

## *Book Reviews*

### **General Jan Smuts and His First World War in Africa, 1914–1917**

*David Brock Katz*

### **Botha, Smuts and the Great War**

*Antonio Garcia and  
Ian van der Waag*

and

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Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball  
2023, 306 pages  
ISBN 978-1-77619-270-0

Warwick: Helion & Company  
2023, 311 pages  
ISBN 9-78-19151137-7-1

The two books reviewed here represent detailed biographies of top South African political and military leaders of the First World War (1914–1918). Katz’s treatment of Jan Smuts sustains a clear argument throughout the text. Previous historians have underestimated Smuts’s military experience, portraying him as an amateur general, and unfairly denigrating his accomplishments in the war especially during the German East Africa campaign. The case is convincing in many ways, especially regarding Smuts’s wartime qualifications. While some previous historians described Smuts’s role in the South African War (1899–1902) as leading a Boer commando of a few hundred men, Katz shows that Smuts planned the rudimentary Boer republican war strategy as attorney general of the Transvaal, learnt highly mobile Boer warfare under the mentorship of accomplished leader Koos de la Ray, and eventually led several thousand fighters during an incursion into the Cape. Subsequently, in 1914 and as deputy prime minister and cabinet minister in the Union government, Smuts played the leading role in planning the initial South African invasion of German South West Africa (GSWA, now called Namibia) involving simultaneous landings at the Atlantic ports of the territory and overland columns pushing up from the South African border in the south. Although this operation was delayed by the ultimately failed Boer rebellion – during which his staff work supported Prime Minister Louis Botha’s campaign in the field – Smuts eventually took command of a sizable South African contingent in southern GSWA when the invasion was renewed in 1915, supporting the main invasion force under Botha to the north. In the context of the Boer republics and early Union, which provided no formal advanced military command training, Smuts had led brigade-sized forces and planned and administratively supported higher-level military operations. As such, he arguably had just as much – or probably more – relevant experience and expertise as many British generals.

Katz makes several other related and interesting points about the GSWA campaign. He explains that the reduction of coastal landings in Smuts’s original plan led to the South African defeat at the Battle of Sandfontein in September 1914 rather than other factors.

Furthermore, the much larger-scale renewed invasion of GSWA in 1915, which relied heavily on mounted infantry, contributed to the dominance of Boer commando culture in the embryonic Union Defence Force (UDF), which had initially been developing along British lines.

Katz devotes much of the second half of the book to Smuts's command of British imperial forces, including thousands of newly arrived South African troops in the German East Africa (GEA) campaign – ultimately the longest campaign of the entire war – during 1916. *Botha, Smuts and the Great War* shows that negative portrayals of Smuts's performance in this theatre began early with a memoir by Richard Meinertzhagen who had served as a British intelligence officer in GEA and a biography by inter-war era British writer and iconoclast HC Armstrong. According to Katz, more recent 'British historians' (p. 252) Hew Strachan and Ross Anderson continued unwarranted criticisms of Smuts's leadership in East Africa, which were then repeated by other writers in works of synthesis. Katz identifies several instances when these 'British historians' left out important passages of primary source documents and even made minor changes to a quotation to make Smuts look bad. For Katz, the GEA campaign became the scene of a clash between two very different ways of war: the British approach of directive command and frontal attack, and the Boer method of flexible command and sweeping manoeuvres meant to render enemy positions untenable without incurring many casualties. For example, as Katz describes, while the British mounted a failed frontal attack on German positions around Salaita Hill on the GEA–Kenya border just before the arrival of Smuts, the South African commander eventually outflanked the position causing the Germans to withdraw southward into their colony. According to Katz, Smuts's distinctly South African approach enabled British imperial forces invading from Kenya assisted by Belgian and Rhodesian contingents entering from other directions to occupy most of GEA by the start of 1917 when he departed for Britain to participate in the Imperial War Conference.

Nevertheless, Katz does not provide entirely sufficient counters to the principal criticisms of Smuts's campaign in GEA. These criticisms include that sweeping movements facilitated the German strategy of endless withdrawals that bogged down Entente (Allied) forces and led to a drawn-out war resulting in mass starvation of civilians, and that he neglected logistics and particularly medical support in a region where tropical disease ravaged his mostly white South African troops who were particularly vulnerable. Katz's claim that the Germans would not have stood and fought a pitched battle is reasonable but speculative, and the idea that Smuts bore less responsibility for the health disaster than subordinate officers because he 'led from the front' (p. 160) is unconvincing.

Focused on operational history, *General Jan Smuts and His First World War in Africa* uses technical military terms, such as 'interior and exterior lines' (p. 64), and 'trading space for time' (p. 70) in a way that helps the reader understand the GSWA and GEA campaigns better. Overall, though, Katz never discusses or reviews the broad concept of a way of war that is central to his argument and presents an oversimplified portrayal of the British approach, including the debunked Chateau Generals myth<sup>1</sup> and casts allegedly incompetent British generals and seemingly dishonest British writers and historians in the dramatic role of persecuting a South African hero. Interestingly, South African historian,

Bill Nasson, has voiced some of the same criticisms of Smuts as Katz's 'British historians' but is highlighted here as posing important questions for would-be biographers. This well-written and engaging military biography acknowledges some failings in Smuts, such as his ignoring signs of an imminent Boer uprising in 1914, but occasionally borders on hagiography or an almost idolised version of Smuts.

The book by Antonio Garcia and Ian van der Waag examines the close relationship between Prime Minister Louis Botha and his right-hand man, Smuts, during the First World War. As the authors point out, it is difficult to disentangle the activities of the two leaders during this era. One of the main points of the book is that the combined leadership of Botha and Smuts transformed South Africa during the First World War, setting many of the international and domestic policies of the new country. As the authors emphasise, Botha and Smuts complemented each other well as the former was a big farmer with a warm smile, full of emotion and charisma, appealing to rural Boers, while the latter was physically small, highly intelligent, formally educated at Cambridge but perceived as arrogant. Starting the book with contemporary calls for the removal of statues of Botha and Smuts from public spaces in South Africa and Britain, the authors clearly present their subjects as flawed men or 'men of their time' (p. 135) who failed to address the political aspirations of the South African black majority ushering in racist policies, such as the Natives Land Act of 1913, that entrenched white minority rule. That said, most of *Botha, Smuts and the Great War* deals with white politics in the early years of the Union – and particularly the context of the First World War where Boers who had been defeated by Britain a dozen or so years earlier were now called upon to support the empire. There is a great deal of discussion of the wartime Union elections, which saw Botha and Smuts of the South African Party who wanted to fight for Britain to gain additional territory in the region, struggle to retain political power given opposition from the new Afrikaner (Boer) National Party favouring neutrality and greater independence. Richly peppered with quotations from letters between Botha and Smuts, as well as correspondence with their respective wives and friends, Garcia and Van der Waag show how the two leaders collaborated to overcome the Boer rebellion and conquer GSWA, and then how they maintained long-distance communication once Smuts went off to East Africa and then Britain where he became an important trouble-shooter for the wartime government. The sections on Smuts in Britain, and Smuts and Botha at Versailles where their warning not to punish Germany too harshly was ignored are particularly fascinating. Compared to Katz's book, *Botha, Smuts and the Great War* is less about military strategy and tactics although these are not absent, and more about the interaction between war and politics. The work ends with Botha's death in 1919 and Smuts inheriting a 'poisoned chalice' (p. 267) as the second South African prime minister who lacked his predecessor's charm and connections that would have been useful in engaging the bitterly divided white electorate thus pointing to a troubled future.

*Botha, Smuts and the Great War* is based on meticulous and detailed archival research, much of which is original, but there are places, such as the section on the South African Native Labour Contingent where the extensive primary source citations seem superfluous repeating what existing scholarly works already cover. Some readers may find this highly specialised work frustrating, as it mentions many now little-known white South African

and British politicians and personalities of the period without much explanation. While the book mentions some black South African leaders, such as Sol Plaatje, it is surprising that Walter Rubusana – the only black elected legislator of the era serving in the Cape provincial legislature from 1910 to 1914, and who played a considerable role in the rise of African nationalist politics – is ignored. Seeing the First World War as an opportunity for black South Africans to earn political rights, Rubusana wrote to Botha in 1914 offering to recruit a 5 000-strong front-line military corps but was turned down given white fears over arming the subject majority.<sup>2</sup>

Criticism aside, both books cover some of the same ground but do so in different ways and make important contributions to South African First World War history updating a considerable although aging historiography on Botha and Smuts. Anyone interested in the First World War in Africa, and particularly the role of these prominent South African leaders, should read *General Jan Smuts and His First World War in Africa* as well as *Botha, Smuts and the Great War*.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> F Davies & G Maddocks, *Bloody Red Tabs: General Officer Casualties of the Great War 1914-1918* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2014).
  - <sup>2</sup> B Nasson, 'War Opinion in South Africa, 1914', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 23, 2 (1995), 256; T Winegard, *Indigenous Peoples of the British Dominions and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 76–77.
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