

Jan Smuts and the Bulhoek Massacre: Race and state violence in the making of South Africa, 1919-1920s

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine the role played by General JC Smuts, the prime minister of the Union of South Africa at the time, in the incident known as the Bulhoek Massacre which took place in May 1921. The discussion locates the Bulhoek incident in the broader context of Smuts's attitude towards black people in South Africa. It explores his ideas and views on the subject of race, and scrutinises the policies that the government introduced under his premiership. It shows how he steered the country towards shoring up minority government and the political and economic exclusion, marginalisation and domination of African people in South Africa. In this it follows on the works of many other historians who have written in this vein and contend that the Bulhoek Massacre is the exemplar of Smuts's views on the matter of race in South Africa.

Keywords: Bulhoek Massacre; Black people; Race; State violence; JC Smuts; "Israelites"; African nationalism.

Introduction

A day after the massacre of over two hundred Africans at Bulhoek, Jan Smuts, the prime minister of the Union of South Africa at the time, stood up in the House of Assembly in Cape Town to deliver a statement regarding the incident and how it had been handled. In this statement, he argued that his government had done everything possible to avert bloodshed at Bulhoek. In his judgement, "there was no alternative for the police but to fire as they did".¹ As will be demonstrated in this paper, Smuts's contention about the government "doing everything" to avert the massacre was not completely true. He spurned the numerous requests made by this religious group who named themselves the "Israelites", to visit their settlement in Bulhoek to listen to their pleas. Despite promising to do so, he did not honour their invitation. Instead, he sent members of the government's Native Affairs Commission (NAC) to assess the situation. Notwithstanding the bloodshed caused, Smuts saw a silver lining in the whole affair. He assured parliament that the message had been communicated

¹ "Tragedy of Bulhoek: Melancholy aftermath of the battle", *Cape Times*, 26 May 1921.

to both black and white people that “the law of the land will be carried out in the last resort as fearlessly against black as against white”. For this expression of bravado, he was cheered by his supporters in the House of Assembly, who broke out into a “Hear, hear!”.² Soon after issuing his statement, Smuts left for the United Kingdom to attend an imperial conference of Commonwealth prime ministers. It was left to FS Malan, the acting prime minister, to face the political fallout from the massacre and to answer for the actions sanctioned by the absent Smuts.³ Smuts’s decision to leave so soon after the massacre demonstrated, as his biographer Kenneth Ingham suggests, is indicative of “his attitude to African affairs and to his personality”. For Smuts, Ingham explains, the issue was one of “native affairs”. By this he implied that the Bulhoek Massacre was not “important enough to require his personal [attention or] involvement”.⁴

The purpose of this article is to provide a critical examination of the role Smuts and his government played in the incident. It locates the Bulhoek Massacre in the broader context of Smuts’s attitude to black people in South Africa, examining his ideas and views on the subject of race, as well as the policies that his premiership followed to address what Africans regard as South Africa’s original sin.⁵ Following on Ingham, the article contends that the Bulhoek Massacre is incomprehensible outside Smuts’s views and policies towards the question of race in South Africa. Race struggle in South Africa, as Smuts wrote in 1892, was “destined to assume a magnitude on the African continent such as the world has never seen”, and it was therefore important for white people to unite if they were to win that struggle.⁶ The Bulhoek Massacre and the policies pursued by numerous governments in which Smuts was a leading figure, should be understood in this broader context.

The shadow of Cecil John Rhodes

In May 1917, Smuts gave an address in London at a dinner organised in honour of Lord Selborne, the famed colonial administrator and the former high commissioner to South Africa. Titled “The white man’s task”, the speech was Smuts’s extensive exposition of his views on the so-called “native problem”. Consistent with the message he had conveyed numerous times before, Smuts used the speech to call for unity between the two white “races” of South Africa, the descendants of the early Dutch settlers and the English-speakers, of British background. The unity between the Afrikaner (or Dutch) and the English was, for Smuts, critical for the survival of the white race in southern

2 “Tragedy of Bulhoek: ...”, *Cape Times*, 26 May 1921.

3 WK Hancock, *Smuts: The fields of force, 1919-1950, Vol. 2* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 97.

4 K Ingham, *Jan Christian Smuts: The conscience of a South African* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1986), p. 126.

5 The expression “South Africa’s original sin” refers to the denial of political and other rights of citizenship to Africans at the founding of the Union of South Africa in 1910.

6 Smuts, quoted in K Ingham, *Jan Christian Smuts: ...*, p. 8.

Africa. Unlike other countries such as the United States of America, Australia or Canada in which the white population constituted a racial majority, Smuts reminded his audiences that in South Africa (and the southern African region as a whole) the situation was reversed. There was “an overwhelming black population with a small white population”, which necessitated the unity of the white race.⁷

In the various political speeches that he made when campaigning, Smuts’s attitude to race became clear. He contrasted his call for white racial unity against what he referred to as the point of view advocated by early 19th century Christian missionaries, who came to South Africa and preached “human brotherhood”. He suggested that experience had shown that the missionaries’ view was incorrect. In its place a fundamental principle had emerged, he said, one that should guide relations between the black and the white, that there should be “no intermixture of blood between the two colours”.

Another lesson that white people had learnt from their contact with Africans, he continued, was that “political ideas which apply to our white civilisation largely do not apply to the administration of native affairs”. Consequent to this realisation, Smuts claimed that a practice had emerged in South Africa of creating parallel institutions of governance for whites and blacks respectively. Smuts credited Cecil John Rhodes for beginning an “experiment in native self-government” in the Glen Grey Reserve, according to which separate institutions for governance were created for black people. So successful was the Rhodes’s scheme, Smuts claimed, that it had been extended to a large part of the Transkeian territories.⁸

This was not the first time that Smuts had expressed admiration for Rhodes’s views towards black people in general and the Glen Grey scheme of institutional segregation in particular. Shortly after his return from his studies at Cambridge University, Smuts published several articles in the Cape Colony press in which he expounded his ideas on race and his support for Rhodes’s policies on this subject. Rhodes was the prime minister of the Cape Colony and Smuts had so much admiration for him that in October 1896 Smuts travelled to the diamond mining town of Kimberley to deliver a speech in defence of Rhodes’s policy towards black people. At the time, Rhodes was under attack from Olive Schreiner and her husband, Samuel Cronwright, both of whom are described by Smuts’s pre-eminent biographer, Keith Hancock, as being Rhodes’s “formidable enemies”. Added to this, the couple “commanded a large reading public throughout the English-speaking world”.⁹ They accused Rhodes of seducing Afrikaners into supporting his capitalist schemes in the northern part of the country. They were also opposed to his policy of racial territorial segregation as

7 JC Smuts, “The white man’s task”, JC Smuts, *Plans for a better world: Speeches of Field-Marshal the Right Honourable J.C. Smuts* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1942) p. 22.

8 JC Smuts, “The white man’s task”, JC Smuts, *Plans for a better world: ..., pp. 23-24.*

9 WK Hancock, *Smuts: The sanguine years, 1870-1919* (London, Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 55.

enshrined in the Glen Grey Act of 1894.

According to Hancock, Smuts's October 1896 speech in Kimberley was aimed at countering the accusations levelled against Rhodes and at supporting his policy towards black people. Echoing Rhodes, Smuts urged the Afrikaner and the English to unite their efforts if they wished to survive in the African continent that he described as being occupied by over 100 million "barbarians". He argued that if the white people of South Africa did not unite, their position in the subcontinent would become untenable against what he called, once again, the "overwhelming majority of prolific barbarism".¹⁰

A thread running through the speech was not only its claim of white superiority, but it also had an unmistakable tenor of paternalism towards black people that would become the hallmark of Smuts's views on the race question throughout his career in public life. Indeed, racial paternalism came to the fore strongly in his speeches when he addressed the issue of extending political rights to indigenous Africans. Smuts labelled those who called for political equality between black and white as being "impractical" in the sense of not coming to terms with the conditions of "barbarous Africa".¹¹ Political rights, he claimed, should be extended to people who had reached a certain stage of development, which a vast majority of black people (in his view) had not yet reached. Smuts thought that white people were the standard bearers of Western civilisation, and black people, in contrast, were in the main barbarians to whom rights of citizenship should not be granted. Unless and until black people reached the standard of what he labelled "development" – in other words were as "civilised" as their white counterparts – they should be treated differently in public and other affairs. In making this statement, Smuts was echoing Rhodes yet again.

In the debate on the merits and demerits of the Glen Grey Act of 1894,¹² Rhodes argued that that his approach was based on the "practical point of view" as opposed to a philosophical one. He maintained that "natives" knew nothing about the "politics of the country".¹³ In the same speech, presented to members of the Cape Colony parliament, he claimed that he had spoken to black people and they had informed him that they were not interested in politics and should therefore be left out of all such matters, including being denied political rights. After all, he continued, black people were "poor children" whom his government should remove

10 WK Hancock, *Smuts: The sanguine years...*, p. 56.

11 WK Hancock, *Smuts: The sanguine years...*, p. 57.

12 The Glen Grey Act was championed by Cecil John Rhodes, the prime minister of the Cape Colony at the time. It was passed into law by parliament in August 1894. Although there were many provisions to the Act, its main objective was to regulate the supply of black labour in the agricultural sector in the Cape Colony. On this see, for example, RJ Thomson, "Cecil John Rhodes, the Glen Grey Act, and the labour question in the politics of the Cape Colony" (MA, Rhodes University, 1991), pp. 2-5.

13 CJ Rhodes, "The Glen Grey speech: A transcription of Cecil John Rhodes's speech on the second reading of the Glen Grey Act to the Cape House Parliament on July 30 1894", available at glen_grey_speech.pdf (sahistory.org.za), accessed 9 Dec 2022), p. 3.

from their “life of sloth and laziness ... [and be given] some gentle stimulus to come forth and find out the dignity of labour”.¹⁴ The “gentle stimulus” Rhodes referred to was of course the clause in the Glen Grey Act that imposed tax on black males who did not own the land on which they were resident. This was to force black people to serve as manual labourers in the mining and farming sectors in the Cape.

Writing approvingly of Rhodes’s views and policies towards black people, Howard Hensman tells us that Rhodes believed that black people were members of a “weaker race” as compared to white people and Africans were thus “unfit to govern the land they hold”.¹⁵ Hensman also points out that Rhodes believed that Africans were an inferior race, and should make way for the whites, allowing them to occupy those parts of the African continent that proved habitable. In this arrangement, the role that Africans would play was to act as servants to white people. Furthermore, Hensman states that Rhodes believed that Africans, as an “inferior race”, should not be afforded the political and civil rights that whites enjoyed. Instead, they should be “allowed to retain their old [traditional] laws and customs so long as these are not of a harmful or demoralising nature”.¹⁶

In his book, *Cecil Rhodes: The Anatomy of Empire* (1972) John Marlowe suggests that Rhodes’s racist statements about black people may have been influenced by and aimed at placating the Afrikaner Bond, a political party that represented white agricultural interests in the Cape Colony.¹⁷ However, when the political usefulness of Rhodes’s association with the Afrikaner Bond ceased to exist, Marlowe avers that Rhodes revealed his true attitude on the question of race in Africa. True to his racist, sexist attitude, he was in favour of extending political and civil rights to all “civilised men” south of the Zambezi River. However, it appears that what qualified a man to be considered “civilised”, was the colour of his skin and whether he had “sufficient education to write his name, has some property or work, in fact is not a loafer”.¹⁸

Marlowe’s assessment of Rhodes’s views on black people and Smuts’s support for the mining baron and arch-imperialist Rhodes, are all too evident. Rhodes’s most significant piece of legislation as prime minister of the Cape Colony, the Glen Grey Act of 1894, demonstrates his fundamental racist assumptions regarding black people. While it is true that the clause on the introduction of taxation was intended to compel black men to work in the agricultural sector in the colony and that this clause was intended to mollify the Afrikaner Bond, it is also true to point out that the Glen Grey Act introduced territorial and institutional segregation – which foreshadowed what was to develop in later years.

14 CJ Rhodes, “The Glen Grey speech...”, (available at [glen_grey_speech.pdf](#) (sahistory.org.za), accessed 9 Dec 2022), p. 7.

15 H Hensman, *Cecil Rhodes: A study of a career* (Cape Town, Struik, 1974), p. 110.

16 H Hensman, *Cecil Rhodes: A study of a career...*, p. 111.

17 J Marlowe, *Cecil Rhodes: The anatomy of empire* (London, Paul Elek Books, 1972), p. 280.

18 J Marlowe, *Cecil Rhodes: The anatomy of an empire...*, p. 281.

Although Smuts came to regret delivering the speech that defended Rhodes after the notorious Jameson Raid in which Rhodes was the devious mastermind,¹⁹ the political significance of the Kimberley speech should not be underestimated. As already mentioned, it was the first extensive statement in which Smuts outlined his views on the race question in South Africa. In line with Rhodes's attitude to and thinking regarding black people, Smuts's Kimberley speech was as condescending as it was racist. He called Africans "barbarians" and savages against whom white people had to unite. Demonstrating the paternalism that would become the hallmark of his policy towards black people, he contended that the "dead-weight of immemorial barbarism" called for the "light and blessing of ordered civilisation", which he claimed that the white races embodied.²⁰

When Smuts became prime minister after the death of Louis Botha, one of the major laws his government passed was the Native Affairs Act of 1920. As Richard Steyn observes correctly, the law entrenched and extended the provision of Rhodes's Glen Grey Act throughout the Union of South Africa. By doing so, it established a system of institutional segregation, which Smuts believed, Steyn notes, would promote "native" culture and "avoid forcing them into a European mould".²¹

A more benevolent view of Smuts's position on race is taken by Noel Garson, who argues that Smuts's views on the race question in South Africa evolved and shifted over his long public career and was shaped by the unique circumstances of the time. When he moved to the north to serve in the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR, also known as Transvaal) under Paul Kruger, for instance, Smuts adopted the "avowedly racist ideology of the northern republics".²² Notwithstanding these shifts, turns, and nuances, Garson believes that Smuts's overriding politics on the race question were consistently discriminatory and prejudicial towards African people.

After expressing her assessment of Smuts's views and on race and giving her level-headed opinion on his record in this regard during his many years in political life, Shula Marks reaches the following conclusion:²³

At one level, he [Smuts] was adept at mouthing the conventional wisdoms of the day; at another he actively refashioned his evolutionary philosophy to justify South Africa's racial policies. The result was a curiously coded form of racism. This enabled his protagonists to argue that it derived from deliberate Fabian tactics designed to erode the racial prejudices of his fellow South Africans in the interests of progressive change, and his detractors to allege it was simply a policy of drift or worse. Yet if Smuts's utterances on race have for

19 JC Smuts (jnr.), *Jan Christian Smuts* (London, Cassell, 1952), p. 32.

20 J Marlowe, *Cecil Rhodes: The anatomy of an empire...*, pp. 280-281.

21 R Steyn, *Jan Smuts: Unafraid of greatness* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2015), p. 101.

22 N Garson, "Smuts and the idea of race", *South African Historical Journal*, 57, 2007, p. 161.

23 S Marks, "White masculinity: Jan Smuts, race and the South African War", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 111, 2001, p. 206.

the most part the dispassionate tone of the philosopher, they are also frequently disrupted by a far more visceral racism which, together with his ruthlessness, directly contradicts his image as a man of moderation and liberal conviction.

Added to the “visceral racism” to which Marks refers is a public record whose signal virtue is the exclusion of black people from the political life of the country. After the Treaty of Vereeniging that ended the Anglo-Boer War (now referred to more widely as the South African War) as well as in the founding of the Union of South Africa in 1910, Smuts was the main architect of clauses that disenfranchised black people. In a letter to John X. Merriman, he justified the political exclusion of black people by contending that granting Africans the franchise would “only have an unsettling influence” on them.²⁴ He added that he did not “believe in politics for them”. Even as a minister in the Louis Botha government, he implemented policies that in Marks’s view “collectively helped establish the framework for the segregationist state in South Africa in the inter-war years”. As prime minister between 1919 and 1924, he showed – to turn to Garson once again – that Smuts was “still committed to a discriminatory programme”.²⁵

As it has been shown, it was during Smuts’s first premiership from 1919 to 1924 that he presided over the massacre of almost 200 black people in Bulhoek in May 1921. On his role in the Bulhoek Massacre and the later Bondelswarts²⁶ incident, the South African polemical poet Roy Campbell (no doubt in sarcasm) says of Prime Minister Smuts:²⁷

The love of nature burning in his heart,
Our new Saint Francis offers us his book
The saint who fed the birds at Bondelswart
And fattened up the vultures at Bulhoek.

Smuts and the Bulhoek Massacre

Several of Smuts’s biographers note that prior to becoming prime minister in 1919 he had not dealt directly with what was known as “native policy”.²⁸ This is not to

24 Quoted in WK Hancock, *Smuts: The sanguine years...*, p. 221.

25 N Garson, “Smuts and the idea of race”, *South African Historical Journal*, 57, 2007, p. 161.

26 The Bondelswarts were a mixed-race community residing in what is today known as Namibia. At the time, the territory was administered by South Africa, which was the outcome of the political settlement after World War I. The Bondelswarts valued their independence and resisted South Africa’s control over their affairs, including the demand that they pay taxes. This led to conflict in May/June 1922. Some of the Bondelswarts were armed but South Africa had sophisticated weapons and subdued their resistance. Bombing the Bondelswarts from the air killed more than 100 Africans. Smuts and his government were blamed for their use of force in quelling the resistance. See WK Hancock, *Smuts: The fields of force...*, pp. 100-104.

27 The poem has been borrowed from the study of A Birch, “A study of Roy Campbell as South African modernist poet”, (D.Litt, University of the Western Cape, 2013), p. 73. The book in question here is *Holism and Evolution* authored by Jan Smuts and published in 1927. The analogy to the “new Saint Francis” is to Smuts.

28 R Steyn, *Jan Smuts: ...*, p. 222.

suggest that he did not hold strong views on the question of black people in South Africa, which has been discussed above. However, as prime minister he also assumed the position of minister of Defence and that of Native Affairs. It was in his capacity in this latter portfolio that Smuts introduced two pieces of legislation that expanded upon the notorious 1913 Natives Land Act by entrenching territorial and institutional segregation. The first was the Native Affairs Act of 1920, which created a three-member (all white males) Native Affairs Commission to make recommendations on matters affecting black people. The same Act also introduced Native Representative Councils as instruments of indirect representation and consultation of black public opinion. In addition, the Act empowered the governor-general to convene conferences of chiefs and other bodies representing African people. Ironically, Smuts argued that the purpose of the law and the institutions it created was to facilitate the representation of blacks on matters that affected them.²⁹

The second major piece of legislation which came into force under Smuts's premiership was the Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923. While the main focus of the 1920 Native Affairs Act was to provide separate institutions for black representation, the 1923 legislation legalised residential segregation in urban areas. It made provision for establishment of what were called "native villages" in urban centres in which black people would live separately from white people. The law was based on two fundamental principles. Firstly, black people's presence in urban centres was for working to meet the needs of white people, and secondly, their presence in the urban areas centres was to be temporary. Africans who were unemployed in the cities were considered "surplus" and were forced to go to live in the rural reserves.³⁰ Hancock's assessment of the law as fundamentally segregationist is correct. He observes that Smuts placed emphasis on its segregationist character because he had been "disturbed" by the unregulated intermixture of black and white people in urban centres that was prevalent at the time.³¹

These two laws demonstrate Smuts's view on the rights of indigenous Africans in the country of their birth. That being said, nothing revealed his attitude towards Africans more than the Bulhoek Massacre. The events leading up to this tragic event have been written about extensively by many historians, most notably by Robert Edgar.³² For the purposes of this article, a brief historical background to the Bulhoek incident is provided.

The Church of God and Saints of Christ was a religious organisation established in the United States of America. It was introduced to South Africa by John J. Msikinya, formerly a Wesleyan Methodist priest from the Fort Beaufort district in the eastern

29 R Steyn, *Jan Smuts: ...*, p. 223.

30 WK Hancock, *Smuts: ...*, p. 125.

31 WK Hancock, *Smuts: ...*, p. 124.

32 RR Edgar, *The finger of God: Enoch Mgijima, the Israelites, and the Bulhoek Massacre in South Africa* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2018).

part of what was the Cape Colony at the time.³³ Although Msikinya was based in the Uitenhage Location, his church soon gained influence in various parts of what is today's Eastern Cape Province, including areas such as Peddie, Grahamstown and (later), Queenstown. One of Msikinya's followers in Queenstown was Enoch Mgiijima, who was a landowner in Kamastone Location. He was a respected man who succeeded Msikinya as the leader of the church when the latter died in 1914.³⁴

With Mgiijima taking over the reins of the church, Bulhoek – one of the eight sub-locations of Kamastone – became the central focus of the church. This church followed certain rituals and characters of the Jewish faith, especially in its observance of the Passover. During Passover members of the church went to Bulhoek to partake in the church activities.³⁵ The government's Native Affairs Commission (NAC) was duly informed that church members planned to congregate on a privately owned piece of land at Bulhoek. As the number of congregants grew, they moved to a commonage called Ntabelanga, where they pitched a tent to use as their tabernacle. In its report to the government, the NAC claimed that Mgiijima's followers, popularly known as the "Israelites", had indeed sought permission to visit Ntabelanga each year since 1917. Thus far, this request had been granted. It was only in 1919 that permission was refused. In 1920, Mgiijima asked again if members of his church could congregate on the commonage for the annual Passover church service.³⁶

It appears that although the request was granted it was on the condition that the people would disperse once the church activities were over. But by June 1920, they had not yet left, and they had started to erect dwellings on the land by the end of the year. The erection of what appeared to be permanent structures led to complaints from neighbouring farmers and this seems to have motivated the government to intervene.

On 8 December 1920, a contingent of 93 police officers was dispatched to Ntabelanga to remove the members of the church who were now living there permanently. However, the police mission appears to have failed. The explanation given by the police for not removing the "Israelites" in December 1920 is instructive because it set the tone for what occurred five months later in May 1921. According to the NAC:³⁷

33 WK Hancock, *Smuts: ...*, pp. 90-91.

34 National Archives of South Africa (NASA), Pretoria, Governor General (GG), Vol. 1553, Reference 50/935: Interim and final report of the Native Affairs Commission and telegram from Commissioner, South African Police, relative to "Israelites" at Bulhoek and other occurrences in May 1921, no date.

35 It is important to mention here that the visit to Bulhoek by the "Israelites" was not uncommon; they had done so in the past to participate in the Passover religious event. However, previously they had visited and then returned home, on this occasion they appear to have decided not to leave. This led to the deadly conflict of May 1921.

36 NASA, Pretoria, GG Vol. 1553, Reference 50/935 Interim and final report of the NAC..., no date.

37 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 1553, Reference 50/935: Interim and final report..., no date.

The conclusion arrived at by the police and officials was that the Israelites were fanatics and that registration would be forcibly resisted; that [this initial police group] was too small to overawe the natives [and] that reinforcements were necessary.

The idea that the Israelites were “fanatics”, who would not agree to being registered by the police, and that police reinforcements were required to remove them from the land, set the scene for the bloody state-sponsored violence that took place on 24 May 1921.³⁸ Adding to what was fast becoming a tense situation was the involvement of white residents from nearby Queenstown, who organised themselves into what the NAC report calls a group of about 150 “armed volunteers”. In addition, a white farmer from Queenstown shot at three members of the church, one of whom was wounded while another person died on the scene. Although the presence of the police in December 1920 and the fatal shooting did not lead to a major confrontation at the time, the stage was set for another confrontation in the near future.

After the earlier December visit by the police, the government took several steps to get the Israelites to leave Ntabelanga. They tried sending the secretary for Native Affairs and the Commissioner of Police, as well as the general of the Defence Force to visit the area to consult with the leader of the sect. The visit by these high-level officers of the suppressive state suggests that the government was preparing for a forceful removal of the Israelites from Ntabelanga. This is not what the Israelites wanted – they had meanwhile requested that a personal interview be arranged with Smuts.³⁹ Although Smuts had agreed to such talks, he did not honour his promise, and the decision not to visit Bulhoek raised criticism from several members of parliament. One MP, Arthur Barlow, who was a Labour Party member, accused Smuts of having chosen to focus on the election campaign rather than visit Bulhoek to talk to Mgiijima’s supporters.⁴⁰ Barlow’s point of view was supported by a Mr Snow, who reminded his colleagues in parliament that Smuts had actually agreed to go to Port Elizabeth and another place close to Queenstown to attend other events while the Ntabelanga impasse still simmered, but had chosen not to visit Bulhoek despite promising to do so.

38 Note that the government’s decision to shoot the “Israelites” was an example of using undue force because the “Israelites” were only armed with assegais and sticks. Later, in his statement to parliament, Smuts admitted as much: “It was the case of so many hundreds of police, well-armed, and so many thousands of poor deluded natives, armed with such weapons as they had”. See “Tragedy at Bulhoek”, *Cape Times*, 26 May 1921.

39 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 1553, Reference 50/935: Interim and final report..., no date. It is instructive that in its interim and final reports regarding the Bulhoek massacre, the NAC states that “a European farmer while on his farm” fired at three Israelites. The reason he did so is not specified. They merely indicate that “no more can be said about” the incident because it is “sub judice”, See Interim and final Reports of the NAC and telegram from commissioner, SAP re “Israelites” at Bulhoek and occurrences in May 1921, p. 4. Although there were allegations of stock theft directed at the “Israelites” by the farmers, this is not mentioned in the reports.

40 On Barlow’s statement re Smuts being involved in an election campaign, see *Cape Times*, 15 June 1921.

Smuts's failure to honour his promise to visit Bulhoek to hold talks on the occupation of Ntabelanga by the Israelites is a subject of much disagreement and debate among Smuts's biographers. History publications on the politics of the time give attention to his hardline tactics on this and several occasions when he felt that the state was obliged to take a firm stand. Hancock, for instance, believes that Smuts was entitled to refuse the request to consult with the Israelites, pointing out that the prime minister was in the midst of an crucial election campaign and under the circumstances there was simply no prospect of being able to honour his promise.⁴¹ Hancock also contends that Smuts's promise to go to Bulhoek strengthened the resolve of the Israelites to remain on the commonage. While sympathetic towards Smuts and the action he took, Ingham argues that Smuts's failure to meet with the Israelites was indeed a reflection on his attitude towards black people. Ingham maintains that the Bulhoek incident could have been dealt with by administrators.⁴² Ingham is supported by Steyn, who, citing Ingham, appears to believe that Smuts's snub of the Israelites demonstrates the low regard in which he held black people.⁴³

Instead of visiting Ntabelanga himself, Smuts sent several senior members of the NAC to meet with Mgijima and his followers. When talks failed, and the Israelites refused to move, he felt that force was necessary. He sent a strong contingent of 800 policemen armed with rifles and machine guns to Bulhoek. The force was under the command of the national commissioner of the South African Police (SAP), Colonel Truter, who was accompanied by General van Deventer and other senior ranking police officers.⁴⁴ Also present in Ntabelanga on that fateful day was the secretary for Native Affairs, Barrat, as well as the magistrate of Queenstown. Barrat's presence is significant because of his official relationship to Smuts, who was not only the prime minister but was also Minister of Native Affairs, which means that Barrat reported to him directly.⁴⁵ This indicates the Smuts government's involvement at the highest level in the massacre.

When Truter's strong contingent of heavily armed police officers left Queenstown for Ntabelanga, it is reported that they were cheered by a "large crowd of local white people", who "witnessed the departure of this fine body of men".⁴⁶ Presence of the crowd is another critical factor in understanding the circumstances surrounding the massacre because for some time there had been agitation by the white community and local farmers in the Queenstown area for the government to take drastic measures to remove the Israelites from Ntabelanga. This pressure from the white community

41 WK Hancock, *Smuts: ...,* p. 92.

42 K Ingham, *Jan Christian Smuts: ...,* p. 126.

43 R Steyn, *Jan Smuts: ...,* p. 104.

44 "Truter moves on Bull Hoek: To-day's fateful mission to 'Israelites' and prophet talks of blood", *Cape Times*, 24 May 1921.

45 "Battle of Bulhoek: 'Israelites' pit themselves against police; 60 to 80 killed; village surrenders and prophet is a prisoner", *Cape Times*, 25 May 1921.

46 "Truter moves on Bull Hoek: ...", *Cape Times*, 24 May 1921.

(and thus the voters, with an election looming) was acknowledged by the NAC. Its report gave details of over a hundred “armed volunteers” that went to Ntabelanga to remove the Israelites.⁴⁷ The NAC’s report adds that the whites were “nervy” and wanted the government to remove the Israelites. Hancock also notes the impatience of the farming community, which demanded that the government act against the Israelites and threatened to to “take action themselves if the government [fails to do so]”.⁴⁸

The fevered agitation to get the government to teach the Israelites a lesson by removing them violently from Ntabelanga is evident. For instance, in the news report published in *The Star* on 26 April 1921, a month before the massacre there was a report on an incident in which some members of the Mgijima church clashed with a group of white farmers. *The Star* decried what it called the “indecisive attitude of the Government in dealing with the Israelite menace” and contended that its failure to remove Mgijima’s followers forcibly from Ntabelanga was “causing uneasiness” among the white section of the population in the area.⁴⁹

In an election season in which the Smuts government was facing a stiff challenge from General Hertzog’s National Party (NP)⁵⁰ with its call for strict racial segregation, the news reports such as that in *The Star* would no doubt have caused alarm. The heavy-handed response by the Smuts government to the continued presence of the Israelites must also be understood in the context of the election campaign. As several Smuts biographers note, the ruling party was under pressure from Hertzog’s NP regarding the “native question”. Smuts’s opponents tried to paint him as indecisive on the issue or as having no plan at all. The continued occupation of Ntabelanga by Mgijima’s supporters and the reaction to their presence provoked in the neighbouring farming communities appears to confirm that Smuts’s government was indecisive. The state’s handling of the Bulhoek crisis should also be considered in the broader political context.

On Sunday 22 May 1921, Colonel Truter, the police commander issued an ultimatum to Mgijima demanding that his supporters vacate Bulhoek; that the police be allowed to arrest certain members of the church; and that accommodation structures already built on the commonage be demolished. Truter informed Mgijima that he commanded an “adequate force” to enforce the terms of the ultimatum should Mgijima decide not to honour them. Mgijima replied that he had already addressed the points raised in the ultimatum. He asked Truter whether he was coming to Bulhoek to “make war”. Truter

47 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 1553, Reference 50/935: Interim and final report..., no date.

48 WK Hancock, *Smuts: ...*, p. 94.

49 “Israelites’ again: Reported fight on a farm, Queenstown people alarmed”, *The Star* 26 April 1921.

50 D Kriek, “Crisis management by Smuts: The rebellion, Bulhoek, the Witwatersrand mineworkers’ strike and the Bondelzwartss uprising”, K du Pisani, D Kriek, et.al., *Jan Smuts: Son of the veld, pilgrim of the world* (Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2019), p. 265.

replied saying that he had “nothing more to add”.⁵¹ Truter’s ultimatum and Mgijima’s refusal to accede set the stage for the massacre that took place on 24 May 1921.

There was much commentary in the press prior to the incident and in the aftermath of the massacre, much of which alleged that Mgijima and his supporters were itching for a fight with the police. However, there is no evidence to support such a claim. In his message to Mgijima, Truter said he was leading an “adequate force” to deal with the Israelites should they persist in occupying the commonage. Mgijima noted Truter’s mention of an “adequate force” and asked if the government wanted to use the attack to crush the members of the church. Truter chose not to give an answer but led his force of 800 armed policemen to the site, cheered on by a crowd of farmers, who were baying for blood. Shortly before the police began to fire, Truter sent a Sergeant Weeks to “get into touch with the Israelites and ask their intentions”. Weeks met with three representatives of the Israelites one of whom was Charles Mgijima, Enoch’s brother. These men are alleged to have replied: “We will not allow you to burn our huts, to drive our people away from Ntabilanga [sic] ... we will not allow you to arrest the men”.⁵²

When asked directly whether they intended to fight, their answer was the following: “That is for you [to decide] and not for us to know”. In the communication between the Israelites and the police it does not appear that they [the Israelites] were agitating for a fight with the police – as some newspapers suggested after the massacre. *The Star* went so far as to describe the Israelites as a “fighting force” that their people were dressed in white uniforms and “ready for war”. A colonel Woon, one of the police commanders, alleged that he shouted at the Israelites asking them to move and according to the report in the *Rand Daily Mail*, they replied: “No, Jehovah says we must fight you”.⁵³ In a telegram dated 26 May 1921, Truter adds that the Israelites said: “If there is a fight, God will ...[be] on our side”. The Israelites followed their so-called defiance by charging at the police “brandishing swords and assegais”.⁵⁴ The police responded by firing a volley of live ammunition, which was followed by 10 minutes of machine and rifle gunfire ... aimed at the Israelites.⁵⁵

The Rand Daily Mail notes the devastation caused by the machine-gun fire at close range. Of its impact it said: “Many are terribly wounded, the machine gun fire in

51 The information in this section is sourced from newspaper reports as well as the reports of the NAC in NASA. In respect of newspaper reports, the *Cape Times* wrote extensively on the events leading up to the massacre as well as its aftermath. See, for instance, “Truter moves on Bull Hoek...”, *Cape Times*, 24 May 1921.

52 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 1553, Reference 50/935: Interim and final report..., no date, and newspaper accounts in *The Star*, of 25 May 1921 that reported extensively on the events at Bulhoek. The summary provided here is a collage of important details deemed significant in the discussion on the use of violent means to enforce state racism.

53 “Just over 320 casualties reported, many killed” and “Prophet Enoch’s surrender”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1921.

54 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 1553, Reference 50/935: Interim and final report..., no date.

55 “Full description of events at Bullhoek”, *The Star*, 25 May 1921.

particular having fairly torn them into ribbons”.⁵⁶ All in all, the police counted over 320 casualties’, some of whom died while others perished after the shooting.⁵⁷ Mgijima, together with his brother and other members of the church were arrested. *The Star* described the immediate aftermath of the massacre as a “depressing spectacle”.⁵⁸

The reaction to the massacre was swift. While most newspapers decried the many of casualties, there was consensus that the government had done everything it could to avert bloodshed. Even black newspapers such as *Umteteli wa Bantu* were critical of Mgijima and his followers and argued that the government had been patient with them for too long.⁵⁹ For his part, Smuts delivered a statement in parliament the following day in which he justified his government’s shooting of the Israelites. He claimed that while he regretted the bloodshed, he was convinced that there “was no alternative for the Police but to fire as they did”.⁶⁰ Furthermore, he argued that there was a great deal at stake in the continued occupation of the commonage by the Israelites. There had to be “respect for the authority of the state”, he said. He expressed the hope that the action by the state had delivered a message to the people, that “whether black or white”, they had to “obey the law of the land”.⁶¹

If Smuts thought his statement in parliament would address the circumstances leading up to the massacre, he was mistaken. A heated debate ensued in which JBM Hertzog, the leader of the official opposition, and Barlow, representing the Labour Party, called for a commission of enquiry to be set up. Hertzog stated that he agreed with the enforcement of law and order, but was worried how black people would react to the massacre of so many of their brethren. In his view, the Bulhoek incident was less like a case of law enforcement than “a slaughter.”. Hertzog was particularly concerned by the fact that the police used machine guns. In his view, such weapons were only to be used during war, and not for law enforcement.⁶² Hertzog was supported by Arthur Barlow, who also criticised the government for the excessive use of force. He informed the acting prime minister, FS Malan, that while the Labour Party supported law and order, it was against “shooting ... when those involved had only broken what was after all one of the “smallest of laws in the country”.⁶³

56 “Just over 320 casualties”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1921.

57 Kriek claims, without providing evidence, that a stampede occurred, which in turn provoked the police to fire at the Israelites. This is an uncommon claim that, as already mentioned, not supported by the evidence. See D Kriek, “Crisis management by Smuts: The rebellion, Bulhoek...”, K du Pisani, *D Kriek, et.al., Jan Smuts...*, p. 266.

58 “Full description of events at Bulhoek”, *The Star*, 25 May 1921.

59 “The slaying”, *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 28 May 1921.

60 Smuts’s statement was reported in various newspapers, including the *Cape Times*. See for example “Questions raised in the house; Statement by the Prime Minister”, *Cape Times*, 26 May 1921.

61 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 1553, Reference 50/929: Statement by General Smuts in Parliament re “Israelites”, 25 May 1924.

62 NASA, GG, Vol. 1553, Reference 50/929: Statement by General Smuts in Parliament... 25 May 1924.

63 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 1553, Reference 50/929: Statement by General Smuts in Parliament..., 25 May 1921.

Although Smuts's statement in parliament suggested that the Bulhoek massacre was a matter that involved the government in the broader sense, it is important to mention that Smuts himself issued the instructions to the police to employ force against the Israelites at Bulhoek. This information was revealed by Malan, who acted as prime minister when Smuts left to attend the imperial conference in London shortly after the massacre. During a debate in parliament over the conflict and in replying to a statement by JBM Hertzog, the leader of the official Opposition, Malan contended that Bulhoek was different from other violent incidents in the past, conflicts in which black people were killed by the state. He is even alleged to have suggested that the authority for the Bulhoek attack had come from Smuts himself.⁶⁴ Malan repeated this when he was questioned by another MP about who had given the instructions to the police. His answer was that the instructions were given by Smuts in his [Malan's] presence. Malan went on to point out that the terms of the ultimatum to Mgijima came directly from Smuts. It was he who directed that a "sufficient force" be deployed with the object of "impressing the natives". Although the purpose of Malan's revelations was to caution against the establishment of a commission of enquiry, the unintended consequence of his statement was to put Smuts at the centre of the Bulhoek Massacre. Essentially, Malan was arguing that if a commission of enquiry were to be established, it would have to investigate Smuts's part. Malan's point of view was that such an outcome would be undesirable. This conclusion of the matter, according to John X Merriman, suited the Smuts government because it was then able to perpetuate the media narrative and to brand the Israelites as "religious fanatics led by a maniac".⁶⁵

The aftermath of Bulhoek: Smuts and the race question

Judged on its own terms, the Bulhoek Massacre represents the egregious slaughter of black people by a racially exclusive government. It was followed over the years by other examples of violent acts against African people. As the debate in parliament demonstrated, Smuts gave instructions to Truter, which eventually led to the massacre. In this article, I have sought to show that to understand the Bulhoek Massacre it is important to come to terms with Smuts's ideas on race, as well as the project of state-making in South Africa. At its heart there was racism and state sponsored violence against African people.

Clements Kadalie, the founder and leader of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa (ICU), pointed to this pattern of violence in which Smuts

64 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 1553, Reference 50/940: Press reports of a further debate in Parliament re "Israelites", no date.

65 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 1553, Reference 50/940: Press reports of a further debate in Parliament..., no date. The idea that the Israelites were religious fanatics and maniacs was not confined to white politicians and certain other commentators. The black press appeared to hold the same view. For instance, the *Umteteli wa Bantu* the Israelites as "religious maniacs", "dupes", and "madmen". See *Umteteli wa Bantu*, "The slaying", 28 May 1921.

was directly involved. Furthermore, at a conference in which the ICU endorsed Hertzog's National Party for the 1924 general election, Kadalie stated that he was reminded of those who supported Smuts such as DDT Jabavu and ZR Mahabane, both prominent black leaders, despite Smuts's dubious record. He went on to say that Smuts was guilty of the "shootings at Port Elizabeth in 1920, the Bulhoek Massacre, the calling of troops to the Cape Town dock strike in 1919, and many other acts too numerous to mention."⁶⁶ On his list Kadalie could have included the Bondelswarts massacre in which the administrator of South-West Africa (today known as Namibia) dropped bombs on an indigenous population and killed many people.⁶⁷

To what extent did the role Smuts played in the Bulhoek Massacre reflect upon the politics of race as it unfolded in South Africa in the years that followed? Smuts lost the 1924 general election to a coalition between the NP and the Labour Party. One of the reasons for the loss was the violent suppression of the 1922 strike known as the Rand Rebellion. Although both the Rand Rebellion and Bulhoek incident involved bloodshed and death, the underlying difference between them is that the 1922 uprising mutated into armed resistance against the state, while the Bulhoek Massacre was an isolated local incident. Hertzog's NP and the Labour Party capitalised on this and came to power on the back of discontent arising from the 1922 rebellion. Hertzog had been at the forefront of criticism against Smuts for the Bulhoek Massacre, going so far as labelling him the man who "fattened up the vultures" of Bulhoek. In 1924 Hertzog became prime minister at the head of the so-called Pact Government.

Upon assuming office, Hertzog introduced four bills that outlined his government's policy on racial segregation. At their heart was the issue of the black franchise and land ownership, both of which Hertzog wanted to curtail. The bills also included what became known as the "civilised labour policy" by which was meant that certain jobs were reserved for white workers at the exclusion of black workers (the exception being Coloureds). Another legislative intervention of Hertzog's Pact government was to entrench white privilege and supremacy by introducing the Mines and Works Amendment Bill.⁶⁸ Before long Hertzog's native policy in the form of the four bills was criticised heavily by the African National Congress (ANC) and other black leaders.⁶⁹

Now the leader of the official Opposition, it took Smuts eleven months to respond to Hertzog's so-called "native bills" outlined above. Smuts's "native memorandum", as it came to be known, was, in the words of Professor Edgar Brookes, "ambiguous,

66 C Kadalie, *My life and the ICU: The autobiography of a black trade unionist in South Africa* (London, Frank Cass, 1970), p. 58.

67 WK Hancock, *Smuts: ...*, pp. 100-109.

68 WK Hancock, *Smuts: ...*, p. 208.

69 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 988, Reference 19/963: Reports to Secretary of State: European and Native conference convened by the Federal Council of the Dutch Reformed Church with the purpose of discussing the four Native Bills now before Parliament, no date.

ineffective and merely destructive”. Brookes goes on to say that it “left the natives themselves quite in the dark ... regarding their political, social and economic future”.⁷⁰

Although at the time these measures could not be passed by the legislature because they did not enjoy support from two-thirds of the members of parliament, Smuts was waiting in the wings. His decision to form a coalition government with Hertzog’s National Party in 1934 opened the way for passing them into law. Ironically (and perhaps cynically, depending on one’s interpretation), when forming the fusion government, in the so-called United Party (in 1934) with Hertzog, Smuts, now prime minister once again, is reported to have said of himself, that he was “the champion of Native interests and rights”. But others disagree. Hancock invites readers his of his biography of Smuts to look at his subject’s record on matters affecting black people. One of the pieces of evidence that Hancock suggests should be reviewed is Smuts’s public statements on the question of race.⁷¹ Brookes agrees. As he notes, Smuts’s major public statement regarding Hertzog’s so-called native bills was “ambiguous, ineffective and merely destructive”. He goes on to say that:⁷²

...by not spelling out a clear position on pressing political questions of the time such as the black franchise and his attitude towards the government’s “colour bar” policy, Smuts’s document left black people in the dark regarding their future.

A few years before his 1934 statement declaring himself “the champion of native interests and rights”, Smuts gave a comprehensive speech outlining his views on the race question in South Africa. The occasion, perhaps appropriate for the influence that Rhodes had on Smuts’s thinking, were the Rhodes Lectures that Smuts delivered at Oxford University in 1929. In a speech titled “Native Policy in Africa”, Smuts described Africans as having remained essentially child-like, with child-like psychology and characteristic. Continuing this line of thinking that he attributed partly to anthropologists, he claimed that Africans “easily forget past troubles” and “do not anticipate future troubles”.⁷³ Having thus characterised Africans as being permanently childish and incapable of cognitive development, he then went on to criticise those who proposed political equality between white and black people. What was required, he argued, was the implementation of an idea and policy introduced by Rhodes and epitomised in the Glen Grey Act. The seminal innovation of Rhodes’s policy, Smuts emphasised, was “to introduce indirect white rule, and to make the natives manage their local tribal affairs”. Another innovation would be, he said, “to

70 Brookes’s criticism of Smuts’s 1926 memorandum is available in NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 976, Reference 19/945A: Article by Professor Edgar Brookes of the Transvaal University College criticising General Smuts’s memorandum on Native Policy together with statement issued by the Federal Council of the Dutch Reformed Churches on the Prime Minister’s Native Bills, no date.

71 WK Hancock, *Smuts: The fields of force...*, p. 259.

72 NASA, Pretoria, GG, Vol. 976, Reference 19/945A: Article by Professor Edgar Brookes..., no date.

73 JC Smuts, “Native Policy in Africa”, JC Smuts, *Plans for a better world...*, p. 54.

make it possible for natives in their tribal areas to become possessed of their own separate plots of agricultural land...". The third way forward as suggested by the Glen Grey Act was the introduction of the labour tax. This, said Smuts would be an excellent idea because legislative coercion would make it possible for white employers to get access to the necessary labour supply.⁷⁴

Reflecting on his earlier tenure as premier of South Africa, Smuts informed his audience at Oxford that he was so impressed by the Rhodesian idea of institutional and territorial racial segregation that he had extended it throughout the country by passing the Native Affairs Act in 1920. Concluding his speech, Smuts compared his plans and Rhodes's idea of racial segregation with what the missionaries tried to do when they arrived in the African continent. He said:⁷⁵

Unfortunately, the earlier efforts of missionary enterprise were made without any reference to, or knowledge of, the peculiar native psychology, or the light which anthropology has thrown on the past of human cultures. For the natives, religion, law, natural science, social customs and institutions all form one blended whole, which enshrines their view of the world and of the forces governing it. Attack this complex system at any single point and the whole is endangered.

Oxford University honoured Smuts with a Doctor of Civil Laws degree after the conclusion of his lecture. As shown above, he was joined by Hertzog in a coalition government in 1934, which meant that black people in the Cape lost the very limited franchise they had enjoyed and also entrenched the principle of land dispossession. From 1939 until 1948, Smuts was the prime minister and in many respects, he stood firm on refusing to extend civil and political rights to black people.

Conclusion

I have argued that the Bulhoek Massacre is better understood when placed in the context of Smuts's ideas on race and his treatment of black people throughout his political career which spanned more than five decades. Viewed from this perspective, the Bulhoek Massacre was not a mere incident. Nor was it the first instance in which Smuts and his government used the violent machinery of the state to kill African people. As discussed in this article, Smuts believed in the superiority of whites and the inferiority of their black counterparts whom he characterised as representing the deadweight of prolific barbarism. He expressed this view in the 1890s and repeated it on numerous occasions. It is also true to say that Cecil Rhodes was very influential indeed

74 JC Smuts, "Native Policy in Africa", JC Smuts, *Plans for a better world...*, pp. 55-59.

75 JC Smuts, "Native Policy in Africa", JC Smuts, *Plans for a better world...*, pp. 64-65.

in shaping Smuts's thinking on race and how this should be addressed in South Africa.