2. Jan Smuts and the World Counter-Revolution 1917-1923[1]

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At 7.20 p.m. on Tuesday 1 April 1919, a train steamed out of Paris's Gare de l'Est. On board was a delegation dispatched from the Supreme Council of the victorious powers of World War I. The mission was led by Jan Christiaan Smuts, Minister of Defence and Deputy Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa and a member, since June 1917, of the Imperial War Cabinet. Smuts's task was to negotiate with the revolutionary government of Béla Kun, which had seized power in Hungary in the aftermath of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the subsequent failure of the liberal government of Count Mihály Károlyi. The Council was considering how to handle the military confrontation that had been shaping up between the Romanian and Hungarian forces over disputed border territories. It had been toying with sending a Romanian army, under the command of France's General Charles Mangin, to crush the revolutionaries. But the Council would first allow the South African to exercise the powers of intellect and persuasion with which he was credited by his admirers (Nicolson, 1933: Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:105-118).

Smuts was preoccupied with the question of how best to quell revolution in Europe. He was steadily hardening in his attitudes to the Bolsheviks and their supporters in Hungary, Germany and elsewhere. Just before leaving on his journey, Smuts wrote to a liberal-minded friend who was inclined to give the revolutionaries the benefit of the doubt: 'No I don't agree with you on Bolshevism. I fear it is a disease of socialism

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arising from the horrors and sufferings of the war, but still a disease. You cannot save mankind by barring the élite and letting the proletariat (as it is called) run riot' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:98). Yet he was no simple-minded reactionary; he already found himself in strong opposition to the punitive attitudes of the leaders in Paris towards the defeated nations. His project was to build prosperous and stable new states that could stem the revolutionary tide. Smuts's preference was for an approach to the post-war settlement that would stabilise a new political order by supporting the forces of the political centre. However, he did not rule out the use of the Allies' armed forces to crush the revolutionaries, if all else failed.

Outside South Africa, Jan Smuts is largely forgotten today, yet in his time he was regarded within the British political establishment as a titan. He was, at the time he went to Paris, hailed in the corridors of Westminster for his role in overcoming the division between Afrikaners and Britons, thus helping to pave the way for the unification of South Africa as a settler-dominated state in 1910. He was equally applauded for his part in commanding Imperial forces against the Germans in South West Africa (1914-1915) and in East Africa (1916). He would receive further British accolades for his role as protagonist of the Commonwealth idea, especially during his two periods as Prime Minister of South Africa (1919-1924 and 1939-1948). The prestige of the Union of South Africa reached an all-time high in Britain in the years of World War II, when South African troops under Smuts's active direction fought in Ethiopia, the Western Desert and Italy. A personal friend of Winston Churchill and of John Maynard Keynes, Smuts was invited to address the UK parliament in Westminster in 1942 and was ultimately to become the Chancellor of Cambridge University. He was then, an extremely significant figure in the networks of British global power (Hancock, 1962, 1968).

However Smuts's role in the revolutionary period of 1917 to 1923 is of importance not just because it represents the unique phenomenon of a colonial statesman playing a significant part in the European drama. (Australia's William Morris Hughes did have a notable role at Versailles, but it

was largely related to the pursuit of his country's aspirations for colonies). Smuts's interventions suggest the need for a rethink of the geo-spatial framework of those insurrectionary years. His approach to the European revolutions was crucially formed by his clashes with syndicalist revolutionaries in Johannesburg in 1913 to 1914. And conversely, his experiences in Europe were to shape the harshness with which he later dealt with working-class insurrection in South Africa in 1922. Within the British government, Smuts's attack on the Treaty of Versailles, was driven partly by his experiences in post-Second Anglo Boer War reconciliation in South Africa; but it was based above all on an acute fear of the consequences of the Russian Revolution. In his career, there was a continuous interaction between his experiences in South Africa and in Europe, in forming his decisions during his confrontations with the forces challenging existing social hierarchies.

Examining Smuts's role in this period helps us to see why the revolutionary epoch of 1917 to 1923 cannot be regarded only as a European-Russian phenomenon. The work of Erez Manela (2007) has rightly drawn attention to the connection between the Paris peace conference and the upsurge of anti-colonialism in Egypt, Korea, China and India. But it may be open to question whether he is correct to link this so exclusively to a 'Wilsonian Moment' and to play down to such a great extent the ripple of the 'Leninist Moment'. While Manela is right to emphasise the 1919 wave of nationalism in Asia and the Middle East, he perhaps underemphasises the short-term global impact of the Russian Revolution, which helped drive forward not only movements for self-determination, but also labour militancy, around the world. Smuts's particular trajectory highlights the extent to which both the leftist-revolutionary insurgency of the end of the war, and the politics of counter-revolution that met it, were transcontinental, extending well beyond Eurasia.

Smuts and the Syndicalists

Jan Christiaan ('Christian') Smuts, born in 1870, was the scion of a prosperous Afrikaner farming family in the western part of Britain's Cape Colony. He was an outstanding student at Victoria College in Stellenbosch and then won a scholarship to Cambridge, where he was the top law student in his year. He was initially attracted by Cecil Rhodes' Imperialism, but turned against him over Rhodes' attempt to overthrow the Boer Republic in the Transvaal. At the age of 28, Smuts was appointed Attorney General of the Transvaal by Paul Kruger. During the Second Anglo Boer War (1899–1902), he became an outstanding guerilla commander, leading a Boer force in a daring invasion of the Cape. Smuts was won back to the Imperial cause after the war by the conciliatory policies of Henry Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal government towards the Boers. The British allowed white self-government in the Transvaal, and thereafter permitted movement towards a unified, settler-ruled South African state, which was achieved in 1910. Smuts's mentor, Louis Botha, became Prime Minister, with Smuts as his deputy, Minister of Defence and general right-hand man. With the outbreak of war, Smuts played a key part in Botha's defeat of an armed rebellion by German-aligned Afrikaners (the 1914 Rebellion against the Union government). Although the rebels were in general treated with leniency, the execution of one army officer, Jopie Fourie, was held by Smuts's Afrikaner Nationalist enemies as the symbol of his capitulation to British Imperialism (Davenport, 1963). Smuts went on to participate in the seizure of South West Africa. While, as British commander in German East Africa, he was unable to defeat Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck's troops, he did succeed during 1916 in clearing the German forces from the strategic northern half of the country. These achievements explain the enthusiasm with which he was greeted when he arrived in England for an Imperial conference in early 1917. He was then invited to join the Imperial War Cabinet. Smuts became the chief advocate of recasting the Empire as a British 'Commonwealth', in which the settler colonies would enjoy equal status with Britain under the Crown. (This did not of

course imply any racial egalitarianism; Smuts's racial politics in the South African context remained firmly paternalist in regard to the African majority) (Hancock, 1962, 1968).

Smuts underpinned his whole approach to politics with a sophisticated philosophical rationale drawn from the influence, during his Cambridge student years, of the late nineteenth century British Hegelians inspired by the writings of Thomas Hill Green (Mazower, 2009). In Smuts's 'Holist' vision, wise elites deny their own self-interest, and lead the greater community to seek the good of the whole. Human organisation rises over time towards higher forms and ever increasing unity-in-diversity. Small nations (South Africa) find a place within a greater unifying entity (the British Empire) (Dubow, 2008). This construction had strongly hostile implications for how attempts at revolutionary change were viewed. Human society would make progress over time, but that progress was necessarily slow and gradual. The British Empire had a special role in leading this evolution and thus its stability was essential. Social advance was about creating the potential for individual self-development and ethical conduct within a law-governed community. Even electoral democracy (let alone social democracy) was of limited importance.

Smuts's politics of counter-revolution moved from South Africa to Europe and back again. It had been significantly shaped by a massive confrontation in 1913 to 1914 with a syndicalist-led white worker trade union movement centred on the Witwatersrand gold mining area around Johannesburg. The bulk of this labour force were Cornish, English and Scottish miners and artisans, but they were joined by increasing numbers of newly urbanised Afrikaner miners and railway workers. Their agitation focused on conventional trade union demands, although their politics was underpinned, at least amongst the rank and file, by a fear that low-paid black workers would undercut their privileged position in the labour market. In 1913, these white unionists fell under the leadership of syndicalist militants, most of them of British, Irish and Australian artisan backgrounds. Some were influenced by the Industrial Workers of the World

(IWW) which had led a tramway strike in Johannesburg in 1911; others had connections to James Connolly's Glasgow-based Socialist Labour Party (Hyslop, 2007). (These activists tended to hold much more egalitarian racial political views than the generality of trade unionists, although they largely avoided this issue in their practical activities as strike leaders). Smuts, an adherent of strong free market views and a rural romantic, had little sympathy for the trade unionists, let alone for revolutionary militants. He was appalled when in early July 1913, the strikers unleashed a massive confrontation in central Johannesburg in which the railway station and the leading newspaper office were burned down, shots were exchanged with police and eventually twenty civilians were killed by British troops. In a direct encounter with strike leaders, Smuts and Botha were forced to make major concessions to them. But the humiliated Smuts planned his revenge. In January 1914 he deliberately precipitated another strike, mobilised the newly created Union Defence Force, carried out arrests and declared martial law. Hundreds were arrested, and nine leaders deported (Katz, 1976). In justifying his actions, Smuts (1914) described what he faced as a 'Syndicalist Conspiracy'. From this time he manifested a passionate loathing of labour radicalism, linked in his mind to the notion of 'anarchy' and civilisational collapse.

There can be little doubt that this affected the way in which Smuts approached the European Crisis. He was thoroughly committed to a British victory in the war. Yet he became, along with John Maynard Keynes, one of the two members of the British Empire delegation at Paris who were most critical of the Treaty and most anxious for the re-stabilisation of Germany. In part, this position arose from his great admiration for the way in which the British had reconciled with the Boers after 1902, which he saw as a model for transcending conflict. But it also came from a highly personal detestation of revolutionaries, whom he saw as the antithesis of the complex evolutionist teleology of 'holism' to which he subscribed, in which social order was paramount. Thus, while Smuts at one level was a liberal

humanitarian critic of the sufferings that the victorious powers were inflicting on Germany and central Europe, at another level his critique was one preoccupied with the need to build, in Germany and elsewhere, strong states that could crush revolution. His differences with the positions of the French and British governments arose precisely because he felt that they underestimated the danger that a harsh post-war settlement would risk of precipitating revolution in East and Central Europe.

Smuts and Revolution in Europe

In Britain, by 1917, the initial wave of loyalism that quelled the syndicalist militancy of the pre-war years had faded, and worker protest was becoming widespread again in the industrial heartlands. For David Lloyd George's government this was a vital threat to war production. Smuts received some new exposure to the syndicalists he so detested when, in October 1917, he was sent on a morale-boosting tour of the South Wales coal fields. This was part of the Lloyd George government's propaganda offensive, and Smuts was – perhaps rather oddly – seen as a winning card in consolidating the support of a region which had been a centre of the Syndicalist wave in the immediate pre-war years. South Wales was drenched with a quarter of a million copies of Smuts's speeches, standardised articles about his achievements were supplied to the local press and window displays about him in shop windows were arranged. In his speeches to largely working-class audiences in Cardiff and Tonypandy, he spoke about the virtues of freedom and self-government, which he assured his audience were characteristic of the British Empire, but not to be found in Germany (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966a:566-567). At the Empire Pavilion in Tonypandy, an aide noted, the audience 'consisted to some extent of pacifists, syndicalists and other enemies of the government' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966a:566). But Smuts at least temporarily won over his audience with his appeals to patriotism.

For Smuts, the Russian Revolution was an existential challenge to all he believed in. Moreover he was increasingly pessimistic about the prospect of a short-term defeat of Germany on the Western Front. This led him to form the view which would permeate his interventions within the British political leadership over the subsequent years; namely, that while German militarism still needed to be checked, the revolutionary threat was ultimately a far greater one. He became an advocate within the cabinet, of a settlement with Germany and Austria-Hungary that would head off the spread of revolution beyond Russia. In early December 1917, Smuts travelled to Geneva on behalf of the cabinet for a highly secret meeting with an intermediary of the Austrian government, Count Albert von Mensdorff-Pouilly-Dietrichstein, who had been the Empire's Ambassador to Britain at the time of the outbreak of war. Smuts tried to win over von Mensdorff to the idea of a separate peace, urging that the temporary abatement of the Russian military threat provided an opportunity for this. He also held out the prospect of British acceptance of the continued existence of the Austro-Hungarian polity, albeit in a reformed and federalised format (Lloyd George, 1936:21-35). But his attempt to drive a wedge between the Austrians and the Germans did not succeed.

Smuts's ability to take his distance from the policy of the government in which he served was to some extent enabled by his interaction with Liberal Party networks whose politics derived from Gladstonian anti-expansionism. The roots of this affiliation lay in the campaign against the British government's war policies in South Africa mounted by British radical liberals in 1899 to 1902. Smuts had become a particularly close friend of the leading campaigner against the British use of concentration camps, Emily Hobhouse, but there were many others. This was a creative tension: Smuts was generally more cautious than these friends and acquaintances, but they, rather than conservatives, were his interlocutors. One of them was the former Lord Chancellor and peace campaigner, Lord Loreburn. Loreburn wrote to Smuts on 20 January 1918 that the recent peace overtures from the German

side had been driven by fear of revolution, were sincere, and therefore needed to be followed up:

> What I fear is that if all this goes on as it has for three and a half years, the outcome, not only in Germany but also elsewhere, will be far beyond reform, however large, and will be what no wise man can desire, a sort of *novae tabulae* for the European race. It is not money or property I am thinking about, but a replacement of salutary customs and hitherto accepted axioms of moral and social principle by a wholesale revulsion which will take generations to work itself out, and on a scale so large that no nation can escape its contagion (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966a:593).

This very much echoed Smuts's own view. In a speech in early May 1918, Smuts, while resolute in the face of the German spring offensive, sounded a similar note. If the war continued for many years:

> the civilization we are out to save and to safeguard may be jeopardized itself. It may be that in the end you will have the universal bankruptcy of government, and you let loose the forces of revolution, which may engulf what we have so far built up in Europe, because civilization is not an indestructible entity (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966a:650).

He believed that the harshness of the Peace of Brest-Litovsk demonstrated the necessity to check Germany's military power. But it was clear from the speech that Smuts no longer thought an outright victory was possible, and that in any case, he thought that an excessively punitive peace was undesirable. Once Germany had been fought to a standstill, diplomacy and conciliation would be necessary to secure peace and create a new basis for stability in Europe. Were wisdom not to prevail: 'The war may drift on until all the Governments become bankrupt, until a bleeding people lies in agony and the forces of Bolshevism and revolution are let loose on society. Would that be in your interest?' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966a:653). Smuts however opposed private peace initiatives,

which he saw as disruptive of coherent policy: it was up to the government to lead the war effort and conclude a settlement.

With the coming of the Armistice, Smuts joined the Paris Peace Conference. The contributions of the Dominions (South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada), to the war effort had secured representation in their own right, rather than as part of the British delegation. This gave South Africa a new level of independence in international affairs. Smuts was eventually joined by Botha at the conference. Smuts significantly shaped the conference by producing the most coherent proposal for a future League of Nations. Woodrow Wilson's views on how the League should function were strongly formed by reading Smuts's pamphlet on the subject during his voyage to Europe, and by their subsequent conversations. Smuts was able to use the influence thus gained over Wilson to secure the American President's acquiescence to his proposal for a League of Nations 'mandate' system for the former German colonies. Wilson had initially been reluctant to agree to the handing out of these colonies to individual states. This threatened to derail Smuts's desire to obtain control of South West Africa. But by pushing the notion of 'trusteeship', Smuts managed to make the appropriation of the German territories acceptable to the USA delegation (Curry, 1961).

Smuts's immediate concern though, was with the revolutionary situation in Europe. He wrote to David Lloyd George on 26 March 1919, laying out his concerns. Essentially, he argued that the imposition of a brutal peace on Germany would open the way for the Bolsheviks:

> I am seriously afraid that the peace to which we are working is an impossible peace, conceived on a wrong basis; that it will not be accepted by Germany, and even if accepted, that it will prove unstable, and only serve to promote the anarchy which is rapidly overtaking Europe (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:83).

Reconsolidating Germany, he explained to the Prime Minister, was essential:

1. We cannot destroy Germany without destroying Europe.
2. We cannot save Europe without the co-operation of Germany (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:84).

He warned that: 'The Bolshevists will reap what we have sowed'. Especially, he saw a strong German army as an essential bulwark against both internal revolution and Soviet Russia: 'The German army is to be restricted to 100 000 men, who will have to maintain internal order and stem the Bolshevist wave from the East!' He viewed this in the context of the Nationalist insurrection in Ireland, pointing out that the British had required 100 000 troops to maintain control there, in a country of only four to five million inhabitants, compared to Germany's 70 million. This reduction of the German military to a minimal level was 'calculated to hand Germany over to anarchy at the hands of the Spartacists and Bolshevists' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:84). Smuts believed that the proposed handing over of the Danzig area to Poland and Alsace-Lorraine and the Saar to France was unwise: 'the Germans ... simply will not accept such terms ... for the future there is the legacy of revenge' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:85). Neither Poland nor the future 'Bohemia' (Czechoslovakia) would be stable without German 'good will and assistance'. Smuts believed that the Allied leadership had missed the opportunity to consolidate a 'favourable' regime under Károlyi in Hungary, by allowing Romania and Serbia to be 'placated' with Hungarian territory. In sum, Smuts's view was that Germany needed to be enabled to rebuild itself and the Allied leadership should be less concerned with satisfying the emergent small states of Eastern Europe. While heavy reparations could fairly be asked from Germany, the Allies should 'avoid all appearance of dismembering her or subjecting her to indefinite economic servitude and pauperism, and make her join the League of Nations from the beginning' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:87). Characteristically, he

invoked the generosity of Campbell-Bannerman's conciliation policy in South Africa.

The Communist seizure of power in Hungary intensified Smuts's sense that a reconciliatory settlement with Germany was necessary to stem the revolutionary tide. He wrote to his confidante, the feminist historian Alice Clark that 'unless a really just and fair peace is made with Germany, you may find 300 million Russians and Germans and Hungarians banded together in one wild Bolshevist onslaught on what we call civilization' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:90).

To Vienna and Budapest

While it might be speculated that Lloyd George sent Smuts to Budapest to get the opinionated South African out of the way, it is more likely that the Prime Minister took the mission seriously, given the need for a decision on possible military intervention in Hungary. Certainly Smuts himself felt that the Prime Minister was relying on him more than ever, especially as Lloyd George found himself increasingly isolated by his loss of his support amongst British liberals. Smuts took with him his personal aide-de-camp, the British-born Ernest Frederick C. Lane, and two senior Foreign Office officials, the brilliant A.W. Allen Leeper and the sophisticated Harold Nicolson, as well as other advisers and support staff. Nicolson knew Smuts already and was liked by him – Smuts had insisted on his coming along, even though the Foreign Office had wanted to keep Nicolson in Paris. Nicolson was a considerable literary figure in his time, although today likely to be better known for the fact that his wife, Vita Sackville-West was the lover of the writer Virginia Woolf (Nicolson, 1973).

On Wednesday 2 April 1919, after passing through Basel, Smuts, Leeper and Nicolson had a private discussion. They had the impression that although the ostensible purpose of the journey was for them to create an armistice line between the Hungarian insurrectionaries and the Romanians, the actual purpose was to seek to use Béla Kun as a conduit through whom the Allies could establish contact with the

Bolshevik government in Moscow. Leeper and Nicolson felt that Smuts was keeping his options open, willing to leave this tricky part of the agenda to the bureaucrats, in order to be able to disentangle himself if matters went awry (Nicolson, 1933:293). It was not for nothing that Smuts was known amongst his fellow Afrikaners as '*Slim* Jannie' a term implying a combination of slyness and cleverness, which evokes simultaneous admiration and distrust. The officials dreaded a repetition of the 'Prinkipo muddle' an abortive attempt initiated by Woodrow Wilson for a discussion with the Bolsheviks on the island in the Sea of Marmara. As the train passed through Austria, Nicolson noted the grim conditions and the 'pinched and yellow' faces of the population. At a stop in Vienna, Nicolson was struck by the rubbish in the streets, the uncut grass, broken and boarded-up windows and 'dejected and ill-dressed' people (Nicolson, 1966:293-4). Lane too was appalled by the poverty the party saw on the journey (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:109). The head of the Military Mission there, Sir Thomas Cunninghame, took the delegation for an elaborate meal at the famous Café Sacher. Smuts was furious, calling this a 'gross error in taste' (Nicolson, 1933:294). There is no doubt that Smuts was strongly affected by the suffering he witnessed, which evoked for him the years of the Second Anglo Boer War.

Nicolson went off to the Hungarian delegation office, where he persuaded the revolutionary official in charge, a Dr Alexis Bolgar, a Jewish Galician who had been a professor and newspaper editor in the USA, to make contact with Budapest and arrange for the delegation to be received (Nicolson, 1933:296). Given the chaotic state of the disintegrating Empire, the delegation had to turn to a private company, to arrange a train. Late that evening they arrived at the station, accompanied by Bolgar and his secretary. Early in the morning of 4 April, the train reached Budapest. Along the platform was a line of troops with red armbands and fixed bayonets. After breakfast, the delegation strolled up and down next to the train. Kun arrived with his entourage (Nicolson, 1933:293-296). Nicolson reacted to the Hungarians in predictably

hostile terms; Kun was 'a little man of about 30: puffy white face and loose wet lips: shaven head: impression of red hair: shifty suspicious eyes: he has the face of a sulky and uncertain criminal' (Nicolson, 1933:298). Lane viewed the revolutionary leader in unabashedly anti-Semitic terms: 'Béla Kun is a Jew of most unprepossessing looks, and his Jewish companions were no more attractive than their leader' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:109). There is no indication that Smuts shared these views; indeed over his career as a whole he had strong relationships with the South African Jewish community and the Zionist movement. But these statements exemplify both the prevalence of anti-Semitism amongst the British elite of the time, and how that anti-Semitism easily connected to a visceral fear of revolution. Lane went straight on from his description of the Kun delegation's looks to excoriate the utopianism of the Communists.

Smuts held a private discussion in his compartment with Kun and Bolgar (Nicolson, 1933:298). By Smuts's subsequent account to Nicolson, Kun came across as wanting to make a deal with the Allies, but was afraid that if he did so, the Nationalist sentiment which he had harnessed to his revolutionary cause might evaporate. Kun was heavily reliant on officers of the old Austro-Hungarian army for his strength, and felt that if he weakened his position, they might desert him. He proposed a conference with the Allies at Vienna or Prague. Smuts countered with a proposal for a meeting at Paris (Nicholson, 1933:299-300). Kun emerged from his discussion with Smuts, and Nicolson escorted the revolutionary leader to the end of the platform. Nicolson noted contemptuously that the Red Guards did not salute Kun, and one asked the leader for a light for his cigarette (Nicolson, 1933:299). Kun had arranged a splendid lunch for the visitors at the city's leading restaurant, the Hungaria, hoping, in Nicolson's view, to advertise the event as de facto recognition of his government by France and Britain. But the suspicious Smuts refused to allow the delegation to leave the train (Nicolson, 1933:299). At mid-afternoon Kun returned, and Smuts and Nicolson met with him in a compartment. Kun undertook to consult

his cabinet about the proposals that had been made. Later, Kun returned, and Nicolson induced him to sign a document releasing all British citizens who had been imprisoned. Nicolson thought that 'Kun does not strike me as a man who enjoys the fruits of office. He sat there hunched, sulky suspicious and frightened,' Smuts, in Nicolson's view, 'talks to him as if he were the Duke of Abercorn: friendly, courteous but not a touch of surrender of his own tremendous dignity' (Nicolson, 1933:300).

Members of the delegation talked with a British journalist and the Spanish and Swiss consuls, all of whom seem to have emphasised the weakness of the regime (Nicolson, 1933:300-302). To what extent this fed into their subsequent evaluation of the situation is not clear.

On Saturday 5 April, Kun appeared at the train. Smuts gave him a draft for an agreement providing for the occupation by the great powers of a neutral zone between the Hungarians and the Romanians. In exchange, the powers would raise the blockade which had been imposed on Hungary. Nicolson's impression was that Kun desired to accept this proposal because it would imply international recognition of his regime, which he craved. But he said that he had to consult his cabinet, which Nicolson read as him saying that he had to consult the Bolshevik leadership. Kun said he would return by 7 pm and Smuts put on the pressure by saying that the train would leave at 7.15. At 7.00 Kun and his entourage arrived at the station. In the 'half-lit dining-car', the delegations met. Smuts was handed a piece of paper. In it the Hungarians accepted the earlier proposal, but added the condition that the Romanians should retreat beyond the Maros River. Smuts read it twice, gave it to Nicolson to look at, then passed it back to Kun. Smuts then said: 'No gentlemen, this is not a note which I can accept. There must be no reservations'. He spoke, advocating unconditional acceptance of the original offer. The Hungarians were puzzled; they seemed to be hoping for further negotiations, but Smuts closed off the possibility. He said, 'Well Gentlemen, I must wish you goodbye', and courteously escorted them to the platform. While the Hungarians were

still waiting on the platform, Smuts nodded to his aide and the train moved out, as Smuts saluted the commissars. As the train headed west, over a dinner of rations Smuts reminisced about the veldt 'a ring of deep homesickness in his voice' (Nicolson, 1933:302-304).

It seems that Smuts had already concluded, to give Nicolson's (1933:304) summary of his position, that 'Kun is of no importance or seriousness and that he is not capable of giving effect to the treaty'. Smuts had apparently decided that the revolutionary government could not sustain itself and could be left to the mercies of the Romanian army. Nicolson too thought that 'Béla Kun and Hungarian Bolshevism is not a serious menace and cannot last'. He noted that Smuts had refrained from using Kun as a way of contacting the Bolsheviks. Similarly, the far less astute Lane also thought that the Kun government was too weak to survive; they 'did not carry out any of the terrorisms which had made it possible for the Russian Government to carry out its ideas' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:109). While like Nicolson, he observed the Red Guards coercing 'presents' out of shopkeepers, he conceded that '[b]eyond this form of blackmail terrorism had not yet started' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:110). It is likely that Smuts's assessment of the situation was important in the subsequent decision of Lloyd George and the other leaders at Paris to permit the Romanian military advance into Hungary. When the Romanians did eventually capture Budapest in August, they carried out ruthless mass executions of the defeated revolutionaries. Though Smuts may have flinched from this had he been confronted over it; it was the logical outcome of his policy decisions.

Against the Treaty of Versailles

Back in Paris, Smuts became frustrated with the Treaty proposals, feeling let down by Wilson and increasingly angry at the Allied leaders' failure to recognise the danger of revolution that a harsh peace would bring. By the second half of May, Smuts was seriously considering refusing South

Africa's agreement to the treaty. In a scathing memorandum to Lloyd George, he objected to the provisions for extended occupation of the left bank of the Rhine and of the Saar, the amounts involved in the reparations clauses, the extent of the adjustment of Germany's territories in the east, the extent of reduction of military forces and other, more minor, provisions (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:183-189). On such questions he found common ground with another member of the British Empire delegation, John Maynard Keynes.

After ultimately deciding to sign the Versailles Treaty, Smuts issued a press statement. He had put his name to it 'not because I consider it a satisfactory document but because it is imperatively necessary to close the war'. He objected to the territorial, economic and political provisions. But beyond that his criticism based on the revolutionary threat:

> We witness the collapse of the whole political and economic fabric of Central and Eastern Europe. Unemployment, starvation, anarchy, war, disease, despair, stalk through the land. Unless the victors can effectively extend a helping hand to the defeated and broken peoples, a large part of Europe is threatened with exhaustion and decay. Russia has already walked into the night, and the risk that the rest may follow is grave indeed (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:258).

With the conference at an end, Smuts prepared to return to South Africa. On leaving England, he made a full-throated case of support for the newly created Weimar Republic; 'We have today in Germany a moderate Republic' which deserved British support. Chancellor Friedrich Ebert's leadership had 'done its best to prevent anarchy on the one hand and military reaction on the other' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:269). For Smuts, Ebert was the representative of 'European order against the growing forces of anarchy'. He deserved British backing and encouragement: 'Do not let us deal with Ebert as we dealt with Kerensky and Karolyi – with results beyond recall today' (Hancock & van der Poel, 1966b:269). By now he had concluded that the condition of Russia was one of 'national pathology' and irredeemable. This led him to

conclude that outside intervention would not prevail. But by backing Ebert against the revolutionaries, Germany, and thus central Europe, could be saved.

'Revolution' in South Africa

Within a few days of Smuts's return to South Africa, Botha died, and Smuts assumed the Prime Ministership. The country was undergoing dramatic social changes. The war years had brought about a surge of import-substituting industrialisation on the Witwatersrand. Johannesburg had become a very substantial manufacturing centre. At the same time the urbanisation of both African and Afrikaner rural people had speeded up. Wartime inflation hit the country hard. All this fed into a significant political radicalisation. Strikes by both black and white workers surged. A group of young radicals were challenging the gradualist and Imperial-loyalist leaders of the Native Congress (later the African National Congress). A radical black populist movement appeared in 1919 in the form of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU), influenced by both Garveyism and the Industrial Workers of the World. The segregationist, but anti-capitalist South African Labour Party (SALP) was popular amongst white voters. The syndicalist International Socialist League (ISL), a movement of primarily British immigrant skilled workers and Jewish activists, had emerged out of a split in the SALP (van der Walt, 1999, 2007; Hyslop 2016). The ISL both supported attempts to build black unions and had a number of members who were important in white unions. In 1921 the ISL was the major component in the formation of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA). The organisation was small and very predominantly white, but it had a disproportionate degree of influence.

It would be wrong to say that Smuts was obsessed with these threats: white power and capitalist dominance probably seemed far from imperilled in South Africa in 1919. But he showed himself willing to act fiercely against any perceived danger. His government carried out the brutal destruction of

a Garveyite-influenced African millenarian movement in the Bulhoek Massacre of 1921 (Edgar, 1982, 1988). It also launched a vicious campaign, including the use of aerial bombardment, against a minor rising in South West Africa in the next year (Freislich, 1964).

In early 1922 Prime Minister Smuts was to confront a mass white mine worker strike on the Witwatersrand. Although largely concerned with the protection of the privileged position of white workers, it was chiefly led by British-born syndicalist militants and members of the newly formed Communist Party. The inherently rather tame SALP was sidelined. The strikers, a large proportion of them Afrikaners, formed armed 'Commandos' evoking the military units of the Second Anglo Boer War and received training from the rather numerous World War I veterans in their ranks. Rather than attempt to defuse the situation, Smuts sought confrontation. He saw it as necessary first to expose the nature of the threat to public view, and then to crush it. As he explained his position afterwards: 'If there are revolutionary forces brewing in the country, let the country see it, let us even at the risk, the very serious risk of a couple of days of revolution, delay the declaration of martial law and let the situation develop' (van der Poel, 1973:128). He unleashed the full force of the army against the strikers, including the use of bomber planes and artillery. In intense fighting along the Witwatersrand and in central Johannesburg, well over two hundred civilians and defence force personnel were killed before Smuts destroyed the strike (Krikler, 2005). The strike was accompanied by some intense racial violence against black workers, although this was not approved of by the movement's leaders. This did not cause the Communist International to put any distance between it and the Rand Revolt. Strike leader Bill Andrews was subsequently elected to the executive committee of the Comintern (Cope, 1944). Smuts himself was convinced that the Communists were at the heart of the strike. The (in reality chaotic) events of 1922 were, for him, part of the Bolshevik onslaught, and in his own eyes, his actions were fully justified.

Thus Smuts's experiences in war-torn Europe reinforced his ruthlessness in dealing with issues in South Africa.

Smuts's account of the rising, when he spoke about it afterwards in parliament, was that it was unequivocally, a revolution, rooted in the unreliability of subaltern white people and the direct intervention of the international Communist movement: 'We have on the Rand, in addition to some of the best people in South Africa, a fairly large percentage of people there who are of a very dangerous class' (van der Poel, 1973:121). A portion of these were South African poor white people: who, 'owing to social conditions, owing to land conditions, gravitated into the town. People without calling or education, people who easily fall prey to any mischievous movement which may be afloat....' (van der Poel, 1973:121). At this point Smuts evoked the spectre of foreign, and implicitly, East European, revolutionaries:

> a proportion of the population on the Rand is also recruited from the less developed countries of the world, and people come from abroad with ideas, with social ideas of government, which are opposed to all the traditions of South Africa ... and you have another small number of people who are advanced Communists, international Communists, who preach the most dangerous doctrines for a class of that kind (van der Poel, 1973:121).

Smuts then moved to give the South African Labour Party the opening they needed, by commending the 'ordinary working class', whom he portrayed as politically middle-of-the-road skilled workers, and saying that Labour Party members had not taken part in the strike. This latter assertion was certainly not true, but it gave the party the space they required to put some distance between themselves and the Communists. He then turned his attention to the Afrikaner Nationalist members, highlighting the role of their supporters in the upheaval. The Communists had exploited the feeling created by the Nationalists: 'a spirit of lawlessness which the Communists teach these people from day to day is reinforced most dangerously by the doctrines which they pick up from

their own party. The Nationalist leaders say 'no violence'. But the international Communists do not say that. They say 'we want violent subversion from the ordinary state'' (van der Poel, 1973:121). Ultimately, Smuts saw the Rand Revolt as another event in the civilisational battle he had been fighting in Europe: 'As in Russia' he wrote to Alice Clark 'so elsewhere, the danger is that in a very short time the slow results of progress may be undone' (van der Poel, 1973:115).

Germany Again

Smuts continued to be a staunch advocate of giving Germany relief from reparations payments. But he feared that it would be too late and that the spiral of violence and potential revolution was unstoppable. Only the British Empire appeared to him as a bastion of stability, and then only partially. In the second half of 1923, Smuts was preoccupied with the critical situation in Germany around the default on reparations payments and the subsequent French occupation of the Ruhr. In a letter to Winston Churchill, Smuts wrote: 'With Germany crumbling, and Europe shooting Niagara, I see but a bleak prospect before the world. Even the British Empire will feel the effects for many a day' (van der Poel, 1973:180). 'Shooting Niagara' was a reference to Thomas Carlyle's famous polemic against social and cultural decline and insurgent democracy. Smuts placed primary blame for the situation on the intransigence of the French government and wanted to see the British government be more active. In September, Smuts sailed again for England on state business. On arrival in London, he cabled his friend, the Wall Street financier and political *eminence grise* Bernard Baruch, calling for a 'Great gesture by the United States' in the affair. He wrote that 'Without moral and political support of the United States it is doubtful whether there is sufficient strength left in Europe to save herself' (van der Poel, 1973:186). Smuts also corresponded with Keynes on a possible formula for the reparations question (van der Poel, 1973:191-192). There was some talk of the British government sending Smuts to Europe, but the lackadaisical Stanley Baldwin was not one for such a bold stroke. Smuts, with the clear aim of

positioning himself within the debate, gave a public speech to the South Africa Club in London, roundly denouncing the Ruhr occupation. He received a flood of congratulatory messages from highly placed figures in Britain. He also received a letter from Chancellor Gustav Stresemann, thanking him for his understanding of the German situation, and expressing hope that a productive conference could be convened (van der Poel, 1973:209-210). But whether his lobbying had any material effect is difficult to say. Smuts replied to Stresemann, urging him that if he could 'keep Germany going' public opinion in the British world and the United States would come around to a sympathetic position (van der Poel, 1973:216).

Smuts's deep hostility to even mildly leftist forces in Europe continued. The coming to power of Ramsay Macdonald's Labour government in early 1924 was seen by him as an evil portent of future success by the South African Labour Party. He complained that 'The Labour government in England has done us much harm: They already sit in the seats of the mighty' (van der Poel, 1973:224). He was particularly angered at Labour's retreat from the previous pro-Imperial trade policy of the Baldwin government.

Ireland

A final dimension of the European post-war crisis that engaged Smuts was the situation in Ireland. Smuts had long observed the growing conflict there and saw Ireland as a field in which he might make another contribution to stabilising Europe. At the time of his arrival in England in 1917, the British Government was having to cope with the aftermath of its bloody repression of the 1916 Easter Rising. The British over-reaction had swung public sympathy in Ireland towards the previously somewhat isolated *Sinn Féin*, and considerable security resources were being allocated to holding down dissent. But though Lenin and a small number of Irish leftists could see these events part of the world revolution, Smuts had another view. The Irish Nationalists were not the objects of the aversion he felt towards European revolutionaries

in general. The fact that there had been considerable Irish sympathy for the Boer cause may have been a factor here: John MacBride, the martyr of 1916, had led a military contingent fighting for the Boers, and Arthur Griffith, the leader of *Sinn Féin,* had lived in the Transvaal and later organised solidarity with the Boers from Dublin from 1899 to 1902. Moreover, the lack of any very radical social programme on the part of the insurrectionaries in Ireland made them appear relatively unthreatening to Smuts. Smuts saw the Irish as a small nation with genuine historic grievances, like the Boers, and believed that the conciliation was possible on the model of the post-Second Anglo Boer War settlement in South Africa. In 1918, Smuts had strongly opposed Lloyd George's attempt to impose conscription in Ireland. In May 1921, Smuts returned to London for a conference of the Dominions. By now the crisis in Ireland was at a peak. The War of Independence was inching towards a close, but the incipient split between the followers of Michael Collins and those of Éamon de Valera was emerging. Smuts was encouraged to intervene as a mediator by a number of Irish Nationalists. He successfully engineered the insertion of a conciliatory declaration towards the Nationalists into King George V's opening speech to the Ulster parliament. With the support of Prime Minister Lloyd George and the King himself, Smuts accepted an invitation to go to Dublin to meet with de Valera. The meeting took place on 5 July; Arthur Griffith was also present. Smuts assured the Irish delegation that he did not come as a representative of the British government, but as a 'friend who had passed through similar circumstances.' He told the delegation of the British desire for peace and conciliation. He urged de Valera to accept the reality of partition and believed that he had made some progress (van der Poel, 1973:95-98). But Smuts was unable to break through de Valera's distrust of the British intentions. Before returning to South Africa Smuts wrote to de Valera urging a gradualist path and invoking once more the post-Second Anglo Boer War conciliation as an example to emulate, but to no avail (van der Poel, 1973:100-105).

Conclusion

In 1924, Smuts lost a general election in South Africa and commenced a very long period in the political wilderness. He appears in very different guises to those who have written about his role in the post-World War I years. To admirers, he was the far-sighted and humane statesman who foresaw the disastrous consequences of the Peace of Versailles (Lentin, 2010). And indeed, the attempts of some historians in recent years to rehabilitate the Peace (Macmillan 2003) remain highly unconvincing. The idea that the peacemakers could not foresee the consequences of what they were doing is laughable; Smuts, in his writings and speeches of the time, identified many of the problems. On the other hand, Smuts's detractors – now the vast majority of South African historians – largely ignore his international statesmanship, and, reasonably enough, denounce him for his racism and his employment of military force against opponents at home. This chapter, however, suggests that these two, 'statesmanlike' and 'brutal' aspects of Jan Smuts were joined by the fear of revolution. His desire for a humane settlement to end the war was driven not only by empathy with the suffering of the peoples of central and eastern Europe, but by an intense commitment to creating governments that could crush the threat from the radical left. His willingness to act with violence against both black and white dissidents at home was informed by a view of a society as best led by wise and paternalistic elites, and an intense hostility to popular mobilisation. For Smuts, the priority was always social order – and his actions to defend it in the face of revolutionary times had the same basis, in Europe and in South Africa.

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