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Crisis and Opportunity: The Union of South Africa's First World War Economy

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Abstract:

This article provides a succinct overview of the impact of the First World War on the economy and the home front of the Union of South Africa, and considers the main ways in which these domestic sectors responded to the disruptions and strains of these years. Its central aim is to illuminate the very patchy and ambivalent manner in which South Africa's economy and society intersected with the wartime European imperial world and reacted to its intrusive effects. Although its distant geographical location enabled this British Dominion to escape the devastating material effects of warfare in other African regions, the pre-war conditions of mining, manufacturing and agriculture were substantially re-shaped by wartime forces. The complex mix of burdens and opportunities associated with this was spread highly unevenly across South Africa's population of around six million white and black inhabitants. What it all amounted to was a decisive transition towards the formation of an increasingly diversified and modernising post-1918 segregationist colonial state.

Keywords: Manufacturing, mining, agriculture, labour, urbanisation.

Introduction: pre-war South Africa

The Union of South Africa was established only four years before the outbreak of the First World War, created in 1910 as a British dominion in Africa, an almost independent, white-ruled country. With its territory comprising a massive bridge between the Indian and the Atlantic oceans, it represented the economic heartland not only of Southern

Africa, but of British colonial sub-Saharan Africa more generally. The Union's first government was ambitious. Its hopes rested on further exploiting the rapid economic development of Southern Africa in the decades following the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand to boost the development of its new national state, and to consolidate its dominant role in the integration of a regional economy. As the Deputy Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, declared in 1913, despite some "troubles of growth", these were only to have been expected as the country was "young and growing rapidly" (Hancock, Van Der Poel 1966: 131).

That said, South Africa's accelerating industrial and urban development and rising prosperity within an otherwise fairly sluggish rural colonial zone also rested on foundations which were still extremely uneven on the eve of world war. While the dynamism of the gold mines was the powerhouse of capitalist development, turning it into a "new Eldorado of the far south" (Van Onselen 2019: 38), elsewhere "urban infrastructure was limited, agriculture was generally technologically backward and unproductive, and secondary industry was only at a modest level of development" (Freund 2011: 211). What were the effects of an international war on the state of the Union's economy?

The following discussion of how the forces of war affected the South African economy and the material life of the country's inhabitants is based primarily on contemporary wartime newspapers, trade journals and official reports, and a varied range of secondary literature. The broad scale and complexities of this story necessitates a survey framework of interpretation that require us to see two elements. Firstly, and generally, these are the broad outlines of the war's impact on industrial and agricultural sectors, and, secondly, there is the fragmentary illumination of how the wartime tide of movement, pressures, demands and responses swept through ordinary working, trading and other areas of existence.

This paper treats the economic experience of the war sequentially and thematically, commencing with the early reactions to, and the effects of, the outbreak of war, before dealing with the further starting point to wartime economic life, the growth of immediate shortages and the emergence of import substitution. Subsequent parts consider the worlds of labour, the stimulation of industrial expansion, gold mining, agriculture, and the issue of economic patriotism. Discussion concludes with some reflections on the legacy of the First World War and its role in the modern development of the Union of South Africa.

The overall argument is that what defined the economic impact of the conflict on the Union of South Africa is not comparable to the wholesale upheaval and immense damage inflicted on colonial societies in many other areas of Africa. In most respects, the complex costs, adaptations, losses and gains induced by the war were configured in peaceful circumstances. Yet they were of immense significance in fueling segregationist South Africa's growth into an increasingly diverse and regionally influential modern

capitalist economy, poised to become a sub-imperial African colonial power in the aftermath of the First World War.

Early reactions to the coming of war

Although it was a combatant country as part of the British Empire, South Africa's geographical distance would shield it from the destructive impact of total warfare in Europe and of widespread fighting across large parts of eastern and central Africa. Nonetheless, at the outbreak of war in 1914 there was considerable uncertainty and apprehension over what the economic impact of war might be. A particular concern of financial commentators in major newspapers was the prospect of an interruption to vital overseas trade. A sudden dislocation of shipping would be a "massive threat" to both industry and agriculture, one columnist warned.¹ Another foresaw "a catastrophic collapse of economic existence" if the country found itself unable to maintain the flow of imported and exported goods on which its national stability and development depended.² In one extreme apocalyptic view, it would take no more than a few weeks for internal collapse and the "most dire calamity to be imagined", the possibility of "the ruination of the livelihoods of one's own European people as well as those of the Natives".³ In the imagination of most observers, South Africa could not in any way be shielded from the upheaval of a war that would be "an unprecedented economic event" (Supple 2014: 296).

Trade disruption and production difficulties

At first, predictions of disaster looked only too likely to be true. For a start, trading with the enemy obviously stopped. Supplies of South African cereal crops, dried fruit and frozen beef no longer went off to Hamburg. Before the war, German leather tanneries had been the market for over 80% of wattle bark production from tree plantations in the Union's southeastern districts. That, too, collapsed, with many African workers being laid off in the unsettled first few weeks of the war (Nasson 2007: 177-78; Nasson 2014a: 159). The coming of hostilities also squeezed the vital empire trade artery for imported British manufactures like heavy industrial equipment, cement and wire cables for the mining industry, and basic consumer goods such as blankets and bicycles. For some wealthier white city dwellers, the onset of "dark days of war" seemed to signal the end of known civilisation in their African outpost, as they faced being deprived of "basic necessities" like "Scottish Pringle knitwear and English Jaeger coats" (Nasson 2014a: 38).

At first, the more seriously gloomy predictions that the war's economic disruption would lead inevitably to mass bankruptcies, unemployment and deteriorating social conditions looked only too likely to turn out to be true. With the country's rich diamond mining industry having "always been vulnerable to international crises" (Davenport 2013: 268), its Kimberley operations in the northern Cape were as swiftly paralysed by

hostilities as were the world's European trading centres of Amsterdam and Antwerp. Indeed, on the day of London's war declaration against Germany, the diamond industry's controlling monopoly, the De Beers company, closed its doors in "a fateful sign of coming upheavals".⁴ Although they kept their jobs, the pay of its skilled white employees was cut by half. The fate of the mass of Kimberley's migrant African mineworkers was far worse. Most were fired and were repatriated to the unproductive and poor rural regions from which they had come. The demand for diamonds would only pick up again much later in the war.

European market problems were also severe for the Union's ostrich farming industry which had been enjoying boom times through 1913. As the curtain fell on the overseas luxury market for imported feathers, profitable large ostrich farms in the Karoo region soon found themselves running into the sand. Some of the biggest farming barons of the ostrich industry town of Oudtshoorn lost their fortunes virtually overnight, while the end of the export bonanza and the ensuing bankruptcy of the ostrich farming enterprise saw large numbers of agricultural workers, mostly poor Coloured labourers, evicted by employers and left destitute to roam the countryside. This created perilous conditions for the creation of "marauding robber gangs", an observer noted typically.⁵ Alongside worries over the odds against South Africa's profitable overseas export trade with both Britain and continental Europe, the German danger to Allied and also neutral merchant shipping threatened the supply of imported manufactures on which the country's markets were heavily dependent. With the added anxiety of Britain – the state on which the Union's economy relied most – turning its peacetime industries towards the production of war goods, it is small wonder that press commentators were quick to pick on import deficits and to wring their hands over the "state of the factories which are a woefully unprepared force of capital to do what is required to safeguard the general interest of the people".⁶ There was good enough reason for so pessimistic a view. At the beginning of hostilities, local manufacturing was still contributing a mere 5% of annual National Income, dwarfed by mining and agriculture. Apart from some bulk items for the mining industry, small-scale local industry was confined mostly to the production of light consumer goods, such as footwear and soap, and sugar-refining. Even biscuits continued to be mostly British-made. Between 1910 and 1914 there had been one or two hesitant proposals for tariff or state subsidy protection to boost national manufacturing, but competition from empire exports which dominated local markets had stifled chances of serious manufacturing growth (Du Plessis 1950: 19-21).

Wartime shortages and import substitution

Sure enough, in the early stage of hostilities the Union was soon running short of a wide range of basic consumer commodities, including blankets, bicycles, biscuits, beverages, confectionary, clothing, and furniture. In this, South Africa was not alone, for "nearly every African territory was affected by the wartime shortages of imports"

(Pallaver 2015). No less inevitably, drastic shortages and rampant increases in import prices fuelled inflation which became one of the war's serious social costs for ordinary inhabitants. Although South Africa escaped the hyperinflation associated with the war, generally local consumer prices rose steeply by between 30 and 40% during the course of the conflict. What made this feel especially onerous between 1915 and 1918, when the prices of manufactured items rose even more than rising food costs, was that it was being experienced "in an economy in which there had previously been almost no inflation" (Hyslop 2004: 280).

But this dark war cloud came with a distinctive silver lining for the Union's fledgling manufacturing capitalists. For the combination of the throttling of external trade, shortages of basic goods, and inflated import costs suddenly improved the competitiveness of local companies who were now able to turn their industrial energies towards import substitution, as secondary industries scrambled to make up for shortfalls, resulting in massive growth between 1914 and 1918. Sectors such as textiles, processed foods, household goods like glassware, pottery, furniture and ironware blossomed. With local manufacturing assuming a priority in wartime, the country's secondary industries duly emerged from the margins of mining and agriculture to become a dominant force in the formation of what has been termed 'national capital' in the interwar decades (Bozzoli 1981: 171).

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In the war years this output even encompassed – for the first time – the production of machine tools and other heavy industrial equipment. By 1916, many of the staple equipment and food necessities of South Africa's expeditionary army contingents like blankets, candles, boots, belts, bandoliers, tin mugs, biscuits and other dry food packs were being churned out by domestic factories. Symbolically it was, perhaps, of no small iconic significance for the country's households that well before the end of hostilities, the traditional imported British brand of Robertson's Golden Shred Marmalade had been replaced by "tinned apricot jam from the Western Cape".⁷

The gross value of secondary industrial production rose from just over 22 million pounds at the start of the war to over 40 million pounds by 1916, and to over 60 million pounds by the penultimate year of the conflict. In the First World War decade, between 1911 and 1920, the total value of factory production had more than trebled (Nasson 2014a: 163–164). As the Union's industrial structure grew new wings on the back of profitable private as well as government procurement contracts, and with gains from varied manufactures being channelled overseas in addition to being absorbed at home, banking services and credit houses were given a shot in the arm and pushed fresh capital into newly flourishing sectors like food processing and clothing. Notably, that boosted production in the boot and shoe workshops of Port Elizabeth and East London, in the garment industries of the Witwatersrand and Cape Town, and in the food processing plants of Paarl, Worcester, Robertson and some other larger agricultural towns in the southwestern Cape. Between approximately 1915 and 1919, the number

of manufacturing sites increased by over 70%. In such fundamental ways, wartime demands, run almost entirely through the mechanism of market capitalism rather than a 1914–1918 command economy, "significantly enlarged the Union's industrial structure" (Freund 1989: 80).

The position of urban and rural workers

One of the consequences for labour of this mushrooming secondary industrial growth was obvious – a pressing need for more workers. A factory employment pool of about 55,000 at the outbreak of war swelled to around 125,000 by the end of 1918, with over 60% of new industrial jobs being taken by unskilled rural African migrants who, pricked by worsening distress in the countryside and lured by urban wage opportunities, tramped into a city like Johannesburg in their thousands. There, outside of the mines, the number of African industrial workers expanded from around 17,000 by 1916 to more than 35,000 by 1919. By the following year, the proportion of factory operatives exceeded the 1914 level by over 80% (Nasson 2014a: 164).

At the same time, the departure from factories of white male volunteers on expeditionary campaigns opened a door for some lower-paid white women to squeeze into a growing manufacturing arena, especially on the Witwatersrand. There, the employment of female labour, a large number of them poorer Afrikaners, climbed by over 180% through the wartime years, reaching almost 3,500 by 1918.⁸ Far down in the south, a much smaller but not insubstantial number of Coloured 'countrywomen' migrated from menial seasonal farm work, and from life under the watchful moral eye of Christian authority on mission stations, to fill vacancies on offer in better-paid light factory work in Cape Town and some smaller inland towns.

By 1915, members of the educated urban white middle classes in bodies like the National Council of Women had become sufficiently alarmed by the free movement of a growing number of "unkempt factory girls" in "these distinctly disturbed times", to spring into action. Volunteers commenced campaigning for greater policing of city streets around manufacturing sites, for the provision of "healthy and respectable" recreational facilities, and for literacy training and social improvement measures such as classes and clubs as a "safeguard for the uneducated against falling into unsavoury ways", including "indiscreet" night life and "excessively familiar conduct in the company of soldiers"⁹

On the other hand, nothing much happened in the war to significantly boost the movement of African women into the expanding factory sector. An overwhelming majority of females in rural reserves continued to scratch out a precarious subsistence existence, subsidising low wage male labour migrancy to urban areas. With city jobs scarce, the tiny trickle of poor African women who made their way into towns ended up largely in "hawking, illicit liquor-selling and prostitution" (Nasson 2007: 181). A few – along with some men – were incorporated into domestic service as a minor – and

unexpected – social consequence of the conflict. Wealthier British expatriates in larger cities like Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban, who had been used to importing butlers, other house servants and kitchen staff from Germany and Austria-Hungary suddenly found themselves in a predicament. "Surely nothing", a letter-writer observed at the end of 1914, "could ever justify a continuation in service of such suspect aliens?".¹⁰ So, before long, the continental European butlers and cooks in the grand residences of Johannesburg's mining barons and Durban's sugar lords came to be replaced by African 'houseboys', and kitchen staff, mostly of Zulu origin.

Wartime stimulus of industrial expansion

The productivity, resilience and rapid growth of South Africa's secondary industry in this period underlines the degree to which the war ushered in a broader wave of change and development. For the spread of factories accelerated the rate of urbanisation and, as an accompaniment, the expansion of railways and other transport, and increased electrification. Granted, the effect of this development across the Union was uneven. But it is plain enough that the wartime economy accelerated the path of urban modernisation and helped along the national 'developmental' aspirations of the Union's first administration. Obviously, racial policies were a deep-seated preoccupation of the segregationist government of Louis Botha and Jan Smuts. But so, too, was the formation of an administratively integrated national state, with the capacity to exploit economic development to elevate and integrate underdeveloped sectors through what one of South Africa's foremost economic historians has characterised recently as its twentieth-century "drive towards modernisation and industrialisation" (Freund 2018: IV).

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The strategic situation of gold

On the eve of war, the established industrial core of the Union was provided by gold extraction, amounting to "by 1914 a whopping 40% of the world's supply" (Van Onselen 2019: 38). This was the economic sector where the 1914 crisis put paid most immediately and most decisively to any idea of continuing with 'business as usual' in the Witwatersrand mining industry, with its production of gold bullion comprising "subtropical Africa's most valuable and most indispensable commodity" (Nasson 2014b: 134). Strategically vital for Britain's global financial position, as the world's leading gold producer, South Africa's mines stocked the Bank of England with over two-thirds of its precious metal reserves. The standing of Britain's sterling-based world trading and banking system was highly dependent on the security of its hold on Johannesburg's gold supplies. One immediate consequence, for instance, was the termination of any continuing sale of South Africa's gold on the open world market.

Beyond this, as the Johannesburg Chamber of Mines emphasised, the war crisis presented "a very complex question" for the handling of gold (Innes 1984: 78). Bullion

represented a particularly prized and risky cargo, vulnerable to German sea raiders in the South Atlantic Ocean. Inevitably, insurance fees and freight costs soared in response to shipping hazards. The Witwatersrand mining companies urgently needed to find a way of avoiding losses through unsafe overseas trade. In August 1914, a solution appeared to have been found. The Bank of England struck a deal with the Witwatersrand mining houses in which all of their gold output would be sold exclusively to London, at a fixed official rate of just under four pounds per ounce. This emergency agreement meant that the sterling value of the Union's most valuable main export commodity would be fixed at a 1914 level for the duration of a war that was initially widely expected to be short, with even the Bank of England assuring the public that the conflict "would have to be stopped after six months" (Stone 2008: 30). On the face of things, the gold arrangement did not appear to present any obvious problems – if anything, it looked to be advantageous not merely for the mining houses of the Witwatersrand, but also for the financing of the Union's own expansionist war effort. After its extraction, Britain's gold bullion would be impregnable, stored securely in South Africa where it would be safe from any enemy land invasion or at risk of being lost at sea or captured by German cargo raiders. A further benefit of the Bank of England arrangement was that London would advance close to 100% of the gold purchase price until hostilities ended and it would be safe to resume normal bullion shipments. In other words, Britain would provide South Africa with advance sterling credit cover for looking after its prime strategic asset. Amounting to a kind of war bonus, it would enable Pretoria to do more *nationally* than "simply support the wider British war effort through South African trade and industry", through the export "of steel and war-related materials to Britain, Russia, France, Italy and Japan" (Van der Waag 2015: 106). With the wartime subsidy of British financial credit, the pro-war government of Louis Botha and Jan Smuts could be sure of funding for its expeditionary military efforts in southwest Africa, in East Africa, in the Middle East and on the Western Front in Europe. That assisted in the financing of what would still be a costly war effort – Union War Expenditure would eventually exceed 31 million pounds.¹¹ At the same time, the gold agreement was favourable for Britain's position, too. Despite the war crisis, the Bank of England's reserves would be not only maintained but increased. And London's leading world position in trade and finance would be preserved, ensuring that in the fortunes of the First World War, it was "the immense extent of British financial power" and "her superior fiscal system" (Ferguson 1998: 35, 248) that tipped the scales in favour of London. In this respect, South Africa's mineral resources were crucial in helping to tip those 1918 scales to the advantage of London and empire.

Mining troubles and discontents

For the Witwatersrand gold mining industry, though, it soon became evident that it was not going to be smooth sailing. However attractive for profits the guarantee of

a fixed price for their product may have looked in a wartime emergency, inevitably the war also brought other factors with which companies found themselves having to contend – shortages and inflation. As overseas trade contracted, supplies of essential raw materials and goods like machine tools grew erratic, a difficult situation made even worse by the demands of the British war economy in which export industries shifted to the production of war materials. Then, as the value of sterling dropped, the cost of general mining supplies soared, jumping by over 20% between 1914 and 1916.¹² It was, as one witty writer observed in *The Rand Daily Mail* late in 1916, "an unpleasant pill to have to swallow", and was "sure to put a few champagne corks back into the bottle".¹³ Stuck with a fixed gold price in an acutely cost-sensitive industry, Witwatersrand mine-owners were now stuck with a steeply rising bill for key imports of suddenly scarce specialised equipment and stores. Nor was this the only headache brought on by cargo shipping uncertainties and inflation. Among mining capitalists there was also frustration at the cost of mine labour, in a decade in which cost constraints were in any event a major pressure point in an industry prone to unpredictability and ups and downs, whether or not there was a big contingency like a war.

Mobilisation and control of cheap mine labour

The wartime position of mineworkers was decidedly mixed. Overall, as inflation chipped away at living standards between 1914 and 1918, the real wages of cheap African and better-paid white workers all declined. But consequent labour hardship was certainly not felt remotely equally. High-handed control and rigorous labour repression of the vast mass of unorganised African mineworkers enabled the mines to keep a tight lid on black wages. Here, the average annual earnings of 29 pounds in 1913 only increased by around 10% during the war, far outstripped by the increased cost of living. In general, significantly increasing the extremely low and ultra-exploitative wages paid to African workers would have dramatically cut dividends and tax revenues. Thus, as another of South Africa's leading economic historians has underlined in a survey of the economy during the earlier twentieth-century, "high wages for all workers were simply incompatible with profitability" (Feinstein 2005: 10-11). It followed that the Witwatersrand mines were unwilling to release contracted cheap African labourers for army recruitment as non-combatant, auxiliary workers, despite the difficulties experienced by the authorities in securing sufficient manual labour to service South Africa's expeditionary campaigns in South West Africa and in East Africa or to join the South African Native Labour Contingent bound for France. By the end of 1917 it was becoming exceptionally hard to attract recruits to the Labour Contingent "without resorting to direct compulsion", and with the increasing growth of Afrikaner Nationalist opposition to the government's black recruitment scheme, the enlistment of Africans was in any event turning into "more and more of a political liability" (Willan 2018: 331). From the preceding year, the Chamber of Mines – the biggest employer of Africans in

the whole of Southern Africa – had been flatly refusing repeated requests to permit tied workers to leave the Union for war service (Grundlingh 2014: 52–58). The Chamber insisted that on no account could migrant workers engaged on an annual mine labour contract be allowed either to break or to extend their terms of service to become an 'imperial' body beyond South Africa's borders, least of all to be deposited in the worryingly uncertain environment of the "critical conditions of Europe".¹⁴

Indeed, wherever and whenever possible, the gold industry looked for opportunities to divert supplies of migrant labour to the Witwatersrand, sometimes quite independently of its recruiting networks in South Africa. In one illuminating case, very soon after colonial Portugal abandoned its First World War neutrality in March 1916 and became the last of the European belligerents to enter the conflict, the existing capacity of the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association in Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) was "expanded to recruit [...] workers for the gold mines" (Grundlingh 2014: 43). For oppressed and ultra-cheap Mozambican workers, Johannesburg was not exactly an Eldorado. Still, as labouring "East Coast Boys" in South Africa, at least some escaped "the forced-labour regime on the East Coast of South Africa", and survived these wartime years without experiencing "physical ruination" in a ramshackle and ruthlessly predatory colony at a time characterised by "an extraordinary decline in the real value of wages during the First World War" (Van Onselen 2019: 185).

White mine-worker militancy and its consequences

At the top of the ladder, the minority of immigrant white workers on the gold fields who were well accustomed to high wages were in no mind to countenance any erosion of their privileged position, something which reflected both their role as a skilled labour aristocracy in local politics, and the identity to which they were firmly attached, an inheritance shaped by "the influence of British wage rates, which were the highest in the world" (Simkins 2011: 522). Pinched by mounting costs that were almost all beyond their control, and unable to make up for losses by raising the gold price, Johannesburg's mining capitalists found themselves with very little room to manoeuvre in the face of a wartime round of wage demands, forced upon them by an increasingly restive, stridently militant, skilled white labour force. Predictably, pleas by the Chamber of Mines for selfless sacrifice and the exercise "of a patriotic duty for the greater good of our industry and our land" fell on deaf ears.¹⁵ Instead of wage demands from well-organised skilled and semi-skilled workers slackening, these intensified in force. Through insistent bargaining, white mine labour, whose average annual earnings had been just over 330 pounds in 1914, was able to push through an overall increase in pay of almost 60% by early 1919.¹⁶

In addition to improved wages, unionised militant workers also achieved other gains, aided by a tight wartime labour market. Hostilities overseas drained South Africa of its pool of skilled mine labour as thousands of British-born loyalist mineworkers

volunteered for army service in 1914, and the annual immigration to the Union of large numbers of artisans from Britain virtually dried up during the course of the war. Making the most of unprecedentedly favourable circumstances, from 1915 trade union muscle was able to secure the payment of a war bonus, a reduction in working hours, and the granting of paid holidays. These concessions were accompanied by mine employers' allowing official recognition of days that were dear to the political hearts of both British socialist and Afrikaner nationalists – May Day and Dingane's Day or the Day of the Vow (commemorating the nineteenth-century Boer Voortrekker defeat of the Zulu at the Battle of Blood River).

In effect, the wartime imperative for labour peace to keep gold flowing, combined with skilled white labour shortages, created a particularly burdensome problem for owners as well as the government. Workers were in a position to push up their wages, to reduce their productivity by working fewer hours, or, if companies sought to resist wage demands, by threatening strike action. Mining capitalists found themselves boxed into a corner. Although disgruntled Johannesburg magnates like Lionel Phillips wished to stand firm against labour demands, he, like others, was obliged to "recognise that some appeasement of workers was unavoidable" (Nasson 2007: 176). For maintaining stable gold production was of crucial importance.

Indeed, in the view of another grumpy mining baron, because of the war "virtually every demand" from the country's European workers was being conceded because national need had become a priority of the state. Having become far too accommodating towards their workforce, "The Government" was compelling mining houses to do whatever had to be done "to carry on the production of gold", as this "had become an absolute war necessity".¹⁷ In one of the most extreme examples of having to curry favour with organised labour, the Chamber of Mines, it was declared, was being held to ransom in having to oblige union bureaucracy by collecting their regular "Trade Union subscriptions through the Mine Pay Sheet" (Krikler 2005: 40-41, 310).

Almost needless to say, the shift in the balance of industrial power hit profitability hard. Along the Witwatersrand, the heartland of the Transvaal gold mining industry, gross profits dropped by over 55% between 1915 and 1918, while by the end of the war the value of dividends overall had declined by more than a quarter. Several of the country's more marginal mines were also forced to shut down operations. The grim mood was made even more grim by a continuous drop in gold production after 1916, caused largely by radical white workers forcing a reduction in their working hours. As a – fairly staggering – result, gold output in 1918 was actually lower than its 1914 level. It was, to put it mildly, "not a period of growth for [...] the gold mining industry in particular" (Nattrass, Seekings 2011: 524).

Mine-owners' push for profitability

With no cards of its own left to play, the Chamber of Mines tried to get the government to come to its aid by tackling the only issue that could have resolved its problem of

how to stem losses – finding a means of returning to normal economic circumstances in which South Africa would be able to raise the price of its gold. But calls for Pretoria to make diplomatic overtures to London to try to get the fixed price agreement relaxed were to no avail, as neither government was inclined to become involved in wrangling over an economic sector which formed the wheel upon which the entire British – South African imperial enterprise turned. The unresponsive reaction left troubled relations between the Union's gold producers and London, a situation that only began to ease in the course of 1919, when Britain eventually consented to the customary restoration of "a free market for South African gold" (Ally 1994: 59).

On the domestic front, the war left a legacy of even more troubled relations between capital and labour on the gold fields. A dilemma for companies saddled with a drastic loss of skills because of the departure of patriotic English workers for army ranks was finding a way to fill a hole that was not easy filled. Granted, growing numbers of poorer white rural Afrikaner mineworkers were available to fill vacancies in jobs traditionally reserved for an English-speaking white labour aristocracy. But while this kind of labour substitution helped to maintain production, it did little to address the serious – and politically volatile – question of wage costs.

Mine labour dilution, white worker resistance and labour peace

There, the real challenge for the Chamber of Mines was not so much job substitution but job *dilution* – inserting cheaper black workers into places usually reserved for more expensive white labour. Given the economic urgencies of wartime, there looked to be at least some limited scope to test the water. For employers, behind this calculation lay an important and much larger hope. If the mines could get away with re-allocating labour in the short term as a measure to deal with a war-induced production crisis, when peace returned it might well turn out to be viable in a *longer* term.

Thus, wading in lightly, some mining houses eased in experienced African and a few Coloured workers into semi-skilled jobs that had previously been held by white employees. The Chamber of Mines justified this "departure from known ways" as a temporary response to "patriotic need", enabling the entire workforce, "Native and European", to make their "fullest contribution" to sustaining the economic well-being of the Union in war.¹⁸ What it really meant in practice was the cheapening of labour costs, as the wage rates of substitute black labour were very much lower. Now further imperilled by the impact of the wartime emergency, profit remained the overriding imperative for the mining industry, given that "high wages for all workers were simply incompatible with profitability" (Feinstein 2005: 110).

As mining houses were unable to reduce the wages of their white labour, a creeping dilution of the industrial job colour bar in the early years of the war inevitably created consternation among white workers over the security of their position in the mine labour hierarchy – cherished status and high wage assumptions suddenly faced the

threat of being undercut. Tempers boiled over from 1916, as organised labour agitation added to the gold industry's difficulties of falling productivity and output, and its burden of mounting costs.

Early in 1917, to take one example, around 3,000 white miners on the Transvaal's East Rand gold belt came out on strike against the use of a small handful of African workers in semi-skilled positions on the Van Ryn Deep Mine. This spurred on the South African Mine Workers' Union to demand the sacking of "every single Non-European, without any exception", from employment in places that were "unsuited to their proper station".¹⁹

Initially, the Chamber of Mines tried to dig in its heels. But it faced a wartime government concerned with the patriotic collaboration of a white citizenry and with labour peace, not one with the stomach to back mine-owners in an uncompromising industrial showdown. Intervening in the dispute, the Louis Botha administration instructed the tense Van Ryn Mine to remove black miners from any inflammatory "European positions", and assured the Mine Workers' Union that the Department of Mines would investigate its "wholly understandable" concerns over the upholding of the rights of "civilised" labour, and that its industry inspectorate would take steps to end "the intolerable encroachment of cheap labour" (Johnstone 1976: 107).

What followed was a fragile compromise reached between the Chamber of Mines and the Mine Workers' Union just a few months before the end of the war. Under a 1918 Status Quo Agreement, a sprinkling of black as well as white workers would be entitled to remain in their existing semi-skilled positions, a personal protection which would be forfeited through any change of jobs. This discouraged mobility. More telling in its effect was another provision which decreed that there was to be no further dilution of the job colour bar. Although what had been imposed amounted to a fairly edgy truce, it held for the remaining months of the war.

The Witwatersrand on edge

These wartime strains all left a shaky legacy after 1918. For the labour cost crisis dictated by the enormous capital expense of South Africa's deep-level gold mining was bound to resurface as renewed industrial strife on the Witwatersrand. While unionised white labour dug in to protect its entrenched position of workplace privilege, employers were left hankering after an opportunity to settle scores through a renewed effort in peacetime to dislodge expensive white miners. They did not wait long to try to deal with the unfinished business of the First World War.

In the postwar depression after 1918, Witwatersrand mining companies again tried to cut costs by replacing whites with cheaper blacks in a range of work functions – again, it was raised the 1916 spectre of job security and the preserving of a 'civilised European' labour standard. This move against white artisans and other more skilled workers provoked a major violent strike in Johannesburg in 1922, which turned into an

insurrectionary uprising that has come to be known as the Rand Revolt. In the course of this confrontation, radical white strikers, many of them communist, turned their rage directly upon working black miners, viewing them as lower even than strike-breaking scab labour, for they were "simply" not considered to inhabit "the community of labour to which the white strikers belonged" (Krikler 2005: 133). That community consisted of the "empire-wide phenomenon [...] of racism and xenophobia" which characterised "White Labourism" (Hyslop 2004: 255).

The crushing of the Johannesburg uprising with the aid of martial law, the regular military and pro-government militia forces, led to peace based upon "a long compromise, to the mutual benefit of the mining companies, their white workers and the state itself, at the expense of the mass of black mineworkers" (Ross 2008: 113). In a sense, the economic circumstances of the First World War had been a breeding ground for the biggest crisis which rocked white South Africa between the Anglo-Boer War or South African War of 1899-1902 and the apartheid struggles of the 1980s, the explosion of the early 1920s over governing authority and who would win and who would lose on the gold fields of the Witwatersrand.

Social change and the mines' white work-force

It would be a mistake to dwell exclusively on the major economic stresses experienced by capital and labour on the gold mines and to overlook other important sociological shifts or adaptations generated directly by the effects of the war. In pre-war decades, immigrant British artisans had provided the majority of South Africa's white miners – between the formation of the Union in 1910 and the end of 1913, the average annual influx had been 10,000 men. In 1914, this dropped to 1,000 immigrants and arrivals then virtually dried up until well after 1918 (Nasson 2007: 174). And, as already noted, in 1914 thousands of British mineworkers left to enlist either in the British Army or in the ranks of the Union Defence Force. By 1915 this exodus of skilled British artisan miners amounted to about 25% of the work-force (Bonner 2011: 267).

The gap left by departing war volunteers was filled largely by thousands of Dutch-Afrikaans speaking recruits who, being either anti-war, pro-German or indifferent to the war atmosphere, might otherwise have stayed at home had it not been for the attraction of urban work. Depicted as a rootless, "unstable segment of the population", they joined existing poorer white town-dwellers in wage labour on the Witwatersrand where, by the second year of the war, "they probably accounted for 50% of the white underground labour force" (Bonner 2011: 264). There, labour need in a strategically crucial sector gave them not only work but a leg up the income scale. On the East Rand, for instance, Afrikaners from the Orange Free State moved into this expanding gold quarter following the departure of some 2,000 British miners who volunteered to fight at the outbreak of war.²⁰

As already noted, here, and elsewhere the great majority of these new employees

were low-skilled poor whites who were drawn from the northern countryside of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Many of them found a position in the labour hierarchy as supervisory foremen in charge of black labour. In that respect, patriotic white working class war recruitment can be viewed as having initiated a social change in the employment structure. This shift amounted to more than the issue of skilled British artisans being replaced as overseers by far less skilled Afrikaner incomers. For a wider *national* consequence of the fluidity brought by the First World War was that it accelerated the pace at which the white industrial workforce was becoming more indigenous in its identity, maturing as "colonial-born", rather than arriving with the migrant pedigree of being "overseas-born" (Nasson 2007: 175).

At the outbreak of the war, approximately a third of white mine employees had been born locally. By 1918, that proportion was over half. Thereafter, despite some displacement by returning soldiers who sought to resume their old jobs, the trend of Afrikanerisation continued, contributing to the growth across classes of an "ideology of white Africanism" across a "broader terrain", even though contentious aspects "of imperial and national sentiment and loyalty" (Dubow 2011: 33) remained destined to rub along uneasily for several decades after 1918.

War-induced changes in other economic sectors

In the shorter term, the war led to other immediate, *ad hoc* expedients which now altered another level of the prewar landscape of labour. A production boom in textiles, furniture, leatherworks, food canning and other light industrial sectors in port cities such as Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Durban and East London, provided improved job opportunities and increased wages for skilled and semi-skilled Coloured artisans and apprentices who had previously been excluded from employment at the upper end by protective white craft unions. Several hundreds of these experienced Coloured craftsmen took on jobs which had been held hitherto by British immigrant artisans who joined the military. For these and some other groups of non-unionised "non-European" urban workers, "conditions in wartime helped to brighten up the horizons of employment" (Goldin 1987: 35).

A further buoyant sector which offered expanded and better-paid job opportunities was transport, where demand was stimulated directly by the needs of the Union's armed forces. The motorised and animal-drawn assembly and servicing requirements of South Africa's long-distance south-west African and east African infantry expeditionary campaigns drew hundreds of male workers into mechanical sheds, railway workshops, metal-finishing yards and fuel depots in places like Salt River and Woodstock in Cape Town and Germiston and Fordsburg in Johannesburg. Along the coast, an upsurge of heavy shipyard work in ports such as Cape Town and Durban saw a stream of African migrant labourers leaving agriculturally-depressed interior parts of the countryside for urban employment. Elsewhere, there was a sharp spurt in growth and also mobility for

a skilled workforce employed by cart and wagon works, in ambulance van construction, and in small woodworks, saddleries and blacksmithies in dozens of minor rural towns and villages.²¹ Given the need for the Union's armed forces to convert and reinforce their lorries and cars to enable them to operate in exceptionally difficult campaign terrain – desert in German South West Africa and rough bush in German East Africa – experienced fitters and welders were especially sought after, as were light toolmakers and rubbersmiths.²² Government motorcars, some of them slow and ungainly American vehicles, had also to be armoured and made more robust for domestic use on public roads in remote areas, to deal with being ambushed or sabotaged at night-time roadblocks set up by anti-government Boer fighters of the 1914–15 republican Afrikaner rebellion. Steel craftsmen prepared to work on long shifts and at a greatly increased pace of intensity were prized, celebrated as the envy of all “concerned Patriots” for their “ready sacrifice” to “safeguard those under arms who are protecting us”.²³ They were, declared the Kimberley-based *Diamond Fields Advertiser* in 1917, “to be prized in our days of danger as if they were themselves diamonds or even gold”.²⁴

The politics of profiteering and patriotism

If wartime sentiment heaped honour upon patriotic artisans, traders, merchants and shopkeepers were increasingly disliked and distrusted for a lack of responsible patriotism in their conducting of business. As shortages of essential goods began to trigger steep price increases, public perceptions grew that these were the result of manipulative hoarding to enable speculative interests to pursue immoral wartime profiteering. Larger firms and smaller businesses were denounced as “mercenary”, “rotten”, “unscrupulous”, and as “despicable profiteers”.²⁵ Facing increasing expenditure as the war dragged on, in 1917 the government introduced a new Excess Profits Tax on businesses, applied on earnings “in excess of what was deemed a ‘normal’ income” (Ndlovu 2017: 20).

In Natal, suspicion was directed particularly at Indian merchants in Durban, Pietermaritzburg, and in several country districts, where prices rose by around 300% by 1917. Strengthened by the wartime boom, Indian dealers were able to shrug off efforts, for a time at least, by competing anti-Indian white trading interests to restrict their business ventures. But they were unable to avoid some official censure. A government Cost of Living Commission, established in November 1917 to investigate food prices, identified Natal's Indian firms as “prominently among the businesses guilty of excessive profiteering during the war” (Nasson 2014a: 177).

Earlier, anti-German sentiment had had useful commercial consequences for the English merchant elite. Organised in the patriotic British League, from the outbreak of hostilities merchants pressed for the confiscation of local German business assets and, by 1915, had secured an Enemy Trading Bill which prohibited local trade with enemy aliens and permitted the taking over of confiscated business holdings. In its extinguishing of the legal rights of German settlers, the Union of South Africa mirrored the experience of

other dominions, such as Australia, and of colonial territories like Morocco, in which French authorities "confiscated the assets of enemy nationals, including the numerous Germans" (Aldrich, Hilliard 2012: 530).

In other respects, much of the running of the Union war economy remained on largely laissez-faire lines until some level of administrative control and central regulation became unavoidable. In this respect, a degree of state intervention generally emulated the economic experience of other dominions like Canada or Australia. In the South African case this was the Public Welfare and Moratorium Act, a measure which provided for a regulation of food prices, controls over the sale of alcohol, a modest level of rationing, and official oversight of a small range of essential goods and services. What these regulations actually accomplished was probably less important than the political motive behind their introduction – the pacifying of municipal bodies of white citizens which were up in arms over supply shortages and rising prices, "creating alarm and stirring up undesirable public feeling".²⁶

Agricultural gains and losses

74 Meanwhile, following the initial shock to some agricultural export sectors at the start of European hostilities, the war directly influenced the workings and fortunes of white commercial farming in some substantial ways. In addition to stimulating output for a home market which was now mostly free of European competition because of the disruption of trade, the war also opened up a very large export market for the Union's pastoral and arable producers. Prices of such staples as wool, maize, sugar, hides and skins shot up, as did beef and other meats, dairy produce and dried fruit. Those who did well out of wartime conditions were not only the country's big commercial cattle, maize and wool farmers. Grape and sugar producers also profited handsomely. Export shipments of brandy rose from 24 gallons in 1914 to 25,000 gallons by 1916, while rum and cane spirit soared from 160,000 gallons in 1914 to about 350,000 gallons by 1916.²⁷

The value of exports climbed by more than 60% in these years, with the Department of Agriculture observing that "practically everything" farmers had for sale were fetching "extremely high prices".²⁸ Although white farmers faced a drought in 1916, shortages of imported equipment and a surge in freight costs, they were not subject to wartime requisitioning or any other official directives, and were left in peace to maximise gains from wartime opportunities. As *The Agricultural Journal of South Africa* concluded smugly, "with the vast armies in the field, the consumption of food has increased enormously, and every one of these men has to be fed. It means not only an increase in price, but that we in South Africa have a glorious opportunity of producing even more".²⁹

That glowing prospect did not extend to the country's tiny and diminishing body of African independent peasant producers, sharecroppers and other marginal rural tenants.

As capital flowed into commercial agriculture in response to expanded wartime demand, the established struggles over land and labour between capitalist farmers and South Africa's surviving patches of black peasantry intensified. In areas like the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, there was a ratcheting up of efforts by increasingly wealthy white farmers to further limit Africans' already precarious hold on land, so as to turn producers into servile wage labour on commercial farms. With these years witnessing a rising crescendo of calls for the more rigorous application of the 1913 Natives' Land Act to have remaining black producers uprooted, "the war thus helped to tighten pre-war screws" (Grundlingh 2014: 166).

Free or semi-independent rural Africans were also struck by other blows. In the northern Transvaal and parts of the Orange Free State, the worst drought in more than two decades and catastrophic harvest failures virtually demolished their agricultural subsistence base, tipping large numbers of impoverished men into various kinds of wage labour. Well over half of the 25,000 men recruited to the South African Native Labour Contingent between 1916 and 1918 was drawn from the ranks of these displaced and distressed individuals. And in due course, the loss of male labour from homesteads increased the work burdens on those left behind, particularly women, children and elderly dependants.

Concluding perspectives

There is, in all of this, a sense of the First World War having either shaken up some of the fundamental structures of economic life in South Africa, or of having hit its more fragile worlds hard, even though the country was spared the direct impact of warfare which devastated several other regions of the continent. The coming of the conflict substantially boosted industrial growth, accelerated the consolidation of a white capitalist agriculture, and produced a more diverse economy. In essence, then, the war's legacy helped to cement the foundations of the more resilient and comparatively more self-standing national economy which matured in the 1920s under the Pact government of J.B.M. Hertzog, under whom a promotion of "economic nationalism" included dispensing with "the preferential tariff for British goods" (Steyn 2015: 115).

In that sense, the war expedited the Union's journey along the path of capitalist modernisation. Alongside that, with the conquest and colonial occupation of neighbouring German South West Africa from 1915, the Pretoria government expanded its regional economic influence as a sovereign, sub-imperial African colonial power, establishing "a new colonial order" in a large territory with land and mineral resources that would be "of direct benefit to South Africa" (Wallace 2011: 218).

Even as this 1915 integration and post-1918 expansion occurred, other socio-economic developments that had been induced by wartime circumstances left a more brittle and distinctly incendiary aftermath to the conflict. The war years had unsettled both race and class relations in both cities and the countryside, and nowhere more so than in

the rapidly advancing world of secondary industrialisation and urbanisation, where the number of unskilled African workers had rocketed from 61,000 in 1916 to 113,000 by 1920 (Houghton, Dagut 1972: 226). With this labour concentrated overwhelmingly in the country's industrial heartland, the Johannesburg region, frustration over the poverty and deprivation in which the mushrooming black working class found itself boiled over into the classic expressions of urban unrest – strikes, marches, and boycotts. The years of 1918 – 1920 were years of bubbling labour militancy among both blacks as well as whites. The state recognised what was going on, and was well aware of the lingering influence of the past few years. As a 1919 Native Affairs Department memorandum observed, “the roar and noise of a universal war” had “awakened” the political awareness of African workers by having “put the hand of time forward many years”.³⁰

In a broader African colonial context, the impact of the 1914–1918 war on the economic life of the Union may perhaps be viewed less as a frenzied drama and more as a moderate epic – not because not much happened, but because what did happen took place in relatively stable and peaceful circumstances. Unlike in East Africa, the conflict did not result in “the devastation of the human communities” (Gregory 2014: 168). But within a national context, wartime South Africa looks – or ought to look – rather different. The domestic tremors and transitions triggered by World War I were hardly humdrum or of only temporary significance. They were, in many ways, major turning points in creating the modernising and increasingly diversified industrial-agricultural topography of a post-1918 South Africa, a state in which the benefits of resources and power in post-war decades would fall ever more lavishly into the hands of a dominant white minority.

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Notes

- 1 – *A Great Uncertainty*, «Cape Times», 28 July 2014.
- 2 – *Ruin is Staring Us in the Face*, «Pretoria Friend», 29 July 1914.
- 3 – *Never a more sorry state of affairs*, «Natal Witness», 2 August 1914.
- 4 – «Diamond Fields Advertiser», 12 August 1914.
- 5 – *Vigilance over the proclivities of the new Unemployed*, «The Friend», 26 September 1914.
- 6 – *A Bleak Outlook*, «Rand Daily Mail», 12 October 1914.
- 7 – *How our producers are excelling*, «The Agricultural Journal of South Africa», vol. 8, February 1917.
- 8 – *Sonop vir Vrouwen*, «De Burger», 17 November 1918.
- 9 – *Moral Dangers*, «East London Daily Dispatch», 10 November 2015.
- 10 – *Patriots Beware*, «Natal Mercury», 2 December 1914.
- 11 – Department of Defence Archives, SANDF Documentation Centre, Pretoria, Secretary for Defence (DC) Archive, 1152/DB 2443/Z, *Union War Expenditure 1919*.
- 12 – *Worrying Burdens*, «The South African Mining Journal», March 2017, p.18.
- 13 – *Not everything looking so golden*, «Rand Daily Mail», 22 October 1916.
- 14 – *The proper maintenance of Native Labour*, «The Friend», 27 July 1916.
- 15 – *A Call to Duty by All*, «Diamond Fields Advertiser», 10 December 1915.
- 16 – Union of South Africa, U.G. 16, *Annual Report of the Economic and Wage Commission for the year ended 31 March 1920*, p. 19.
- 17 – *Extraordinary Times for our Industries*, «South African News», 15 December 1916.
- 18 – *Sharing the Burdens*, «The Great War», vol. 53, June 1917.
- 19 – *European workers stand firm*, «South African News», 26 March 1917.
- 20 – *Nieuw werk by goudmyn*, «Het Volksblad», 2 December 1914.
- 21 – *How the war brings opportunities*, «Diamond Fields Advertiser», 20 May 1915.
- 22 – *New applications for the skilled*, «South African Railways and Harbours Magazine», June 1915, n. 33.
- 23 – *Putting their shoulders to the wheel*, «Natal Mercury», 9 January 1915.
- 24 – *Artisans are as Armour*, «Diamond Fields Advertiser», 22 August 1916.
- 25 – *Immoral speculation*, «Cape Argus», 14 January 1916.
- 26 – *Necessary measures by the authorities*, «Eastern Province Herald», 5 December 1915.
- 27 – *Positive Export Picture*, «Farmers Weekly», 20 February 1917.
- 28 – Union of South Africa, U.G. 25-17, *Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture for the year ended 31 March 1916*, pp. 25-26.
- 29 – *A Remarkable Prosperity in a Time of War*, «The Agricultural Journal of South Africa», February 1919, n. 12.
- 30 – Transvaal Archives Depository, Pretoria, Archive of the Secretary for the Department of Native Affairs, S.N.A. 1/4/26, *Memorandum on Native Political Affairs on the Witwatersrand, 14 May 1919*.

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