

Afrikaner nationalism in action: F. C. Erasmus and South Africa's defence forces 1948–1959

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ABSTRACT. F. C. Erasmus became South Africa's defence minister in 1948 after two decades as the leading political organiser for the National Party. Although an architect of the Nationalists' post-war victory, he was not considered a minister of the first rank. Erasmus initiated a process of ridding the defence force of officers who he believed were associated with the government of the Anglophile Jan Smuts and replacing them with party supporters. As a result, the military often lost experienced and talented officers, many with combat exposure. Erasmus felt that the armed services had been too British in ethos and appearance. He inaugurated tighter regulations on bilingualism, introduced Boer rank titles, launched new uniforms and original medals and decorations, to the acclaim of the Afrikaner *Volk*. His purpose was to have a defence force which was uniquely 'South African'.

Introduction

On 29 May 1998 in a ceremony in Pretoria a significant change in the leadership of the South African military occurred. General Siphile Nyanda, veteran of the African National Congress armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, took formal command of the National Defence Force from his Afrikaner predecessor, General Georg Meiring. The arrival of Nyanda in the post of chief of the defence force signalled that a new political order had truly arrived; a parallel of events of almost precisely half a century before, when undiluted Afrikaner nationalism triumphed in the general election of 26 May 1948. This had brought to office a determined political force, the National Party, under the leadership of D. F. Malan. The incoming administration was dedicated to overturning the perceived wrongs suffered by many in the Afrikaans-speaking population under British rule and, since 1910, the governments of the Union of South Africa. Malan's close lieutenant, Frans Christiaan Erasmus, was to undertake a dramatic alteration in the ethos, appearance and leadership of the armed services to reflect the new political landscape.

For over eleven years after the 1948 election victory Erasmus was the Union's defence minister. During the two decades before this electoral

success, he had been the leading political organiser for his party. An individual imbued with an intense desire to raise the position of the *Volk* in relation to the Union's influential English-speaking population, he took the view like many others of his party that the Afrikaner, formed by the African experience, was genuinely 'South African', and that English-speakers still retained a dual loyalty to Britain. Despite South Africa's formal independence, recognised by London in the Balfour Declaration of 1926 and the 1931 Statute of Westminster, many Nationalists contended that their country was still in thrall to the British imperial system. Its ongoing status as a dominion meant it retained the British monarch as head of state, the Union Jack, a system of judicial appeals to the Privy Council, strong economic ties with the United Kingdom and an unmistakable British and Anglophone veneer to South African public institutions, including its armed forces. As the opposition spokesman on defence from 1935, Erasmus promoted the notion of 'national' armed services which would more adequately reflect Afrikanerdom, the majority component of the white population. After 1948 Erasmus quickly set about altering the ethos and appearance of the Union Defence Force (UDF), enforcing bilingualism and ridding its officer corps of those he deemed to be too closely identified with the government of the Anglophile Jan Smuts. His personal inclinations were emphasised in a speech in October 1949. Referring to the conflict with Britain in 1899–1902, he said that 'we lost the second war of independence but step by step we have won the peace' (Gibbs 1950: 194).¹ By the time of his departure from the defence department in December 1959, the armed forces could not be mistaken for those of any other Commonwealth country.

The changes under Erasmus's direction in the UDF were components of a much larger Nationalist agenda. The cabinets from Malan to Verwoerd were anxious to incrementally dilute the ties with Britain towards the realisation of a republic. This came in the form of lukewarm involvement by the Union government in the coronation in 1953, the discontinuation of the Union Jack as an official flag and the dropping of 'God Save the Queen' in 1957, the disappearance of royal portraits from stamps and official buildings, the scrapping of appeals to the Privy Council and the creation of a uniquely South African citizenship. Simultaneously, Nationalist ministers intended their political supporters, almost exclusively Afrikaners, to occupy positions of control and influence in the public service, para-statal bodies, state-owned industries, universities and the media. The speed of this 'affirmative action' policy varied. Erasmus proved to be one of the most enthusiastic in this area. Successful political pressure was applied to remove English-speakers from senior positions in the Native Affairs Department and the important South African Railways by the early 1950s. Ironically, a minister like the supposedly hard-line Eric Louw, in the Economic Affairs Department and later in External Affairs, was content to continue to surround himself with officials from the Smuts period. The position of the

Afrikaans language in its relationship to English in many sectors of national life was also enhanced by government. By the time of the proclamation of the republic in May 1961 Afrikaner nationalism was dominant in all areas of national life except that of commerce.

Erasmus the political organiser

The future defence minister was born in the Karoo region of the British-controlled Cape Colony in 1896. The young Erasmus went to high school in Worcester before going on to Cape Town for teacher education. After serving as a teacher for a short period he undertook legal training. By the mid-1920s he had become a leading figure in the Cape's legal circles and well known as a committed republican and Afrikaner nationalist. In 1927 the Pact government of Barry Hertzog (formed of the National Party (NP) and mainly English-speaking Labour Party) appointed Erasmus as assistant attorney-general of South West Africa. Despite the possibility of a glittering judicial career he left the territory after just a year to return to the Cape as assistant secretary of the province's NP organisation. By the following year he had been promoted chief secretary by the Cape leader, D. F. Malan, who held the portfolio of home affairs minister. Erasmus was soon to become one of Malan's three closest confidants. In 1930, due to his organisational abilities, Erasmus was appointed as secretary of the federal council. This drew together the party's provincial and parliamentary leadership and was responsible for the conduct of elections.

By the early 1930s the Union was affected by the economic repercussions of the Wall Street crash. Discussions commenced early in 1933 between Hertzog and Smuts, the head of the opposition South African Party, for a coalition of the two parties to advance national recovery. The coalition was formed and captured most of the parliamentary seats in the subsequent May 1933 election at which Erasmus was elected as member for Moorreesburg. Malan distrusted the alignment of the NP with that of the more empire-minded and predominately English-speaking Smuts grouping. This developed into outright hostility when the two major party leaders resolved that a further progression should occur beyond coalition to outright fusion. The Cape alone among the four Nationalist party organisations opposed this move. Before a final schism Erasmus was asked by the Cape party's head committee to ascertain from Hertzog his views on certain elements of the future constitutional relationship with Britain. The Malanites became convinced that the prime minister was wedded to the concept of 'the two streams' approach to white unity. Abetted by Smuts, they believed that he intended the Union to maintain its considerable imperial links within the new United Party (UP). In late 1934, the rump of nationalistic Afrikaner members, mainly based in the Cape and led by Malan, left Hertzog's NP. They were to form the Gesuiwerde (Purified) National Party (GNP) of

eighteen MPs which came into the House of Assembly as the official opposition in January 1935. Erasmus was again the chief secretary of the Cape party and secretary of the federal council. He was asked by Malan to be spokesman on defence although he had no military experience, unlike many in parliament, and had indicated no interest in the subject during the previous two parliamentary sessions.

Erasmus from the mid-1930s continued his efforts to make the Cape party the best organised and financed of the four provincial bodies. Among his appointments in 1936 as assistant secretary was the 20-year-old P. W. Botha. The chief secretary was used as an intermediary the following year in discussions with the fascist Greyshirt movement on a possible electoral pact. This was not forged as the GNP leadership concluded that 'because of our South African character and constituency' the National Socialist symbols and unparliamentary attitudes of the Greyshirts were not acceptable (*South Africa*: 20 Nov. 1937). In the May 1938 election the opposition made few gains against Hertzog's UP, which was enjoying an economic boom. The government had been fortunate in the poll date, as a dramatic resurgence of Afrikaner ethnic solidarity occurred from the following August. This centred on the centennial reenactment of the Great Trek and culminated in the laying of the cornerstone of the Voortrekker Monument outside Pretoria on 16 December.

In parliament Erasmus criticized what he believed was the slavish stance of the fusion government to the imperial defence link. The Royal Navy held a major base at Simonstown and was primarily responsible for the naval defence of the Union, as agreed with Whitehall in 1933. Most defence equipment was acquired in the United Kingdom and UDF personnel attended British training programmes. Military regulations and social conventions, uniforms, medals, regalia and rank insignia were patterned on the British model. The commando units of mounted infantry in the Boer republics had been less sophisticated *levee en masse* bodies and, with the exception of the artillery regiments, Boer formations lacked uniforms. Philip Frankel has pointed out that after the Union's formation in 1910:

Britain remained the focal point for the Union Defence Force in the process of articulating its internal structures and devising pathways of institutional growth. Lacking any definite and alternative military model to that introduced by British colonialism, it was only natural that the leaders of the nascent South African military would gravitate toward British experiences and norms in the task of shaping the Union Defence Force from an extended police organisation into a fully-fledged and highly corporate body of soldiers. (Frankel 1984: 14)

Erasmus in March 1938 described the UDF as being 'a cog in the defence machinery of the British Empire and the government has done very little to release it from that'.² He was later to complain that the Afrikaans language did not enjoy its constitutional parity with English in the services, though Afrikaners constituted the majority of servicemen.

The political landscape altered dramatically on 4 September 1939, after Britain and France declared war on Germany. Hertzog was anxious that the Union remain neutral, fearing that white unity would be fractured. His anti-war position was enthusiastically supported by the GNP. The deputy prime minister Smuts, however, believed that it was vital that South Africa stand with the Western democracies against totalitarianism. After a day-long debate in the House of Assembly Smuts's resolution to declare war was passed by 80 votes to 67. Hertzog wanted to hold a new election but this was rejected by the governor-general who called upon Smuts to form an administration. The rump of supporters of Hertzog went into opposition. Erasmus and Malan within months made approaches to the former premier for a merging of the two political groupings. This occurred in January 1940 with the formation of the Herenidge (Re-United) Nasionale Party (HNP). By the following year, Hertzog had left the party believing that its dominant Malanite element did not respect the right of equality for English-speakers in a future republic. His followers, led by a colleague from the Orange Free State, N. C. Havenga, formed the Afrikaner Party. The HNP also confronted the defection of fifteen of its MPs to the neo-Nazi New Order organisation led by a former defence minister, Oswald Pirow. Malan and his associates also faced the rising influence of an Afrikaner 'cultural' organisation with pro-German and para-military trappings, the Ossewa Brandwag (Ox-Wagon Sentinel). The movement appeared to want to enter the political arena despite an agreement made in 1940 to leave this to the HNP. In this difficult period, Erasmus was asked to prepare the party for the 1943 elections. Party discipline was tightened up and a cell system introduced for HNP structures around the Union. The chief secretary was a leading light in a campaign initiated in October 1941 to remove Ossewa Brandwag (OB) influence from the party. At the elections the HNP took all the opposition seats, New Order did not run and the power of the OB had waned due to Axis reverses. Erasmus, who opposed the franchise for servicemen posted abroad, attempted on behalf of the Nationalists to disallow thousands of these votes on technical grounds. His legal machinations delayed the declaring of the national results for several days. Though Malan lost, with the assistance of Erasmus he had accomplished the goal of making the HNP the premier standard bearer of Afrikaner nationalism.

Throughout the war the Nationalists maintained the stance that the Union should remain neutral. Up to 1943 there was an undisguised wish on the part of many HNP leaders for a German victory, as this would weaken the British Empire and produce a South African republic. Erasmus criticised the use of South African troops, though all volunteers, in operations alongside Commonwealth forces in East and North Africa and in Italy. He believed that the effects of these close interactions 'were making Britishers of our men and British officers of our officers'.³ The Nationalists were unhappy about the use by the government of non-white troops and about the alliance with the Soviet Union (diplomatic relations were established in

1942). During the 1946 parliamentary session Erasmus pledged that a future Nationalist government would build up a UDF 'according to South African traditions'.⁴ Regulations on bilingualism would be reinforced; negotiations with Britain over the cession of Simonstown would begin; black units would be disbanded and an atmosphere created where the 'nationally minded' Afrikaner would feel at home.

A general election was called by Smuts for late May 1948. The UP felt confident that with its leader having won international prestige for the Union in wartime the party would be again successful electorally. This complacency was combined with a party organisation which was highly inadequate (the national headquarters had only five staff) and less motivated than that of Erasmus. While the UP had only two organisers in the Transvaal outside the Johannesburg/Pretoria area, Erasmus had seventeen fulltime organisers in the Transvaal alone. In 1947 Erasmus had also helped to negotiate an electoral pact with Havenga's Afrikaner Party (eventually to merge with HNP in October 1951 to form the NP). On the campaign trail the Nationalists were able to play on public dissatisfaction with the unemployment rate and the post-war shortages of food and housing stock. However, their most controversial pledge was on the race question. A party commission under a Cape member, Paul Sauer, formulated a policy of racial segregation and control termed 'apartheid'. The influx of blacks into the factories of the cities during the war had created the fear among many whites of 'swamping' and of increased crime. During the campaign the Nationalists promoted the view that only the HNP could effectively deal with the crucial race issue. In order to capture some of the traditional government supporters Erasmus toned down anti-English and anti-Jewish references in campaign literature and underplayed the desire of the Nationalists for a republic. When the results were announced the HNP/Afrikaner Party coalition had substantially fewer (443,278) votes than the government and lesser parties (547,437), but held a five seat majority in the lower house. The Nationalists captured a large number of seats with small majorities while UP votes piled up in strongholds such as Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth and Johannesburg. The opposition was also assisted by the additional weight given to rural seats under the constitution, i.e. there needed to be fewer voters in these areas to elect a member and the NP was strong in the countryside.

The efforts of Erasmus in preparing the party for an election victory in 1948 were highly appreciated by the party leadership. However, unlike many, such as the prime minister, Malan, interior minister Donges, justice minister Swart and health minister Stals, Erasmus had not worked or studied abroad and was considered a 'provincial'. He was also a 'professional' politician who except for brief periods in education and the law had spent most of his working career in political organisation. Essentially Erasmus was a technician of the hustings who lacked a breadth of experience in other fields. Ironically, the electoral success which Erasmus

had gained for his party marginalised him once he was in government. He did not enter the inner circle of policy formulators surrounding Malan, and became a less pivotal figure during his thirteen years in cabinet. The forte of Erasmus was seen as winning and retaining power rather than using it. Defence in the wake of the war was not seen as an important portfolio, with the police perceived generally as being able to deal with any internal black unrest. However, Erasmus saw the armed forces as a consequential institution of the old order which could be fashioned into one having 'national' characteristics.

The creation of the 'nationally minded' officer corps

In his transformation programme Erasmus moved on a number of fronts from the time of his appointment as defence minister on 4 June 1948. These included the creation of new uniforms, medals and the reintroduction of Boer rank titles, an enhanced use of Afrikaans, and attenuating monarchical aspects. However, the vital component was the removal of officers identified with the UP and the British connection. Many of them were Afrikaners who, like Smuts, accepted partnership with English-speakers and valued the Commonwealth tie. These individuals in turn would be replaced by those clearly identified with Afrikaner nationalism.

Within weeks of entering the defence department Erasmus began making waves with his personnel policies. He appointed Colonel R. C. Hiemstra as military advisor in the ministerial office. He was a controversial officer for many veterans. At the beginning of the war the then Major Hiemstra had refused to volunteer for overseas service as, like the HNP, he opposed the Union's participation in the world conflict. He was transferred to a civilian post in the public service until soon after the Nationalist victory when he was allowed to re-enter the UDF by Erasmus. He advised the minister on the formulation of appointments and promotions. There was resentment among many in the commissioned ranks who had served 'up North' that instead of drawing on considerable practical experience, Erasmus preferred to rely on someone of similar political sympathies. The choice of Hiemstra, who was appointed in 1966 as head of the defence force, set the tone for the minister's handling of the officer corps.

The next action was of greater import. The chief of the general staff (the senior uniformed commander over all the three services), General Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, was scheduled to retire in May 1949 but would be taking leave three months earlier. His obvious successor was his 47-year-old deputy, Major-General Evered Poole. Poole, a divisional commander in the Italian campaign, was known as a very 'British' officer who had been attached to the Brigade of Guards while on secondment in England in the mid-1930s. Because of his age he would be expected to be the military chief until 1956. To Erasmus's mind van Ryneveld's heir apparent was one with whom he

would not have a harmonious working relationship. In these circumstances the minister moved quickly and adroitly. Just forty-three days after the election Erasmus announced that the *post* of deputy chief of the general staff was to be suppressed. Without a position on the general staff, Poole was sent to Berlin to head the twelve-man South African military mission to Germany and Austria. Before Poole's departure Erasmus again made headlines. Early on the morning of 22 July, Erasmus, accompanied by van Ryneveld and Hiemstra, made an unscheduled visit to defence headquarters in Pretoria. The minister went straight to the offices of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Powell, director of military intelligence. Powell was dismissed summarily by Erasmus from service in the UDF, and the files of the directorate seized and removed by Pretoria police CID. In the defence debate in parliament the following month, the connection between the confiscation of the files, the removal of Powell and the transfer of Poole was disclosed by the minister. He revealed that during the war and afterwards military intelligence had closely monitored Afrikaner political and cultural organisations such as the secret Broederbond which were associated with the Nationalists. Powell as a senior intelligence officer was well aware of the contents of the files. Poole, as deputy chief of the general staff and with oversight for intelligence, was no doubt as well informed. It was obvious that Erasmus could not countenance the continued incumbency of two politically hostile individuals who held secret and confidential information affecting his party. The intelligence section was placed in the hands of a reliable Nationalist soon afterwards. During the same debate the minister announced that defence units with black and coloured personnel would be disbanded. They were not re-introduced until 1963 by Erasmus's successor, J. J. Fouché.

In November 1948 the list of members of the future general staff was released. To replace van Ryneveld, Erasmus appointed someone with evident Nationalist credentials, General Len Beyers, the nephew of General Christiaan Beyers who had rebelled against the Union's participation beside Britain in the First World War. During the 1939–45 conflict Len Beyers simultaneously held the positions of adjutant-general, director of prisons and director of internment camps and was a senior officer of ability. Assisting him as director-general of land forces was Brigadier C. L. de Wet du Toit who had won the Distinguished Service Order in North Africa. Soon after the election he made it known to Erasmus that he was a Nationalist. Confirmed as air force chief was Brigadier J. T. Durrant who in the previous war at the astonishing age of 32 was made major-general. The British-born Commodore F. J. Dean remained as chief of the navy. Other senior officers such as quartermaster-general and adjutant-general were designated by the minister. The list of appointees was well received across the white political spectrum. However, it was noteworthy that all of the above appointees, with the exception of du Toit, were eventually dismissed, resigned prematurely or were relegated to inconspicuous overseas posts by the minister.

The relationship between Erasmus and his new military chief deteriorated. Within months, Beyers complained that the intrusion of the minister into defence headquarters minutiae was negatively affecting the discipline, effectiveness and military value of the UDF. Erasmus, he believed, had a total lack of understanding of basic military principles and procedures. He revealed to the American Embassy that the minister was involving himself in administrative matters so trivial that 'it could be handled by some corporal'.⁵ Erasmus accused Beyers of lacking enthusiasm in altering what the minister described as 'the foreign and un-Afrikaans' (i.e. British) aspects of the forces. Disagreements occurred between the two over military transfers and appointments. The military chief contested that personnel changes were being initiated by the minister without the knowledge of the heads of the three services. Beyers was widely believed to be guided primarily by the need to maintain military efficiency and effectiveness. In January 1950, after a *contretemps* with Erasmus over the composition of the contingent of senior officers accompanying the governor-general at the opening of parliament, Beyers resigned.

The disappearance of Beyers permitted Erasmus to place the obsequious and more overtly Nationalist du Toit into the top military position. The British High Commission reported that the new chief of the general staff did 'not possess to the same degree as his predecessor the professional respect of his fellow senior officers'. Between Erasmus and du Toit an increase would be made in the number 'of Nationalist-minded officers in key positions', often lacking combat experience as they had opposed the Union's participation in the recent war.⁶ Du Toit was in the post for over six years and oversaw with the minister a systematic creation of a 'nationally minded' officer corps. This was undertaken through the advancement of Nationalists, the premature departure or neutralisation of those not politically acceptable, and military education. Regarding the latter, a military gymnasium was established in November 1949. This provided a year's continuous service after secondary school for 300 young men, who then did not need to fulfil the requirements of service in reserve units. The military gymnasium, along with those of the navy and air force created in the 1950s, later developed into 'clearing houses' for potential officers. Of greater import was the foundation of the military academy in April 1950 providing a military science degree programme and a commission. Associated initially with the Afrikaans-medium University of Pretoria as the degree-awarding institution, its first intake consisted of forty cadets of whom thirty-eight had Afrikaans surnames. Erasmus made certain that Major Gideon Jacobs, the officer designated by Beyers and the general staff to be the academy's first dean, was replaced by a firm Nationalist. Jacobs, though an Afrikaner from the Orange Free State, had served with the Royal Marines during World War II in France and East Asia and had been decorated by the British government. The academy in the mid-1950s moved to Saldanha (in the minister's constituency) and had official links with another Afrikaner cultural strong-

hold, Stellenbosch University. Erasmus also greatly curtailed the previously substantial participation by UDF personnel in United Kingdom-based training. This was purportedly on financial grounds but also had the effect, to the minister's satisfaction, of attenuating British influence in the forces. In 1948/49, 121 servicemen were scheduled to go to Britain; by 1952 this figure was reduced to 17.

Erasmus's 'hands-on' approach to personnel matters went to the extent of perusing the list drawn up by air force headquarters of airmen destined for the South African squadron sent to the Korean war. Without explanation to the SAAF chief, Durrant, the minister removed five names. By coincidence, four of the names were English and the remaining one, though an Afrikaner, was known to support the UP. Even Erasmus did not dispute the Opposition's contention that of the 146 local commandants of the reserve force created in 1948, the Skietcommandos (The Rifle Commandos), only 68 had ever had any previous military experience. As all the commandants were Afrikaners, and as the defence department confirmed their appointments often after vetting by NP provincial organisations, it was probable that the vast majority were Nationalist supporters. American diplomats reported that Erasmus and du Toit had 'a stranglehold on the UDF and appear ready to place power in the hands of those who they consider politically reliable'.⁷

Among those not considered politically in favour was Durrant. The English-speaker had risen quickly under Smuts and was an obvious non-Nationalist. The air force head was known for his views on increasing the autonomy of the SAAF. The chain of command, he felt, should go from the uniformed head of the service to the minister rather than be routed through the chief of the general staff, a soldier. Durrant was removed in a skillful manner. He had been nominated by du Toit for the prestigious year-long course at the Imperial Defence College, London, commencing in January 1951. After this period of advanced training he expected to return to his former posting. An acting air force chief, Brigadier H. J. Bronkhorst, was meanwhile appointed. In mid-1951 Erasmus triggered a reorganisation of the senior ranks. He appointed the politically neutral Brigadier H. G. Willmott, the military and air attaché in London, as the new substantive air force chief. Colonel S. A. Melville, brother-in-law of the Transvaal NP leader and future prime minister J. G. Strijdom, was appointed his deputy although unpopular among the commissioned ranks. With Willmott scheduled to retire in 1954, Melville was viewed as his successor. Erasmus offered Durrant, still in his thirties, to the diplomatic post vacated by Willmott. Durrant refused. He was in a difficult position. With Willmott ensconced as chief of the SAAF, there were no appropriate and available posts back in the Union for an officer of his rank. Durrant, fully aware that the London offer by Erasmus was a sign that the minister wanted him away from headquarters for the long term, tendered his resignation. This was effective 1 March 1952 at the end of the defence college course. Once in

mufti Durrant was to become closely involved with the anti-Nationalist Torch Commando movement composed mainly of veterans. He later headed the UP's Transvaal organisation.

Removing politically unacceptable senior officers, most of whom had advanced under Smuts, to overseas diplomatic and service posts was a technique employed by Erasmus on several more occasions. Brigadier Jock Kriegler, who had commanded the important Potchefstroom training centre, was despatched to Washington in 1951 as a military attaché. A year later Brigadier Piet de Waal, the chief of the navy and corps of marines, replaced him. The former adjutant-general, Brigadier Steve Joubert, was sent on attachment to British forces headquarters in Egypt. Commodore Dean, the senior naval officer, was relegated to the London High Commission as military and air adviser (*sic*), never to return to the Union on active service. To replace Dean, Erasmus appointed a respected and professional officer of ability, Hugo H. Biermann, a veteran of wartime naval operations in the Mediterranean. During 1952 he was promoted to substantive commander, substantive captain and then acting commodore, all at the age of 37. He and his brother S. C. Biermann (also later an admiral) were two of only seven Afrikaner commissioned officers in the navy in 1948. H. H. Biermann was asked by a later defence minister, P. W. Botha, to be chief of the defence force in 1972.

The 1951–3 period was a turbulent one for white politics because of the great unease in opposition circles over moves by the Malan government to alter the franchise provisions for coloured voters in the constitution. The charged anti-government atmosphere spilled over into the forces, particularly within the SAAF. Senior ranks such as Commandant Douglas Loftus, who had formulated the air force's first staff course, and Commandant Kotze, a former commander of an air training school, resigned their commissions. A number of air force officers were disciplined for the theft of and damage to portraits of Malan and Erasmus in the mess at the Waterkloof air station outside Pretoria in 1952. In May of that year, a group of officers, probably drunk, caused an affray and shouted anti-government slogans at a hotel in Upington where Swart, the justice minister, was accommodated.

In the wake of the NP's April 1953 election victory, Erasmus made further changes in the general staff. The new post of inspector-general was created to which he appointed Brigadier H. J. Klopper, the former army chief. Klopper in turn was replaced by Brigadier P. H. Grobbelaar, who had been known as a Smuts supporter before turning overtly Nationalist in 1948. Hiemstra, moving up the ranks, was appointed adjutant-general. He was also advancing in the secret Broederbond organisation and eventually was elected a member of its executive council, the Uitvoerende Raad, in 1958.

In a confident mood Erasmus decided to move against the non-Nationalist elements of the UDF leadership, particularly in the SAAF. During August 1953 a series of in-camera courts-martial commenced at the

Swartkop air base. The leading officer indicted was Colonel Jan Pretorius, the Afrikaans-speaking commandant of the air force college but a known UP supporter (he was to run for the party in the 1958 election). He had also been critical of the increasing Broederbond influence in the forces. Convicted on minor charges he was dismissed from the service. A more dramatic event occurred towards the end of the year. On the evening of 30 November despatch riders delivered dismissal notices to twelve officers. The most prominent was Brigadier Bronkhorst, the quartermaster-general, a trustee of the SAAF Regimental Fund. The Fund had helped to finance the unofficial *SAAF Journal*, which had an editorial policy critical of Erasmus. Two other trustees, Colonels de Vos and Irvine, were also removed as well as Colonel Maurice de Villiers of the Corps of Marines. Hiemstra, the adjutant-general, publicly announced to general disbelief that the dismissals had been on economic grounds to save the defence department £250,000. As in the case of Pretorius, Bronkhorst and de Vos ran as Opposition candidates at the subsequent general election.

From the beginning of the Erasmus period in defence, but particularly from the start of the 1950s, there occurred a haemorrhaging of personnel from the commissioned ranks. One reserve unit, HMSAS *Unittie* in Cape Town, lost ten officers during 1950 and 1951. In the same two years, the part-time Active Citizen Force (ACF) and the reserve of officers were losing twenty-two officers per month. Within the ACF, officers without combat experience but correct political credentials often leapfrogged to higher ranks over those who served overseas in 1939–45. Bob Rogers, an English-speaking air ace and ultimately the most decorated officer in South African history, was superseded as a major over twenty-five times during the Erasmus era. In the more tolerant period of the 1970s he was appointed the air force chief. The creation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1953 provided an escape route for many army and SAAF ranks unhappy with their career prospects. With British assistance, the Federation was building up its forces which appeared not to be affected by partisan politics as in the Union. By the mid-1950s many competent officers were crossing the Limpopo. These included Major Keith Coster, who in 1968 at the rank of lieutenant-general was appointed commander of the Rhodesian Army, and Major RP Stableford, the senior instructor at the SAAF College. The latter complained that he had not been promoted since the arrival of Erasmus at the Defence Department. By 1960, 40 per cent of the European element of the Federation's forces were South African, with a particularly high proportion in the air force.

A change in the ethnic composition of the full-time Permanent Force (PF) officer corps, especially in the SAAF occurred. In 1948 English-speakers constituted a clear majority in the air force's commissioned ranks. From 1950 there was a noticeable shift to Afrikaners, who became a majority in 1955. By the end of the decade the English element was down to 25 per cent. The primary reason for the departure of the English when later

questioned was 'political interference' which affected their promotion prospects as they tended not to be sympathetic to the government. In a survey of resignations from the pilot complement ninety-seven English officers resigned between 1948 and 1960 in comparison to just fourteen Afrikaners (Van Den Bos 1978: 57).⁸ The legacy of Erasmus's affirmative action policy was still to be seen fifteen years after the end of his tenure at defence. In 1974, despite more sympathetic treatment from subsequent defence ministers only 15 per cent of the PF strength of the army was English. The SAAF was unchanged at 25 per cent, but down to 50 per cent in the traditionally Anglophone navy.

In 1955 Erasmus removed one of the last of the senior officers of the 'old order', the very 'British' Brigadier Hingeston, again in an unorthodox manner. The former adjutant-general was the officer commanding Natal Command. He was ordered to an interview with du Toit in Cape Town and was surprised to find Erasmus also in attendance. Hingeston was advised that he was being permitted to resign his commission on medical grounds. To this he countered that he felt well and did not wish to leave the service; he still had seven years to go to normal retirement. He was bluntly informed that he could resign immediately or in the near future be dismissed with an implied threat to his pension rights. Hingeston resigned and moved to Southern Rhodesia and was replaced in Durban by an overt Nationalist but a highly effective officer, Colonel P. J. Jacobs. A British High Commission assessment in March 1957 concluded that as a result of Erasmus's 'jobs for pals' policy, only the commandant-general, Klopper, in the top echelon of officers, remained sympathetic to Britain. The remainder were convinced supporters of the NP of varying degrees. On the same day as the report an anonymous source at defence headquarters told the *Rand Daily Mail* of the obsequious attitude of the 'top brass' towards their minister:

There is an atmosphere of everyone for himself. If you are an opponent of the government conceal it at all costs. Many of the new clique of senior officers make it their business to be prominent at political meetings, particularly if the minister of defence is on the platform. That's how it is. If you want to get ahead in what today serves as the defence force you have to demonstrate your allegiance to a political party. (*Rand Daily Mail*: 28 Mar. 1957)

By the time Klopper retired in September 1958, to be succeeded by Melville, Erasmus had a docile general staff. He succeeded in forming an officer corps with which he was generally satisfied, one moulded to the general advancement and ethos of the NP. As first and foremost a political organiser he was unable to perceive the wider strategic picture. The self-interest of the South African state demanded that its security be conducted by the most gifted and qualified white personnel, not necessarily Nationalist. But Erasmus preferred a more congenial leadership group, overtly sympathetic to his party and often lacking talent. Unlike his successor Fouche, he never comprehended the important inheritance bequeathed by Britain, that

of an institutionally non-partisan defence force loyally serving the Union, whatever the political complexion of the government.

Altering the ethos of the defence force

Before 1948 Erasmus had spoken of the defence force as being insufficiently 'South African'. On becoming minister he promoted the displacement of the UDF's British traditions and the substitution of Boer/Afrikaner customs, conventions and symbols. In this he wanted to forge a distinctive South African appearance and demeanor. Changes were introduced gradually. However, by the time he had left the defence department, the Union's armed forces seemed to have lost most of the style which they had originally shared with the other dominions.

To aid in the transformation process, within months of entering the defence department Erasmus appointed a three-man committee under the chairmanship of Professor A. N. Pelzer of Pretoria University. One of the other members was Major J. S. van der Merwe, who like Hiemstra, had refused to volunteer for wartime service. Erasmus asked the committee to delve into the origins and forms of the various defence systems of the Boer Republics and the former British colonies in South Africa. Particular scrutiny was required of 'military flags, regimental colours, standards, badges, characteristics and uniforms'. When the Pelzer report was complete, Erasmus had the information he needed to launch his assault on the British legacy. The committee made recommendations with regard to the reviving of Boer rank nomenclature in the land forces. Erasmus moved cautiously in this area. 'Commandant' was introduced in 1950 to replace lieutenant-colonel, and 'commandant-general' for chief of the general staff was brought into use in 1956. The title of commandant was somewhat controversial as it was a position as well as a rank. In the Boer republics the leader of a commando, which could have been of company or battalion strength, was a 'commandant'. By the end of 1949, Erasmus replaced the British officers' 'pips' with a five pointed star representing the Union's four provinces and South West Africa. In the same year he discontinued the wearing of a 'red tab' on uniform epaulettes which designated that the wearer had volunteered for wartime service outside South Africa. He terminated the services within the Union of Britain's inspector of regimental colours. Within months the government ruled that king's colours presented to military units would in future have to be paid for by the regiments themselves rather than by the defence department.

The minister was particularly interested in altering the style of uniforms away from the British prototype. His enthusiasm for changing the appearance of armed forces personnel would eventually cause Erasmus to become known as 'The Tailor' in opposition circles. The navy was the first target. Its director was minuted by the ministerial private office in January

1949. Dean was advised that the defence department wanted an investigation undertaken so that 'in some way' the naval ratings uniform could have 'a South African identity'.⁹ Two months later the Malan cabinet requested drawings for new uniforms for the army and air force. Len Beyers as chief of the general staff undertook a personal initiative in the realm of military fashion. At a 1949 passing-out parade at the military college he wore a new two-tone uniform. This comprised the normal *barathea* tunic but with lighter *gabardine* trousers. This was a marked change from the British pattern and proved to be the prototype for the walking-out dress for army personnel, standard from April 1951 onwards.

In March 1950 the headgear for the ceremonial dress of the military gymnasium was altered by the introduction of a blue *kepi* of a nineteenth-century Dutch pattern, such as had been worn by regulars in the period of the Transvaal republic. The school cadet corps were given a cap similar to those worn by the German *Afrika-Korps*. On being queried about the style, Erasmus claimed that these were a Swiss army ski pattern. During April 1950 an announcement was made that the air force would have distinctive blue uniforms. This brought the SAAF in line with other air forces, as previously it had its airmen in uniforms of an army-style colour and cut. The new design proved to be very popular. Non-commissioned officers in the air force as well as in the army, from the early 1950s began wearing rank chevrons similar to those of the *Wehrmacht*, replacing the British design used throughout the Commonwealth. The new design for the naval ratings uniform was eventually unveiled in September 1950. Anxiety had arisen among many English-speakers during the previous month when the defence minister described the British-inherited 'rig' as consisting of a woman's jumper, funny bell-bottomed trousers and a soup plate hat. The English press had produced illustrations of what they believed would be the new design. This bore a strong resemblance to a bus conductor's uniform. When finally revealed, the uniform was similar to that of the pre-1945 German navy. This became general issue in March, 1952, and because of its unpopularity adversely affected recruitment. By the end of the following year the defence department was obliged to announce that yet another naval uniform would be introduced. This proved to be a modification of the existing petty officer's uniform and was seen publicly in mid-1954.

The arrival of the German-patterned naval ratings uniform in March 1952 coincided with an increased republican ethos in the forces. Without warning, the cap tallies of the new uniform had deleted the initials 'HM' (Her Majesty's) before the ship's name, only retaining 'SAS' (South African Ship). In official documentation naval vessels and shore establishments were also designated without the HM prefix. Many English-speakers and naval veterans saw this as an insensitive action by Erasmus, particularly as the new sovereign, Elizabeth II, had only assumed the throne on 6 February. An even more overt display of the government's intentions regarding an eventual republic occurred the following year. This was on the occasion of the

Coronation in London. Though a foot contingent participated in the ceremonial procession, no elements of the UDF were involved with mounting guard at Buckingham Palace (unlike the 1937 coronation), or the naval and air reviews. In the Union itself there were official military parades in honour of the monarch; however none was attended by members of the cabinet.

Various cultural and protocol aspects of UDF were affected in making the forces 'national'. During 1953, Biermann, the navy chief, introduced the practice of serving South African brandy as a tot to the ships' companies. This replaced what he described as 'the foreign practice' of providing rum, which had been the custom on South African vessels, derived from the British one.¹⁰ In the army that same year it was decided to drop the tune 'Auld Lang Syne' when regimental colours were laid up, replacing it with 'Vaarwel Ou Vriend' (Farewell Old Friend). During 1956 the appellation 'sir' was discontinued throughout the forces. Officers were to be addressed by their rank, a practice common in Afrikaans units. The term 'private' had already been replaced by 'rifleman' in infantry units three years previously. Erasmus had always been eager to inaugurate a unique range of South African medals and decorations, distinct from those of many Commonwealth countries. In 1950 he commissioned new designs which were unveiled during the tricentennial celebrations two years later, commemorating the arrival of Van Riebeeck at the Cape. They covered the normal range of commendations for bravery, long service and efficiency. 'The Castle of Good Hope' medal was designated as the highest decoration for courage under fire. Under Erasmus's defence act of 1957, the governor-general was given extra discretion for creating and awarding military decorations without the normal protocol of reference to the British sovereign.

A programme of renaming existing or new land force regiments after Nationalist heroes began in the early 1950s. In 1951 the 2nd battalion of the Botha Regiment, titled after the Union's first premier, became the Regiment Christiaan Beyers in honour of the World War One era rebel. Many veterans believed that it was inappropriate to commemorate an individual who had taken up arms against the legally constituted government. The most controversial retitling was that of the Die Middellandse Regiment, based in the Karoo, which was renamed after Gideon Scheepers. Scheepers had been a commando leader in the Anglo-Boer War who was executed by the British in 1902. The renaming of this popular unit in 1953 occurred without consultation between defence headquarters and the commanding officer, W. G. Kingwill. The commandant and all his officers except one resigned their commissions in protest. To head the regiment Erasmus appointed a former captain, Friedrich Setzkorn, who had not served in World War II but had been interned by the Smuts government in the 1940s as a pro-German subversive.

When the new rank of 'commandant-general' was introduced in September 1956, Erasmus used the occasion to remove the crown from the rank insignia for the military chief, retaining the crossed sword and stars.

Speaking in his Morreesburg constituency the defence minister described this action as part of 'a move inexorably towards a republic' (*South Africa*: 6 Oct. 1956). Several months later the general staff resolved that the stylised design of Cape Town Castle would replace the crown for the insignia of officers from the rank of major upwards. By the end of the decade the crown had also disappeared from the sleeves of warrant officers' uniforms, and the leaping springbok replaced monarchical representations on all uniform buttons. Increasingly the loyal toast to the sovereign at service functions was substituted by the words 'Ons Land, Suid Afrika' (Our Country, South Africa). In 1957 the defence department refused to permit defence force units to participate in Remembrance Day activities organised by veterans if the Union Jack was displayed or 'God Save the Queen' played. Navy personnel were instructed that they could not attend Trafalgar Day commemorations as the celebrations were 'foreign'. In the same year, Erasmus ruled that there would be no further alliances between UDF regiments and counterparts in the Commonwealth; twenty-four such ties already existed with Britain alone.

In a further move towards changing the image of the SADF, Erasmus in December 1959 introduced a new set of rank titles, largely influenced by Boer prototypes. 'Field cornet' replaced captain in the army and air force, with 'sub-lieutenant' superseding second lieutenant. The rank of major-general was retitled 'combat-general'. A 'naval cornet' was placed between lieutenant and the new rank of 'lieutenant-commandant'. In the case of uniforms there was a concession to English traditionalists. Variations in regimental uniforms such as Scottish kilts and Irish caubeens were to be permitted. Earlier in the year the head of Witwatersrand command had forbidden cadet corps under his command to wear items such as slouch hats and kilts. This was believed to be the first step towards creating homogeneity in uniforms. The new ranks brought in by Erasmus in 1959 were rapidly dropped in the Fouche period as they attracted little popular appeal within the forces. 'Commandant-general' disappeared in the early 1970s and was replaced by 'the chief of the defence staff'. 'Commandant' survived until April 1994 when the pre-1950 rank of 'lieutenant colonel' was revived. Soon after Erasmus's departure from the defence portfolio the British envoy, Sir John Maud, noted that the minister's 'over the top' dedication to removing British symbols 'became in its last throes a matter of ridicule to the Afrikaners themselves'.¹¹ However, as the defence force entered the 1960s it was sufficiently 'national' in appearance and customs not to be mistaken for the armed services of any other nation.

The consolidation of bilingualism

From the beginning of his period in the defence department Erasmus was anxious that there be a parity of esteem for the two official languages in the

UDF. English and Afrikaans from 1925 had had constitutional equality. Erasmus believed that there had been discrimination in favour of English usage in the Smuts era, reinforced by Union troops fighting alongside Commonwealth forces in the African and Italian campaigns. When he perused the files seized from the military intelligence section in July 1948 he was disturbed to see that most of the documentation was in English. An early action of the minister was to alternate departmental correspondence as well as training between the two languages month by month. He also despatched a four-man commission to the Netherlands to study Dutch military terminology to assist in the expansion of Afrikaans usage in the UDF. In 1950 Erasmus appointed a committee to revise handbooks and pamphlets so that they would be available in both languages.

The consolidation of bilingualism had ramifications for defence personnel. From the early 1950s military chief, du Toit, affirmed that the language policy of the minister would be rigidly applied in the PF and ACF. For the successful completion of courses at the military college and for promotion, personnel would need to be bilingual. This policy applied to all members of the forces including artisans and non-artisans. It therefore affected hundreds of British technicians brought to the Union by the Smuts government. Their primary role was to maintain the flying efficiency of the air force. Most had been using English almost exclusively as aircraft engineering documentation tended to be in English. The majority of the British did not have a working knowledge of Afrikaans. With little prospect of promotion, many did not renew their contracts from 1951 onwards or bought themselves out. Their departure adversely affected the flying operations of the air force and obliged the defence department to quadruple the buying-out rate. One of the senior casualties of the enhanced bilingualism policy was matron-in-chief of the UDF's medical service, Miss D. M. Dixon. An individual of wide professional experience and training, she had served with South African forces in Italy. She and two nursing sisters failed to obtain passes in Afrikaans. The latter were permitted to remain on short service commissions but without pension rights, and Dixon was forced to leave at the end of 1952, less than five years before retirement. The UP-supporting media noted that at the time of Dixon's dismissal the military nursing service was severely under staffed and that Afrikaner staff had not been required to sit English tests.

From 1952, Erasmus decided to activate for the first time the ballot provision of the 1912 Defence Act for filling the ranks of the ACF. The lower echelon reserve formations, the Skietcommandos were already exclusively Afrikaans-speaking (English units were not formed until 1962 by Erasmus's successor). The ballottees constituted approximately one quarter of the white male manpower pool reaching the age of nineteen. After initial basic training the personnel would be assigned to reserve units for annual training periods for the following four years. The ballot system had not been instituted since the beginning of the Union as there had been a

constant stream of volunteers into the service ranks. The English-speaking population (40 per cent to 42 per cent of whites) was proportionately over-represented. Under the ballot, with requisite numbers chosen from each magisterial district, a wider range of whites was inducted into uniform. The ACF was from the 1953 intake approximately 65 per cent Afrikaans. Fourteen anglophone regiments with smaller intakes were obliged to 'couple' while new Afrikaans-medium units were established. Only towards the end of the decade with an increased number of ballotees were the English formations able to decouple.

By the mid-1950s, the bilingualism policy was gradually accepted through the ranks of the UDF. Many English-speakers who tended not to be fluent in Afrikaans had left the forces. In this period regulations were further tightened so that staff courses could be attended only by officers suitably proficient in both languages. The defence department decided that there needed to be further usage in the traditionally English-dominated navy. A committee was established to formulate a naval handbook in Afrikaans. To ascertain how the language could be utilised in the navy, the flagship SAS *Good Hope* was designated to be Afrikaans-medium for a period of three months in 1956. Later that same year the army held one of its largest exercises of the 1950s – *Operation Oranje* which occurred in the De Brug training area outside Bloemfontein. This was designated Afrikaans-only for the operational handbook and communication between units. English was relegated for use only within Anglophone units. The army chief of staff, Grobbelaar, said that the exercise demonstrated that 'the requirements of war did not interfere with a citizen's cultural aspiration as far as the two official languages are concerned'. He then alluded to the domination of English within UDF units who served alongside Commonwealth forces during the recent world war: 'It would be a pity if one or other language should have to disappear temporarily under the pressure of our military commitments' (*Cape Argus*: 27 Apr. 1956).

After *Oranje* the defence department introduced even more rigid language tests for promotion, comparable to those already given to civilians in the civil service. Knowledgeable observers suggested that these new regulations would affect many middle-aged officers, predominantly English. They had not had the opportunity of experiencing the more concentrated bilingual programmes offered at the gymnasias and military academy. It was believed that the servicemen such as pilots, naval technical staff and staff involved in the servicing of equipment were most at risk if not sufficiently bilingual. In his enthusiasm for his native tongue Erasmus wanted military air traffic control to be in Afrikaans, until it was discovered that English was recognised and accepted internationally as the language for this purpose. However, even in the aviation field Afrikaans made progress. It took its place beside English in technical documentation and training in the SAAF from early 1957.

Erasmus's attitude towards the equality of the two official languages

rested on constitutional considerations and the ethnic composition of the white population. However, he was prepared to pursue this aspiration to the point where it had a detrimental effect on the performance of the forces. While innocuous on the surface, the emphasis on bilingualism tended to discourage the recruitment of English-speakers who were more likely not to be fully bilingual. The stance on this question by Erasmus would have been straightforward. The Union was officially bilingual and therefore the defence force serving it should reflect this aspect of national life. If as a by-product the process further eroded the once dominant British and English-speaking influence in the UDF this was a bonus.

Conclusion

The policy pursued by Erasmus of converting the defence force to one in tune with Afrikaner aspirations had the widespread support of the Nationalist electorate and media. They appreciated the measures undertaken to eliminate the residual legacy of the British colonial connection. The minister was able to remove so many non-Nationalist officers without effective opposition as the 1950s was a period when internal unrest was handled almost exclusively by the police. He was given great leeway by the three prime ministers he served, and their cabinets, in pursuing his transformation programme. Until the late 1950s, the primary roles of the UDF were to provide support to the West in safeguarding the Cape sea route, and to supply air and land forces for the protection of the Middle East. Defence was not an important policy issue and received a derisory portion of the government's revenue budget. The attention of most voters centred on the implementation of the programme of apartheid in the civilian sphere.

The actions of Erasmus in the 1950s triggered the departure of a tranche of competent personnel from the forces, often with wartime experience. He alienated many servicemen from the English community, already anxious over the government's efforts to marginalise their British-derived culture and their position in South African society. A sizeable number felt estranged for decades from the defence force. Efforts by later ministers Fouche and Botha tried to rectify the damage. Anglophone officers such as Allan Fraser and Dunbar Moodie who were 'stuck' at the rank of lieutenant-colonel during the Erasmus period were later to be chief of the army and chief of army staff respectively. There were calls by the Defence Department in the early 1980s for more English officers. This reflected the need of the NP government to shore up the existing political order, under international and domestic pressure, by 'bringing back on board' the other important white community. The limitations of Erasmus in the handling of his portfolio in the 1950s were soon exposed in the ill-equipped and undermanned position of the defence force at the time of the March 1960 Sharpeville disturbances.

In the years that followed there was more emphasis on building up an efficient military leadership, whatever their politics, and less Afrikaner exclusivity. Erasmus, however, had formed armed services which to a great extent mirrored the post-1948 political reality: that of an ethnically based political structure attempting to stamp its authority on all other population groups. Equating 'Afrikaner' with 'South African', the minister produced a defence force unable until the 1990s to embrace the wider polity.

Notes

1 Erasmus was of the last generation of Afrikaner Nationalist politicians who had personal memories of the war with Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century.

2 *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 8 March 1938, Column 3897.

3 *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 16 March 1943, Column 3496.

4 *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 4 April 1946, Column 5033.

5 US State Department-Central Files, Bland to Secretary of State, 22 December 1949, 848A.00/0754.

6 Public Record Office, Rumbold to Secretary of State, Commonwealth Relations Office, 5 July 1950, DEFE 7/934.

7 US State Department-Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 19 May 1950, 745 A.00(W)/0889.

8 Van Den Bos is a retired South African Air Force brigadier who spent his formative years as a commissioned officer in the Erasmus era. For his thesis he interviewed a wide range of air force staff who had been adversely affected by the minister's personnel policies in the 1950s.

9 SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, van Heerden to Dean, 17 January 1949, MV 22/8.

10 SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Biermann to du Toit, 23 June 1953, MV 22/8.

11 Public Record Office, Maud to Home, 23 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

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