

THE "YOUNG AFRIKANDERS": JAN SMUTS AND PIET GROBLER DURING THE MONTHS OF STORM AND STRESS (JANUARY TO OCTOBER 1899)¹

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INTRODUCTION

In 1893 the First Volksraad of the Transvaal Republic (ZAR) decided that wherever possible, "zonen des lands" (sons of the soil) should receive preferential treatment as far as appointments in die civil service were concerned. At that time most government positions were in the hands of Dutch officials and the Afrikaner population felt marginalised. Attempts would have to be made in future to appoint young Afrikaners even if it meant that more capable Dutch officials had to be overlooked.³

In May and June 1898 the civil service was recognised and a number of new senior officials were named. In May the former State Secretary, Dr WJ Leyds, was appointed to the post of Minister Extraordinary in Europe, with Brussels as his headquarters. In June, JC Smuts and PGW (Piet) Grobler took over as State Attorney and Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs respectively and Leyds was succeeded as State Secretary by the former President of the Orange Free State, FW Reitz.⁴ In addition to this team of new officials, President Kruger had the active support and co-operation of the Free Staters, MT Steyn and Abraham Fischer (MEC), and the well-meaning Cape sympathisers. All these men were to play an important role in determining the destiny of the Transvaal and indirectly, also of the Free State, in that fateful year of 1899.

¹ I am indebted to my colleague, Bridget Theron, for her advice and assistance on this article and for proof-reading the draft.

² Department of History, University of South Africa.

³ Minutes of the First Volksraad, Article 474, 27 June 1893, p. 644.

⁴ JCH Grobler, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942* (Melville, 1988), pp. 11-2.

In this study, attention will focus on the actions of the two young Afrikaners, Smuts and Grobler. The 28 year-old Smuts, a colonial by birth, needs no introduction. He was a brilliant young jurist and philosopher who would later gain world recognition as a militarist and politician. The 25 year-old Piet Grobler, however, was less of a celebrity and his role in the period before the outbreak of the South African War has received little attention. He was a great-grand nephew of Kruger's and received his education at the State Gymnasium in Pretoria. At the age of 18 he entered the civil service and at the time of his appointment as Under Secretary he held the position of responsible clerk in the Mining Department in Pretoria.⁵ It was Grobler who introduced Smuts to Kruger and later recommended that Smuts should be appointed State Attorney.⁶ This was to be the beginning of a life-long friendship.

Smuts's appointment was hailed in all quarters. Only his youth and lack of practical experience for such an important post were questioned.⁷ Although Grobler was related to Kruger and allegations of nepotism were raised,⁸ his appointment was generally well received. There were, however, those who felt that he was too young for the post, and the majority of the officials in the Foreign Office were initially unhappy with his appointment.⁹ Although it is true that Kruger dominated the Executive Council in 1898, and that after his successful suppression of the Jameson Raid in 1895-96 his influence and prestige had rocketed, it was not merely a question of appointing Grobler at all costs. Indeed, public reaction to Grobler's nomination seemed to indicate that it was well earned. In *De Volkstem* of 29 June 1898 it was claimed that a number of members of the Volksraad ("verschillende Volksraadsleden") had actually suggested that Grobler be given the position. The acting British Agent in Pretoria, Edmund Fraser, also informed the British High Commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner, that Grobler's appointment "has been hailed with approval, excepting his extreme youth, by all sections of the press".¹⁰

At first glance the two young Transvalers were reasonably well equipped for their new posts. Smuts, with a thorough legal knowledge, was fluent in English and Dutch, and had a good reading knowledge of German. As for Grobler, by 1898 he was proficient in Dutch and English and had a sound reading knowledge of both French and German. Smuts had furthered his studies with outstanding success in

⁵ Grobler, pp. 2-11.

⁶ Transvaal Archives (TA), A 787 GS Preller Collection, Vol. 221: Smuts, JC, p. 69; WK Hancock, *Smuts I: The sanguine years 1870-1919* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 68; JC Smuts, *Jan Christian Smuts* (London, 1952), p. 38.

⁷ *The Star*, 2 June 1898.

⁸ See NJ van der Merwe, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I* (Cape Town, 1921), p. 158.

⁹ TA, E 32 Leyds Archive, Mf, film A 556, Box 78: TJ Kroch-WJ Leyds, 3 September 1898.

¹⁰ Imperial White Book, No. 543: Fraser-Milner, 28 June 1898, p. 533; See also *The Weekly Press*, 2 July 1898, 23 July 1898.

Britain and Germany. Grobler had undertaken an extensive tour of Britain and the continent in 1896, and had met a number of influential British statesmen, including the Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, with whom he had held a long interview.¹¹ Grobler was certainly intelligent and well-read, although obviously not as highly educated as the brilliant young Smuts.

Although not a member of the Executive Council, as State Attorney Smuts was the Council's legal representative. He soon became embroiled in all contentious issues and points of dispute which came up between Britain and the republic. Grobler's task as Under Secretary involved two main functions. He had to maintain close contact with the republic's legislation in Brussels and monitor all developments which might influence the republic's position abroad. These had to be brought to the immediate attention of Leyds. Secondly, Grobler's office had to handle all requests, complaints, etc. from foreign powers in Pretoria and to do this he had access to all foreign correspondence.¹² The working relationship which gradually developed between the two young officials was thus of necessity a close one.

Although Grobler subsequently played the less prominent role in the "Smuts-Grobler partnership", he enjoyed one great advantage: the complete trust and confidence of President Kruger. When, for instance, EA Lippert (concessionaire of the dynamite monopoly) asked in January 1899 that his friend Johann Rissik, the Transvaal Surveyor General, recommended someone to accompany him to an important interview with Kruger "in order to avoid misunderstandings, and whose support might influence him [Kruger] ... he strongly recommended young Piet Grobler ... as a man who would be best, and who would speak up to the old man with most influence. I found this opinion endorsed in Pretoria."¹³ Edmund Fraser also wrote that Grobler "enjoys the Pres.'s confidence, having been present as a listener, each time I have interviewed the President".¹⁴ Although it was not in the nature of the rather aloof Smuts to encourage close friendships, his relations with Kruger were also excellent: "...like those of father and son" he later recalled.¹⁵

It is therefore clear that the two young Transvalers could claim to enjoy the confidence of Kruger. They quite possibly had more influence with him than did many of the more experienced Transvaal leaders. In 1899 it was probably only Leyds who had more clout with the President - but Leyds was in Brussels. In

¹¹ *The Standard and Diggers' News* (London edition), 11 June 1896; Grobler, pp. 6-10; JA Buttery, *Why Kruger made war* (London, 1900), pp. 230-2.

¹² Grobler, p. 16; Hancock, *Smuts I*, pp. 78-9.

¹³ P Lewsen (ed.), *Selections from the correspondence of John X Merriman 1899-1905*, VRS No. 47 (Cape Town, 1966); Lippert-Merriman, 10 January 1899, p. 5.

¹⁴ TA. FK 1097 Milner papers (Oxford No. 3); Fraser-Milner, 26 August 1898, p. 430.

¹⁵ Hancock, *Smuts I*, pp. 69, 189.

November 1898 JS Smit, the Commissioner of Railways, who often attended meetings of the Executive Council in an ex officio capacity when railway issues were discussed, declared that Kruger had become an autocrat in the full sense of the word ("een outocraat in letter en geest"). It was only Schalk Burger who occasionally opposed Kruger in the Council. Piet Joubert was a beaten man and even State Secretary Reitz appeared to have little influence over the President.¹⁶ Reitz's ill-health at this time could possibly have been a factor here too. Be that as it may, during 1899 Kruger came to rely increasingly on the support of Smuts and Grobler.

WAR CLOUDS GATHER: THE SUZERAINTY ISSUE

In January 1899 Milner returned to South Africa after a three month visit to Britain. He was now determined to bring the "Transvaal question" to a "final solution". He was also assured of Chamberlain's active support.¹⁷ However, the two young Transvalers still firmly believed that war could be averted. So too did the influential Cape friends. In January 1899 John X Merriman came forward with a peace initiative. He proposed a conference of all the South African states. They would meet in order to find solutions for political problems and other issues of mutual concern. Although Grobler was actively involved in the initial negotiations and preparations for this conference, it did not take place because the Cape Prime Minister, WP Schreiner (at the instigation of Milner), refused to co-operate unless Britain could also be represented.¹⁸

According to article IV of the London Convention of 1884, the Transvaal could not enter into treaties with any other state or nation except the Orange Free State without Britain's permission. Britain refused to recognise the ZAR as a sovereign independent state because her relationship to Britain was that of a suzerain state, i.e. Transvaal was only permitted to exercise self-government under Britain's ultimate authority. Thus, according to the British viewpoint, there could be no question of arbitration between them: they simply did not enjoy the same status. On 15 December 1898 Chamberlain once again emphasised that Britain as the "Paramount Power" would not tolerate any foreign interference in South African affairs.¹⁹

¹⁶ TA, E 32 Leyds Archive, Mf, film A 556, Box 78: Smit-Leyds, 6 November 1898. See also JC Moll, *FW Reltz - 'n outobiografie* (Cape Town, 1978), preface: "...hy [Reitz] was soos klei in Kruger se hande."

¹⁷ RH Wilde, *Joseph Chamberlain and the South African Republic 1895-1899* (Archives Year Book for South African History, 1956, Vol. 1), pp. 89-91.

¹⁸ Grobler, pp. 21-2.

¹⁹ C 9507 - '99 Correspondence relating to the status of the South African Republic, No. 6: Chamberlain-W Butler, 15 December 1898, pp. 28-30.

This dispatch was seen in a very grave light by the Transvaal government. Initially Leyds, who was in the republic from January to March 1899, was instructed to formulate a reply to Chamberlain's letter. However, during his stay in Pretoria, Leyds did not find time to put pen to paper and it was only during his brief stay in Cape Town that he compiled a draft reply which he then sent to Grobler, with whom he had previously discussed the matter in some detail.²⁰ Although Grobler must have received the draft in early April, he informed Leyds on 30 April that Chamberlain's "Suzerain dépêche" had still not been answered.²¹ The reason behind this four-week delay is unclear, but in the light of later developments it is obvious that Smuts and Grobler made a comprehensive revision of Leyds's draft. Leyds himself had little doubt about the identity of the authors of the suzerainty dispatch in its final form. Although Reitz had signed it, it was "in bewoordingen die uit de pen van Smuts en Grobler waren gevloeid" (judged by its text, the work of Smuts and Grobler).²² This opinion was also shared by Conyngham Greene, the British Agent, in a letter to Milner.²³ It is clearly a valid one because as we shall see, by 1899 the two young Transvalers had largely taken over the correspondence with the British government whereas Reitz's input had correspondingly declined.

Although Smuts and Grobler were no doubt sincere in their course of action, they nevertheless erred by hammering on the international status of the ZAR as a sovereign state. In his draft Leyds had concentrated on one point only: whether or not the Transvaal was subject to the suzerainty of Britain. He tacitly ignored the question of the republic's international status. Smuts and Grobler, however, notified Chamberlain that the Transvaal's right to "absolute self government" was based not on the conventions but purely and simply on the republic's inherent right as a sovereign state in terms of international law.²⁴ This was not in fact a true reflection of the republic's status. Smuts and his colleague were demanding more than the Transvaal could rightfully claim. Chamberlain's reply of 13 July 1899 was terse: he was not prepared to react to false representations; British suzerainty over the Transvaal was an historical fact.²⁵ By this time, with war between Britain and the Transvaal only months away, the suzerainty debate was soon swallowed up in the mounting tension.

²⁰ WJ Leyds, *Eenige correspondentie uit 1899* ('s-Gravenhage, 1919): Leyds-Grobler, 26 March 1899, pp. 2-3, Bijlage C, p. 200; TA, SS a 1050, Telegram No. T 219/99: Grobler-Leyds, 27 March 1899, p. 227.

²¹ TA, LA 252 (iii): Grobler-Leyds, 30 April 1899 (unnumbered, copy).

²² WJ Leyds, *Vierde Verzameling* (Corr 1900-1902), Deel II, Bijlagen ('s-Gravenhage, 1934), Bijlage A VII, p. 21.

²³ TA, FK 1117 *Milner papers* (Oxford No. 12): Greene-Milner, 12 May 1898, p. 1041.

²⁴ Leyds, *Eenige correspondentie*, Bijlage C, pp. 201-2, 209.

²⁵ C 9507-99 No. 8: Chamberlain-Milner, 13 July 1899, pp. 33-4.

THE UITLANDERS AND THE FRANCHISE QUESTION

While the suzerainty issue was still in full swing, the political struggle took a serious turn when Chamberlain and Milner started to interfere in the internal affairs of the Transvaal by using the quite legitimate grievances of the foreigners (Uitlanders) in a more aggressive and manipulative manner. The Uitlanders paid the bulk of the republic's taxes and were also considerable property owners. And yet, in order to vote for the First Volksraad (where the real power lay), they had to have been resident in the Transvaal for fourteen years.²⁶ When an Uitlander named Edgar resisted arrest and was shot dead by a policeman in December 1898, the Uitlanders seized the opportunity. A mass petition, in which the franchise issue featured prominently, was sent to the Queen. Much to Milner's displeasure, however, the acting High Commissioner, Sir William Butler, refused to accept it.²⁷ In March 1899 Kruger announced that he intended reducing the period of residence for the franchise by five years, i.e. to nine years.²⁸ But Milner, who had returned to South Africa in January, decided to use the Uitlander issue to drum up even more pressure. Fired by Milner, the Uitlanders drew up a second petition which was sent to Chamberlain on 29 March. In order to prevent direct British involvement in the republic's internal affairs (which was implicit in the petition), an attempt was then made by the Transvaal government to reach some form of agreement with the pro-Uitlander Rand capitalists, but this ended in failure.²⁹ On 9 May Chamberlain persuaded the British cabinet to accept the Uitlander petition,³⁰ and by so doing, Britain accepted responsibility for reform: the only alternative to this was war.

THE BLOEMFONTEIN CONFERENCE

To make another effort to solve this serious crisis, it was decided that Kruger and Milner should meet in Bloemfontein to begin discussions on 31 May. Like other well-informed Transvalers, Smuts and Grobler did not expect much from the conference because by now they had little faith in Milner and the British government.³¹

²⁶ GD Scholtz, *Die oorsake van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902 I* (Johannesburg, 1947), pp. 265-7, 272.

²⁷ Hancock, *Smuts I*, pp. 81-3.

²⁸ JS Marais, *The fall of Kruger's republic* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 253-4.

²⁹ Lewsen, pp. 12, 42 nt 98; Leyds, *Eenige correspondentie*, Bijlage B, pp. 198-200.

³⁰ Wilde, pp. 99-103.

³¹ See, for example, WK Hancock & J van der Poel, *Selections from the Smuts papers I* (Cambridge, 1966): Smuts-Leyds, 30 April 1899, pp. 226-9; Grobler, p. 25; Marais, pp. 272-4.

Smuts did a great deal of preliminary work on the Transvaal proposals and also took a leading role at the conference. Grobler was unable to participate because he had to attend the opening of the Pretoria-Pietersburg railway line, but he was back in Pretoria in time to meet the Kruger party at the station. Here Smuts filled Grobler in on the outcome of the deliberations; in a word, Milner was set on war.³²

The Bloemfontein Conference ended in failure mainly because the two parties could not agree on the franchise issue. Milner demanded the Uitlander vote after five years' residence, but Kruger was only prepared to lower it to seven years.³³ Milner had not really approached the conference with an open mind. Three weeks earlier he had confided to a friend: "Perhaps it would be best if Kruger hardened his heart and the smash came."³⁴ As far as Smuts and Grobler were concerned the conference was a turning point. They now had no illusions at all about the sincerity of the British government as represented by Milner. Thereafter they became staunch advocates of a strong, determined stand against British interference.

In May, Conyngham Greene informed Milner: "You have the young Afrikaner War Party consisting of Smuts, Piet Grobler, [Ewald] Esselen ... They are the dangerous combustible element in the situation."³⁵ According to Grobler the only advantage the republic gained from the conference was that the Free Staters and the Cape friends "absoluut bij ons staat" (absolutely support us) and shared the opinion that the Transvaal had conceded enough.³⁶ In the event, it was not long before the "friends of the Transvaal" would demand even more concessions from Kruger because war had to be avoided at all cost.

Despite the unsatisfactory outcome of the conference, the First Volksraad approved all the Bloemfontein resolutions. On 15 June it published a draft law to that effect.³⁷ But the franchise issue had now become the main bone of contention and Milner refused to let it go.

³² Marais, p. 282; JC Smuts, *Smuts*, p. 45; FS Crafford, *Jan Smuts: a biography* (Cape Town, 1946), p. 32.

³³ Hancock, *Smuts I*, pp. 92-3.

³⁴ C Headlam (ed.), *The Milner papers I* (London, 1931): Milner-Hely Hutchinson, 8 May 1899, p. 359.

³⁵ TA, FK 1117 *Milner papers* (Oxford No. 12): Greene-Milner, 12 May 1899, p. 1041. Esselen was a prominent Pretoria advocate.

³⁶ TA, LA 252 (iii): Grobler-Leyds 16 June 1899, (unnumbered, copy).

³⁷ *Staatscourant der ZAR*, 15 June 1899 (Proclamation No. 291: Conceptwet), pp. 1097-8.

THE HOFMEYR MISSION

To combat Milner's fierce propaganda campaign the influential Cape politician, JH (Onze Jan) Hofmeyr, thought that the Transvaal should make further concessions. In this he received the somewhat reluctant support of President Steyn and Abraham Fischer.³⁸ Accordingly, Fischer was sent to Cape Town to consult with all interest groups, including Milner and Schreiner.³⁹ On 19 June Fischer arrived back in Bloemfontein with a list of proposals which would satisfy the Cape friends and the British government. The most important of these was to grant the franchise immediately to all Uitlanders who had arrived in the Transvaal prior to 1890.⁴⁰ With Steyn's blessing Fischer then went to Pretoria to discuss these proposals with the Transvalers.⁴¹ Initially they were unwilling to co-operate but after lengthy discussions with Kruger and the Executive Council, a commission comprising Smuts, Grobler, Schalk Burger and Fischer was appointed on 26 June. They were to compile a draft for further discussion.⁴² Although not unanimously accepted, the Council agreed to the draft with a few minor alterations. On the same day, to add fuel to the fire, Chamberlain announced in a speech at Birmingham that the British public should prepare for the possibility of war.⁴³

Despite the fact that almost all Hofmeyr and Milner's proposals were accepted by the Executive Council, Chamberlain's speech caused the Cape friends to request even more concessions from Pretoria. Hofmeyr took the initiative and wired Fischer that he intended, come what may, to negotiate personally with the Transvalers. He would first go to Bloemfontein to discuss the Cape's new proposals with Steyn. He also requested that Smuts and any other friends he might choose to bring with him, should join him in Bloemfontein.⁴⁴ On 31 June Smuts and Grobler departed in great secrecy for the Free State where Hofmeyr and AJ Heroldt, the Cape Minister of Agriculture, arrived on Sunday 2 July.⁴⁵ That same day they had a long interview with Steyn, Fischer, Smuts and Grobler. During the discussions the two Cape Afrikaners pointed out numerous ("vele") shortcomings in the draft franchise bill and they handed Smuts and Grobler a memorandum on Hofmeyr's

³⁸ Van der Merwe I, pp. 198-9, 205; DS Jacobs, *Abraham Fischer in sy tydperk (Argiefjaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis, 1965, I)*, p. 277.

³⁹ Van der Merwe I, pp. 207-10.

⁴⁰ For a complete list of the proposals see JH Hofmeyr & FW Reitz, *Het leven van Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr* (Kaapstad, 1913), p. 592.

⁴¹ Van der Merwe I, p. 211.

⁴² Free State Archives (FA), P 26 Staatspresident OVS: Fischer-Steyn, 27 June 1899.

⁴³ Van der Merwe I, pp. 217-8; Wilde, p. 116.

⁴⁴ Hofmeyr, p. 593; SA Library, Cape Town, *JH Hofmeyr papers*, Box 8 c (i): Hofmeyr-Fischer, 20 June 1899, (unnumbered, copy); Van der Merwe I, p. 219.

⁴⁵ FA, P 26 Staatspresident OVS: Grobler & Smuts-Gouvernements Secretaris, 31 July 1899; *De Volkstem*, 5 July 1899; Van der Merwe I, p. 220.

new proposals.⁴⁶ The two Transvalers promised that they would recommend the proposals to Kruger and the Council, but could not guarantee that all points would be acceptable. They also had to organise an invitation to Hofmeyr to visit Pretoria. This promised to be difficult because relations between Kruger and Hofmeyr had been strained for a number of years.⁴⁷

On 3 July Fischer, Smuts and Grobler arrived in Pretoria. At first the Executive Council opposed the Hofmeyr-Herholdt visit. When it appeared that no invitation was forthcoming, Hofmeyr wired Grobler with the request that he make a personal appeal and do all in his power to get the required permission.⁴⁸ The following day Grobler replied, without compromising himself, that although it was impossible to say whether Hofmeyr's visit would have the desired results, discussion between friends could perhaps be beneficial.⁴⁹ That same afternoon Hofmeyr and Herholdt left for Pretoria.⁵⁰

In the event, the Executive Council approved the Hofmeyr proposals practically in toto, so that the final revised draft bill differed very little from Milner's Bloemfontein proposals on the franchise. The result was that Kruger submitted his seven-year franchise bill to the Volksraad. It differed from his Bloemfontein proposal in that it was *retrospective*, so that Uitlanders who had already been in the republic for seven years would be granted the vote immediately. When Chamberlain heard the news of this bill, he declared that if the report was correct, the crisis was over. No one, he said, would dream of going to war over a difference of two years.⁵¹ On 19 July the new franchise law was approved by the Volksraad.⁵²

THE JOINT COMMISSION PROPOSAL

Milner, however, was unmoved. Exerting pressure on Chamberlain, he decided to tighten the screws.⁵³ On 27 July Chamberlain proposed that a joint British-Transvaal commission should investigate the seven-year franchise law.⁵⁴ Such action would have made Britain the arbiter of Transvaal legislation: an extremely

⁴⁶ TA, A1 JC Smuts Collection, Public papers (SA), Vol. 96, file 42: Memo Conceptwet, 2 July 1899; Hofmeyr, pp. 593-4.

⁴⁷ Grobler, p. 28.

⁴⁸ SA Library, Cape Town, JH Hofmeyr papers, Box 8 c (i): Hofmeyr-Grobler, 3 July 1899.

⁴⁹ TA, SS a 840, T 383/99 with file R a 3601/99: Grobler-Hofmeyr & Herholdt, 4 July 1899, p. 167.

⁵⁰ Grobler, p. 28.

⁵¹ Marais, pp. 298-9.

⁵² TA, ZAR Localen Wetten, Act No. 3, 1899 (Naturalisatie en Vol Stemrecht), pp. 11-6.

⁵³ Headlam (ed.) I: Milner-Chamberlain, 26 July 1899, pp. 471-2.

⁵⁴ MJ Hugo, *Die stemreg-vraagstuk in die ZAR* (Argief Jaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis, 1947), p. 143.

grave precedent. In order to bypass this British proposal Smuts initiated negotiations with Conyngham Greene.⁵⁵ Grobler was also kept in the picture and he assisted Smuts in the final composition of a new set of proposals.⁵⁶ New concessions were made in a letter dated 19 August. The republican offer implied the acceptance of Milner's 1 June 1899 Bloemfontein franchise demands, i.e. retrospective franchise after five years' residence. The number of Uitlander seats in the Volksraad would be increased to ten. But there were three conditions attached to this offer. The British government had to guarantee that (i) this interference in the Transvaal's internal affairs should not constitute a precedent; (ii) that the claim to suzerainty over the republic be dropped and (iii) that the remaining disputes between Britain and the Transvaal be submitted to arbitration which excluded any foreign element.⁵⁷

Britain was prepared to accept the franchise proposals but not the three conditions. On 30 August Chamberlain rejected the republican offer out of hand.⁵⁸ As a new crisis loomed, Pretoria immediately contacted Steyn and he wired back his recommendations.⁵⁹ It fell to Smuts and Grobler to complete a draft reply expressing the republic's disappointment at the British rejection. The Transvaal had no guarantee that Britain would not in future interfere in the internal affairs of the republic and it reiterated its unequivocal refusal to acknowledge British suzerainty.⁶⁰

This draft reply was telegraphed to Steyn for his comments on the afternoon of 30 August. Steyn felt that it gave "noodeloozen aanstoot" (needless offence) to the British government, and should be worded more diplomatically. He added that negotiations on the suzerainty issue should not be severed by the Transvaal. Britain, if it so wished, should be the one to take this step. The republic should merely reiterate its now well-known standpoint.⁶¹

In the light of these comments, Smuts and Grobler reluctantly admitted that they might have been too rash in the wording of the draft, but added that over-elaboration would confuse rather than promote the republic's cause. The time had come to let the British government know in no uncertain terms that such threats

⁵⁵ Marais, pp. 308-9.

⁵⁶ See TA, SS a 845, file R a 3811/99, DI III, pp. 108-14; N Levi, *Jan Smuts* (London, 1917), p. 44.

⁵⁷ Hancock & Van der Poel (eds.) I, Report 14 September 1899, pp. 283-4; Green Book ZAR, No. 9, 1899: State Secretary-British Agent, 19 August 1899, pp. 5-7.

⁵⁸ Green Book ZAR, No. 9, 1899: Groene-State Secretary, 30 April 1899, pp. 17-9.

⁵⁹ TA, LA 738, Telephone discussion between Kruger and Steyn, 30 August 1899 (typed copy), pp. 17-9.

⁶⁰ Scholtz II, p. 269, The complete draft reply appears in Van der Merwe I, pp. 235-6.

⁶¹ TA, LA 738, 30 August 1899, pp. 17-9 and 31 August 1899, pp. 19, 42-4.

would not blackmail the republic into making further concessions.⁶² This telegram was not well received in Bloemfontein. On 31 August, Fischer replied on Steyn's behalf. Steyn was obviously piqued: he felt that his proposals should not be seen as "elaboration" but as diplomatically correct. In Steyn's view, Chamberlain was trying to push for an immediate reply in the hope that his flawed assessment of the situation would go unchallenged.⁶³

Grobler immediately wired that he and Smuts did not mean to be disrespectful or to create the impression that they did not appreciate Steyn's assistance. Indeed, the president's suggestions would most certainly be followed up.⁶⁴ However, when it became clear that Steyn and his government had serious reservations about the Smuts-Grobler draft reply, Kruger requested that Fischer come to Pretoria immediately. He could then assist with the compilation of a reply that would satisfy Steyn.⁶⁵ On that same evening of 31 August, Fischer departed for Pretoria and the following morning he and the Transvalers finalised the dispatch. In essence this letter was more conciliatory than the Smuts-Grobler draft. Dated 2 September, it responded to Chamberlain's dispatches of 27 July and 30 August. The focus of the letter was that the Transvaal acceded to Chamberlain's demand for a joint British-Transvaal commission to investigate the seven-year law, but that the republic's five-year franchise proposal had now been revoked.⁶⁶

On 12 September Chamberlain replied that a return to the seven-year franchise proposal was out of the question, which made the notion of a joint commission irrelevant.⁶⁷ When Greene gave Reitz the note he intimated that a reply was expected within 24 hours.

LAST MINUTE ATTEMPTS TO AVERT WAR

By chance Grobler happened to be in Bloemfontein on 12 September to consult with Steyn about a number of matters including the dynamite concession.⁶⁸ He used the opportunity to discuss Chamberlain's reply with Steyn. When he became aware that Kruger was thinking in terms of an ultimatum, Steyn reiterated his warning about reacting too hastily. He would consult with Grobler and, if possible,

⁶² TA, LA 637, file GR 1083/99: Telegram, Grobler & Smuts-Fischer, undated, pp. 79-80; Van der Merwe I, p. 244.

⁶³ TA, LA 637, file GR 1083/99: Fischer-Grobler, 31 August 1899, p. 85; Van der Merwe I, p. 245.

⁶⁴ TA, LA 637, file GR 1083/99: Smuts & Grobler-Fischer, 31 August 1899, pp. 86-7.

⁶⁵ TA, LA 738, 31 August 1899, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Green Book ZAR, No. 9, 1899: State Secretary-British Agent, 2 September 1899, pp. 20-1.

⁶⁷ Green Book ZAR, No. 10, 1899: Greene-State Secretary, 12 September 1899, pp. 1-2; Hugo, p. 157.

⁶⁸ *De Volksstem*, 16 September 1899.

would let Kruger have his view that same day. However, the following day, 13 September, while Steyn and Grobler were still in consultation, the draft reply to Chamberlain's note arrived from Pretoria. Steyn strongly disapproved of it because it was "te ultimaties" (too much like an ultimatum). He promised to give his view, which he had discussed closely with Grobler, in the form of a draft reply. He urged Kruger not to take any steps until Grobler had returned to Pretoria with this draft.⁶⁹

Grobler arrived back in the capital on 14 September. The next day a reply was formulated, which was handed to Greene on 16 September. The republic once again declared its willingness to accept the "Joint Committee" proposal - a point which was included at the specific insistence of Steyn and Grobler. It also expressed the hope that the British government would stop making unacceptable demands on the republic.⁷⁰ By this stage, however, the die was cast, and on 22 September the British cabinet decided that no further proposals would be made to the Transvaal government.⁷¹

The last few days of peace were busy ones for the two young Transvalers. They were constantly at Kruger's side to assist him wherever necessary. On 26 September the Transvaal formally requested the Free State Volksraad for military assistance in accordance with the terms of the Political Alliance of 1897. Together, the two Boer states decided to issue an ultimatum⁷² which was finally handed over to Greene on 9 October 1899. It was stipulated that Britain should reply on or before 11 October 1899, no later than 17h00. The ultimatum demanded *inter alia* the withdrawal of all British troops from the borders of the republic.⁷³

On the afternoon of 11 October 1899 Kruger and his councillors Reitz, ADW Wolmarans, and appropriately, the two young stalwarts Smuts and Grobler, were discussing developments in the president's office. Greene arrived and without much ado, handed over the British reply - the ultimatum had been summarily rejected.⁷⁴ The political and diplomatic struggle of more than a decade now became a military one...

⁶⁹ TA, LA 738, 12 September 1899, pp. 93-4, 13 September 1899, pp. 103, 119, 128; Van der Merwe I, pp. 246-7.

⁷⁰ Grobler, p. 32.

⁷¹ C 9550-99, No. 12: Chamberlain-High Commissioner, 22 September 1899, pp. 16-7.

⁷² TA, LA 738, 26 September 1899, p. 179; Van der Merwe I, pp. 249-62.

⁷³ TA, SS a 1025, No. B3570/99: State Secretary-British Agent, 9 October 1899, pp. 208-16.

⁷⁴ DW Krüger, *Paul Kruger I, 1883-1904* (Johannesburg, 1963), p. 239.

CONCLUSION

The appointments of Smuts and Grobler, two promising young Afrikaners, were hailed in the *Uitlander* press and in British government circles as a step in the right direction. Grobler, in particular, was considered somewhat "progressive",⁷⁵ and there were high expectations of both men. But these hopes were soon dashed. Initially, both tried to normalise relations with the British government and went out of their way to avoid confrontation. In August 1898 Edmund Fraser informed Milner that Grobler "is most obliging [and] anxious to show every attention to our wants"⁷⁶ and in December, during an interview with Smuts, Fraser told the young State Attorney that "since the appointment of Reitz, Grobler [PGW] and myself some improvements had appeared".⁷⁷ However, as we have seen, from about May 1899 onwards, the attitude of the two young Transvalers towards the British government changed. Feelings were running high in government circles in Pretoria during 1899, and Smuts and Grobler were in daily contact with the diplomatic recriminations which were being traded between London and Pretoria. This was certainly not conducive to any feelings of goodwill on their part towards the British government.

The accusation made by Charles Uys that the "young Afrikaners" (he specifically mentions Smuts and Grobler) precipitated the struggle, is questionable.⁷⁸ It is now generally accepted that the sacrifice of the Transvaal's independence on the altar of "co-operation" was all that might have averted the war in 1899. The conflicting interests of British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism, were irreconcilable. After the Bloemfontein Conference, even the sober and diplomatic Leyds expressed his disappointment that the republic had yet again bowed to British demands.⁷⁹

The suggestion that the appointment of Reitz, Smuts and Grobler weakened the ZAR's political position vis-à-vis Britain, is also debatable.⁸⁰ Leyds might possibly have formulated the crucial dispatches with greater care and insight, but this writer feels that the end result would probably have been much the same. One should also remember that Steyn and Fischer, especially during the final months before the war, had made a significant input into the final formulation of the various dispatches which were sent to London. From August 1899 the Free Staters

⁷⁵ *Weekly Press*, 23 July 1898.

⁷⁶ TA, FK 1097 Milner papers, (Oxford No. 3): Fraser-Milner, 26 August 1898, p. 430.

⁷⁷ Hancock & Van der Poel I, (conversation with Fraser), 22 December 1898, p. 213.

⁷⁸ CJ Uys, *Paul Kruger, van die wieg tot die graf* (Cape Town, 1955), p. 51.

⁷⁹ Leyds, *Eenige correspondentie: Leyds-Grobler*, 9 June 1899, p. 43-4.

⁸⁰ Uys, pp. 51-4.

were in almost daily contact with Smuts and Grobler and put their stamp of approval on all correspondence.

During the course of 1899 the two young Transvalers gradually took over the reins from Reitz. In August Fischer even went as far as to send Smuts "a 'code' (Fisher's patent) for use with you and Grobler".⁸¹ By that time Reitz had become marginalised and his health was a source of grave concern. During the critical weeks of July he was away with his family at the coast. Smuts, Grobler and others were left to cope with the August crisis.⁸²

The final question is whether the two "young Afrikaners" were equal to the task which had been entrusted to them. In the light of the foregoing discussion it cannot be denied that at times they were too hasty and that their judgement was not always sound (the suzerainty dispatch, for instance), but this is largely attributed to their youth and lack of practical political experience. Then too, in 1899 the 29 year-old Smuts and the 26 year-old Grobler had to contend with an astute and polished diplomat in the person of Greene and an arrogant and belligerent "empire builder" in Milner. Again would the capable, experienced Leyds have fared any better or acted differently? On 8 September 1899 Leyds wrote two letters, one to Smuts and the other to Grobler. In both letters he condoned the actions they had taken and expressed his support for their approach to the crisis situation.⁸³ It would thus seem that if criticism is to be levelled at them it should be directed at their approach rather than at what they aimed to achieve.

An important reason why Smuts and Grobler were prepared to negotiate almost to the last moment was that they, like many others, realised that the republic could not afford to lose the support of the Free Staters and the Cape friends. Grobler, unlike the strong-willed and intellectually superior Smuts, had a deep-rooted aversion to violence and would do almost anything to avoid conflict. He was the more emotional and impulsive partner and his actions were at times inconsistent.⁸⁴ Being so closely involved in its final formulation,⁸⁵ Grobler was well aware that the republics had decided to issue an ultimatum. Yet as late as October 1899, a few days before the hostilities started, he was still prepared to negotiate. On 3 October Arthur Enoch, a Quaker who sincerely believed he could avert war, consulted with Grobler and Reitz at the presidency about a peace plan he had in

⁸¹ Hancock & Van der Poel I: Fischer-Smuts, 24 August 1899, p. 304.

⁸² Hancock, Smuts I, p. 103.

⁸³ Leyds, *Eenige correspondentie*: Leyds-Grobler, 8 September 1899, p. 161 and Leyds-Smuts, 8 September 1899, p. 162.

⁸⁴ Grobler, pp. 34-5.

⁸⁵ Grobler, pp. 32-3.

mind. They listened with great interest and even encouraged him until Smuts arrived "and upset the whole position by appealing to the worst feelings of the other two men ... He influenced the others so much that they veered round a great deal" and consequently Enoch's peace initiative suffered an untimely demise.⁸⁶ Some time later Enoch remarked that "Smuts and Grobler had been strong for war, but that FW Reitz ... was the most culpable, for in his relations with his belligerent colleagues, he was as a weather vane is to the strong wind".⁸⁷

It is not surprising that the domineering Smuts influenced and browbeat Grobler, because Smuts was undoubtedly the senior partner in the relationship. And yet, Grobler had one great asset: he enjoyed Kruger's complete trust. John Buttery, who was chief sub-editor of the semi-official government newspaper *Standard and Diggers' News* at the time, but no friend of the republic, gave the following assessment of Grobler in 1900: "For reasons that are not familiar to Europe, Piet Grobler comes easily first of what may be called the Lesser Lights of Fallen Krugerism. Indeed, during the last twelve months of storm and stress he came very much to the front at Pretoria ... One of the young hopes of the Afrikaner Party ... he was a great power at the Presidency and the affection in which he was held by Oom Paul made him a person of no little importance, even apart from his official standing [and] as he possessed intimate access to the President, and was implicitly trusted by him, I have no doubt that he communicated many of his mistaken notions to the head of State, who would absorb them without question."⁸⁸

Smuts's biographer, Levi, declares that "the responsibility of pitting two young and inexperienced officials against a polished diplomat such as Mr Greene cannot lie at the door of Messrs Smuts and Grobler, but belongs to the Executive Councillors who had sent them."⁸⁹ This author is of the opinion that the two "young Afrikaners", under the most trying circumstances, acquitted themselves very creditably of their task. By 1899 complete capitulation might have saved the republic: good diplomacy assuredly would not.

After suffering from ill-health for a number of years Piet Grobler was admitted to a Pretoria hospital in May 1942, where he passed away on 22 August. A few days before Grobler's death, in the midst of world conflict, and with things not looking good for the allies, Prime Minister Smuts still found time for a brief

⁸⁶ Hancock I, pp. 105-6.

⁸⁷ Quoted by AM Davey, *The British pro-Boers, 1877-1902* (Cape Town, 1978), pp. 154-5.

⁸⁸ Buttery, pp. 2-4, 230-2.

⁸⁹ Levi, p. 44.

visit to see his old friend. Later, in a special message he paid tribute to Grobler: "To many of us his passing is a sincere personal loss. To me in particular he was a valued associate from the last days of the old Transvaal Republic, when we were closely associated, and in the stormy period between the Jameson Raid and the South African War ... for me personally [he] was and remained throughout half a century, a much-valued bond with an unforgettable past."⁹⁰

⁹⁰ The Cape Argus, 24 August 1942.