–3. See also Jeremy Krikler, "Army of White Labour in South Africa," *Past and Present* 163 (1999): 202–44; and WLHP, box V, folder 2, General Report, Anglo American Corporation of South Africa, 21 Feb. 1923 (F. A. Unger), 4; Herd, 1922: *The Revolt on the Rand*, 27–28.

<sup>40</sup>See Herd, 1922: *The Revolt on the Rand*, 27–40; Krikler, *White Rising*, 180–81; and Cooper Key, "Rand Results."

<sup>41</sup>*Historical Papers*, A1201, Martial Law Commission, "Testimony of Belsazar Johannes van Zyl," 17 May 1922, eleventh day, 687–89.



EAST RAND: The notorious Brakpan 'Commando' at the end of January.

Figure 2. The notorious Brakpan Commando at the end of January. *Historical Papers*, A2368, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

better than that of urban Africans. Together, these two discrete groups of white mine workers unleashed the violent energy that lay just beneath the surface of the initial general strike.<sup>42</sup>

### Mining Companies and Engineers Take the Offensive

Although several scholars have written brilliantly about the beginning and end of this period,<sup>43</sup> what remains little studied is how a new generation of mining engineers, especially the influential American cohort, supplanted the mine owners or Randlords in planning the industry's future.<sup>44</sup> Where new gold mines should be opened, if they

<sup>42</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd 3.13 (Disputes 1921), "Conference between the Transvaal Chamber of Mines and the South African Industrial Federation held at the Chamber of Mines, Johannesburg, on Tuesday, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921," 59–62; see also Cooper Key, "Rand Results."

<sup>43</sup>See Russell Ally, *Gold and Empire: The Bank of England and South Africa's Gold Producers, 1886–1926* (Johannesburg: University of Witwatersrand Press, 1994); see also Moodie, "Maximum Average Violence"; Jeeves, *Migrant Labour*; Jonathan Crush, *The Struggle for Swazi Labour, 1890–1920* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987); Katz, *Trade Union Aristocracy*; Krikler, *White Rising*; Robert V. Kubicsek, *Economic Imperialism in Theory and Practice: The Case of South African Gold Mining Finance, 1886–1914* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1979); Peter Richardson and Jean Jacques van Helten, "Development of the South African Gold Mining Industry," *Economic History Review* (New Series) 37, 3 (1984): 319–40; van Onselen, *Essays*; and David Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983).

<sup>44</sup>The significant exceptions are Wilmot G. James' *Our Precious Metal: African Labour in South Africa's Gold Industry, 1970–1990* (London: James Currey, 1992); and Morley Nkosi's *Black Workers White Supervisors: The Origins of the Labor Structure in South Africa* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2017).

should be opened at all, and how they should be worked, were matters left in the hands of the engineers. What was the net effect of their new responsibilities? Who benefited, who lost, and why?

As a result of the new more exclusive interpretation of white supremacy, enforced by the engineers, especially those at Anglo American's mines on the Far East Rand, an increasing number of white workers were compelled to remain underground as long as black mineworkers.<sup>45</sup> The consequences of the new policies, which could not be practically realized until the smaller mining companies had been gobbled up after the war, began with a series of "experiments" at Ferreira Deep and a handful of mines under the control of Anglo American. F. A. Unger, one of the onsite Managing Directors of Anglo American, observed several years later that the mines where white workers were most eager to strike and where many quickly joined the Rand Rebellion in March 1922 were also those where working costs remained stationary or fell sharply: that is, where white miners were squeezed hardest by the new policies. Between January and September 1920, for example, 780,050 tons of gold ore were milled at an average cost of 18 shillings 4 pence per ton at Knights Deep.<sup>46</sup> Knights Deep ceased operations in 1921, but had been known as a mine favored by Afrikaners.<sup>47</sup> Working costs at Knights Deep, Simmer Deep, Brakpan and Springs fell because a smaller cohort of white workers at these mines, and also at New Primrose, New Gooch, Roodepoort United and Aurora West, drove black workers in the most brutal and relentless fashion imaginable—in part to keep their own wage rate from falling. The closing of Knights Deep and laying off of hundreds of Afrikaner workers was in fact the detonating cap for the Rand Rebellion two years later. At the very least, it gave a core of determined leaders to the rebellion on the Far East Rand, where Afrikaners comprised a sheer majority of white workers.

A significant twist in the demography of the workforce on the mines of the Far East Rand, where the white workers' actions rapidly assumed an insurrectionary character, was that both black and white workers were homegrown.<sup>48</sup> Before the outbreak of the First World War, one in three white mine workers was an Afrikaner. By 1922, one in two was so. However, on the eve of the strike and rebellion Afrikaners were a preponderant majority on the Far East Rand, where the insurrection was sustained the longest. H.R.W. Browne, an Afrikaner himself, claimed that Knights Deep, New Kleinfontein, Modder B, and the smaller mines of the Far East Rand had been some of their earliest strongholds, and they, along with Irish from the Republic, added to the thick air of hostility and sedition that obtained on these mines.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>45</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, "Resolutions Passed at National Conference of Employers and Employees," Dec. 1919, 7.

<sup>46</sup>Unger's statistics countenanced details on tons milled, yield, gold premiums, total yield, working costs, working profits, and dividends declared from 1920 and 1921; see WLHP, box V, folder 2, General Report, Anglo American Corporation of South Africa, 14 Feb. 1922 (F. A. Unger), 1–4.

<sup>47</sup>A large number of men who had fought on the Boer side in the South African War and who also participated in the failed rural white uprising of 1914 were concentrated at a number of the key deep-level mines on the Far East Rand, such as Knights Deep, Modder B, New Kleinfontein, and Van Ryn Deep; see Humphries et al., *Benoni*, 191–93; and W. A. Murray, *Poor White Problem*, vol. 4, 107–19.

<sup>48</sup>Jeremy Krikler, "The Commandos: The Army of White Labour in South Africa," *Past and Present* 163 (1999), 202–44, 214.

<sup>49</sup>Humphries et al., *Benoni*, 191–93, 201–19; see also Oberholster, *Die Mynwerkerstaking*, 53–58.

As early as 1914, the Far East Rand also had a higher percentage of Sotho-Tswana speaking African workers who were from the Transvaal.<sup>50</sup> For example, Brakpan, the most prolific mine on the Far East Rand at the time, was one of the first mines to employ a significant number of white underground inspectors proficient in seSotho, seTswana, and isiXhosa after the African mineworkers' strike of 1913.<sup>51</sup> Like many other mines on the Far East Rand, Brakpan also had a large number of foremen who had formerly been mine captains and members of the white mineworkers' unions.<sup>52</sup> Homegrown workers with extensive social networks that stretched deep into the Transvaal's countryside increased potential labor militancy on both sides of the racial divide. That potential had been realized earlier with the two respective strikes of white and African workers in 1913 and in the wartime strikes that were a prelude to the 1922 rebellion (see figure 3).<sup>53</sup>

The white to black worker ratio on the gold mines ranged from 1 to 13.9 to 1 to 20. As Unger wryly put it, "The idea of one man one job had been abandoned on those mines, and as a good deal of the work was 'reclaiming,' there were few highly paid contractors [stoppers or developers]...." Predictably, Unger continued, "...the present organization of underground, were [*sic*] directed towards regaining the control that passed out of their [the mining companies'] hands, and that was essential before greater efficiency and lower costs could be obtained." In short, Unger was admitting that on the eve of the strike the mining companies had effectively lost control over the point of production underground.<sup>54</sup>

"At the time of writing the matter of working costs is in the melting pot," Unger announced at the beginning of his report. He insisted that, "in the past, all the 'give' has been from the side of the industry, and that the various items such as shorter hours, increased scale of pay, holiday privileges, and care as to the general working and living conditions and recreation of the employees have met with very little response [on the part of the workers themselves]...."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, every aspect of underground mining on the entire Rand was at stake once virtually all of the twenty thousand white workers prepared to strike.

Unger claimed, "The high wages of stoppers and developers, to some extent were an inducement for the lower grade of [white] employees to try and qualify for this class,

<sup>50</sup>Jeeves, *Migrant Labour*, 68–69.

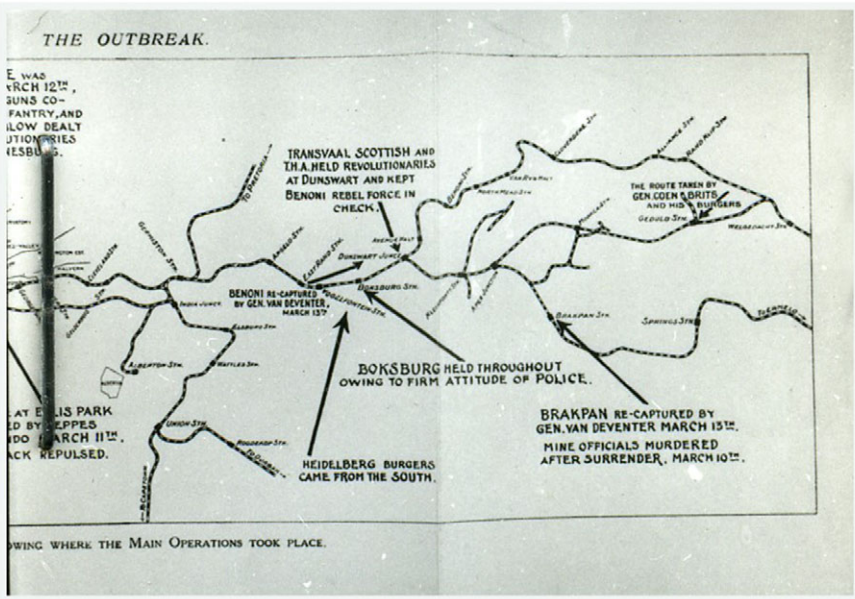
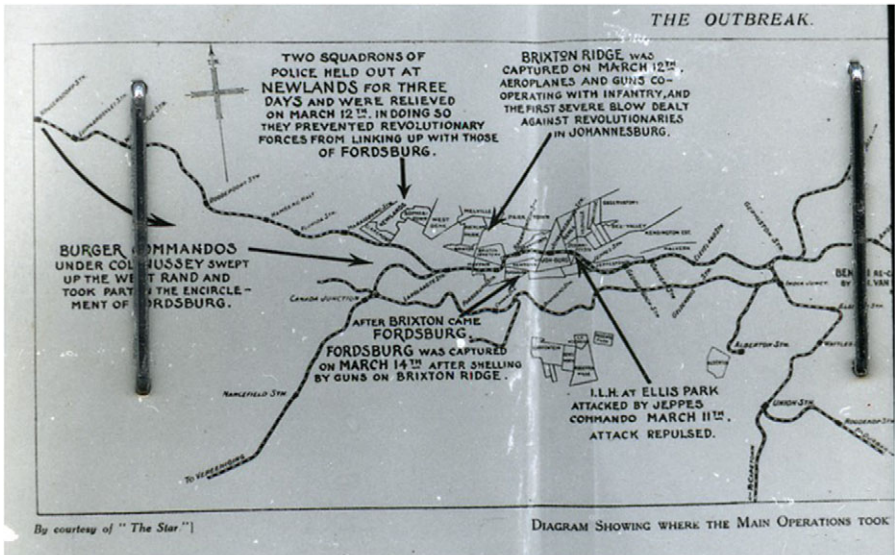
<sup>51</sup>On 10 March 1922, white strikers burned or looted the houses of such men in the Anzac quarter of Brakpan, while they laid relentless gunfire on the African workers' compound for seven to ten minutes, according to the testimonies of Charles Kidder Pitt, Acting Manager of Brakpan and former Underground Manager, and Edward Ward Hancock, Acting Underground Manager at Brakpan, in the *Historical Papers*, A1201, Martial Law Commission, 12 May 1922. See also Native Grievances Commission 1914, Minutes of Evidence Magistrate's Court, Johannesburg, 3 Mar. 1914, "Testimony of Charles Walter Villiers," 5.

<sup>52</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd. 30, "Conference between Representatives of the Executive Committee of the Mining Department of the South African Industrial Federation and the Chamber of Mines, Thursday, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 1921," 6.

<sup>53</sup>See H. J. and R. E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850–1950* (London: Penguin, 1969), 230–33. See also *Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd 6.3.17 to Bd 6.3.22, "Criminal Cases of Public Violence": "Instructions to Counsel on Defence, Testimony of William Jacobus Stoltz (accused), Testimony of Pieter Jacobus Nel (policeman)"; Native Grievances Commission 1914, Magistrates' Court, Johannesburg, 6 Feb. 1914, before H. O. Buckle, "Testimony of Herman Melville Taberer, 2–4.

<sup>54</sup>See WLHP, box V, folder 2, General Report, Anglo American Corporation of South Africa, 21 Feb. 1923 (F. A. Unger), 1–4.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 3–4.



Figures 3a and 3b. Flashpoints of the 1922 Rebellion. *Historical Papers*, A2368, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

but, on the other hand, caused dissatisfaction amongst the day's pay men, as the differences in remuneration was [sic] disproportionate to the amount of work, and even skill, involved.<sup>56</sup> Unger claimed that the wage disparity among white workers

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

compelled the engineers to initiate “‘experiments’ like the Miners’ Co-operation Scheme” at Ferreira Deep. The latter scheme was designed to prevent catastrophic accidents by bolstering the hanging wall with more waste and reef. The scheme called for a marked increase in the number of African and white workers underground. However, the work routine was not synchronized, and as a result, semi-skilled white workers such as pipe fitters and tracklayers would continue to work without regard to dangerous conditions in another part of the same mine. This translated to situations where drilling was held up for hours at a time and had to continue beyond the 3:30 p.m. blasting time.<sup>57</sup>

Unger claimed that white workers (usually timbermen or stopers) who participated in the initial Ferreira Deep experiment received higher wages. However, he noted that they started work an hour earlier than most white workers. He also claimed, “To get these men interested in the machine man’s doings, they should be given an increasing bonus based on his [*sic*] results.” Unger stipulated that the bonuses for stopers and timber men should come out of the machine man’s extra wages as contractor rather than the company’s funds. On balance, such a practice would tend to undermine the status of semi-skilled white workers as contractors.<sup>58</sup> However, the militant white shop stewards’ movement—which began with a wildcat strike at the Consolidated Langlaagte mine in 1920 and was provoked in part by the dramatic increase in inflation of the immediate postwar period—bought time for those underground white workers designated as contractors, even though only a few of the highest paid workers participated in the strikes.<sup>59</sup>

Two shillings were deducted from every pound if the machine man made less than 50 pounds a month; if his monthly wage exceeded 50 pounds, four shillings; between 61 and 70 pounds, six shillings; and between 71 and 80 pounds, eight shillings were deducted from each. The deducted funds were divided among the timber man, pipefitter, and trammer. Obviously, African workers, even the skilled “machine boys” did not share in this bounty. The trammer was not considered a skilled position as such and was totally supervisory. According to Unger, “If the machine man had to return a certain amount of his earnings to those who had assisted him, he would see to it that those others did their work efficiently and properly supervised natives in their gangs.”<sup>60</sup>

The autonomy and persistence that the subcontracting system afforded a large portion of the underground white workforce enabled them to pass off some of their short-term losses to the African workers under them. This offloading took the form of assaults on African workers, “loafers’ tickets,” and an air of negligence and disdain that often led to permanent maiming and death for many Africans—especially once thousands of African workers became proficient at using pneumatic hand drills.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>See *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup>See Herd, 1922: *The Revolt on the Rand*, 27–40; Krikler, *White Rising*, 180–81; and Cooper Key, “Rand Results.”

<sup>60</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd 3.7, “Copies of Memoranda and Correspondence Exchanged between the Chamber of Mines and the South African Industrial Federation Held at the Chamber of Mines, Johannesburg, on Tuesday, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921,” 59–62.

<sup>61</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, “Transvaal Chamber of Mines,” Johannesburg, 23 Dec. 1921 (from the Acting Secretary); see also WLHP, box V, folder 2, General Report, Anglo American Corporation of South Africa, 14 Feb. 1922 (F. A. Ungar), 1–5.

J. C. Lawn, a mining executive at Johannesburg Consolidated Investment (JCI), had some inkling of the coming crisis but no indication of its scale: "... the constant and unending agitation and the hunt for grievances, the constant harassing of the mine managers and other officials, the frequent sectional strikes, were all evidences [sic] of the position.... What does 1921 hold for us?"<sup>62</sup>

### The Underground Work Routine and the Violent Context of the 1922 General Strike and Rebellion at the Point of Production

What was the connection between violence underground and murderous assaults on African workers at the Brakpan, Springs, Knights Deep, and New Primrose mines, and women and children in streets of the Johannesburg neighborhoods of Fordsburg, Vrededorp, and Newlands?<sup>63</sup> How did the violence of the underground work routine connect to previous racist outbursts—such as the Chinese labor riots of late 1904 and the Black Peril (*Swart Gevaar*) scares of 1907 and 1912—that had troubled the black, white, and Asian inhabitants of Johannesburg and the neighboring towns? Can one discern a relationship between these earlier bouts of racial hysteria, fluctuations in the business cycle, and changes in the workforce or production processes?<sup>64</sup>

Was there a connection between "habitual assaults" underground and the increased amount of lashing done by African drill operators or "machine boys"? Where did the impetus for the assaults lie—with underground white workers or with the consulting engineers?<sup>65</sup> Two years before white workers threw up a plethora of explanations for their actions during government repression, one white worker, H. Pohl, suggested that white workers underground had become the hapless tools of the engineers. In 1919, Pohl, a white mineworkers' union delegate, concurred with the official suggestion that white assaults on Africans underground were the consequence of a "damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't" situation: "He [the white miner] is forced to get a job and he goes underground and he is told that [this and] that is required of him and the natives. His boss ... tells him at the same time 'you must not hit the boys, you will get fired if you do.' Well, if he does not he gets fired as well because the work is not done. What position do you put him in?"<sup>66</sup>

After the First World War, the gang system underground was in complete disarray. The irregularities in supervision of African workers—a work ticket not

<sup>62</sup> As quoted in Cooper Key, "Rand Results," 663–65.

<sup>63</sup> See Katz, *Trade Union Aristocracy*, 30–35; see also Krikler, *White Rising*, 90–113.

<sup>64</sup> See Charles van Onselen, "The Witches of Suburbia," 45–48. See also *South African National Archives*, SAB K373, Commission to Enquire into the Assaults on Women or Black Peril Commission, vol. 3 (Transvaal), "Testimony of Mrs. Katherine Blomefield: November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1912"; *South African National Archives*, SAB PM vol 1/1/251, file 120/33/1913, Private Secretary to Prime Minister to Town Clerk of Krugersdorp, "Closed Compounds: Black Peril Commission's Report," 30 July 1913; and Timothy Keegan, "Gender, Degeneration and Sexual Danger: Imagining Race and Class in South Africa ca. 1912," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, 3 (2001): 459–77.

<sup>65</sup> See *Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd 3.7, "Copies of Memoranda and Correspondence Exchanged between the Chamber of Mines and the Federated Trade Unions during the Negotiations of July–August 1918," (Disputes 1917–21), appendix C.

<sup>66</sup> See Moodie, "Maximum Average Violence," 548, 553; Krikler, *White Rising*, 156; *Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd 3.13 (Disputes 1921), "Conference between the Transvaal Chamber of Mines and the South African Industrial Federation Held at the Chamber of Mines, Johannesburg, on Tuesday, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921," 59–62; and Cooper Key, "Rand Results."

getting punched, tools going missing, contradictory demands from the white drill man and white ganger, or the failure of one of them to show up in a designated work area—left the odd African worker open to recrimination and abuse for circumstances over which he often had no control. A hand driller or “machine boy” suddenly commandeered to load ore could be certain that he would receive no pay for his day’s work, or certainly not the rate he received as a driller.<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, in preparation for blasting, a white miner could force an African driller to work overtime without compensation in instances where compressed air and electricity were not turned off promptly at 3:45 p.m.

Sectional and wildcat strikes by white mineworkers, most of which followed the 1920 strike of thirty to forty thousand African mineworkers, became the incubators of a new kind of white working-class leadership. Percy Fisher, the iconic figure of the March rebellion, had been a leader of the wildcat strike at Consolidated Langlaagte, for example, as were several commando leaders on the mines of the West Rand.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, the work rules that animated production underground had never been adequate as a means of creating a functioning social order a mile under the earth. The latter rules had always been dependent upon a series of informal processes that belied the literal understanding of each underground job description.<sup>69</sup> In fact, on the eve of the 24 January 1922 meeting of the appointed leaders of the SAIF and the “Augmented Executive,” the new leadership entity that grew out of the strike, one of the most credible trade union leaders of the moment, Tom Matthews, said, “As a matter of fact the Federation, although still in existence, is practically dead.”<sup>70</sup>

In August 1921, H. O. Buckle, now President of the Chamber of Mines, offered what seemed a harsh package to the white workers: (1) the reduction of the pay of underground contractors and bringing it more into line with the flat rate for white supervisors; (2) the abolition the 1917 Status Quo Agreement, which had limited the number of non-white workers in the more peripheral skilled trades to under one hundred; and (3) drastic rearrangement of the gang system and underground work.<sup>71</sup> On 8 December 1921, the Chamber of Mines did in fact revoke the Status Quo

<sup>67</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646, SAIF, Bd3.7, “Copies of Memoranda and Correspondence Exchanged between Chamber of Mines and the Federated Trade Unions during the Negotiations of July–August 1918,” appendix C; see also *Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd 3.16 (Disputes 1921), “Conference between the Chamber of Mines and the South African Federation of Industrial Trade Unions Regarding Reduction of Wages, August 2, 1921.” See also Moodie, “Maximum Average Violence,” 554–57.

<sup>68</sup>See Herd, 1922: *Revolt on the Rand*, 27–28. See also Rickard, “Strike on the Rand,” 757; Cooper Key, “Rand Results”; Polhemus Lyon, “South Africa—Then and Now,” *Engineering and Mining Journal*, 28 Feb. 1920: 551–52; and E. M. Weston, “Jackhammer,” *Engineering and Mining Journal*, 7 Feb. 1920: 395–97.

<sup>69</sup>James Scott claims, “...any production process depends on a host of informal practices and improvisations that could never be codified.... To the degree that the formal scheme made no allowance for these processes or ... suppressed them, it failed both its intended beneficiaries and ultimately its designer as well” (*Seeing Like a State*, 6). This is precisely what happened in the South African gold mines in January–March 1922.

<sup>70</sup>See “Sensational Sidelights: More Secret Strike History,” *Sunday Times*, 26 Apr. 1922. See also Herd, 1922: *Revolt on the Rand*, 27–30.

<sup>71</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd3.7, “Copies of Memoranda and Correspondence Exchanged between Chamber of Mines and the Federated Trade Unions during the Negotiations of July–August 1918,” appendix C. See also SAIF, AH 646, Bd 3.16 (Disputes 1921), “Conference between the Chamber of Mines and the South African Federation of Industrial Trade Unions Regarding Reduction of Wages, August 2, 1921.”



Agreement. From the vantage point of the white trade unions, the occupational color bar had been disposed of without just cause.<sup>72</sup> The joint Chamber of Mines-Industrial Federation conferences also reached a new low and many white rank-and-file workers displayed a marked intolerance to continued negotiations. The test of wills over who would control the mines and to whom they belonged had begun.<sup>73</sup>

### Strike, Racial Pogrom, and Rebellion versus the “Volcanic Vocabulary”

Many white workers acquired a jaundiced view of the established trade unions upon their return from the First World War and upon their discovery of the expanded importance of African drill handlers in extracting gold ore from the stopes. War had also prepared such men to use violence to achieve their aims. However, the most pervasive consequence of the war for participants on both sides was the creation of a normative conception of citizenship.<sup>74</sup> This new conception of citizenship also carried with it a belief that willingness to kill for the state gave citizen soldiers the right to determine what kind of state they would live under. Such a capacity complemented rather than contradicted the white workers’ demand for a “White South Africa.” Killing for the state and killing nonwhites became fused in the minds of many striking white workers amid an unfolding rebellion, especially for those who joined the commandos. In their minds, under such desperate circumstances, there was no other way to demonstrate that they should be treated like other whites.<sup>75</sup> After all, at this point, the mining industry was the guarantor of the state, and the mining industry had callously discounted the lives of Africans from its inception.<sup>76</sup>

Was it not possible that these men also had second thoughts about the war’s aim, once they returned home to an economy in which inflation exceeded the purchasing power of the average white working-class family by well over 30 percent? Consider again the testimony of Belsazar Johannes van Zyl, a white underground worker, arrested shortly before Prime Minister Smuts declared a State of Emergency on 10 March 1922: “I am at present in the prisoner of war camp and charged with High Treason. I claim the privilege of knowing ... that the underground workers are

<sup>72</sup>A. P. Cartwright, *Golden Age* (Cape Town: Purnell and Sons, 1968), 113. See also Humphries et al., *Benoni*, 20.

<sup>73</sup>On 24 January 1922, just before the meeting of the SAIF and the Augmented Executive at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg, one of the most credible trade union leaders of the moment, Tom Matthews said, “As a matter of fact the Federation, although it is still in existence, is practically dead” in “Sensational Sidelights.” See also Herd, 1922: *Revolt on the Rand*, 27–30.

<sup>74</sup>See Moore, *Injustice*, 273–84.

<sup>75</sup>Between 28 February and 8 March 1922, commandos at Springs and Boksburg, who were on their way to attack African mine workers at the nearby Rose Deep and Springs mines, regaled Lieutenant Arthur Edward Lorch of the South African Police with just these kinds of arguments in “rather truculent” fashion while he was on his way to inspect detachments of his undersized battalion that were spread out all along the Far East Rand, see *Historical Papers*, A1201, Martial Law Commission, “Testimonies of Lieutenant Arthur Edward Lorch and Lieutenant Colonel George Stephen Beer,” Friday, 12 May 1922.

<sup>76</sup>The number of accidents on all the mines of the Witwatersrand rose sharply in 1904. Often, fatal accidents took place during the shaft-sinking phase of the development of a given deep-level mine. In 1904, six African workers were killed for every white worker killed underground. The ratio continued to worsen right up to the Second World War; *Annual Report of the Government Mining Engineer* (Pretoria: Government Printing and Stationery Office, 1904), filed 1 Sept. 1904 by H. Weldon, Commissioner of Mines (Acting). See also *Historical Papers*, A3297, Mining Papers.

approximately 80% Dutchmen, and ... 70% are Nationalists ... a lot of us [van Zyl included] fought in the Great War.... I regard myself as a leader on constitutional lines."<sup>77</sup>

The First World War must be counted alongside the South African War and the failed white rural uprising of 1914 as a catalyst for creation of the Council of Action and the white workers' commandos. For example, van Zyl was a veteran, an Afrikaner Nationalist, and one of the earliest organizers of a commando group. He was, in fact, representative of many of the commandos who overpowered the police and mining officials in the white working-class neighborhoods of Fordsburg, Newlands, and Vrededorp in Johannesburg and at crucial mines on the Far East Rand such as Benoni, Brakpan, Springs, and the New Primrose.<sup>78</sup>

The most intransigent core of rebels was not composed of internationalists but of Boer republicans from the Orange Free State and the districts of the western Transvaal. Many of them had fought with the rebel commanders in the failed white rural rebellion of 1914.<sup>79</sup>

By the beginning of February, and perhaps earlier, before the general strike petered out, white workers and their wives organized the Council for Action and the commandos in direct opposition to their union leaders.<sup>80</sup> The commandos were particularly "thick" in the towns and mines of the Far East Rand. As mentioned earlier, by 1922, Afrikaners were a distinct majority among the white working population on this part of the reef, as were Africans who were indigenous to the Transvaal.<sup>81</sup>

On 8 March 1922, the violence at the New Primrose mine marked the first apotheosis of the "racial killings" or pogroms that had begun almost immediately after the call for a general strike.<sup>82</sup> By the evening of the next day, and for at least a full week afterwards, the New Primrose, Springs, and Brakpan mines, the juncture of Terrace and Main Reef Roads in South Fordsburg where a clutch of rebel snipers had been posted, and the corner of Sixteenth Street and Delarey Street in Vrededorp became some of the most dangerous places in South Africa for a nonwhite person to be. Several African men, an Indian woman, and several African children were killed, and scores wounded within a few blocks of Delarey Street.<sup>83</sup> However, the incidents at Brakpan and New Primrose became a defining moment for this kind of violence, not only because of the number of African workers killed and wounded, but also because

<sup>77</sup>*Historical Papers*, A1201, Martial Law Commission, "Testimony of Belsazar Johannes van Zyl," 17 May 1922, 687–89.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, "Testimonies of Charles Kidder Pitt, Acting Manager of Brakpan Mine, and Edward Ward Hancock, Acting Underground Manager at Brakpan Mine," 12 May 1922, 476–88.

<sup>79</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd6.3.22, "Criminal Cases of Public Violence": various testimonies.

<sup>80</sup>See *Historical Papers*, A1201, Martial Law Commission, "Testimony of Dr. Robert Ray," 12 May 1922, 464–67.

<sup>81</sup>As early as 1914, 43.4 percent of the African workforce at Brakpan and Springs mines was from "local sources"; see WLHP, box III, folder 11d, CMS (Consolidated Mines Selection Trust) Weekly Manager's Reports, 1914 and 1915.

<sup>82</sup>Dr. Robert Ray of the Fordsburg district of Johannesburg claimed that he had witnessed several whites assaulting Africans in early February. According to Ray, "The natives gave no provocation whatever. They were mine natives taking a walk about the place..."; see *Historical Papers*, A1201, Martial Law Commission, "Testimony of Dr. Robert Ray," 12 May 1922, 464.

<sup>83</sup>"Starting Trouble: Systematic Attempts to Provoke Natives: Important Affidavits," *Sunday Times*, 19 Mar. 1922.

it demonstrated the stark connection between control over the work process and the apparent erosion of the privileged position of the white mineworkers.

Although driven by the belief that their communities and families were in danger of an imminent attack from Africans, the killings at Brakpan and New Primrose were not entirely spontaneous. The attackers did experience some initial casualties during their first visit to Brakpan and Springs Mines on 7 March. They also acquired valuable intelligence that served them well later. The police were aware that the attackers were on their way as early as noon of 8 March 1922.<sup>84</sup>

When the rebels returned to Brakpan on 8 March, ten policemen under the command of Lieutenant Brodigan were barricaded in the central office of the mining complex with mining officials. They had been left behind after a mounted column of policemen, which had been on the premises of the mining complex since early afternoon, “disappeared” behind the May Consolidated ore dumps. Shortly after the mounted column left, the attackers began to fire on the African workers.<sup>85</sup> On the evening of 7 March, the night before the attack, the hauling engine at the May Central mine had been blown up and several pieces of complementary machinery smashed. Several African “police boys” found the wreckage. They had perhaps actually witnessed the sabotage, which was carried out by approximately fifty rebels who were mounted on bicycles. After the African police informed them of the sabotage, white mine officials distributed axe handles among many of the African workers and ordered them to guard the Glencairn shaft of May Deep and what remained of the headgear (the mechanism for suspending winding cables) of May Central. Later that evening some of the saboteurs returned. African workers challenged their presence and later bested them in a fight. As the rebels fled, a white mine official came out to see what had happened. One of the rebels turned to him and said, “If you don’t order the natives to leave their sticks behind then you will die with them.” The official complied and the rebels left, escorted by corps of South African Mounted Rifles (SAMR) officers.<sup>86</sup>

This account brought out a startling aspect of the initial New Primrose skirmish previous historians ignored: that the police, particularly the SAMR, abetted the subsequent killings by implicitly confirming the white workers’ belief that they and their families were in danger of being attacked by African workers in the nearby compounds.<sup>87</sup> The violence at New Primrose created tactical space for the seizure of the larger Brakpan mining complex. It also weakened the resolve of the state’s forces and threw into question its control over the town of Germiston, the gateway to the Far East Rand.

By 7–8 March 1922, the commandos in the vicinity of Brakpan and New Primrose were more numerous (eight to nine hundred men and perhaps some women) and better armed than they had been at the end of January, according to Charles Kidder Pitt, the Acting Manager of the Brakpan Mine, in the aftermath of the insurrection. Pitt had been the Underground Manager of Brakpan between January and March 1922. He claimed that he “knew big trouble was brewing” by the beginning of March.

<sup>84</sup>See the testimony of Archibald Spence Edmunds, an engineer at Geldenhuis Deep, and Vernon Temple Harrison, Compound Manager at Brakpan, *Historical Papers*, A1201, Martial Law Commission, 624–28.

<sup>85</sup>See the testimonies of Henry Grigg, Acting Manager of the New Primrose Mine, and Edward Miland, Compound Manager at the New Primrose Mine, *Historical Papers*, A1201, Martial Law Commission, 623–37.

<sup>86</sup>“Starting Trouble.”

<sup>87</sup>Krikler, *White Rising*, 183–89.

At 7 a.m. on 10 March, Pitt, Lieutenant Brodigan of the South African Police (SAP), and the Mine Secretary at Brakpan George Rogers, observed a portion of the commandos drilling on the mine's grounds. At 7:45 a.m. the commandos marched within 300 yards of the Number Two Shaft. At least one hundred of the eight hundred commandos were armed with rifles, and some were on horseback.<sup>88</sup>

The seizure of the Brakpan mining complex, the Dunswart Ironworks, and the nearby town of Benoni between 9 and 10 March marked the final transformation of white labor militants into rebels determined to overthrow the government and replace it with a "white republic." The seizure of Brixton Ridge, the Newlands, and Fordsburg police stations, and the Newlands Hotel at roughly the same time marked this transformation in Johannesburg. While the victories in Johannesburg could not be secured without the seizure of all the area between the Number One shaft of Robinson Deep mine and the Main Reef Road, the commandos farther east were, in a very real sense, in control of most of the Far East Rand east of Boksburg once Brakpan fell.<sup>89</sup>

On the morning of 10 March, just after a shift of more than seven hundred African workers had been halted from going underground, more than six hundred variously armed commandos attacked the mine. The commandos that attacked Brakpan had assembled initially at the Apex mine under "Commandant" John Garnsworthy. Garnsworthy, a veteran, made a tactical mistake by assembling the commando at Apex mine. Officials there telephoned Alex Thom, Brakpan's chief engineer, and C. B. Brodigan, the mine manager, to warn them of the impending attack. The failure to cut the telephone lines had been a tactical blunder on the part of the rebels.<sup>90</sup>

John Larkin, a shift boss at Brakpan and a former underground miner at Simmer Deep, gave an eyewitness account of the attack: "We were scarcely a dozen all told, while the revolutionaries, mounted and on foot, must have numbered between 500 and 600 ... they spread out in a semi-circle, taking cover in the plantation and behind material which was plentiful within a radius of a thousand yards. At 8 am they opened a hurricane of fire and kept up a continuous bombardment as they closed in.... Our ammunition was giving out.... We took refuge in the office by the shaft, but they swarmed in and beat us with loaded hose pipes and pick-handles."<sup>91</sup>

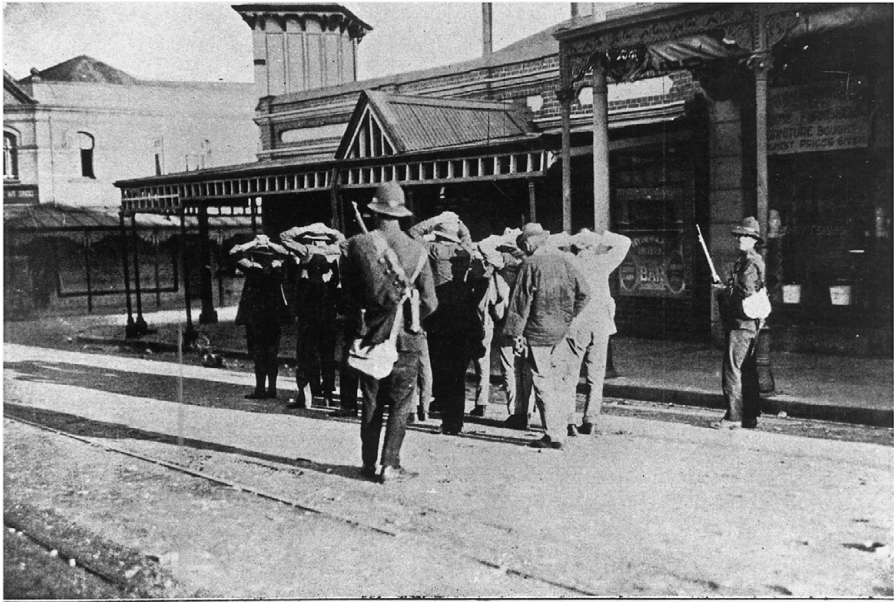
Some white workers objected to the slaughter of African workers at the Brakpan and New Primrose mines, and of African men, women, and children in the streets of Vrededorp, Newlands, and the adjoining African location of Sophiatown. However, virtually none of them objected to white supremacy in the form of the color bar and insofar as they did not, they allowed their class enemies, including many former mine captains-turned-officials, to take the moral high ground during the suppression of the strike and rebellion. The rebel slaughter of Africans was merely a more violent mimicking of the existing social order, but after a point the carnage took on a life of its own. The mining executives and the state were thus afforded the

<sup>88</sup>See the testimony of Charles Kidder Pitt, former Underground Manager at Brakpan, and George Rogers, Mine Secretary at Brakpan, *Historical Papers*, A1201, Martial Law Commission.

<sup>89</sup>See WLHP, box V, folder 2, General Report, Anglo American Corporation of South Africa, 21 Feb. 1923 (F. A. Unger), 3–4; and Herd, 1922: *Revolt on the Rand*, 104–9.

<sup>90</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH 646 SAIF, Bd6.3.22, "Criminal Cases of Public Violence," various testimonies. See also "Larkin's Luck: Dramatic Escape from Brakpan Mine," *Sunday Times*, 19 Mar. 1922.

<sup>91</sup>"Larkin's Luck."



FORDSBURG: The last batch of prisoners taken.

**Figure 4.** Fordsburg: Last Batch of Prisoners Taken. *Historical Papers*, A2368, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

opportunity to depict themselves to the rest of the society as the guardians of civilization (see [figure 4](#)).<sup>92</sup>

### Conclusion: Whither the White Republic?

Despite its great intensity over much of the 40 miles containing the principal gold mines and Johannesburg, the rebellion's confinement to the Rand would prove to be its undoing. Without support from whites in the countryside, even the fiercest rebels in places such as Brakpan, Benoni, and New Primrose could only make a series of ingenious feints as government troops and De Haviland fighter planes moved to encircle them and the rebellion's nerve center in the Fordsburg district of Johannesburg between 12 and 14 March. Few would have predicted this outcome a few days before. Having defeated local police forces, the rebels appeared to be in uncontested control of key points on the Far East Rand. But within less than 24 hours, after Smuts declared martial law on 10 March 1922, the weaker centers of insurrection at Germiston and Boksburg gave way to detachments of the Durban Light Infantry. Why rebels in Germiston did not attack raw troops who had been standing on a cramped train virtually all day or blow-up portions of the rail line

<sup>92</sup>"Reveling in Filth: The Psychology of Revolution," *Sunday Times*, 19 March 1922. See also "The Battle of Boksburg: Official Report—Why Firing Was Ordered," *Pretoria News*, 1 Mar. 1922; and "Don't Rub It In" (editorial), *Sunday Times*, 16 Apr. 1922; "Primrose Fight: Another European Death," *Sunday Times*, 26 Mar. 1922; and "Grateful Natives," *Sunday Times*, 2 Apr. 1922.

remains a mystery. But afterwards the connection between militants in the outlying strongholds of the insurrection and their command center in Fordsburg was cut.<sup>93</sup>

Deprived of a coordinated defense, the rebels could only hope that whatever resistance they put up would be enough to make the state's forces have second thoughts about slaughtering them wholesale. In some cases, their courageousness might have been a miscalculation, since no one really knows how many of the rebels the special detachments of the South African Defense Force executed summarily. Once rebel defenses collapsed after 13 March, units like the Transvaal Scottish Regiment, which had experienced especially heavy casualties at the hands of the insurgents, were not inclined to restraint.

By 12 March 1922, two thousand insurgents had been captured; by 15 March, between 3,500 and four thousand were the government's prisoners. Rebel strength had been at least between five and six thousand men and several hundred women at the peak of the rebellion. However, several of them slipped through the government's dragnet to find protection among their rural kin and people they knew in the Transvaal and Orange Free State. Many were executed once their captors had disarmed them (see figure 5).<sup>94</sup>

Mining executives and the press tended to gloss over these circumstances. Consider the observations of a prominent American engineer, "The outrages committed by insurgent strikers on the Rand alienated public sentiment in the surrounding countryside and provoked an immediate rally to the side of constituted authority."<sup>95</sup> How "immediate" rural civilian support was and whether it, in fact, amounted to a "rally" are debatable. It took more calculation than loyalty to the government for Afrikaner farmers to decide to assist in suppressing a rebellion that they knew could not succeed without their intervention. Men who had often looked askance at urban life held the fate of South Africa's economic mainspring within their grasp for several days.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup>See Krikler, *White Rising*, 193–294. See also Herd, *1922: Revolt on the Rand*, 183–89; and Rickard, "Strike on the Rand," 758.

<sup>94</sup>After government forces suppressed the rebellion and declared martial law, Smuts spoke before the Parliament on 31 March 1922, urging them to support the Indemnity Bill and the government's view of the causes of the rebellion: "There was this state of feeling on the Rand, there was this military organization [the commandos], and I must add this, that there was no doubt that these people expected support from the country." J. H. Munnik, the Nationalist representative from the Northern Transvaal shot back, "They were unarmed!" Smuts then said that he would "come to arms just now." Hertzog, the leader of the Nationalist Party and the representative from the Harrismith district of the Orange Free State, interjected, "Perhaps they expected support from the government." Visibly rattled by Hertzog's comment, Smuts called his bluff: "I did not know what happened at the secret strike meeting at Witbank, but I always give General Hertzog credit for being so intelligent as not let himself in for a thing like this. No doubt stories were about but I have personally never believed them." Hertzog responded directly to Smuts's sidelong accusation, "You are a fool not to." Smuts was determined to make his case, though, "Yes, perhaps I am a fool. No sir, there is no doubt about it that assistance was expected from the country, and it was one of the disappointments that led rapidly to the end when these revolutionaries, these revolutionary commandos, found out that the only commandos which were coming to the Rand were the government commandos..."; speech delivered to Parliament by Prime Minister Jan Smuts on 31 March 1922, in Jean van der Poel, ed., *Selections from the Smuts Papers*, vol. V (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 118–35.

<sup>95</sup>Rickard, "Strike on the Rand," 758.

<sup>96</sup>*Historical Papers*, AH646 SAIF, AH, 646, Bd6.3.22, "Criminal Cases of Public Violence": "Testimonies of Mr. Levy, Mrs. Martha Maria Mack and Terry Snider, plainclothes policeman." See also SAIF, AH 646, Bd6.3.21, "Names of Accused: Preparatory Examination."



Figure 5. Africans removing their dead after the 8 March pogrom. *Historical Papers*, A2368, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

On 26 January 1922, for example, at a mass meeting in Benoni, one anonymous commando leader declared, "...whereas previous strikes had been engineered by men from overseas, that could not be said of the present strike as I myself am a Dutchman." He went on to say that many Afrikaner mineworkers had gone to the "backveld explaining matters to the burghers so that they should not come to the support of the Government."<sup>97</sup> On 10 March 1922, after members of his commando had killed a mine official and policeman at Van Ryn Estates that morning and moved out toward the New Kleinfontein mine, a leader of the Putfontein commando declared, "We were called to shoot the English (*Ons is geroep om die Engelsman te skiet*)."<sup>98</sup>

These sentiments did not simply erupt out of the desperate last days of the rebellion. They were intimately connected to the workers' aspirations from the very beginning of the struggle. However fragmentary these declarations might appear, they surfaced at key moments of the uprising. They could not have been the product of an individual participant who simply got carried away.<sup>99</sup>

However desperate or deluded the rebels' efforts to reach out to former leaders of the failed 1914 rebellion might have been, attempts to enlist the assistance of their rural relatives and former neighbors who had actively supported the latter rebellion were not entirely unsuccessful. After the killing of three demonstrators at Boksburg

<sup>97</sup>"Red Plot Revealed: Astounding Stories of Rebel Machinations—"National Board of Control," *Sunday Times*, 26 Mar. 1922.

<sup>98</sup>Oberholster, *Die Mynwerkerstaking*, 132–35; and "In Bed: Clever Capture at Rustenburg," *Sunday Times*, 26 Mar. 1922.

<sup>99</sup>Oberholster, *Die Mynwerkerstaking*, 132–35.



Figure 6. Loyal White Farmers from the Eastern Transvaal, ca. 1922. Historical Papers, A2368, William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.

on 28 February 1922, for example, Barend Johannes Botha, a thirty-two-year-old railway shunter from Newlands, and Willem Cornelius Nel, Botha's eighteen-year-old neighbor, made several trips to Marico to urge their kin not to march on the Rand with the commandos formed from rural volunteers.

So convinced were they that these hardscrabble farmers would remain indifferent to the events on the Rand that they urged the officers at the Newlands Police Station to surrender as early as 1 March, more than a week before the station was seized by rebels. That they were later indicted for high treason did not mean that their visits had been in vain. Rasmus Piet Erasmus and Jacobus Viljoen, key leaders of Fordsburg and Newlands commandos, hid out for weeks in an area of the Rustenburg district that had been a flashpoint of the 1914 rebellion and that was quite close to Botha and Nel's relatives in neighboring Marico.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, burgher commandos from the west did not arrive in Johannesburg until 14 March, long after the aerial bombardment of Newlands, Vrededorp, Fordsburg, and Benoni and the summary executions of rebels in Kempton Park. True, there were loyal burgher commandos attached to the forces of Generals van Deventer and Brits on the Far East Rand, but these were formed from farmers from the wealthier eastern districts of the Transvaal (see figure 6).

Some mining executives celebrated the government's victory by having soldiers on active duty tend their gardens and tennis courts. These acts chastened and embarrassed the government's more rabid supporters. Those who had urged the

<sup>100</sup>"In Bed;" see also *Historical Papers*, AH646 SAIF, AH 646, Bd6.3.22, "Criminal Cases of Public Violence," especially the testimonies of Nicolas van Westhuizen, Millie Leach, and Martha Maria Mack.



sternest measures against the 4,700 sequestered strikers and rebels became less shrill subsequently.<sup>101</sup> But the victory of the mining interests and the government was neither pyrrhic nor politically sustainable. Smuts' government was swept from power in 1924 by a corporatist coalition of the Nationalist and Labor parties called "the Pact." The Pact government's electoral victory was an outcome of Smuts' government's refusal to guarantee unconditionally that white workers would share in the benefits of white supremacy. Thus, the Pact was able to appropriate some of the punch of D. C. Boonzaier's ironic assessment of Smuts in a popular cartoon that appeared on the eve of the election: "What you said in 1907 and what you are doing now (*Wat hy in 1907 gese het en wat hy nou doen*)."<sup>102</sup> White mineworkers were as political as they were violent. Even though they failed to make any lasting changes to the existing political order, they paved the way for the triumph and long night of apartheid a generation later, in 1948.

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<sup>101</sup>"Reveling in Filth"; see also Krikler, *White Rising*, 193.

<sup>102</sup>D. C. Boonzaier's cartoons were published widely in *Die Burger* and the *Johannesburg Star* between 1923 and 1929. This particular caption appeared in the latter, in early January 1924; see Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, *Waste of White Skin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 59–61.

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