

FA Mouton

Professor, Department of
History, University of South
Africa. E-mail: moutofa@
unisa.ac.za

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150509/JCH43.v2.2>

ISSN 0258-2422 (Print)
ISSN 2415-0509 (Online)

Journal for Contemporary
History
2018 43(2):15-32

© Creative Commons With
Attribution (CC-BY)

OPEN ACCESS



“BEYOND THE PALE”: OSWALD PIROW, SIR OSWALD MOSLEY, THE ‘ENEMIES OF THE SOVIET UNION’ AND APARTHEID, 1948 – 1959

Abstract

In 1948, Oswald Pirow, trapped in the political wilderness after his once glittering political career had self-destructed with the founding of the national-socialistic New Order, was desperate for a political comeback. In search of an international platform to portray himself as a leading anti-communist campaigner, and as a political sage with a solution to the challenge of securing white supremacy in Africa, he visited Sir Oswald Mosley, former British fascist leader, in London. The result was a short-lived alliance of opportunism, the ‘Enemies of the Soviet Union’, by two discredited politicians who were beyond the pale in public life. By 1959, this alliance would come to haunt Pirow, who had done his utmost to shed his fascist past. It also caused the apartheid state, which had appointed Pirow as the chief prosecutor in the Treason Trail, considerable embarrassment.

Keywords: Oswald Pirow; Sir Oswald Mosley; national-socialism; New Order; British Union of Fascism; communism; ‘Enemies of the Soviet Union’; apartheid; opportunism.

Slutelwoorde: Oswald Pirow; Sir Oswald Mosley; nasionaal-sosialisme; Nuwe Orde; British Union of Fascism; kommunisme; “Enemies of the Soviet Union”; apartheid; opportunisme.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1930s Oswald Pirow was the most brilliant star in the South African political constellation, widely seen as a future prime minister. He had a dramatic fall from grace after 4 September 1939, when he supported prime minister JBM Hertzog's neutrality motion with the outbreak of the Second World War, and then gambled on a military victory by Nazi Germany with the founding of the national-socialist New Order (NO) in 1940. In 1942, he was cast into the political wilderness by the leadership of the Herenigde Nasionale Party (HNP) for clashing with party policy. Pirow, who desperately missed the political stage and craved respect by the political establishment, was determined to return to the political mainstream. In April 1948, in search of an international platform to portray himself as a leading anti-communist campaigner, and an as a political sage with a solution to the challenge of securing white supremacy in Africa, he visited Sir Oswald Mosley, former British fascist leader, in London. The result was a short-lived alliance of opportunism by two discredited politicians, seen as beyond the pale in their respective countries, seeking a political comeback by portraying themselves as self-appointed saviours of the white man in Africa against the communist threat of the Soviet Union. Nothing came of this gamble and in 1959, this alliance would come to haunt Pirow who had done his utmost to shed his fascist past. It also caused the apartheid state, which had appointed Pirow as the chief prosecutor in the Treason Trail, considerable embarrassment.

2. PIROW'S POLITICAL CAREER, 1924-1940

Pirow, born on 14 August 1890, was an outstanding advocate at the Pretoria Bar after qualifying as a barrister at Middle Temple in London, and he took silk as a King's Council in 1925. He also had a meteoric political career. Elected to parliament in 1924 as a member of the National Party (NP) he became the Minister of Justice in 1929, and Minister of Railways and Harbours, and of Defence in 1934. He was a dynamic and innovative minister, modernising the railway system, establishing the South African Airways (SAA), and attempted to rebuild a ramshackle Union Defence Force (UDF). By 1936 he was seen as a future prime minister. In May 1936 Lord Clarendon, the Governor General in South Africa, wrote to king Edward VIII that, "Sooner or later he [Pirow] will undoubtedly become Prime Minister ..." ¹ This opinion was shared by the British government and Malcolm Macdonald, the Secretary of State of Dominion Affairs, informed his cabinet colleagues in April 1937 that, "Mr. Pirow's views are of considerable

¹ Royal Archives, Windsor PS/GVI/C 051, The Earl of Clarendon - King Edward VIII, 1936, 001, Clarendon - Edward VIII, 28 May 1936, p. 6. (I am grateful to John Lambert for this document.)

importance as he is a dominant personality in South African politics and likely eventually to become Prime Minister of the Union".² The perception of Pirow as a leading statesman was bolstered by his mission to Hitler in November 1938. The meeting was part of an official visit to Britain to negotiate with the British War Office about military supplies for the UDF, and was motivated by his desire to become prime minister. He was desperate to avoid a European war involving Britain as he knew it would be difficult for South Africa to remain neutral, and that a war could destroy the government and his prime ministerial ambitions. During this mission he met Dr Antonio Salazar, the Portuguese dictator, General Francisco Franco of Spain, King George VI, Neville Chamberlain, Winston Churchill, Hitler and the top leadership of Nazi Germany, King Carol of Rumania, Benito Mussolini of Italy, and King Leopold III of Belgium.³ On the eve of his return to South Africa, on 9 December 1938, Pirow issued a press statement that Europe was drifting into war and that he was leaving Europe "with a feeling of almost unqualified anxiety", and that international tension will reach breaking point during the spring of next year.⁴ In terms of diplomacy Pirow's visit achieved very little to encourage world peace, but it did bolster his image as a statesman, and a potential prime minister.

A hallmark of Pirow's career was his raw ambition, and not any deeply held political principles. He had a ruthless ability to cultivate powerful figures such as Tielman Roos and Hertzog with sycophantic flattery and unquestioning loyalty, and to successfully adjust his sails to prevailing political winds. He furthermore acted as a ruthless hatchet man for Roos and Hertzog. As a result, many members of parliament in the Purified National Party (NP), and its supporting press, after the NP and the South African Party had merged to form the United Party (UP) and the Fusion government in 1934, loathed him as a malevolent bully and an unprincipled opportunist.⁵ When Hertzog's followers, after the defeat of his neutrality motion, joined former purifieds such as DF Malan, JG Strijdom and HF Verwoerd with the founding of the HNP, they found it difficult to be in the same party as Pirow. On 9 September 1939 AL Geyer, editor of *Die Burger*, explained this enmity in his political notebook, describing Pirow as a person, "... whose interest in politics is the advancement of the political interests of Oswald Pirow" (Translated).⁶

2 *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 January 1968.

3 For details of this mission see O Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1957), pp 221-241.

4 *Daily Telegraph*, 6 December 1938.

5 J.L. Basson, *JG Strijdom. Sy politieke loopbaan van 1929 tot 1948* (Pretoria: Wonderboom-uitgewers, 1980), pp 44-46; *Die Burger*, 15 May 1936.

6 Western Cape Provincial Archives and Records Service (hereafter WCPA), A.L. Geyer collection, vol. 3, Political notebook, 9 September 1939.

3. THE SECOND WORD WAR AND THE NEW ORDER, 1940-1942

Pirow's precarious position in the HNP was weakened when his reputation took a severe battering in parliament when premier Jan Smuts mercilessly savaged his tenure as Minister of Defence on 14 March 1940, especially his bush cart strategy.⁷ The prime minister had turned Pirow into a figure of derision.⁸ Marginalised in the HNP a desperate Pirow hitched his ambitions to the seemingly unstoppable military might of Nazi Germany. After the collapse of France in June 1940 and the defeat of an isolated Britain seemingly inevitable, he started to embrace national-socialism and anti-Semitism. Pirow gambled his career on a German military victory with the founding of the national-socialist New Order for South Africa (NO) on 25 September 1940 as a study group within the HNP.⁹ In a lengthy and widely distributed booklet, *Nuwe orde vir Suid-Afrika*, he argued that the Afrikaner had to follow the example of the new order which had emerged in Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal, namely an authoritarian political system based on state authority and the discipline of the people. For the HNP leadership his founding of the NO was mere opportunism as up to 1939 he had vigorously defended democracy while condemning fascism, and anti-Semitism.¹⁰

DF Malan, viewing the NO as a threat to the HNP, the notion of a national-socialist dictatorship was rejected as alien to the national character of the Afrikaner, prohibited any other doctrines apart from official policy in the party.¹¹ In January 1942 Pirow was cast into the political wilderness by the HNP.¹² By 1943 his hope of an international order dominated by Hitler and national-socialism, which would place him in a position of strength as leader of the NO, faded with the catastrophic destruction of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Germany's defeat seemed inevitable. After rejecting parliamentary democracy, it was impossible for Pirow to contest the 1943 general election. But even if he should have contested the election, he would have suffered a humiliating defeat as the

7 The bush carts, the brainchild of Pirow, were a type of Scotch cart with one shaft and two large spoked wheels pulled by two oxen or mules, to convey material in rough terrain for bush warfare in sub-tropical Africa.

8 B Schoeman, *My lewe in die politiek* (Johannesburg: Perskor, 1978), p. 63.

9 C Marx, *Oxwagon sentinel. Radical Afrikaner nationalism and the history of the Ossewabrandwag* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008), pp. 496-497.

10 GH Calpin, *There are no South Africans* (London: Thomson Nelson and Sons, 1941), p 391; *Die Burger*, 6 March 1939; M Shain, *A perfect storm. Antisemitism in South Africa 1930-1948* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2015), pp. 9, 92.

11 *Die Transvaler*, 13 Augustus 1941; *Die Volksblad*, 13 August 1941.

12 University of Stellenbosch (Hereafter US), D.F. Malan collection, 1/1/1945, Pirow – Malan, 14 January 1942.

NO had limited support. The organisation was mocked as a, “collection of generals without an army”.¹³

4. THE POLITICAL WILDERNESS

Pirow missed the political stage, but especially the respect that had accompanied his status as a cabinet minister, and he was determined to return to the main stream of politics. He did his utmost to reconcile with the HNP. Within months of the 1943 election he proposed a collective security pact among all Afrikaner opposition groups to the Smuts government.¹⁴ Malan ignored him. Apart from loathing him as an opportunist, the HNP cultivated a more moderate image to attract UP supporters. Any formal agreement with the NO would harm such an approach. The HNP's leadership were furthermore fully aware that the Pirow's handful of supporters had no other party to support against the UP, and that no formal agreement was required to secure their votes. However, Pirow persisted in his efforts and at the NO conference in June 1944 the emphasis was placed on Afrikaner unity. He made it clear that the aim of the movement was to establish national-socialism in South Africa, and although he rejected the party-political system, he promised unconditional electoral support for the HNP.¹⁵ Malan once again ignored this offer of support. *Die Volksblad* of 13 September 1944 reflected the attitude of the party by pointing out that if Pirow continued to embrace national-socialism, instead of Christian-nationalism, he would be kept at arms-length.

For Pirow to abandon national-socialism so soon after breaking with the HNP on this principle, was an impossible demand. Doing so would mean a loss of face, and a bolstering of his image as an arch-opportunist. He paid a price for this stance as in April 1945 Malan approached Klasie Havenga, leader of the Afrikaner Party (AP), for closer cooperation between the two parties. He made it clear that he would keep Pirow in the cold because of his rejection of democracy.¹⁶ This meant, to quote Patrick Furlong in his study on the impact of the radical right on the Afrikaner nationalist movement, that Pirow had been “consigned to political oblivion” by Malan.¹⁷ How entrenched his isolation was, was evident in June

13 M Roberts and A Trollip, *The South African opposition 1939-1945. An essay in contemporary history* (Cape Town: Longmans, Green and Co, 1947), p. 147.

14 NM Stultz, *The Nationalists in opposition 1938-1948*, (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1974), p. 99.

15 FJ Van Heerden, “Nasionaal-sosialisme as 'n faktor in die Suid-Afrikaanse politiek, 1933-1948” (Unpublished D Phil, University of the Orange Free State, 1972), pp. 340-341.

16 US, DF Malan collection, 1/1/2168, Malan - Havenga, 2 April 1945.

17 P Furlong, *Between crown and swastika. The impact of the radical right on the Afrikaner nationalist movement in the fascist era* (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press, 1991), p. 216.

1946 when he declared that the NO had given up its demand that Afrikaner unity had to be based on the principles of national-socialism. He only demanded an acknowledgement by the HNP of the NO's right to exist. This statement was once again met with silence. In March 1947 the AP and HNP formed an electoral alliance to contest the 1948 general election. Pirow had no choice but to declare his support for the alliance, and to order NO supporters to join either party. In doing so he effectively conceded that his movement had no reason for its continued existence.¹⁸ Pirow's offer of unconditional support was once more ignored by the HNP's leadership.

5. SELF-APPOINTED PROPHET AND SAVIOUR

Treated as a pariah by the HNP all that remained for Pirow to find his way out of the political wilderness was the potential to exploit the rise of the Soviet Union as a superpower, occupying half of Europe after the defeat of Germany in May 1945. He was convinced that the ideological differences between the (USA) and the Soviet Union, made another world war inevitable. A war in which South Africa could not be neutral, and which would smash the mould of South African politics.¹⁹ While waiting for the outbreak of hostilities between the USA and the Soviet Union he portrayed the NO as a defender of whites in Africa against the threat of communism.²⁰

Another possible way back into the HNP was to establish himself as an original political thinker providing solutions to the challenges facing the white minority in South Africa in an evolving world. The Second World War had broken down the old social order, which had made white supremacy acceptable. In addition, during the war the combination of grinding poverty in the overpopulated and eroded "native reserves" in rural areas, and labour shortages in the increasingly industrialising urban areas, led to an influx of blacks to towns and cities. The result was that existing infrastructures were unable to deal with the influx. By 1946 towns and cities were encircled by large crime ridden shanty towns in which blacks lived in squalor.²¹ These dismal living conditions, combined with the harsh and exploitative treatment of black workers in the mines and factories, fuelled a growing militancy of boycotts, protest marches

18 Van Heerden, pp. 342, 349.

19 *Die Nuwe Orde*, 7 February 1946.

20 National Archives (hereafter NA) Kew, DO 35/1119, File G581/88, High Commissioner – Sir Eric Machtig, 9 October 1946.

21 TRH Davenport, "The Smuts government and the Africans, 1939-48" (University of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies. Collected Seminar Papers, vol. V, 1974, p 85; A Stadler, "Birds in the cornfields. Squatter movements in Johannesburg, 1944-47", in B Bozzoli (red.), *Townships and protest. Studies in the social history of the Witwatersrand* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1979), pp. 19-48.

and strikes. In August 1946 a strike by black mineworkers was suppressed with great brutality.²² The once moribund African National Congress (ANC), under the dynamic leadership of Dr AB Xuma, representing the black majority, demanded equal political rights with whites. The suppression of the strike led to the Natives Representative Council, whose criticism, advice and recommendations had been ignored over the years by the Hertzog and Smuts governments, to adjourn until discriminatory legislation had been repealed. The same year South Africa's racial policies were vehemently criticised at the new established United Nations in New York in which racism, colonialism and oppression was being challenged by Third World countries. These developments created angst amongst whites about their hegemony, and convinced the UP and the HNP that the Hertzog based system of segregation was not tenable anymore, and had to be replaced with a new system taking black aspirations into account. In August 1946 Smuts appointed a commission under the chairmanship of Judge HA Fagan, to find a solution to the challenges of governing a growing black urban population.²³

For Pirow the growing "angst" amongst about white hegemony provided an opportunity to provide his own proposals. He used *Die Nuwe Orde*, the NO's newsheet, to create an image of himself as a political sage, an essential politician that the HNP needed in its fold. His political blueprint was segregation on a pan-African basis. That apart from areas such as North (Zambia) and South Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Kenya and South Africa, the rest of Africa should be given its independence, as well as the creation of sovereign black states in South Africa based on the "native reserves". Whites had to provide the money to create these states.²⁴ For Indians, the fifth columnists of pan-Asianism, according to Pirow, the solution was simple, they had to be repatriated to India.²⁵ Coloureds had to be provided land to govern themselves in a territory stretching from Vanrhynsdorp in the northern Cape to Keetmanshoop and Rehoboth in Southwest Africa (Namibia), and from Upington to the sea. Coloureds would be obliged to live in this area and he advocated forced removals if they should refuse to go. Whites already living in this area had to be removed as a sacrifice to white survival.²⁶ Pirow's proposals fell on deaf ears in the HNP and Malan appointed Paul Sauer to lead a commission to formalise a racial policy for the party.

Unfortunately for Pirow his image as a politician beyond the pale was bolstered in September 1947 when he was charged under the Riotous Assemblies Act for inciting public violence. On 9 May 1946 *Die Nuwe Orde* had published an

22 T Lodge, *Black politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), pp. 19–20.

23 JP Brits, *Op die vooraand van apartheid. Die rassevraagstuk en die blanke politiek in Suid-Afrika, 1939–1948* (Pretoria: Unisa, 1994), pp 38–43.

24 *Die Nuwe Orde*, 3 January 1947.

25 *Ibid.*, 24 January 1947.

26 *Ibid.*, 7 February 1947.

article under the heading *Neem die wet in eie hande* (Take the law into your own hands) in reaction to blacks attending a student “rag” event of the University of the Witwatersrand. The article, not written by Pirow, but approved by him as the editor, encouraged physical attacks on blacks fraternising with whites.²⁷ The court found him guilty and sentenced him to a fine of £40, or two months hard labour.²⁸ By then *Die Nuwe Orde*, struggling to find subscribers and running at a financial loss, at its height it only printed a run of 2 250 copies, had been reduced from a weekly to a monthly sheet. The NO existed in name only. The organisation had no membership list, or membership subscriptions.²⁹

For Pirow his impotence on the margins of public life was a source of deep frustration, especially as by March 1948 both the Sauer and Fagan reports were published. Fagan concluded that total segregation was impractical, and that as urbanisation was a natural process it could not be halted. The focus had to be on the controlling of urbanisation, and that the future of South Africa had to be based on the mutual dependence of black and white. Pirow rejected the report for ignoring cultural differences between black and white, and that his recommendations would encourage integration. According to him this meant that the black worker would be absorbed as a proletarian in South Africa’s economic structure, and that this would lead to a class struggle, intensified by racial differences.³⁰ On the other hand Sauer report promised stricter segregation measures at all levels of society with influx control. Politically blacks had to develop in their own territories according to their own national character. For Pirow the Sauer report was flawed as it ignored the aspirations of the black majority to be sovereignly independent.³¹

6. SIR OSWALD MOSLEY AND *THE ALTERNATIVE*

To convey his own proposals to the wider public, Pirow needed a political platform that would attract attention. This led to Pirow’s gamble to seek an alliance with Sir Oswald Mosley, the former leader of the British Union of Fascists (BUF) to form an international anti-communist movement. Mosley was determined to exploit anti-communist fears to secure a political comeback. His book, *The alternative*, published in October 1947, was an attempt to readjust national-socialism to the post-war world, and to relaunch his political career. In the book Mosley

27 NA Kew, KV 2/908, Untitled newspaper clipping, 6 September 1947.

28 *The Star*, 5 September 1947; *The Pretoria News*, 5 and 19 September 1947.

29 NA Kew, KV 2/908, ‘Oswald Pirow and the Union Movement Statements at conference report, 16 April 1948’.

30 Brits, pp. 42–43.

31 University of Birmingham (Hereafter UB), Sir Oswald Mosley Papers, OMD7/1/1, ‘Statement by Mr. Pirow, 12 April 1948’.

envisioned his task as a defender of Europe against the barbarism of the Soviet Union. His main strategy was the ideal of a unified Europe, “Europe a Nation”, which would preserve European independence in a world of superpowers. This unified Europe would be protected by tariffs, and secure its wealth from an Africa ruled by whites. Africa would provide Europe with raw materials, making it self-sufficient and independent of American financial support. In the process Africa would benefit as Europe would play a crucial role in developing the continent. Mosley formed the Union Movement in February 1948 to encourage European unity to prevent Europe from falling to communism, and to oppose Europe’s pauper existence on the American dole.³²

Pirow initiated the possibility of a meeting with Mosley after an ex-BUF man in South Africa had given him a copy of *The alternative*. According to Stephen Dorril, Mosley’s best biographer, *The alternative* was a pretentious book, ignored by the British press.³³ However, Pirow in *Die Nuwe Orde* December 1947 praised it as, “one of the most important products of one of the clearest political thinkers today”.³⁴ On 29 December 1947 he wrote to Mosley³⁵ to express his admiration and suggested a meeting between them to form an international league against communism with its headquarters in London, with Mosley as the president of the movement. He also expressed the hope to visit the USA to attract American support for such an organisation. His intention was to recruit Charles Lindberg, the famous aviator, who, before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941, was an isolationist and seen as sympathetic to fascism, to their cause.³⁶

7. PIROW AND MOSLEY: POLITICAL OPPORTUNISTS

Pirow and Mosley had much in common. Both were intelligent, self-confident, charismatic with the ability to use flattery to win people over and highly regarded as good sportsmen. Pirow was an outstanding swimmer and as a javelin thrower

32 R Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (London: Papermac, 1990), pp. 485–486.

33 S Dorril, *Black shirt. Sir Oswald Mosley and British fascism* (London: Viking, 2006), pp. 564–565.

34 NA Kew, KV 2/908, Extract from the *Daily Worker*, 31 December 1947.

35 As the British authorities continued to view Mosley as a threat to state security his mail was intercepted. Pirow and Mosley’s correspondence were copied and placed in the file British intelligence had kept on Pirow as a fascist sympathiser since the early 1940s. The intercepted correspondence can be found in file KV2/908 in the National Archives, Kew. Historians have reason to be grateful for the vigilance of the British authorities as Mosley and Pirow failed to retain their correspondence. In the Mosley Papers at the University of Birmingham there are only two letters from the NO leader, while the Pirow papers at the University of the Free State does not contain a single letter from their correspondence.

36 NA Kew, KV 2/908, Pirow – Mosley, 29 December 1947 and 21 January 1948.

he was the British champion in 1913, representing England in a meeting.³⁷ He was furthermore an enthusiastic amateur boxer, seen as good enough to turn professional.³⁸ Mosley was also a skilful amateur boxer, and an outstanding fencer who represented Britain. Both were also former aviators. In 1928 Pirow qualified as a pilot and South Africans were duly impressed when he piloted a plane from Durban over the Drakensberg Mountains to Pretoria.³⁹ Mosley participated in the First World War in the Royal Flying Corps. Where they did differ, was that the bald and rather dumpy Pirow, married to the daughter of a cold-storage company owner, lacked the glamour of Mosley who was tall, broad-shouldered, and a baronet from a wealthy family, and married to Cynthia Curzon, daughter of Lord Curzon, a former viceroy of India. However, both were ambitious and opportunistic with the ability to trim their sails to prevailing political winds, to exploit political parties and their leaders as vehicles for their ambitions. Mosley was elected to parliament in 1918 as a member of the Conservative Party, he was the youngest MP in parliament, but in 1924 abandoned the seemingly declining Conservatives for the rising Labour Party. By then he was such a political star that 70 Labour held constituencies vied with each other to secure him as a candidate.⁴⁰ Mosley used his considerable charm on Ramsay MacDonald, leader of the Labour Party, to advance his career. In 1929 he became a government minister, although not in the cabinet of a Labour government, but resigned in 1930 to form his own political grouping the, New Party.⁴¹

Mosley, after his party was decimated in the 1931 general election, visited Benito Mussolini's fascist Italy. Viewing fascism as the coming political force, he formed the BUF in 1932. Anti-Semitism was the backbone of BUF policy, and from 1936 he had close ties with Nazi Germany. That year he married his second wife, Diana Guinness, in Berlin with Hitler present. Mosley's unscrupulous use of crude anti-Semitism, the thuggery and unprovoked violence of BUF members dressed in black uniforms, and his stance after 1938 that war with Germany had to be avoided, as the calls to opposes Nazi aggression was part of a Jewish conspiracy, made him an isolated and despised figure in Britain. The BUF was never able to attract more than a handful of supporters. During the Second World War he was arrested as a threat to state security in May 1940, and kept in prison until 1943. His release on health grounds led to a public outcry. The war had destroyed

37 *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 July 1930.

38 *Die Burger*, 21 October 1959.

39 *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 July 1930.

40 N. Mosley, *Rules of the game. Sir Oswald Mosley and Lady Cynthia Mosley 1896-1933* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982), pp. 54-56.

41 For a concise overview of Mosley's political career see R Skidelsky's essay in HCG Matthew and B Harrison (eds.) *Oxford dictionary of national biography*, Vol. 39, (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 469-474.

what had remained of his political reputation.⁴² As Pirow he craved respect. *The alternative* was the product of his desperation for a political comeback.

British intelligence informers in Mosley's inner circle, at least three of them, provides crucial information on the interaction between Pirow and the former BUF leader. Mosley, according to informant B.1.c./2487, welcomed Pirow's visit as he felt that the NO leader had a good chance of coming to power in South Africa within two years, when the Smuts regime would be smashed.⁴³ That he thought that Pirow could come to power was an indication of his notorious lack of judgement, and reflected an important difference between them. Mosley had an enormous ego, bad judgement and no capacity of introspection.⁴⁴ As a result he was the architect of his own downfall by leaving the Labour Party. Pirow, although vain and arrogant, could be brutally honest about his own flaws,⁴⁵ and had a career based on cold rational decisions for political survival. This meant that he was politically far more successful than Mosley. The prime ministership of South Africa was within his grasp and it was historical events beyond his control in September 1939 that led to his expulsion from the cabinet. He only broke with mainstream politics, and parliamentary democracy, to gamble with fascism and a German military victory when he felt that he had no choice but to do so.

Pirow's decision to reach out to such a discredited politician as Mosley was a gamble, but a calculated one. As a war between the USA and the Soviet Union was inevitable, he was without doubt that a fervent anti-communist stance was the ticket to secure a political comeback. While in London he informed JA Gray, an acquaintance of his 1938 visit, that with the outbreak of hostilities South Africa would need a new Fusion government, and that he was determined to participate in this war.⁴⁶ London, and Mosley, would provide the much-needed publicity to remind South Africans of his strong political views on communism, as well as his statesmanlike abilities. That he was the person who at the end of 1938 had predicted that a war with Germany was inevitable in 1939. In addition, with London as the capital of a vast empire in Africa, his proposed blueprint of racial segregation on a pan-African basis would secure extensive publicity.

42 For the history of the BUF see Dorril's, *Blackshirt*, and M. Pugh, *Hurrah for the blackshirts! Fascism and fascism between the wars* (London: Pimlico, 2006).

43 NA Kew, KV 2/908, Report of informant B.1.c./2487, 9 January 1948.

44 F Beckett, *Fascist in the family. The tragedy of John Beckett* MP (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 214–215.

45 L Blackwell, *Farewell to parliament. More reminiscences of bench, bar parliament and travel* (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter & Shooter, 1946), p. 74.

46 University of the Witwatersrand, JH Hofmeyr Papers, Aa 1905, Gray – Hofmyer, 23 April 1948.

8. LONDON, 8 TO 24 APRIL 1948: THE “ENEMIES OF THE SOVIET UNION”

Pirow left South Africa with a SAA flight on 7 April at 02h00 and arrived on London on 8 April at 15h15, where he was met at the airport by Mosley and Lady Mosley. The contrast to his arrival in 1938 could not have been starker. Ten years earlier Europe’s attention was focussed on him. On his arrival in London he was met by a Secretary of State, leading establishment figures, police protection and a large crowd of spectators and journalists. In 1948 the only state representation was the Metropolitan Police’s Special Branch officers who noted that 20 people awaited his arrival, and that Mosley had pulled out all the stops to welcome him with a hired Daimler car, and a van with an amplifier for a speech by his guest. However, Pirow refused to make any public statement, and on Mosley’s prompting only said that he was happy to be in Britain, and that he had a fairly comfortable flight.⁴⁷ He then went to spend a weekend at Mosley’s country home in Wiltshire. British intelligence with its informants, and interception of mail, was fully informed of the discussions between Mosley and Pirow, who hoped to use each other for a political comeback. This was evident from an intercepted letter by GF Green to Arnold Leese in which it was noted that the two got on very well. “The two “O”s are most friendly and impressed – and each willing to use the other as a mounting-block.”⁴⁸ According to informant B.1.c/2628 who found Pirow to be well-mannered, arrogant, ruthless and enormously energetic, the NO leader was of the opinion that Smuts would win the next election with the barest majority and that in the coming war with the Soviet Union the government would ask him and his friends to form a coalition. He would refuse the offer as time was on his side.⁴⁹ British intelligence concluded that Pirow’s chief motive to visit Mosley had nothing to do with fascism, but was an attempt to revive his own career,

“Of the two men, Oswald Pirow is probably the more astute and there are indications that his projected political link with MOSLEY is envisaged by PIROW primarily as affording means for building up his own future plans. As evidence of this he has shown no very marked interests in the activities of the Union Movement.”⁵⁰

However, Pirow’s high hopes of reviving his career with much needed publicity was quickly dashed as the British press was determined to keep Mosley

47 NA Kew, KV 2/908, Metropolitan Police (Special Branch), 9 April 1948.

48 NA Kew, KV 2/908, “Extract from int. letter from GF Green to Arnold Leese”, mentioning Pirow, 17 April 1948.

49 NA Kew, KV 2/908, Report of 19 April 1948.

50 NA Kew, KV 2/908, Extract from a report on fascist activities (March–April 1948), 27 April 1948.

isolated. It was the official policy of the British Broadcasting Corporation to ignore him. As a result, a press conference at Mosley's London home on 12 April was poorly attended. Few journalists were present to hear Pirow propagating his ideal of equality coupled with segregation, self-governance and eventual independence for the black man in his own areas in Africa. In white controlled territories, the blacks would have no political rights, and be reduced to unskilled migrating labour. According to Pirow the African had not received even a small part of what was due to him. His plan would give the black man an ultimate national ideal, the same ideal as that of any European nation. He furthermore claimed that his visit was to determine how close the world was to a third world war. In doing so, he reminded those present of his visit to Europe in 1938, and his prediction that a war with Germany was imminent, and to prophesise that a third world war with the Soviet Union was inevitable.⁵¹ His confident performance at the news conference even impressed British intelligence in its detailed summary of the meeting with the press,

“It is difficult to assess precisely what Pirow's real influence in South African politics is today. There is little doubt however that he is an able man, biding his time, and confident that events will yet throw him up into a position of leadership. An eminent K.C., he is a forceful personality, and must certainly be considered as being influential in Nationalist circles.”⁵²

Before leaving Britain on 24 April, Mosley and Pirow announced their intention to launch an organisation, the “Enemies of the Soviet Union” to expose Soviet aggression and to counter the activities of the many pro-Soviet organisations.⁵³ Leaving London, the Special Branch noted that only Mosley and his family, as well as four other men, came to the airport to bid him farewell⁵⁴ – an indication that his visit had failed in its mission to secure publicity. A bigger disappointment awaited his high hopes to meet Franco and Salazar in Spain and Portugal. The Spanish embassy arranged a seat on an aircraft from Britain to Spain reserved for Spanish diplomats, but he failed to meet Franco.⁵⁵ In Portugal he also failed to meet Salazar, but did have a meeting with Dr Marcelo Caetano, chairman of Portugal's only political party, the Uniao Nacional.⁵⁶ Nothing would

51 NA Kew, KV 2/908, Press statement by Pirow, 12 April 1948.

52 *Ibid.*, “Oswald Pirow and the Union Movement. Statements at conference report, 16 April 1948”.

53 *Ibid.*, Newspaper clipping of *Union*, 1 May 1948.

54 *Ibid.*, Metropolitan Police (Special Branch), 24 April 1948.

55 *Ibid.*, Extract from a report on fascist activities (March–April 1948), 27 April 1948.

56 National Archives, Pretoria, PM 22/3/2, Vol. 1, PR Botha – JC Smuts, 4 Mei 1948, (I am grateful to Friek Nothing for this document).

come of his plans to visit the USA because of his difficulties to secure a visa as a result of his fascist views.⁵⁷

Another disappointment awaited Pirow back in Pretoria as the South African press, obsessed with the coming general election, gave his London visit hardly any attention. Leading HNP supporting newspapers such as *Die Burger* and *Die Transvaler* simply ignored him, while the UP-supporting English-medium press just mentioned it in passing. The *Cape Times*, for example, referred to the announcement on the “Enemies of the Soviet Union” in a few lines on page three of the newspaper. The visit instead bolstered the perception of Pirow as a figure of ridicule. The *Cape Times* (10 April 1948) published a cartoon with an outraged Mosley demanding to know why Pirow did not have a moustache like Hitler. *The Natal Mercury* (15 April 1948), correctly concluding that the meeting was a stunt to recapture the glamour he formerly enjoyed as Minister of Defence, mocked his belligerence talk of a crusade against communism by publishing a cartoon of him wielding a sword on one of his bush carts with a mangy horse harnessed back to front. Pirow’s gamble to use the publicity surrounding his meeting with Mosley to enhance his own position in South Africa had failed dismally. On 26 May his political isolation was deepened with the HNP’s shock election victory over the UP. This meant that nothing came of the grandiose scheme to create the “Enemies of the Soviet Union”. As Pirow’s intention was to use such an organisation to bolster his position in a UP governed South Africa, it was promptly dropped and never again mentioned.⁵⁸ However, Mosley would continue with his ideal of a unified Europe as a bulwark against communist aggression to secure political recognition.

As the publicity value of linking up with Mosley had no rewards, Pirow focussed on his legal career. He was still one of South Africa’s leading advocates with a flourishing practice and maintained irregular contact with Mosley. These letters, apart from thanking Mosley for hosting his daughter Henry-Li over the Christmas of 1949,⁵⁹ was motivated by a desire to impress him. That he went out of his way to create a good impression with someone as discredited as Mosley was an indication of how the ridicule and isolation he had endured since 1940 had undermined his once supreme self-confidence. He even resorted to lies to impress the British fascist. Mosley, according to informant B.L.c./2762 had received a letter from Pirow in June 1948 in which he claimed that he had been offered, but refused, two posts in the South African cabinet.⁶⁰ This was fiction as

57 NA Kew, KV2/908, R. Thistlethwaite – Director-General of the Security Service, 15 June 1948.

58 *Ibid.*, “Contact between Oswald Pirow (Chairman of the New Order Party, South Africa, formerly Minister of Defence in the Hertzog cabinet) and Sir Oswald Mosley (Leader of the Union Movement, London).”

59 UB, Sir Oswald Mosley Papers, OMN/B/2/3, Pirow – Mosley, 15 January 1950.

60 NA Kew, KV 2/908, Summary of the informant’s report, 24 June 1948.

there was not the remotest possibility that Malan would have any dealings with him. In subsequent letters Pirow would continue to resort to untruths to boost his image in the eyes of Mosley. In March 1950 he informed him that in one week he was offered a judgeship and a seat in the cabinet.⁶¹ This was sheer fantasy as no judgeship was offered, while a post in the cabinet was a pipedream with a government packed with ministers who viewed him as a pariah. What his lie to Mosley reflect, apart from his strange desire to impress him, was that he doggedly retained the dream that the NP would reach out to him, welcoming him back into the fold.

9. PIROW'S ATTEMPTS AT REHABILITATION

With the HNP in power Pirow had to adapt his political image as he found it difficult to portray himself as the country's leading anti-communist crusader as the government ended diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, banned the South African Communist Party, and sent a squadron of fighter planes to the United Nations forces in Korea to join the battle against communist aggression. Through his newsletter *Adv. Pirow se Nuusbrief*, which replaced *Die Nuwe Orde*, he attempted to secure a reputation as a respected political commentator. He also shed his national-socialism and anti-Semitism and the NO faded away. His reputation received a boost when the translated official German version of Pirow's meeting with Hitler, part of a haul of documents captured by the Allies, was translated into English and released in the public domain at the end of 1951.⁶² "What these documents conveyed was that Pirow did not go to Berlin and Rome as a fascist sympathiser, but that he did his utmost to prevent a war, and that he had confronted Joachim von Ribbentrop, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, on the Nazis brutal treatment of Jews." That Pirow was clawing back some credibility was reflected in May 1952 when the Minister of Justice, CR Swart, offered him a position on the bench of the Transvaal Supreme Court. He declined the offer, claiming that he could do more for the country as an independent supporter of the government.⁶³ His hope of completely restoring the damage done to his reputation in the 1940s, and of being welcomed back into political mainstream, was the reason for this decision. As a result, he plugged away at his growing reputation as a political commentator. The highly respected *The Star* published between 20 and 22 October 1952 his vision of pan-African apartheid. As part of his continued attempts to impress Mosley he forwarded the articles to him who published it under the title "An African solution. The Pirow proposals" in the August 1953 edition of his journal, *The European*.

61 *Ibid.*, Pirow – Mosley, 6 March 1950.

62 *The Argus*, 22 December 1951.

63 *Die Transvaler*, 27 May 1952.

Pirow also improved his public image with the publication of novels and stories based on his love of nature, his hunting experiences, African folklore, as well as the history of the then eastern Transvaal with *Piet Potlood* (1948), *Mlungo Mungoma (Die blanke waarsêer)* (1949) and *Sjangani* (1950). That he had shed his fascist image was evident in that Bram Fischer, a leading South African communist, had read *Sjangani* to his young son Paul.⁶⁴ The book would eventually be translated into German. In 1952 he published *Sikoro (Avonture in die spookland van die Bantu)*, and in 1955 *Ashambeni*. His biography of Hertzog, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog* (1957), received mixed reviews, but it did bolster the growing perception, especially amongst English-speakers, that he was much more than just another opportunistic politician. It was in 1957 that the long-awaited call from the NP government for Pirow's services eventually came, not for his political expertise, but for his legal skills. He was approached by CR Swart to lead the prosecution of anti-apartheid leaders charged with high treason in the so-called Treason Trail from January 1958.⁶⁵ The apartheid state had turned to Pirow with his reputation as a fearsome court advocate, and as an expert on communism, as it was desperate to secure convictions to weaken the anti-apartheid movement. His appointment was not the complete rehabilitation he desired, but it went some way to satisfy his craving for respect from the government. However, in legal circles the trial did much to damage his reputation. In court the defence team ran circles around him, turning him as the once feared courtroom gladiator into a bumbling figure with whom even the judges became impatient.⁶⁶

10. AN EMBARRASSING VISIT, 1959

For Mosley there was not even partial rehabilitation. He remained a marginalised figure in Britain and all his efforts at a political comeback had failed dismally. By the late 1950s his crude and xenophobic exploitation of concerns about the arrival of black workers from the West Indies in Britain, bolstered the view of him as a racist beyond the pale. By then his Union Movement consisted mainly of violent thugs that relished assaulting blacks. In a rapidly changing world in which the British Empire was being dismantled, and communism seemed unstoppable, while British society was changing with new arrivals from the colonies, he viewed apartheid South Africa as, "the final redoubt when the great collapse came". He became an outspoken defender of apartheid. In addition, apart from investing in South African shares, which payed rich dividends, he set out to distribute the

64 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer. Afrikaner revolutionary* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1998), p. 217.

65 *Ibid.*, *Bram Fischer. Afrikaner revolutionary*, pp. 235-239.

66 I Maisels, *A life at law. The memoirs of IA Maisels, QC* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1998), pp. 146-151.

Union Movement's newssheet, *Action*, in the country. His intention was to secure the support of conservative English-speaking whites as a possible source of financial backing for his moribund movement.⁶⁷

At the end of January 1959 Mosley visited South Africa for eight days, claiming that it was purely for business reasons to look after his significant investments.⁶⁸ It is impossible to determine whether Pirow played any role in arranging the visit. His last letter to Mosley in his British intelligence file was one of October 1954, and this letter reflects that they had not been in contact for some time. However, it is doubtful that he was involved. The pragmatic Pirow could not reap any benefits from such a visit, while all his energy was focussed on a challenging trial. More importantly the visit could only harm his new image of respectability. Nelson Mandela, one of the Treason Trial accused, for example, viewed Pirow with some affection as a humane man without the personal racism of the government he was acting for. He especially was struck by his polite reference to the accused, which contrasted with his supremacist political leanings.⁶⁹ For Pirow the publicity surrounding Mosley's visit, especially a 1948 photo of him broadly grinning and looking extremely self-satisfied with Mosley on the front page of the *Rand Daily Mail* (28 January 1959), could only have been a source of acute embarrassment. The press took great interest in Mosley spending the day with Pirow at his home in Pretoria on Sunday 1 February.⁷⁰ It was nothing more than a social call, but it was a reminder to South Africans, and international observers of the Treason Trial, of his fascist background and opportunism.

Mosley caused further embarrassment when he visited parliament in Cape Town and attempted to make courtesy calls on cabinet ministers. In interviews with the English-medium press he created the impression that he had met some of them.⁷¹ However, according to *Die Burger* (3 February 1959) he had no arranged meetings, failed to meet any minister, and that his attempt to contact them caused some unease. As a senior NP member informed Stanley Uys, the respected political journalist of the *Sunday Times*,

"Who is Sir Oswald that he should pay a courtesy call on the Cabinet? The Cabinet would not receive a courtesy call from a top-ranking Communist. Why should it receive a courtesy call from a top-ranking Fascist?"⁷²

67 Dorrill, pp. 612, 616, 627.

68 *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 February 1959.

69 N Mandela, *Long walk to freedom. The autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Johannesburg: Abacus, 1994), p. 220.

70 *Rand Daily Mail*, 3 February 1959.

71 Dorrill, in his outstanding biography on Mosley, incorrectly claims that he had meetings with cabinet ministers. *Blackshirt*, p. 616.

72 *Sunday Times*, 8 February 1959.

An editorial comment in the *Sunday Times* (8 February 1959) confirmed that the government was not enthusiastic about Mosley's friendly overtures. The government's true feelings about Mosley were reflected in its treatment of Derek Alexander, a British emigrant and a Johannesburg teacher, who as Mosley's South African representative had accompanied him to Cape Town. He was promptly dismissed on 24 hours-notice for leaving his post without official permission.⁷³ Ultimately the apartheid government was determined to keep Mosley at arms-length as any association with him could alienate a supportive and powerful British Conservative Party, in power since 1951, and packed with war veterans that viewed Mosley as a disgusting traitor. Although Mosley continued to visit South Africa, encouraging British immigrants to vote NP, and to portray the Union Movement as a defender of the apartheid state, the South African government remained determined to give him the cold shoulder.

11. CONCLUSION

Pirow, despite his appointment as a prosecutor by the apartheid state, never fully succeeded in securing the respect he craved from the political establishment. This was reflected with his death on 11 October 1959. His demise hardly caused a ripple in the Afrikanerdom. With Verwoerd as prime minister he remained unforgiven for his opportunism in establishing the NO. *Die Transvaler* (12 October 1959), still seen as his newspaper, mentioned Pirow's death merely in passing. Not a single senior figure in the Afrikaner political, cultural or legal establishment attended his memorial service in Pretoria.⁷⁴ For Mosley, to his frustration, the call as the self-appointed saviour of Britain also never came. After two crushing defeats in the 1959 and 1966 British general elections he eventually retired from politics. He never gave up on his craving for respect and in 1974 would claim credit for him, and Pirow, as the proposers of the NP's Bantustan policy with their 1948 vision of pan-African apartheid.⁷⁵ He died on 3 December 1980, by then a largely forgotten figure. Pirow and Mosley, by opportunistically gambling on fascism as the coming political force, were the architects of their own political self-destruction. Their gamble for high stakes failed with the destruction of Nazi Germany, and they discovered that no opportunistic exploitation of the fear of the communist might of the Soviet Union could erase the stain of embracing and supporting national-socialism. As a result, they remained beyond the pale of respectable public life, permanently condemned to political oblivion.

73 *The Star*, 3 February 1959.

74 *Die Transvaler*, 15 October 1959.

75 O. Mosley, "African solutions", *Books and Bookmen*, January 1974, p. 31.