

**F C ERASMUS AND THE POLITICS OF
SOUTH AFRICAN DEFENCE**

1948-1959

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ABSTRACT

FC Erasmus became South Africa's defence minister in 1948 after two decades as a leading political organiser for the National Party. Although an architect of the Nationalists' post-war election 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 Smuts government and replacing them with party supporters. As a result the military often lost experienced and talented officers. Erasmus felt that the armed services had been too British in ethos and appearance. He inaugurated tighter regulations on bi-lingualism, reintroduced boer rank titles, launched new uniforms and original medals and decorations, to the acclaim of the volk. His purpose was to have a defence force which was uniquely South African. Many of his policies came under attack not only from the United Party but also groups such as the Torch Commando and the veterans organisations.

With the apparent lack of an imminent military threat to the apartheid government Erasmus never received substantial budgetary allocations from finance ministers. The defence force, one without conscription, remained small with largely antiquated equipment for the important air and land forces. However by the decade's end the navy was gradually receiving modern ships under the terms of the Simonstown agreement, which Erasmus had negotiated with Britain. The events of the Sharpeville crisis, just after Erasmus left defence, demonstrated that the armed forces as moulded by the minister were in poor condition to assist the civil power in suppressing disturbances.

Overseas Erasmus hoped to increase the acceptability of the Union as a defence partner among Western countries by providing personnel for the Berlin Air Lift and the Korean conflict and promising a contingent for the Middle East. He attempted unsuccessfully to instigate anti-communist alliances for the land and maritime defence of Africa when the European powers were leaving the continent. These actions were primarily to obtain political support for the Union, whose prestige was rapidly decreasing as apartheid became better known. The external initiatives with the exception of the Simonstown naval agreements were not lasting.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACF	-	Active Citizen Force
ADO	-	African Defence Organisation
ANC	-	African National Congress
ANZUS	-	Australia, New Zealand and United States Treaty Organisation
AP	-	Afrikaner Party
C-in-C	-	Commander in Chief
CENTO	-	Central Treaty Organisation
CF	-	Citizen Force
CGS	-	Chief of the General Staff
CID	-	Committee on Imperial Defence or Criminal Investigation Department of the South African Police
CRO	-	Commonwealth Relations Office
DMR	-	Die Middellandse Regiment
DFC	-	Distinguished Flying Cross
DSO	-	Distinguished Service Order
GNP	-	Gesuiwerde (Purified) Nasionale Party
HMS	-	Her Majesty's Ship
HMSAS	-	Her Majesty's South African Ship
HNP	-	Herenigde (Reconstituted) Nasionale Party
KWV	-	Kooperatiewe Wynmakers Vereniging (Cooperative Winegrowers Association)
MAP	-	Military Assistance Program (US)
MEDO	-	Middle East Defence Organisation
MP	-	Member of Parliament
NATO	-	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCO	-	Non-Commissioned Officer
NGK	-	Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church)
NP	-	National Party/ Nasionale Party
OB	-	Ossewa Brandwag (Oxwagon Sentinels)
OBE	-	Officer of the Order of the British Empire
PF	-	Permanent Force
RN	-	Royal Navy
SAAF	-	South African Air Force
SABC	-	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SABRA	-	South African Bureau for Racial Affairs
SADF	-	South African Defence Force
SAN	-	South African Navy
SANDF	-	South African National Defence Force
SANF	-	South African Naval Forces
SANLAM	-	Suid-Afrikaanse Nasionale Lewensassuransie Maatskappy (South African National Life Assurance Company)
SANTAM	-	Suid-Afrikaanse Nasionale Trustassuransie Maatskappy (South African National Trust Company)

SAP	-	South African Police
SAPA	-	South African Press Association
SAS	-	South African Ship
SEATO	-	South East Asia Treaty Organisation
UDF	-	Union Defence Force
UK	-	United Kingdom
UN	-	United Nations
UNISA	-	University of South Africa
UP	-	United Party
US	-	United States

PREFACE

This dissertation deals with the career of Frans Christiaan Erasmus, who became minister of defence in the DF Malan government. The main focus of the study is from 1948 to late 1959 when Erasmus in the portfolio was attempting to make the armed services more "national". In parallel he was undertaking initiatives internationally in the security field to increase the Union's participation in the anti-communist struggle of the West. To understand the changes made and the context in which Erasmus pursued his programme, there is in addition an exploration of South Africa's defence policies in the years before the Nationalists came to power and the attitude of the party towards these.

Many of the primary materials used for the narrative have come from the Documentation Service of the South African Defence Department. Of considerable interest among these were the ministerial papers of Erasmus and also his successor, JJ Fouche, who was obliged to restore morale to the defence force after the difficult Erasmus years. Other valuable papers were those of the secretaries for defence in the 1950s, Herbert Cuff and JP de Villiers, and of the military liaison officers at the South African High Commission, London. Acknowledgement of thanks must be given to Lieutenant - Commander Neil Bredenkamp, Steve de Agrela and Louise Jooste of the Service for their considerable assistance to me in obtaining departmental materials over a five year period.

Among South African archives utilised, and whose staff I would also like to thank, were those of the Institute for Contemporary History at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, the Killie Campbell Library, Durban and the University of South Africa (UNISA), Pretoria. The Institute holds the historical files of the National Party including an impressive range of political pamphlets, many of which originated when Erasmus was secretary of the party's federal council and chairman of its information committee. The Institute has the personal documentation of Eric Louw, the Union's external affairs minister from 1955 to 1963, a few papers of Erasmus and also some of JGN Strauss, the leader of the United Party between 1950 and 1956. Killie Campbell holds the papers of Heaton Nicholls who was the opposition's defence spokesman in the senate in the initial five years of the Malan

government and those of EG Malherbe, Smuts's director of military intelligence during World War II. UNISA is the depository for the documentation of the United Party since its demise in 1977. The papers of party luminaries such as Sir de Villiers Graaff, R Pilkington Jordan, Lewis Gay, and Badenhorst Durrant who were interested in defence issues show the very critical view of the official opposition to the manner in which Erasmus was handling his portfolio. The Archives also holds the Willem Kleynhans files on the War Veterans Torch Commando. The library at UNISA in addition has a wide range of South African and overseas daily newspapers on microfilm. Use was made of the Cullen Library of the University of the Witwatersrand, particularly its collection of public documentation such as Hansard and government gazettes, and the South African Library for appropriate periodicals of the 1950s. The University of Cape Town archives provided the papers of the United Party and later Progressive Party politician, Harry Lawrence. While in Cape Town I was privileged to peruse the private files of Brigadier HJ Bronkhorst through the kind permission of his daughter, Mrs Linda Griffiths of Constantia. Unfortunately I was able to have only a brief conversation with the Brigadier just a few hours before his death in 1993. For secondary sources extensive use was made of the library facilities at Rhodes University, the University of the Witwatersrand, the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University and those of Trinity College, Dublin.

As the Union was still an important member of the Commonwealth up to the early 1960s and as its principal defence partner was the United Kingdom, the papers of the Commonwealth Relations Office and armed services departments to be found in the Public Record Office, London were of particular benefit. The large British diplomatic mission in the Union, which included a substantial military liaison staff, as well as Whitehall closely monitored political events in South Africa. They were keenly interested in the state of the defence forces in the Union particularly as Erasmus pledged land and air forces to Middle East defence and sought the transfer of the Simonstown naval base. Though the United States was in association with the Union's security arrangements to a much lesser extent than Britain Erasmus attempted to forge a relationship with the West's leading power to garner diplomatic support for Pretoria. The United States National Archives provided materials from the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Department of State. These clearly showed that there was

a decided lack of interest on the part of America's senior policymakers in being affiliated with a minority regime increasingly unacceptable on the African continent. The Canadian National Archives holds the records of Canada's diplomats in the Union in the period.. The despatches to and from Ottawa provided valuable background details on the South African political scene. The observations of envoys such as High Commissioner TWL MacDermott in the 1950s were so lucid and informative that they were reproduced for reading by British ministers. I would like to thank the staffs of the various archives overseas for their very kind assistance.

As important for the dissertation as the materials in libraries and archives were the interviews and personal statements in letters by South African political and military personalities who were familiar with the Erasmus era. Their testimonies, besides furnishing additional data, gave a more rounded view of the man and his policies. My appreciation must go to the following individuals who either wrote to me or allowed me to interview them. They are Commandant-General RC Hiemstra and Admiral HH Biermann, both of whom held the top military post in South Africa, Vice-Admiral RA Edwards, General Bob Rogers, Lieutenant-General HJ Martin, Lieutenant-General Ian Gleeson, Lieutenant-General Keith Coster, Vice-Admiral SC Biermann, Major-General Edward Pienaar, Brigadier Frans Erasmus, son of the minister, Brigadier Deon Fourie, Brigadier Pieter de Vos, Colonel Denzil Loveland, Commandant WG Kingwill, Commandant Ian Logie, Commander Charles Curtis, Commander Gideon Joubert, Commander WM Bisset, Major Lionel Murray, Professor Piet Cillie. Professor Willem Kleynhans, Mr PW Botha, Sir de Villiers Graaff, Mr Vause Raw, Dr Brand Fourie, a former secretary for external affairs, Ambassador Donald Sole, Ambassador FD Tothill, the late Dr Leif Egeland, the Union's envoy in London between 1948 and 1950, Mr CWC van Heerden, the minister's private secretary, Dr Marais Steyn, Dr Gideon Jacobs, Mr Willem Steenkamp, Mr Hamish Paterson, Mr Mark Coghlan, Mrs Linda Griffiths and Mr Dan O'Meara.

A number of individuals assisted me with various aspects of the production of this work. I would like to thank Mrs Marilena Casalin and Miss Nickie Nuppenau for their help in translating long passages of documentation from the original Afrikaans. Mr Peter Hind in London was able to arrange for the photocopying and postage to South Africa of many of the

documents identified by me in the Public Record Office. My wife, Anne, has been of superb help since this project began in 1990. For most of the period she spent many hours typing the drafts of various chapters which were subsequently sent on to Grahamstown for comment. She and my daughter, Emily, have consistently given me great encouragement and had commendable understanding of my need to travel frequently from our Johannesburg base to seek materials or conduct interviews in various parts of the Republic or overseas.

Three academics who were closely involved with assisting me in the thesis process must be mentioned and thanked. Professor George Carter, formerly head of the Rhodes University Academic Skills Programme, in his wonderfully persuasive manner, urged me to apply to do a doctorate soon after I arrived in South Africa on a posting as British Council Assistant Director. The late Professor Chris Hummel was my first supervisor from 1990 to 1994. Chris kept up my enthusiasm for this project particularly in the early years when I was working full-time in Johannesburg. He was a dear friend to Anne and myself and he is much missed. Paul Maylam has been a thoughtful guide for me through the intricacies of the thesis process during the last three years. He has been most helpful in ensuring that the final submission of this dissertation would be of the highest quality. From him I have learned that the close study of an historical figure can be marvellously rewarding. The constant support he has given has been greatly appreciated.

INTRODUCTION

On 8 January 1995 the *Star* newspaper of Johannesburg devoted nearly a full page to an article by Rocky Williams of the Military Research Group about an almost forgotten South African defence minister, Frans Christiaan Erasmus. Under a banner headline reading "Night of the Midnight Riders" its secondary heading read "Defence Restructuring: A New Government Would do Well to Bear in Mind the Lessons of the Erasmus Purges of the Fifties". After describing the removal of politically unsympathetic senior officers in 1953 ("the midnight ride") Williams outlined the diminution of the British heritage in the military corporate culture, the vendetta of the minister against the air force, the substitution of Nationalist officers, often without combat experience, for those who had supported Smuts in World War II, the enhancement of the commandos at the expense of the more traditional citizen force and other features of Erasmus's management of the defence department. Williams believed that the effects of Erasmus's overall policy were to discard immense reserves of experience, tradition, credibility and "severely undermine morale at all levels of the armed forces". He warned that the legacy of forty years ago needed to be appreciated by the new ANC government:

The armed forces - possibly more than any other apparatus of the State - tend to weather institutional restructuring least well.... Ill-considered intrusions into the military realm can produce unhappy consequences. Political appointments, for example, (especially if conducted in an unscientific manner) can substantially undermine the internal cohesion and morale of the armed forces.

...The position of Minister of Defence during a volatile and highly politicised transition requires careful consideration.... It should demand someone with proven strategic management facilitation and negotiation skills and a high level of sensitivity.¹

This recent interest in Erasmus resulted from the recognition that the marked changes introduced by him between 1948 and 1959 were set in the context of a profound change in the national body politic, as in 1994. The victory of the Nationalists under Malan in 1948 brought in an era of almost undiluted Afrikaner domination in many spheres of South African life including defence. It was a period of ideological commitment to the advancement and protection of the volk, what Dunbar Moodie has described as the Afrikaner Civil Religion.²

¹ *The Star*, 8 January 1995.

² T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1975).

Erasmus was a dedicated advocate of Afrikaner nationalism, with twenty years' experience as a leading party activist before becoming a minister. He saw in his portfolio the possibility of creating a "national" defence force, one in which Afrikaners would feel at home. His policy objective was essentially geared to domestic politics. This was an "affirmative action" programme spearheaded by the National Party. He was clearly dismissive of claims by English-speakers or blacks that they also should share equally in the national defence role. As Cynthia Enloe has noted in her study of ethnicity in divided societies and its relationship to state security:

Military and state elites have a strong incentive to sustain intra-communal cohesion for the sake of maximising state survival. One of the principal vehicles for creating and strengthening such bonds of trust and cooperation among persons of the same ethnic groups has been the political party.... Researchers have discovered that political parties, one of the hallmarks of political modernisation, can be critical agents for ethnic mobilisation.³

Erasmus took the view that the safeguarding of the "tribal" state depended, in Enloe's words, "on there being military commanders and civilian policy-makers who share ethnic affiliations and work closely together".⁴

During the 1950s Erasmus changed profoundly the ethos, appearance and the composition of the defence force away from its primarily English-speaking and British-oriented prototype. However certain scholars have tended to overlook the period. Kenneth Grundy, in his work published in the mid-1980s - *The Militarization of South African Politics* - passes over the interval of 1948 - 1959 in just one page and with no mention of Erasmus.⁵ Even the South African political scientist, Philip Frankel, in his study - *Pretoria's Praetorians - Civil-Military Relations in South Africa* - does not explore in detail what proved to be the foundation for the vast extension of military influence and power into the civil state. Possibly this lack of interest in the period has been caused by the belief that in national security terms it was an interregnum between South Africa's substantial international involvement in World War II and the era of lengthy internal disturbances signalled by Sharpeville. The military

³ Cynthia Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers: State Security in a Divided Society* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), p.163.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.165.

⁵ Kenneth Grundy, *The Militarization of South African Politics* (London: IB Tauris, 1986).

leadership of the "counter-insurgency" and "total onslaught" periods, however, had been shaped in a pattern formed by Erasmus and in an atmosphere, which he promoted, of close identification between the armed services and the apartheid state. Despite reforms introduced by successors Fouché and Botha the defence force was perceived by many up to the early 1990s as partisan, with a military elite reflecting the values and aspirations of the Nationalist leadership. It was hardly coincidental that a chief of the defence staff, Magnus Malan, son of a leading National Party member of parliament of the 1950s, AI Malan, should become defence minister immediately upon leaving the forces in October 1980. Malan was a military "child" of the Erasmus era who spent his formative years as a commissioned officer experiencing the dramatic shift away from the traditional neutrality of the military leadership. A political overview of the growth of the defence force from the nation's colonial era to the present decade has been recently undertaken by Annette Seegers.⁶ She has, however, set Erasmus in the context of the total security apparatus, including the police and the intelligence agencies. Her study is probably the most concentrated so far on the 1950s though there are notable errors of fact.⁷

Erasmus was probably the last defence minister actively to seek a role for the South African military out-of-region before the age of international isolation. This effort was linked to the need to obtain international acceptability for a white-supremacist government in a

⁶ Annette Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996).

⁷ Seegers, in her narrative, claims erroneously that the idea of a defence council originated in Erasmus's 1957 defence act when it had actually been authorised under section 29 of the 1912 act; she has the Italian campaign in which the Union's 6th armoured division participated as ending in April 1944, rather than on the correct date, 2 May 1945; the dismissal of Poole from active military service is placed as occurring after that of Len Beyers; the Berlin airlift which involved the SAAF has July 1949 as a start date when the Soviet restrictions on the city ended on 12 May 1949; the purchase of Vampire jets has Canada as the supplier rather than Britain; Charles de Water is credited with the concept of an "African Charter" when in fact its author was DF Malan in 1945. In one passage Seegers speaks of "the *historically* [my italics] weak position of the Cape" in the National Party of the 1950s. In actuality for the twenty years from 1934 and the creation of the modern National Party the Cape was the centre of Nationalist power. The author has Erasmus authorising visits by delegations in the wake of the 1948 election to the German military to seek out "new, appropriate UDF insignia and symbols". This could not have occurred as the West German armed forces were not constituted until May 1955 when restrictions on the federal republic's sovereignty were lifted by the three western occupying powers. Unfortunately there are more instances of error in Seegers's work.

period of rapid emancipation for colonised peoples worldwide. The initiatives included pledges of support to the United States and Britain, the attempts to create a defence organisation for Africa against communism, and the despatch of the air force to the Korean conflict. Geoffrey Berridge has undertaken the first concentrated examination⁸ of the actions taken by Erasmus with regard to the defence of the Union and Africa in conjunction with the European nations holding territories on the continent. He has relied heavily on British archival materials, giving his study a somewhat London-based perspective, particularly as he did not have access to the ministerial papers of Erasmus. Nor did he use extensively the records of the UDF/SADF. Moreover there is little on how the minister was attempting to draw the United States into a military relationship for the protection of southern Africa parallel to his overtures to the metropolitan powers. Berridge does not explore the internal deterioration of the UDF in the 1950s. The poor state of the Union's armed forces during the decade was an important consideration by potential defence partners in not associating themselves too closely to the South Africans.

Peter Henshaw, in his thesis on the political, economic and military relationships between the Union and Britain and the Commonwealth between 1945 and 1956, devotes some of his study to the actions of Erasmus.⁹ Particular emphasis is placed on the efforts by Britain to obtain South African participation in Middle East defence and on the issue of the transfer of Simonstown. However again, as in the case of Berridge's work, the internal political background is not painted in. James Barber and John Barratt in their joint study of Pretoria's foreign policy between 1945 and 1988 have produced a masterly and balanced view on South Africa's road to isolation from the time of Smuts when the prestige of the Union was at its height.¹⁰ They cover the role of defence in the 1950s within the context of Nationalist government efforts under three prime ministers to continue to be accepted as partners in the Western alliance. Again, the issues of Middle East defence, the Simonstown agreement, and the drive for an African defence organisation are covered but not in particular detail.

⁸ Geoffrey Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and "African Defence": The Rise and Fall of the White Entente, 1948-1960* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

⁹ Peter Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth, 1945 - 1956", unpublished Ph.D Thesis (Cambridge University, 1987).

¹⁰ James Barber and John Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy: The Search for Status and Security, 1945-1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

What has not been examined is Erasmus himself and his role in policymaking. While in the department of defence the minister was given great leeway, particularly by premiers Malan and Strijdom, in conducting national security on the lines that he preferred. He was in essence guided only by the tenets of Afrikaner Nationalism - the advancement of the volk, anti-communism, the philosophy of apartheid. The politics of post -1934 South Africa shaped Erasmus. His programme of appointing Nationalist officers, the acquisition of Simonstown, the idea of a defensive alliance for the continent and other initiatives were all linked to domestic considerations. His many years as a party political organiser undoubtedly narrowed his outlook on wider national considerations.

In the case of Erasmus one needs to ask whether a person without breadth of experience should have been permitted by the three prime ministers he served to operate in such a sensitive sphere. Defence is normally viewed as more bi-partisan and less controversial than other fields of government activity. It is generally accepted that opposition parties as well as the governing administration believe in the preservation of the state and protection of the nation. Almost uniquely in the history of peacetime South Africa there was a substantial unease in many quarters in the handling of the portfolio by Erasmus, particularly over the combat worthiness of the armed services. He appeared to believe that non-Nationalists could be marginalised from assuming a role in national defence and this in a period when all of white South Africa was under increasing pressure internationally. At issue is whether the apartheid state could have afforded at such a critical juncture to have a minister intimately involved in security so enveloped in ethnic-based politics. It may also be questioned why Erasmus, an individual without foreign experience, was allowed to deal so extensively with the Western allies in a decade of decreasing acceptance of the Union when they needed to be subtly cultivated. Does one see in Erasmus other deficiencies of the Nationalists - their short-sightedness in relation to the other population groups, simplistic political views, and a lack of realism over the long-term detrimental effects on national cohesion of apartheid policies? In the context of Nationalist politics one has to examine whether Erasmus was an inappropriate guardian of national security.

CHAPTER ONE

ERASMUS, DEFENCE AND THE NATIONAL PARTY IN THE YEARS OF OPPOSITION

Erasmus the Political Organiser

On becoming a minister in the Malan cabinet in 1948, Erasmus had already been involved with the organisational structure of the Nationalist party for two decades. When he retired from government in 1961 *Die Burger* said that it would be difficult to think of future Cape party battles without the domineering presence of Erasmus.¹ For it was in the Cape that the Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party rump of Malan supporters in 1934 was centred after the schism with Hertzog. The provincial body under Erasmus's direction acted as the vanguard of Afrikaner nationalism during the next fourteen years of political opposition. Many of the party's policies on matters of race, national identity and Afrikaner advancement were shaped in the period by this southern grouping. After Erasmus entered full-time party activity in 1928 he was appreciated by political friends and foes alike as a skilled organiser rather than as an original thinker. His aptitude in dealing with the routine business of party affairs propelled him from his provincial base to the position of secretary of the party's federal council with a nation-wide brief. In the wake of the 1948 election the efforts of Erasmus were credited by many party activists as crucial in securing their victory.

The future defence minister was born in the farming district of Merweville to the north of Beaufort West in January 1896. After attending high school in Worcester he went to the Normal College in Cape Town to qualify as a teacher. He spent a short interval teaching on the Rand before returning to his native province to obtain a BA and LLB at the University of Cape Town. On completing legal studies he served as registrar to Justice EF Watermeyer and Sir Malcolm Searle, judge president of the Cape.² From 1925 to 1927 he practised at the

¹ *Die Burger*, 24 July 1961.

² CJ Beyers (ed.), *Dictionary of South African Biography, Vol. V* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1987), p. 247.

provincial bar in Cape Town and became well known in legal circles as a convinced Afrikaner nationalist and republican.³

In 1927, during the period of the Nationalist/Labour pact government of General Hertzog, the 31-year-old Erasmus was appointed as assistant attorney-general of South West Africa. Despite the encouraging prospect of a glittering career in the judicial field he left the post in the following year to take up a full-time position as an organiser and assistant secretary in the Cape National Party. His energy and ability were quickly noted by the party's provincial leader, Dr DF Malan, the interior minister. By 1930 Erasmus had been promoted as chief secretary of the Cape party⁴ and in the same year was made secretary of the federal council which brought together the leadership of the four provincial party organisations. The council considered all matters of national importance and was vested with the responsibility for political propaganda and relations with the press. Through the operations of the council the four party bodies kept in touch with each other and liaised with the parliamentary representation.⁵ With this Union-wide involvement Erasmus had by 1933 become one of Malan's closest and most valued lieutenants. He shared this relationship with AL Geyer, editor of the influential *Die Burger*, and the prominent Western Cape businessman, WA Hofmeyr, the chairman of SANLAM and SANTAM.⁶

As a result of Hertzog's negotiations with the leader of the South African Party, Jan Smuts, in March 1933 a coalition government was formed. Hertzog remained as premier but with Smuts as his deputy and minister of justice. There was great suspicion, on the part of Malan, of this alignment between traditional Afrikaner nationalism and the empire-minded and English capitalist Smuts grouping. He refused to accept a front-bench position in the new ministry. Together with close party colleagues he kept his counsel until the coalition administration had been constituted and had won the general election in the following May. Not surprisingly the coalition captured 138 of the 150 seats,⁷ though Malan nearly lost his

³ Jeremy Lawrence, *Harry Lawrence* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1978), p.37.

⁴ Henry Gibbs, *Twilight in South Africa* (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1950), p.192.

⁵ Gwendolen Carter, *The Politics of Inequality: South Africa Since 1948* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), p.233.

⁶ Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, p.132.

⁷ GHL Le May, *The Afrikaners: An Historical Interpretation* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p.170.

Calvinia seat to the Farmers and Workers Party.⁸ The poll provided Erasmus with an entrée into active parliamentary politics as a Nationalist winning against two independent candidates in Moorreesburg.⁹ This was a constituency set in the midst of the Swartland, a major wheat-growing area located north of Cape Town and stretching to Saldanha. Until his retirement nearly thirty years later, this was his parliamentary base with increasing majorities in each of the subsequent five elections.

In the wake of the national poll, political discussions focused not only on the continuation of the coalition but the formal merging of the two governing parties. Within Nationalist structures in the Transvaal, Orange Free State and Natal, steps were afoot for this purpose. Malan was alarmed. In an interview in *Die Burger* he berated fusion or samesmelting as "unnatural of every principle for which the Nationalists have striven in the past".¹⁰ Fusion would permit big capital, particularly mining capital, to become dominant in the new political grouping resulting in the replacement of non or semi-skilled labour by cheaper black workers. South African neo-colonial dependence on the British Empire, he felt, would continue making a mockery of the Union's formal political independence.¹¹ Malan immediately undertook steps to ensure that his provincial organisation would set its face against fusion. Erasmus was despatched to districts around the Cape as far apart as Wellington and Victoria West, cajoling and persuading local party leaders and members to remain loyal to the Malan line. Branches were urged by the chief secretary to send delegates who opposed samesmelting to the crucial Port Elizabeth provincial party congress in October 1933.¹² There the prime minister and the only Cape Nationalist in the cabinet, AP Fourie, were given a rough reception with heckling led by Erasmus and a number of the younger MPs.¹³ The firm leadership of Malan and the efforts of Erasmus over a number of weeks resulted in only 30 of the 170 delegates voting for fusion. The Cape became the sole National

⁸ Merle Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid: South Africa, 1910-1984* (Aldershot: Gower Publishing Co. Ltd., 1985), p.271.

⁹ PW Coetzer and JH Le Roux (eds.), *Die Nasionale Party -Vol. III* (Bloemfontein: Institute for Contemporary History, 1982), p.340.

¹⁰ *South Africa*, 8 September 1933.

¹¹ Hermann Giliomee, "The Growth of Afrikaner Identity" in Heribert Adam and Hermann Giliomee(eds), *Ethnic Power Mobilised: Can South Africa Change?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 109.

¹² Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, p.134

¹³ *Ibid.*

Party organisation to reject decisively the Hertzog programme. Not long afterwards Erasmus facetiously commented that a merger with the South African Party would be acceptable if it ridded itself of "the Hoggenheimers, Oppenheimers, Sons of England, Caledonians and Empire Leaguers".¹⁴

By the beginning of 1934 the schism within Nationalist ranks was not yet final. Malan indicated to the premier that he was still prepared to come to an accommodation. The most contentious issues centred on national sovereignty in relationship to the British Empire. On 4 February the Cape leader received an assurance from Hertzog that the new party would permit republican propaganda, work towards the ending of appeals to the privy council in London and seek the appointment of a South African as governor-general. While Malan appeared to be satisfied with these pledges the members of the Cape provincial head committee were not. They requested Erasmus to initiate correspondence with the prime minister to ask for clarification on a number of salient points in regard to the Union's autonomy. Between 9 and 15 February six letters were exchanged and were subsequently printed in the press.¹⁵ The head committee remained dissatisfied with Hertzog's replies. The prime minister was in a delicate position. Smuts and his colleagues had to be reconciled and reassured that Hertzog was not pandering to a radical Nationalist element.¹⁶ On 22 February Malan unequivocally stated that any sympathy he might have had for fusion had dissipated. However he and his acolytes would remain on the government bench for the balance of the parliamentary session.

At the meeting of the federal council in June 1934 Malan and six others voted against fusion while thirteen members agreed to merge with the Smuts group to form the United South African National Party or United Party (UP).¹⁷ The followers of Malan constituted Die Gesuiwerde Nasionale Party (GNP) and held their federal council meeting the following November with Erasmus again as secretary. The new party was to hold distinctive positions based on complete national sovereignty, neutrality in any war involving Britain, the right of

¹⁴ *South Africa*, 1 December 1933.

¹⁵ WK Hancock, *Smuts-The Fields of Force - Vol. II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p.287.

¹⁶ NM Stultz, *Afrikaner Politics in South Africa, 1934-1948* (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1974), p.30.

¹⁷ Dan O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1934-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p.48.

secession from the Empire, the indivisibility of the crown and the energetic promotion of Afrikaner interests. At the beginning of the parliamentary session in January 1935 the GNP sat for the first time to the left of the Speaker and formed the official opposition.

From these early days the Malanites had their power base in the Cape. Of their 19-member complement in the House of Assembly there was only one Transvaal MP, JG Strijdom. As chief secretary in the Cape Erasmus remained a close confidant of the party leader who designated him shadow defence spokesman. Unlike many members of parliament Erasmus had had no military experience and had exhibited no particular interest in the subject in the 1933 and 1934 parliamentary sessions. Indeed his maiden speech on 6 June 1933 dealt with government assistance to farmers, a subject of key interest for a member of an agrarian constituency.¹⁸ Later that month he questioned the posts and telegraphs minister on the extent of Afrikaans-language air time on a Cape Town radio station.¹⁹ He went on to admonish the coalition government for allowing the English-dominated mining houses to accumulate profits while querying whether appropriate benefit had accrued to the (white) mineworkers who had produced the wealth.²⁰ This marked anti-English and anti-capitalist bias, coupled with a solicitude for the status of the Afrikaans language and culture, endured with Erasmus throughout his career. A trait revealed in these early years was a penchant for designing uniforms, which came to full fruition from 1949 onwards. In 1934 he introduced an outfit for the Cape party's youth wing which consisted of an orange shirt and black cap. Within months it was discontinued, as the astute chief secretary concluded that the purchase price might deter potential young party supporters.²¹

The GNP followed the pre-1934 National Party pattern of permitting a high degree of autonomy to the provincial organisations. Each had distinct support bases, memberships, interests and ideological stances. A leader such as Strijdom in the Transvaal could wield greater authority and influence than the national leader.²² In the Cape the GNP encompassed a political alliance of Afrikaans-speaking wheat and fruit farmers of the Western Cape, Karoo wool and ostrich farmers, the Afrikaner petty bourgeoisie, poor whites around Knysna and

¹⁸ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 6 June 1933, column 382.

¹⁹ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 16 June 1933, column 1068.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, column 1084.

²¹ *South Africa*, 15 June 1935.

²² O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, p. 31.

George and the powerful financial interests centred on the companies led by WA Hofmeyr.²³ Die Nasionale Pers with its Cape Town flagship daily *Die Burger* gave the GNP energetic support. Its chief editor, Geyer, would frequently attend meetings of the party's parliamentary caucus throughout the 1930s and 1940s.²⁴ The newspaper's editorial offices occupied the same Cape Town thoroughfare, Keeromstraat, as the party's provincial headquarters. In the minds of many northern Nationalists there existed a too cosy relationship between the newspaper and the local structure.

Erasmus held sway over the nuts and bolts of the Cape party as Malan tended not to concern himself too much with organisational matters.²⁵ The chief secretary's exertions during 1933-34 had ensured that only 3% of the provincial membership had defected to the Hertzog camp.²⁶ The Cape became the best financed and regulated of the four provincial bodies. Members were obliged to pay an annual subscription of one shilling and sixpence. Besides setting the provincial organisation on a solid financial basis Erasmus and his staff were in a position to monitor where support was ebbing or growing. In collecting subscriptions they maintained close contact with Nationalist supporters, registered their concerns and kept records up to date. More full-time professional organisers were hired by Erasmus than in the other three provinces together.²⁷ One of those appointed in 1936 was the 20-year-old PW Botha, the future prime minister and state president. Botha found Erasmus a disciplined leader who was firm with opponents and holding fast to positions. The chief secretary could be moody but generally bore a friendly countenance and was influential in moulding Botha, the party organiser.²⁸ As a legacy of Erasmus's efforts the Cape in the wake of the 1948 election had a NP membership encompassing 120,000 or about one-fifth of white Afrikaners in the province.²⁹

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Interview with Professor Piet Cillie, Cape Town, 1 September 1994. Cillie was chief editor of the *Die Burger* in the 1950s and had been with the newspaper since 1934.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, p.50.

²⁷ Heribert Adam and Herman Giliomee, *The Rise and Crisis of Afrikaner Power* (Cape Town : David Philip Publishers, 1979), p.45.

²⁸ Dirk and Johanna De Villiers, *P.W.* (Kaapstad: Tafelberg-Uitgewers Beperk, 1984), pp. 34-5.

²⁹ Carter, *The Politics of Inequality*, p.221.

The character of the Cape party was quite distinct from that of the northern provinces. Southerners saw themselves as less brash, more tolerant and civilised than the Transvaalers and imbued with the spirit of compromise.³⁰ Ties of sympathy between the Cape Afrikaner and the coloured made the race issue less charged than in the north. The Transvaal party appeared less tolerant in, for example, barring membership to Jews until 1951.³¹ Outside the Cape republicanism was much stronger. Malan had been a belated convert to the cause of a republic, reflecting the reluctance of Cape farmers to isolate themselves from the British market.³² As a *gesuiwerde* Nationalist party was already dominant among Afrikaners in the Cape the Broederbond was noticeably less prominent in the south in comparison to the other regions where fusion was in the ascendant.³³ At some juncture Erasmus joined the Broederbond movement and was certainly a member upon entering government.³⁴

The Nationalist leadership in the mid-1930s targeted the Transvaal with its sole GNP member of Parliament as an area for expansion of the party's electoral base. A vital vehicle was to be an Afrikaans-language newspaper as other northern newspapers particularly the influential *Die Vaderland* supported Hertzog.³⁵ In September 1935 Erasmus was asked to join a committee seeking financial support for the launching of a daily.³⁶ By October 1937 *Die Transvaler* had been established with a former Stellenbosch academic, HF Verwoerd, appointed as editor.³⁷ The umbrella publishing organisation for the newspaper was Voortrekkerpers, whose board Erasmus was asked to join as a director. Erasmus was to remain on the board even while he was defence minister, with Strijdom as chairman until his death in 1958.³⁸ Erasmus's inclusion in the overall direction of Voortrekkerpers for so many

³⁰ Elaine Potter, *The Press as Opposition: The Political Role of South African Newspapers* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 147.

³¹ Hermann Giliomee, "The Leader and the Citizenry" in Robert Schrire (ed.), *Leadership in the Apartheid State: From Malan to De Klerk* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 110.

³² O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, p. 52.

³³ Dan O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years: The Apartheid State and the Politics of the National Party* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996), p.47.

³⁴ Ivor Wilkins and Hans Strydom, *The Broederbond: The Super Afrikaners* (London: Corgi Books, 1980), p.116.

³⁵ Le May, *The Afrikaners: An Historical Interpretation*, p.180.

³⁶ JL Basson, *JG Strijdom: Sy Politieke Loopbaan Van 1929 Tot 1948* (Pretoria: Wonderboom-Uitgewers, 1980), p.193.

³⁷ PW Coetzer and JH Le Roux, *Die Nasionale Party- Vol. IV* (Bloemfontein: The Institute for Contemporary History, 1982), p.29.

years clearly indicated that his political attitudes were acceptable to northern interests. This was despite the fact that Strijdom had not been assisted financially by the leading southern GNP capitalist, WA Hofmeyr, when *Die Transvaler* had run into financial difficulties in the early 1940s. This had left Strijdom with a deep distrust not only of Hofmeyr but of *Die Burger*, Nasionale Pers, SANLAM and, to a lesser extent, the Cape party.³⁹

In the late 1930s Erasmus was designated by Malan as an interlocutor with the Greyshirt movement, a fascist organisation. Founded in 1935 by Louis Weichart, a barber of German extraction, it appeared to hold similar positions to the Nationalists on key issues. In July 1937 the GNP had condemned fusion "liberalism" and labour "communism", both anathema to the Greyshirts. In a letter to the movement Erasmus stated that the Greyshirts had "very pertinently drawn the attention of the people to the Jewish problem".⁴⁰ The chief secretary was asked to negotiate with WB Laubscher, the organising secretary of the Greyshirts, to explore the possibilities of an electoral alliance.⁴¹ By late November 1937 the Nationalist leadership decided that it could not countenance the use of the swastika and the totalitarian aspects of the Greyshirt movement.⁴² Erasmus told Laubscher that "because of our South African character and constituency" a pact was not to be concluded.⁴³ The incident highlighted Malan's intention that the GNP would continue to position itself in the mainstream of the Union's parliamentary tradition, a stance he held in the later conflict with the Ossewa Brandwag (OB).

The UP government called the first general election since fusion in May 1938. As a result of the poll the Nationalists advanced to 27 seats from 19, capturing a growing proportion of Afrikaner votes, though there was no significant headway in the Transvaal.⁴⁴ The rural areas remained the rockbed of party support, with the GNP holding only three urban

³⁸ Potter, *The Press as Opposition*, p.73.

³⁹ O'Meara, *Volkskapialisme*, p. 105-6.

⁴⁰ Gibbs, *Twilight in South Africa*, p.193.

⁴¹ *South Africa*, 20 November 1937.

⁴² PW Coetzer and JH Le Roux, *Die Nasionale Party - Vol. IV*, p.131.

⁴³ *South Africa*, 20 November 1937.

⁴⁴ TRH Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History* (Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers, 1989), pp.306-8.

seats.⁴⁵ Fortuitously for Hertzog the polling had occurred three months before the outpouring of Afrikaner ethnic solidarity which commenced with the re-enactment of the Great Trek and the laying of the cornerstone of the Voortrekker monument.

Increased political fluidity in the Union's domestic politics commenced with the parliamentary debate on the declaration of war on 4 September 1939. The prime minister and 38 UP backers, mainly former Nationalists, supported neutrality in a war with Germany and were abetted by the GNP.⁴⁶ Smuts, more anglophile and internationally-minded, urged MPs to side with Britain and France which had commenced hostilities with the Nazi regime the previous day. The debate was won by the Smuts faction by a margin of thirteen votes and the deputy prime minister was asked by the governor-general, Sir Patrick Duncan, to form a new administration.⁴⁷ From this point Hertzog and his anti-war followers sat on the opposition benches. Quickly Malan and Erasmus made overtures to the former prime minister on political cooperation.⁴⁸ This resulted in the formation in January 1940 of the Herenidge Nasionale Party of Volksparty (HNP) with Hertzog as leader. The new grouping lasted barely a year with Hertzog increasingly disillusioned by the narrow Afrikaner nationalism espoused by those such as the Free State leader, CR Swart. And it was at the Free State congress that Hertzog finally resigned his leadership position over the issue of the rights of English-speakers in a future South African republic.⁴⁹ His lieutenant, NC Havenga, the former finance minister, was left to lead a new faction influenced by Hertzogite ideals - the Afrikaner Party (AP). Other fissures appeared in the HNP edifice when Oswald Pirow, the fusion defence minister, and 15 other Nationalist MPs formed a political group aligned ideologically with Germany's National Socialists, and called the New Order. Meanwhile the OB, originally formed in the late 1930s as an Afrikaner cultural organisation had greatly increased its strength. It was poised to enter the political arena led by a former administrator of the Orange Free State, JFJ van Rensburg.⁵⁰

In this period of political uncertainty Malan asked Erasmus early in 1941 to scrutinise the state of the HNP throughout the Union. The hoofleier was most conscious of the need for

⁴⁵ Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, p.272.

⁴⁶ Le May, *The Afrikaners: An Historical Interpretation*, p.180.

⁴⁷ Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History*, p.328.

⁴⁸ Coetzer and Le Roux, *Die Nasionale Party- Vol. IV*, p.290.

⁴⁹ Le May, *The Afrikaners: An Historical Interpretation*, p.193.

⁵⁰ Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History*, p.324.

Afrikaner unity as the party prepared for the 1943 election. Only the HNP, he contended, could adequately advance the cause of the volk.⁵¹ Within months Erasmus relayed to Malan the disturbing news that enthusiasm among the party membership was not high with many describing party congresses as "boring". Party structures were not keeping up with "modern conceptions of propaganda and organisation".⁵² Drawing on these findings Erasmus created the "group" system for the party, influenced by the cell system of the OB.⁵³ Emphasis was placed on leadership and party discipline with policies flowing down from the top echelons. New members were to be initiated into the HNP in a solemn ceremony encompassing the taking of an oath.⁵⁴ Under Erasmus the party organisation had begun to "clear the decks" for a major electoral leap. He was particularly involved in the campaign by the HNP against the OB from 1941 onwards. There was a concern on the part of Malan that the movement had impinged on his political fiefdom. In September 1941 Erasmus attended a meeting of the party leadership which determined that active measures were required with regards to van Rensburg and his organisation.⁵⁵ Within weeks Erasmus accused the OB of attempting to take control of *Die Transvaler*.⁵⁶ In HNP structures each functionary was obliged by the chief secretary to state whether he or she was an OB member.⁵⁷ Malan formally called upon all HNP members in October 1941 to resign from van Rensburg's movement.⁵⁸ Erasmus toured the Cape in support of the hoofleier attacking van Rensburg and calling on the party faithful to foreswear "the dangerous temptations" of the extra-parliamentary group.⁵⁹ Fortunately for the Nationalists the prospects of the OB waned with those of the Axis powers and its threat to the official opposition lessened as the 1943 election approached.

Erasmus was well aware of the political arithmetic for the poll. He had strenuously opposed in 1941 the extension of the franchise to the tens of thousands of South African

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p.333.

⁵² *South Africa*, 5 July 1941.

⁵³ Hancock, *Smuts: The Fields of Force -Vol. II*, p.298. A "group" would consist of about ten party members and there could be several groups in a party branch.

⁵⁴ *South Africa*, 5 July 1941.

⁵⁵ Dirk and Johanna De Villiers, *Paul Sauer* (Kaapstad: Tafelberg-Uitgewers Beperk, 1984), p.53.

⁵⁶ *Forum*, 25 October 1941.

⁵⁷ *South Africa*, 10 January 1942.

⁵⁸ O'Meara, *Volkskapitalisme*, p.130.

⁵⁹ Michael Roberts and AEG Trollip, *The South African Opposition, 1939-1945* (Cape Town: Longman, Green, 1947), p.110.

servicemen stationed outside the Union, calling it "the scandal of the session".⁶⁰ The HNP was well aware that most of the volunteers "up North" would be likely to support their war leader, Smuts. In the immediate aftermath of the voting Erasmus, in his official capacity as chief party organiser, attempted and failed in moves through the courts to disallow external service votes on the grounds of technical irregularities. These legal machinations delayed the final election results for several days.⁶¹ Though the HNP had only gained two extra seats it had become the sole standard bearer for Afrikaner nationalism within parliament. Havenga's AP lost all the 22 contests which it entered⁶² and New Order did not field candidates. Support for the UP by Afrikaners dropped from 40% to 32%,⁶³ making it increasingly dependent on English support.

In the final stages of the war Erasmus was appointed to the secretaryship of the party's central propaganda committee which co-ordinated information work.⁶⁴ One undertaking of the committee was the production of an English-language party weekly *New Age* to entice anglophone voters. This coincided with a playing down of the HNP's strident republicanism in its public statements. Not all elements of the party received this shift with approval. One prominent opponent was Eric Louw, a former diplomatic envoy in the United States, Britain, France and Italy. He had returned to Nationalist politics in the 1938 election winning the Cape seat of Beaufort West though temperamentally he had more in sympathy with the northern HNP. Besides being a confirmed republican he had a well deserved reputation as an acerbic debater. At the 1946 Cape party congress Louw accused Erasmus of influencing Malan away from the republican ideal,⁶⁵ presumably to make the HNP more amenable to English voters and Smuts-aligned Afrikaners. Louw's unhappiness with Erasmus manifested itself in another sphere. Though holding a Cape seat Louw had been continually blackballed in his attempts to join the Broederbond by the Keeromstraat leadership because of his "Transvaal" sympathies and close association with Strijdom.⁶⁶ Louw held an adversarial

⁶⁰ Gibbs, *Twilight in South Africa*, p.193.

⁶¹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 July 1943.

⁶² Kenneth Heard, *General Elections in South Africa, 1943 - 1970* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p.26.

⁶³ Le May, *The Afrikaners: An Historical Interpretation*, p.193.

⁶⁴ J.L. Basson, *J.G. Strijdom*, p.547.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.520.

⁶⁶ O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p.46.

attitude towards Erasmus after the 1948 election, an inclination which became even more marked after the former was appointed external affairs minister in 1955.

During the three years after the conclusion of World War II the Nationalists decided to develop the race issue as one on which they could build electoral support. The influx of blacks into the urban industrial areas after 1939 appeared to result in overcrowding, squatting and a proliferation of crime which stimulated fears among whites of "swamping". Voters in Natal had become obsessed with protecting their urban space by restricting Indian trade and property ownership.⁶⁷ In this atmosphere the HNP decided to promote itself as the only political party which could effectively counter the supposed threat to "white civilisation". A party commission was established under the chairmanship of the Cape MP, Paul Sauer, to prepare a race policy. His report advocated "total apartheid between whites and natives" as the "eventual ideal and goal" by the gradual extraction of blacks "from industries in white areas".⁶⁸ With their "apartheid" policy as a key component of their political armoury Malan and his associates hoped to contrast their definitive stance with the more ambiguous race position held by the UP.

By the late 1940s Erasmus was well established in the HNP as a fixer and conciliator. In late 1946 he was asked by Malan to meet Havenga, accompanied by a hostile Swart and Strijdom, to discuss a pact for the forthcoming election.⁶⁹ As a result of this initiative it was eventually agreed that the AP could contest 11 relatively safe seats unopposed by the Nationalists.⁷⁰ Malan sensed that this device would bring more Afrikaners into his fold and project a more moderate image with the inclusion of the Hertzogite Havenga and his followers. Despite his achievement Erasmus could still be assailed on occasion by party colleagues. He was criticised by Louw for his appointment of an English-speaker, RH McLeod, as the Nationalist candidate for the important Hottentots-Holland by-election. This was set for January 1947. Louw was concerned that little was known of the candidate and the

⁶⁷ William Beinart, *Twentieth Century South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.131.

⁶⁸ Deborah Posel, *The Making of Apartheid: Conflict and Compromise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p.58.

⁶⁹ *South Africa*, 7 December 1946.

⁷⁰ Rene De Villiers, "Afrikaner Nationalism" in Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson (eds.), *The Oxford History of South Africa-Vol II* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1971), p.385.

nomination had been announced by Erasmus's organisation in the press before clearance by the provincial head committee. At an acrimonious meeting of the Cape leadership Louw poured scorn on not only the chief secretary but also the party leader - "FCE's great protector (Malan) sits dead still and doesn't say a word".⁷¹ Even TE Donges, a Cape colleague took Erasmus to task for his action. McLeod was subsequently dropped. Not long afterwards Strijdom expressed his irritation with Erasmus and *Die Burger* for their evident lack of interest and enthusiasm for an important speech he had made on the race issue at Bethel.⁷²

The Hottentots-Holland by-election signalled an important swing to the Nationalists. For the electoral contest the UP had chosen the scion of a leading Cape family and baronet, Sir de Villiers Graaff, as its candidate. In the general election the government had held the seat with a 1200-vote majority. Despite these factors Erasmus decided to devote considerable financial and organisational resources in support of the HNP candidate, Hennie van Aarde. In the course of the campaign de Villiers Graaff was pursued from meeting to meeting by Erasmus and supporting staff, such as PW Botha, posing uncomfortable questions.⁷³ Van Aarde won the seat with a 635 vote majority.

As the Nationalists approached the general election the question of sufficient funding for the party became a priority for the chief secretary. Money was raised through subscriptions and *stryddae*.⁷⁴ Branch officials were briefed to keep in close liaison with voters in marginal constituencies which were a particular target for canvassing and party promotion. Of the 49 seats with majorities of less than a 1000 votes, 29 were held by the UP. The HNP were greatly assisted in their electoral efforts by the plethora of Afrikaner cultural and economic organisations which had sprung up in the previous decade.⁷⁵ In comparison with the energetic and structured approach of the Erasmus team the UP's style was decidedly complacent. At the beginning of 1948 the full-time headquarters staff of the governing party consisted of a general secretary, a propagandist, a women's organiser and two typists. There

⁷¹ Basson, *J.G. Strydom*, p.494.

⁷² *Ibid*, p.515.

⁷³ Sir de Villiers Graaff, *Div Looks Back* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1993), p.120.

⁷⁴ Carter, *The Politics of Inequality*, p.235. *Stryddae* (" struggle days") were party social occasions signalled by speeches of party leaders and the collection of money.

⁷⁵ Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, p.184.

were only two permanent UP organisers in the Transvaal outside the Johannesburg/Pretoria region and only one in the Orange Free State. In contrast the HNP had 17 full-time organisers in the Transvaal alone.⁷⁶ Prospective Nationalist candidates tended to be closer to their constituency associations as they were chosen by them in contrast to the centralised UP system in which the party's head office selected candidates for the whole Union.⁷⁷

Besides emphasising differences in racial policies the Nationalists went into the election highlighting public grievances over unemployment, lack of housing, inflation and food shortages. Smuts's scheme for large-scale immigration from Britain aggravated the fears of the Afrikaners that they would be "ploughed under". In the northern provinces farmers were alienated by the government's refusal to secure high prices for maize and other produce and over the loose state control on the movement of African labour.⁷⁸ The UP deputy leader, the liberally-minded Jan Hofmeyr, was presented by the HNP as the successor to Smuts. An alarming picture was painted by Erasmus's propagandists of Hofmeyr as a supporter of black rights, black enfranchisement and even racial miscegenation.⁷⁹ However Erasmus ensured that anti-British and anti-Jewish references in campaign literature were generally omitted and republicanism downplayed to win wavering English voters.⁸⁰

Malan and Erasmus cleverly produced a smokescreen to induce the English media, most of which were UP-inclined, and outside observers that the HNP itself did not expect to be a victor at the polls. An example of this strategy was an article in the *Rand Daily Mail* by the UP parliamentarian, Arthur Barlow. While travelling with Erasmus and Malan the latter was only prepared to claim that the Nationalists would obtain an additional 20 seats in the poll - far short of a majority. Barlow's headline read "Malan Doesn't Think Nats Will Win Election". Erasmus was characterised by the correspondent as "affable, able...and a first-class organiser". He and Malan were the two "who really run the whole machine of the Nationalist Party, what they say is law, the Stalin and Molotoff of 'ware Afrikanerdom'".⁸¹

⁷⁶ WB White, "The United Party and the 1948 Election", *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol.17, no.2, December 1992, pp. 74-5.

⁷⁷ Interview with FD Tothill, Pretoria, 18 August 1994.

⁷⁸ O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p.31.

⁷⁹ Brian Lapping, *Apartheid: A History* (London: Grafton Books, 1986), p.92.

⁸⁰ William Vatcher Jr, *White Laager* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1965), p.136.

⁸¹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 April 1948.

When the election tally was announced in late May the HNP-AP coalition had substantially fewer votes (443,278) than the UP and the lesser parties (547,437)⁸² but had obtained a five seat majority in the house of assembly. The Nationalists had been assisted by the additional weight given to rural seats in the electoral system. Malan had been fortunate that the apartheid idea was of particular attraction to farmers; the traditionally UP-oriented South African Agricultural Union shifted towards the Nationalists as the election approached.⁸³ As expected much of the campaign was geared around the race issue.⁸⁴ Remarkable results had also been achieved in the Transvaal urban areas where, with the assistance of the mineworkers union the number of Nationalist MPs increased from 2 to 8.⁸⁵ The gains made in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal gave an increased northern tone to the HNP parliamentary caucus which had for fourteen years been largely Cape-oriented.

For the Nationalists the election was a signal victory. They had moved from near political oblivion in 1934 to government in less than a decade and a half. Political success rested on the consistent and inspirational leadership of Malan who had battled to unite Afrikanerdom under his party's banner. In 1948 the Nationalists captured a minimum of three-quarters of Afrikaner votes.⁸⁶ The hoofleier had ensured that the HNP was attuned to the hopes and fears of the volk, projecting a simple concept, that the Nationalists were the only political force by which whites could be safeguarded and the position of Afrikaners strengthened and enhanced. For his part Erasmus had the vital role of developing party structures and fine-tuning the transmission belt that permitted the distribution of the Malan message around the Union. Under the direction of the chief secretary the party apparatus was invigorated to take electoral advantage of the complacent approach of the UP and the post-war disillusionment with the Smuts government among many whites.

⁸² Lapping, *Apartheid: A History*, p.96

⁸³ Deborah Posel, "The Meaning of Apartheid before 1948 - Conflicting Interests and Forces within the Afrikaner National Alliance", *The Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol.14, no.1, October, 1987, p. 131.

⁸⁴ Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, p.250.

⁸⁵ David Welsh, "The Politics of White Supremacy" in Jeffrey Butler and Leonard Thompson (eds.), *Change in Contemporary South Africa* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1975), p.61.

⁸⁶ Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, p.277.

The two decades before the election of 1948 had for Erasmus been dominated by his work in the National Party organisation. He was a "professional" politician. Except for brief careers in law and education his only real vocation had been in the political realm. With his "ear to the ground" he was aware of the electoral ebbs and flows and how they could be harnessed to the advantage of the Nationalists. Erasmus was essentially a technician of the hustings. Unlike such colleagues as Malan, the former diplomat Louw, the ex-Hollywood cowboy and Washington journalist Swart, the London University-trained lawyer Donges and the Irish-educated physician Stals, he had not studied or worked abroad and was somewhat "provincial". In the twenty years since he entered politics he had however become an effective platform speaker from being a very poor one. Though in parliamentary debate while being factual he tended to be repetitious.⁸⁷ He was much appreciated within the party for the organising and negotiating skills which had catapulted the HNP to victory. This very success ironically was to marginalize him once he was in government. Although a minister he did not enter the inner circle of policy formulators 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.

The Foundations of National Defence

The armed services for which Erasmus assumed responsibility in 1948 had seen distinguished service in two world wars. They could trace a lineage in South Africa back to 1659 when the first militia companies were established by the Dutch East India Company. After the final acquisition of the Cape in 1806 by Britain a new system of defence was introduced. From the beginning of the Union national defence was to blend elements of Afrikaner and British traditions.

The boer commando structure of the 1800s comprised formations of mounted soldiers, ranging in size from a handful of combatants to contingents of over a thousand. Commandos were partly equipped and fed by governments and partly by the members themselves; officers,

⁸⁷ *Forum*, 12 June 1948.

often local magistrates, were usually appointed in the Cape and Natal colonies while the custom of electing officers was adopted in the republics. In the northern boer states the system was brought to its zenith as a form of civil-military organisation. Through its popular participation the commando became a major integrating force in the Afrikaner community.⁸⁸ The traditions that the commando brought into the Union Defence Force (UDF) were a "levee en masse" experience, popular participation in leadership designation and rank nomenclature such as "commandant" and "field cornet", both reactivated by Erasmus. Little was introduced in the field of military fashion. By the time of the second Anglo-Boer War the only Afrikaner units wearing uniforms were the artillery regiments of the two republics.⁸⁹

A powerful current in the stream of South African military culture was introduced with the advent of the British at the Cape. By the early 19th century the army of the United Kingdom had already developed a sophisticated structure and a considerable international combat record in North America, the West Indies, India and the European continent. Distinctive regulations, military dress, conventions, tactics and a neutrality in parliamentary politics had developed. Direct military involvement in civil life had not been a feature of Britain since the Protectorate period of the 1650s. The emphasis in defence planning had traditionally been placed on the navy rather than the army as the former safeguarded British shores from invasion and protected the nation's trading arteries around the globe. With the acquisition of overseas territory colonial military formations were established which replicated to a considerable extent the British prototype. The creation of local defence units in South Africa mirrored the situation in the other settler colonies of Australia, New Zealand and Canada.

Out of the defence act of 1912 grew the modern armed forces of South Africa. Its chief architect was Jan Smuts, who at the time held the portfolio of minister of the interior in the Louis Botha government. In his extensive canvassing of informed opinion on defence he was advised by the experienced Cape politician John Merriman that it was unnecessary for there to be a large standing military force. Rather a small cadre of professional servicemen

⁸⁸ Philip Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians: Civil - Military Relations in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp 22-3.

⁸⁹ Geoffrey Tylden, *The Armed Forces of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Africana Museum Publications, 1954), p.86.

should be constituted and supplemented by reserves. Planning needed to be based on the state's financial resources rather than funding be tailored to the size of the defence force.⁹⁰ This precept was accepted by Smuts and successive defence ministers through to Erasmus. Except in war, defence spending for the following half century consistently remained a minor item of government disbursements, often lagging behind comparable expenditure on national security in the other British dominions.

The defence act passed in November 1912, incorporated elements of the Boer, British and Swiss models. The last system was admired for producing a large number of trained servicemen in a militia ready for an immediate emergency. In addition the Swiss had accommodated existing socio-linguistic differences which further empowered the state.⁹¹ As with the Boer and Swiss models there was a general obligation under the 1912 Act for all white male citizens between 17 and 60 to serve in the active citizen force (ACF) which encompassed the existing colonial regiments. A professional training and administrative nucleus, the permanent force (PF), was created to facilitate expansion of the ACF. Within the PF were also five regiments of mounted riflemen envisaged as a gendarmerie and as a conventional military force. Associated with the defence force were the school cadet corps and the defence rifle associations, local units which, like the regiments of the boer republics, elected their officers.⁹² Under the legislation the post of chief of the general staff was not established; instead there were the executive offices of commandant-general of the ACF, inspector-general of the PF and commandant of the cadet corps. To monitor expenditure a defence secretariat was formed, headed by a senior civilian official, the secretary for defence, who reported directly to the minister. In 1919 a general staff came into existence with a chief of the general staff with oversight for the organisation, training, discipline and efficiency of the military forces.⁹³

⁹⁰ Kenneth Ingham, *Jan Smuts: Conscience of a South African* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p.86.

⁹¹ Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, pp. 18-9.

⁹² Gavin Cawthra, *Brutal Force: The Apartheid War Machine* (London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1986), p.6.

⁹³ Deon Fourie, "A Ministry of Defence for the New South Africa - Lessons from Past Experience" in William Gutteridge (ed.), *South Africa's Defence and Security into the 21st Century* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing, 1996), p.23.

In the aftermath of the Great War, in which the Union participated, four of the five mounted rifle regiments of the PF were disbanded. However by the early 1920s the air force, naval service, staff corps and additional field artillery regiments had been inaugurated.⁹⁴ In 1922 elements of the UDF were deployed by the Smuts government to crush the white mineworkers revolt on the Rand and the Bondelswarts rebellion in South West Africa.⁹⁵ Within three years the air force was again back in action in the territory suppressing minor disturbances at Rehoboth.⁹⁶ However, by the end of the decade the period of multifaceted growth had ended; the last full-time mounted regiment was disbanded and the PF establishment was down to 1410. In the wake of the Wall Street crash no less than 49 ACF units were dissolved. Between July 1930 and June 1934 ACF training was discontinued completely.⁹⁷

With the formation of the coalition and subsequent fusion administration a gradual rearmament programme was initiated in light of the deteriorating political situation in Europe. Under Oswald Pirow, the defence minister, several new ACF regiments were brought into existence in 1934 as components of a five-year expansion programme. This was designed to raise the UDF establishment to 56,000. In 1936 parliament approved an air force development plan eventually to create a South African Air Force (SAAF) reserve of a thousand pilots and 1700 ground staff.⁹⁸ Pirow announced in September 1938, at the time of the Munich crisis, a further intended growth in the nation's military to take it to 137,000. Within this scheme there was to be an accelerated programme of pilot training, increased mechanisation of the army and the mounting of heavy shore batteries for the protection of the Union's ports. Little had been accomplished before the declaration of war on Germany. However the situation under Pirow was similar in many ways to that of the other British dominions at the same juncture. Canada in 1939 had a regular army of only 4,000, a total of 16 tanks across a vast country⁹⁹ with 36 combat-worthy aircraft,¹⁰⁰ and 6 destroyers and 5

⁹⁴ WA Dorning, "A Concise History of the South African Defence Force", *Militaria*, vol. 17, no.2, 1987, pp. 7-8.

⁹⁵ Paul Moorcraft, *African Nemesis* (London: Brassey's, 1990), p.18.

⁹⁶ Willem Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force* (London: Janes Publishing Co.,1981), p.20.

⁹⁷ Dorning, "A History of the South African Defence Force", p.8.

⁹⁸ Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force*, p.21.

⁹⁹ Jim Lotz, *Canadians at War* (London: Bison Books, 1990), p.94.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.136.

small minesweepers to cover two oceans.¹⁰¹ New Zealand had an aggregate of just 2058 personnel covering its regular army, navy and air force.¹⁰² Her neighbour Australia had just over 3,000 in its full-time army and staff corps though its navy was relatively substantial with 7 cruisers and 17 destroyers.¹⁰³

After assuming the defence portfolio in September 1939 Smuts discovered that the ACF had only 14,600 personnel, one-third of its paper strength, with the PF consisting of 3,353 in an establishment of 5,385.¹⁰⁴ Though there was a complement of 104 aircraft in the air force, almost all were outdated with the exception of 6 Hurricanes, a Fairey Battle and a Blenheim.¹⁰⁵ In the run-up to hostilities South Africans were unaware of the poor state of the UDF as the 1938 report of the chief of the general staff had not been made public. In it, General Sir Pierre van Ryneveld had complained that service equipment was either obsolete or obsolescent.¹⁰⁶ After Munich the Union had competed unsuccessfully in the British weapons market with the Chamberlain government also attempting to equip for war rapidly.¹⁰⁷ Pirow's rearmament programme had been a sham - a Potemkin village of statements disguising lack of action on the ground. However, his stance reflected a lack of real anxiety among many fusion ministers in the 1930s over the threat to world peace in faraway Europe. Pirow in 1935 had told the general staff that he feared large-scale "native" trouble rather than an invasion.¹⁰⁸ During a visit to the Union in late 1934 the secretary of the British Committee on Imperial Defence (CID), Sir Maurice Hankey, noted that Hertzog underrated the menace of Germany.¹⁰⁹ In many aspects Pirow was a forerunner of the Erasmus of the 1950s - both faced the unwillingness of their cabinets to transfer substantial resources to defence; both utilised a smug eloquence regarding supposed military readiness; both undertook extensive

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.152.

¹⁰² Andrew Mollo, *The Armed Forces of World War II* (London: Orbis Publishing, 1981), p. 287.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p.286.

¹⁰⁴ Kenneth Grundy, *Soldiers Without Politics: Blacks in the South African Military* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1983), p.83.

¹⁰⁵ Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force*, p.21.

¹⁰⁶ HJ Martin and Neil Orpen, *South Africa at War* (Cape Town: Purnell and Sons, 1979), p.2.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p.17.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p.7.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p.6.

overseas travel, all of which cloaked a lack of concrete preparedness; and both believed that the Union had a special role south of the Sahara in preserving the colonial status quo.

Under his programme of defence expansion Smuts was able to field forces numbering 137,000 volunteers by the end of the first year of the war.¹¹⁰ Despite the opposition of Nationalist politicians to participation in the hostilities, up to 68% of military personnel were Afrikaners.¹¹¹ The UDF was engaged extensively in combat operations alongside Allied forces, predominantly those from the British Commonwealth. East and North Africa, Madagascar and Italy were to be the main theatres of operation for the South Africans. With the closure of the Mediterranean to Allied shipping between 1940 and 1943 due to Italian involvement as an Axis power, the Union's ports became invaluable for Allied convoys required to round the Cape. Besides being prime minister Smuts also occupied the positions of external affairs and defence minister, as well as that of commander-in-chief of South African forces in the field. He permitted only volunteers to serve outside the Union. Those who did wore special red tabs on their epaulettes. Black personnel were mainly used as auxiliaries to the white combat forces with the coloured Cape Corps no longer armed as a fighting unit as in 1914-1918. After the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in February 1942 Smuts admitted that he was contemplating giving arms to other black troops as there was the possibility of an invasion from the Far East. After the threat faded the notion of issuing weapons to blacks also evaporated.¹¹² By 1945, 186,218 white men, 24,995 white women and 123,131 men of colour had served in the UDF during the war.¹¹³

South Africa's participation in the war had cost the government nearly £536 million.¹¹⁴ Once victory was achieved demobilisation rapidly commenced. In the 1946-1947 financial year the defence budget was pared down to approximately £10 million. Expenditure was only £1.8 per capita, much less than in the United Kingdom where it was £38 for that year.¹¹⁵ On

¹¹⁰ Freda Troup, *South Africa: An Historical Interpretation* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1972), p.266.

¹¹¹ Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p.93.

¹¹² Hancock, *Smuts - The Fields of Force*, p. 371.

¹¹³ Le May, *The Afrikaners - An Historical Interpretation*, p.195.

¹¹⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Wilkens to Erasmus, 2 February 1951, MV 18/5.

¹¹⁵ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p.76.

17 April 1946 Smuts announced that the UDF's establishment in the post-war period would be 8,822 (land forces - 4,620, air force - 3,319, navy - 863).¹¹⁶ Because of a shortage of technical personnel, particularly in the air force, appropriate staff were recruited in Britain. The navy received good news: a corvette and two fleet minesweepers would join the complement of three Loch-class frigates which had been a gift to the Union by the British government in 1944.¹¹⁷ By the time of the 1948 election the UDF had reverted to its pre-war status quo of a relatively small permanent cadre supported by an ACF of less than 30,000. The customary peacetime practice had been reactivated by Smuts on the lines envisaged in 1912, i.e. a defence force not substantial enough to disrupt the national economy or to tie up valuable white manpower for long periods. This remained his policy as he went into the 1948 election undeterred by the gathering clouds of the Cold War.

The UDF in the Context of Commonwealth Defence

Despite the formation of the Union in 1910 and the promulgation of the nation's defence act two years later, the UDF remained an integral component of the British imperial system in the first years of dominion status. Apart from the outward and visible signs of the connection with the Empire, there existed a constitutional constraint on the scope of South African security policies. As in the case of the other dominions, Pretoria did not possess complete autonomy from Whitehall in foreign affairs and external defence. When Britain went to war with Germany and Austria-Hungary in August 1914 the other parts of the Empire were obliged to follow suit immediately. However it had been agreed at the 1911 imperial conference that the extent of each dominion's active participation in war would be decided by their individual legislatures.¹¹⁸

During the First World War South Africans campaigned in the Middle East, East Africa and Flanders with the prime minister, General Botha, leading the UDF in the capture of German South West Africa in 1915. By the conclusion of the War the Union had contributed

¹¹⁶ *Keesings Contemporary Archives - 1946-1948*, p.8002.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p.20.

100,000 white troops as well as 60,000 of colour.¹¹⁹ Most combat operations occurred alongside British and other imperial forces. As a demonstration that the senior command structure was not necessarily British, Smuts was appointed overall commander of Empire troops in the East African campaign for a year from January 1916. Subsequently he was asked by Prime Minister Lloyd George to join his war cabinet.¹²⁰ The Union's involvement in the Great War demonstrated that its forces could be easily positioned in the imperial defence system. Due to a comparable staff system throughout the Empire, UDF units like those of the other dominions could be "slotted" into British formations as had been resolved at the 1907 imperial conference.¹²¹

To many observers the armed forces of the Union like those of Australia, New Zealand and Canada appeared as clones of the British model. They wore similar uniforms with slight variations; they displayed identical rank insignia; they followed the social conventions of British commissioned and non-commissioned officers; they utilised British-supplied weaponry; and they conducted themselves under a military legal system patterned on Britain's King's Regulations. As importantly, the armed services of the Empire accepted the notion that military power was subordinate to the political authority of the civil state.¹²² As Philip Frankel has pointed out in the case of South Africa:

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 soldiers¹²³.

It was this degree of genuflection to the imperial prototype that disturbed many Afrikaner nationalists who preferred a defence force more overtly "national".

A notable effect of the participation of the dominions in the Great War was the broadening of their individual national identities. In the case of the Union the appearance of

¹¹⁹ Moorcraft, *African Nemesis*, p.18.

¹²⁰ Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History*, pp.273-5.

¹²¹ *Round Table*, June 1935.

¹²² Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, p.18.

¹²³ *Ibid*, p.14.

Botha and Smuts at the Versailles peace conference of 1919 evinced South Africa's desire for constitutional change. Seven years later Britain declared at the imperial conference, under pressure from Hertzog and the Canadian premier Mackenzie King, that the dominions were autonomous, possessing full responsibility for foreign affairs and defence. Commonwealth membership was in future to be linked by loyalty to a common sovereign. General agreement was reached in London on the role of the dominions in imperial security. The defence of the Empire's lines of communication remained within the purview of the United Kingdom. This role was designated for the Royal Navy assisted by such naval forces as the dominions could provide. Local defence was the responsibility of each dominion while the protection of individual colonial possessions was to be handled by Whitehall and performed by regular British units or colonial regiments.¹²⁴

The CID originally established in November 1902, was an important element in the framework of imperial security.¹²⁵ Under the chairmanship of the British prime minister this was an advisory body encompassing ministers concerned with foreign affairs and defence and senior service personnel. The real work of the CID was done by a number of sub-committees, the most important being that of the chiefs of staff which had "a collective responsibility for advising defence policy as a whole".¹²⁶ In April 1928 Prime Minister Baldwin contacted Hertzog to remind him that at the 1926 imperial conference Britain indicated that she welcomed "frequent association and closer cooperation" with the dominions in the work of the CID. The British suggested that the Union's high commissioner attend and participate in discussions affecting South Africa.¹²⁷ Hertzog welcomed Baldwin's invitation as the activities of the CID were of "an advisory and consultative character" and any final defence decisions "rested" with the governments concerned.¹²⁸ In 1931 the South African high commissioner, Charles te Water, alerted Pretoria that the British were considering making him a full participant in CID deliberations, asking him to endorse recommendations.¹²⁹ Bodenstein, the

¹²⁴ Philip Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez, 1947-1968* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.28.

¹²⁵ John Edward Kendle, *The Colonial and Imperial Conferences* (London: Longman, 1967), p.186.

¹²⁶ *Round Table*, June 1936

¹²⁷ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Secretary of State for the Dominions to the Minister of External Affairs (Hertzog), 24 April 1928, PS 4/4.

¹²⁸ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Minister of External Affairs to the Secretary of State for the Dominions, 28 April 1928, PS 4/4.

secretary for external affairs, conveyed Hertzog's view to te Water that he "should be very careful not in any way to bind the government and also explain to the meeting that you have no authority to do so".¹³⁰ Hertzog remained anxious to set the parameters on defence cooperation with Britain. However the CID did offer the Union military liaison, exchange of information, standardisation of methods and some degree of joint planning at a technical level.¹³¹

The practicalities of the Union's defence in the 1930s demanded collaboration with Britain. In the case of Hertzog and Pirow this was less a sentimental attachment to the "mother country" than realistic self-interest. The United Kingdom provided easy access to the South Africans for the purchase of armaments. The air force had been initiated early in the 1920s by a gift from Britain of one hundred aircraft.¹³² Periodically, high-level defence deliberations occurred between the two countries, invariably in London. Links between uniformed personnel were cemented through the exchange programme of commissioned and senior non-commissioned officers. This on balance gave considerably greater assistance to the training needs of the UDF. From 1921 the Union government had been permitted to nominate South Africans for commissions in the British army and air force and from 1926 this privilege was extended to the Royal Navy.¹³³ In 1927 the Hertzog government arranged with Britain to obtain at the low cost of £1200 a year information on a continuing basis from the world-wide Royal Naval Intelligence Organisation.¹³⁴

It was in the naval field that the most vital defence relationship existed between Britain and South Africa. This centred on the agreement concerning the naval base at Simonstown which the Royal Navy had utilised from 1814. After 1918 both governments felt that its status should be clarified as the British military command in the Union was scheduled to be wound

¹²⁹ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, te Water to Bodenstein, 19 March 1931, PS 4/4.

¹³⁰ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Bodenstein to te Water, 16 April 1931, PS 4/4.

¹³¹ WCB Tunstall, *The Commonwealth and Regional Defence* (London: The University of London/ Athlone Press, 1959), p.9.

¹³² Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, p.15.

¹³³ *Hansard*, Debates of the House of Assembly, 16 September 1938, Column 2892.

¹³⁴ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, Cuff to Erasmus, 31 October 1953, MV 18/10.

down on 1 December 1921. During that year there was an exchange of letters between Smuts and Winston Churchill, the colonial secretary, about the base. The Union received certain land on the condition that it be used for the shore defence of the facility. Britain received the right of "perpetual" occupation of those parts of Simonstown set aside as a naval installation.¹³⁵ In 1922, the Union government ratified the agreement with Smuts pledging as a matter of "honour and duty" to assist in the defence of Simonstown "for imperial purposes".¹³⁶ The agreement was accepted in its entirety by the fusion government in 1935.¹³⁷

Notwithstanding this apparent spirit of cooperation with Britain there existed a residual resistance by the Union not to be London's manservant. A mild rebuke in this regard occurred in 1933 as minuted by the CID. The chief of the imperial general staff in December 1923 had asked dominion governments for details of contingents which could be made available three months after the commencement of a war in defence of "imperial interests". A decade later no response had been received from Pretoria though there had been itemised replies from Australia, New Zealand and Canada.¹³⁸ Conversely the fusion government did not want to appear to be unaccommodating to London. The position of the Union was to strike a balance between collaboration and national self-determination. In 1933 Pirow and van Ryneveld went to the British capital to discuss with the CID aspects of South African defence which impinged on imperial security. Pirow agreed to spend £130,000 on improving the existing coastal defences and forming air force units for seaward protection. Britain would contribute to the annual expenditure of the South African division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and would be given the two trawlers which constituted the naval service of the Union.¹³⁹ In a memorandum the CID suggested that Pirow create "a force of all arms, organised and trained on imperial lines". This would be for internal security and when fully mobilised would act for

¹³⁵ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p.163.

¹³⁶ SANDF Documentation Centre, Ministers of Defence's Papers, Memorandum-"Simonstown" by Eric Stockenstrom,(undated), MV 22/8.

¹³⁷ CJR Dugard, "The Simonstown Agreement: South Africa, Britain and the United Nations", *South African Law Journal*, Vol. 85, no. 2, March 1968, pp. 142-56.

¹³⁸ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, CID Memorandum - "The Need for the Maintenance of Defence Forces in the Union of South Africa", 9 October 1933, PS 8/5.

¹³⁹ Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at War*, p.2.

the defence of Africa, to aid British forces or to operate in "those parts of the Empire requiring assistance".¹⁴⁰

Some of the fruits of the British visit were soon seen. Within several months Pirow announced the formation of eight new platteland ACF units. During his 1934 visit Hankey reported that the Union was experiencing "a military renaissance" brought about by the defence minister and his chief of the general staff.¹⁴¹ As was later discerned much of this was on paper. Pirow had indicated while in London that the Union would be prepared to assist in the protection of other parts of Africa, primarily the white settler communities against black unrest.¹⁴² The South African minister was particularly attracted to the notion of deploying the Union's air power northwards, believing that this would extend the country's influence into central and eastern Africa.¹⁴³ The SAAF periodically took part in liaison flights as far as Cairo and Khartoum in this period.¹⁴⁴ As minister responsible for civil aviation Pirow saw air links afforded both by the national airline and the air force as reinforcing the sense of kinship among the Europeans on the continent. In the context of possible black resistance this support would, he hoped, produce ties of dependence and even loyalty to Pretoria.¹⁴⁵ In October 1935 Pirow offered tear gas bombs to the Northern Rhodesian authorities to help quell riots on the Copperbelt,¹⁴⁶ as part of this overall policy. In a paper given to the Royal African Society in 1937 the minister claimed that the Union was "almost vitally interested" in the territories to the north, excluding French Equatorial Africa but including Kenya and Uganda. The responsibility of the Union for continental defence, he said, was a grave one "but one which we are capable and willing to accept". He was not prepared to see white communities "engulfed by a black sea".¹⁴⁷ Hankey decided to appoint a subcommittee to study possible SAAF participation in

¹⁴⁰ State Archives, C.I.D. Memorandum- "The Need for the Maintenance of Defence Forces in the Union of South Africa".

¹⁴¹ Stephen Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets-Vol 111, 1931-1963* (London: Collins, 1974), p.124.

¹⁴² Martin Chanock, *Unconsummated Union: Britain, Rhodesia and South Africa, 1900 - 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), p.206.

¹⁴³ Roskill, *Hankey - Man of Secrets*, p.116.

¹⁴⁴ Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force*, p.20.

¹⁴⁵ Robert L. McCormack, "Man with a Mission - Oswald Pirow and South African Airways", *Journal of African History*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1979, p.545.

¹⁴⁶ Ronald Hyam, *The Failure of South African Expansion* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1972), p.39.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.39.

the air defence of British East Africa. The report concluded that while the idea "had much to recommend it", it would extend South African political influence which was suspect because of its "native" policy.¹⁴⁸ Like Erasmus twenty years later, Pirow objected to large formations of armed Africans in the colonial armies, particularly those of France and Italy.¹⁴⁹

Pirow had an eclectic philosophy which included racialist and South African nationalist aspects. He was held in high regard by Hertzog who did little to check him in his activities.¹⁵⁰ While prepared to assist Britain in the context of African defence he would on occasion demonstrate his independence of Whitehall. At the Imperial Press Conference in Cape Town in early 1935 he told journalists from all over the Empire that the Union was not prepared to participate "in any scheme of imperial defence". He went on to assert that if international hostilities commenced and a South African government committed the country to participate, large-scale disturbances would occur, possibly civil war.¹⁵¹ The somewhat ambivalent attitude to membership of the Empire was characterised by a British observer in the late 1930s as one of "benevolent neutrality"¹⁵² The son of a German missionary, Pirow was very conscious of his teutonic heritage in a period of German resurgence. He was formally received by Hitler in 1933 and 1938.¹⁵³ During his six years in the defence department London received confusing signs from him on whether it could receive active support from the Union in any struggle with the European totalitarian powers. To visiting German naval officers in 1935 he spoke of the Reich again being "a colonial power and moreover a colonial power in Africa"¹⁵⁴ - a position diametrically opposed to Britain's strategic interests. Hertzog needed to reassure London and did so in a parliamentary speech soon afterwards:

The British navy, now that our freedom has been restored to us and our old enemy has become our best friend, means exactly the same to me as to any Englishman, because the

¹⁴⁸ Roskill, *Hankey: Man of Secrets*, p.123.

¹⁴⁹ Chanock, *Unconsummated Union*, p.205.

¹⁵⁰ McCormack, "Man With A Mission - Oswald Pirow and South African Airways", p. 544.

¹⁵¹ Amry Vandenbosch, *South Africa and the World: The Foreign Policy of Apartheid* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1970), p.72.

¹⁵² Donald Cowie, *An Empire Prepared* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1939), p.102.

¹⁵³ McCormack, "Man with a Mission - Oswald Pirow and South African Airways", p. 544.

¹⁵⁴ *South Africa*, 24 January 1935.

freedom of my people and my country, is just as dependent upon it as that of England itself.¹⁵⁵

The prime minister was sensitive to the more anglophile proclivities of the former South African Party members within the fusion government. In a 1936 speech Smuts declared that "the sole hope" in an increasingly dangerous world was to strengthen the bonds of friendship between the Union and Britain.¹⁵⁶ On the other hand Pirow in the same year said that while there was largely a coincidence of interest linking the two countries this would not necessarily always be the case.¹⁵⁷ During 1937 Hertzog moved towards the Pirow position by giving notice at the imperial conference that his delegation would not arrive at any conclusions affecting South African defence with the other delegations.¹⁵⁸ The premier came down firmly on the side of non-belligerency in the parliamentary vote of 4 September 1939. For his part Smuts was prepared actively to associate the Union with the rest of the Empire, with the exception of the Irish Free State, in a war with Germany.

Most of the land and air operations in the subsequent campaigns in East and North Africa as well as in Italy were made in close conjunction with Commonwealth forces and generally under overall British command and using British-supplied equipment. Due to its small white population the Union was unable to field more than two combat divisions which were obliged to be integrated into larger, mainly imperial, formations such as the 8th Army. The 3rd Division was retained in the Union to act as an internal security force in case of disturbances by anti-war Afrikaners.¹⁵⁹ On occasion imperial forces were placed under South African command, as at Tobruk. The garrison under Major-General HB Klopper was forced to surrender to Rommel's Afrika Korps in June 1942 with the loss not only of the Union's 2nd Division but thousands of Commonwealth troops.¹⁶⁰ The profile of the expeditionary force "up North" reflected the ethnic split of the white population. Afrikaner generals such as Dan Pienaar, George Brink and Klopper held important commands, as did English-speakers such as Evered Poole who led the 6th armoured division in the Italian campaign. These individuals

¹⁵⁵ *South Africa*, 15 February 1935

¹⁵⁶ *South Africa*, 13 June 1936.

¹⁵⁷ Eric Walker, *A History of Southern Africa* (London: Longman, 1965), p. 684.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p.682.

¹⁵⁹ Chanock, *Unconsummated Union*, p.237.

¹⁶⁰ Louis Sowden, *The Land of Afternoon: The Story of a White South African* (London: Elek Books, 1968), p.118.

and their troops spent the war years in close association with the fighting men of the Empire and shared many common experiences. This sense of imperial kinship would outlast the war on both the British and South African sides.

Of great positive significance for the allied war effort was the position of the Union at the tip of Africa. For three years convoys from the north Atlantic region intending to reach the Middle East or India utilised South African ports for reprovisioning and bunkering facilities. Due to the enhanced importance of sea communications the Union's Seaward Defence Force amalgamated in 1942 with the South African division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve to form the South African Naval Forces (SANF). And as a participating nation in the Empire Air Training Scheme the Union, far from the operational areas, provided undisturbed training for Commonwealth air and ground crew.¹⁶¹ Meanwhile the factories of the nation were harnessed to war production with output accessible not only to the Union but also to the Commonwealth forces. During the six years of the conflict mortars, light-medium field guns, armoured cars, radio-sets, ammunition bombs and fuses were produced at various locations.¹⁶² In the post-1945 period factors such as the Union's geographical position, its mineral and industrial wealth and transport facilities which had been highlighted by the war remained in the minds of western, particularly British, defence planners. These aspects were "played on" by Erasmus and other Nationalist ministers, particularly Louw, in their later dealings with London and Washington.

The degree of Commonwealth harmonisation demonstrated in the war was assessed by Britain's Labour government in their February 1946 defence statement. It confirmed that imperial cooperation in the years 1939-45 had been "comprehensive, continuous and effective", with the forces of the Empire "trained, organised and equipped on the same basis". The lessons of the war, Whitehall felt, should be applied "to provide consultation and collaboration in defence matters in peace".¹⁶³ However at the Commonwealth prime ministers conference later that year Smuts refused to make any specific commitment in the field of co-ordinated imperial defence.¹⁶⁴ In this he was supported by the Canadians under Mackenzie

¹⁶¹ Tunstall, *The Commonwealth and Regional Defence*, p.10.

¹⁶² Chester Crocker, *South Africa's Defence Posture: Coping With Vulnerability* (Beverly Hills & London: Sage Publications, 1981), p.8.

¹⁶³ HM Stationery Office, *Statement Relating to Defence*, February 1946, Cmd. 6743.

¹⁶⁴ Ritchie Owendale, *The English-Speaking Alliance: Britain, the United States, the*

King who also opposed schemes that resembled a centralised defence organisation.¹⁶⁵ For Smuts the relationship with Britain was so close, with interests so interlocked, that there was no necessity for formal agreements.¹⁶⁶

The South African premier was aware that, as in Canada with its large francophone population, there did not exist in the Union unanimous approval among whites for links with Britain. Though a staunch monarchist he made no moves to add the prefix "royal" to the titles of the air force and navy as had occurred in the other dominions. During the April 1946 defence debates he came under sustained attack from the Nationalist opposition for his purported interest in an imperial defence council, an idea advanced by the Australian prime minister, Ben Chifley. Smuts did not support the concept and retorted in the house of assembly that the Commonwealth defence system was "voluntary", that the Union had no specific obligations and "had never been asked to enter into any obligations".¹⁶⁷ In a letter to Sir Godfrey Huggins, the Southern Rhodesian prime minister who advocated an integrated approach to imperial security, Smuts stood his ground. He contended that since 1926 the dominions had full autonomy over their national security. A closer linkage under British direction would constitute "a super government over the Commonwealth" which would be "impracticable". He suggested that the existing scheme of "voluntary consultation and liaison" was "the most useful all around".¹⁶⁸ The imperial defence council never came to fruition. Smuts was prepared to accept the exchange of defence liaison staff between Commonwealth member states agreed at the 1946 prime ministers' meeting. In 1947 a mission of 13 UDF members was established in South Africa House, London, with a counterpart British group set up in Pretoria. By that point 61 South African commissioned and non-commissioned officers were on courses in Britain or on attachment to British units with a further 38 SAAF members at subaltern or captain rank on short-term commissions with the Royal Air Force.¹⁶⁹ Other links continued to be forged with the supply of vessels to the

Dominions and the Cold War, 1945-1951 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), p.245.

¹⁶⁵ Peter Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p.76.

¹⁶⁶ Barber and Barrett, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, p. 18.

¹⁶⁷ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 17 April 1946, Columns 5774-5.

¹⁶⁸ Jean van der Poel (ed.), *Selections from the Smuts Papers - Vol. VII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 144-6.

¹⁶⁹ SANDF Documentation Service, Files of the Military Adviser, London, Willmott to the Secretary of the Office of the South African High Commissioner, 6 July 1947, MAL/308.

SANF by British shipyards and aircraft to the SAAF, with the requisite training of South African personnel occurring at a number of locations in the United Kingdom. The Union also was to become a member of the Commonwealth advisory committee on defence science and the Commonwealth advisory committee on clothing and defence stores.¹⁷⁰

The practical military links between the Commonwealth and the Union were buttressed by the symbolic ties between UDF units and their imperial equivalents. By 1945 24 affiliations existed joining South African infantry, artillery, armoured and support formations with counterparts in Britain. Further couplings had been made with regiments in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.¹⁷¹ There was also the royal connection. King George VI, Queen Elizabeth and the two royal princesses occupied the position of colonels-in-chief of a number of ACF regiments.¹⁷² New regimental colours were presented by the King to several military formations during the royal family's tour of the Union in 1947. South Africa also provided the venue for high level visits by British military personalities including the chief of the imperial general staff, Lord Montgomery in 1947, Lord Wavell, former commander of imperial forces in the Middle East and South East Asia, in early 1948, and General Demoline, responsible for British forces in East Africa.

As Smuts went into the election of May 1948 the Union had a comfortable but distinct position within the Commonwealth defence family. The ties, particularly with Britain, permitted her easy access to modern armaments, up-to-date intelligence information and training facilities. The common experiences of the recent war had also reinforced the sense of solidarity of many South African servicemen with Britain and the other dominions.

¹⁷⁰ Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, p. 16.

¹⁷¹ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 2 October 1981, Columns 580-1.

¹⁷² *The Star*, 5 January 1950.

The National Party's Defence and Foreign Policy in the Years of Opposition

During its period of opposition the GNP/HNP's critique of UP foreign and defence policies comprised four phases. For its first five years up to the declaration of war the party of Malan held that the Union should be neutral and dissociated from imperial defence which denoted political subservience to Whitehall. The on-going affiliation with the Empire would oblige the Union to go to war alongside Britain, against the South African national interest. The situation was not assisted by the overt British orientation of the defence force which lacked an Afrikaans ethos, deemed necessary to make it "nationally-minded". From 1939 to 1943 the Nationalists, besides opposing Smuts's war policy, had a more than passing interest in a German victory. For many in the party this would bring to fruition a republic outside the Empire. The tide had turned against the Axis powers by the time of the July 1943 election but the HNP retained its neutral position; this was combined with greater animosity towards the long-term political aims of the Soviet Union and the spread of communism. From the end of the war to their election victory the Nationalists heightened their anti-communist campaign along with hostility to the new United Nations organisation and to India. Throughout the opposition years Erasmus was unswerving in his contention that the armed services needed to reflect to a much greater degree the Afrikaner majority in the white population.

From its first appearance in parliament in 1935 the GNP took a "nationalist" line on security questions. Every symbolic slight on the Union's autonomy, however trivial, was highlighted. In this initial session Erasmus admonished Hertzog for permitting the British admiral based at Simonstown to form part of the governor-general's procession at the opening of parliament.¹⁷³ In that year's defence debate the shadow spokesman enquired why the Union government permitted its nationals to join a "foreign" navy, that being the South African division of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, and why it continued to contribute £7000 annually to the unit's upkeep.¹⁷⁴ Erasmus pointed out in debate what he described as the "exotic" names of certain ACF regiments. Among these were the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Cape Town Rifles, Prince Alfred's Guard and Princess Alice's Own Pretoria Regiment. He

¹⁷³ Stultz, *Afrikaner Politics in South Africa, 1934 - 1948*, p.45.

¹⁷⁴ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 2 April 1935, Column 4219.

suggested that if the Union should ever go to war against Britain the South African kilted regiments would be confused with the kilted regiments sent out from Scotland.¹⁷⁵

As the world-wide political situation deteriorated in the late 1930s the GNP contended that the association of South Africa with the Commonwealth would force the Union into war beside Britain. It was therefore vital for the nation that these ties be weakened. Malan felt that the actions of Hitler and his associates in central Europe could be explained as the bitter fruits of the Versailles treaty imposed by the victorious allies. He wanted to steer clear of these entanglements. Erasmus spoke of UDF personnel being used as "kanonvoer" in support of imperial interests in East Africa in the light of aggression by Germany's ally, Italy, in Abyssinia in 1935-36.¹⁷⁶ To the Nationalist leadership the UP government was irredeemably pro-British and deeply involved in a League of Nations which was itself a tool of the British.¹⁷⁷ A policy of political neutrality was the only safe and appropriate course of action for the country.

As the war clouds gathered the republican proclivities of the Nationalists became more pronounced. In 1936 all the provincial congresses of the party committed themselves to a future republic "on the broad basis of the will of the people".¹⁷⁸ If implemented this would have had foreign policy as well as constitutional implications. The imperial assumption until altered in 1949, was that Commonwealth membership lapsed once the British monarch was removed as a dominion's head of state. Malan and much of the important Cape leadership were aware of the economic damage to local agriculture from loss of imperial preference and were therefore not in the vanguard of republicanism.¹⁷⁹ However they were prepared to limit drastically the symbolic and practical aspects of the relationship with Britain. Suggestions included the removal of the status of "British subject" for Union nationals, the discontinuance of South African participation in imperial conferences and at coronations, and the appointment of a South African as governor-general.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, Column 4171.

¹⁷⁶ Sara Pienaar, *South Africa and International Relations Between the Two World Wars: The League of Nations Dimension* (Johannesburg: The University of the Witwatersrand Press, 1987), p.57.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p.73.

¹⁷⁸ Stultz, *Afrikaner Politics in South Africa, 1934-1948*, p.48.

¹⁷⁹ O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p.105.

¹⁸⁰ *South Africa*, 29 August 1936.

For its 1938 election manifesto the GNP said that the UDF should be used exclusively for the protection of the territorial integrity of a neutral South Africa. The renegotiation of the Simonstown agreement would be part of this process.¹⁸¹ In the run-up to the poll Erasmus took Pirow to task for needless expenditure in support of Britain and suggested that:

Our defence system is a cog in the defence machinery of the British Empire and the government has done very little to release it from that. Roberts Heights, which is our centre of defence, is nothing else than a department of Aldershot. It takes its orders from Aldershot.¹⁸²

In the wake of the election Erasmus complained that the Afrikaans language did not enjoy parity with English in a defence force which needed to be built "on a South African model".¹⁸³

At the time of the Sudetenland crisis in September 1938 Malan introduced a new tack. Britain, he said, was no longer a great power and therefore not in a position to guarantee South African security. Therefore it would be opportune for the Union to declare formally its neutrality as its Commonwealth membership exposed it to the rigours of world conflict.¹⁸⁴ The war debate a year later reconfirmed the GNP's well established foreign policy position and put into sharp relief Hertzog's latent neutralism. An intriguing aspect of the ten and a half hour session was that Erasmus, despite being the official opposition's spokesman on defence, made no contribution.¹⁸⁵ This was probably an early sign that in the parliamentary context Erasmus was not considered by Malan as a debating heavyweight for crucial interchanges.

From September 1939 onwards the Nationalists, joined by the rump of Hertzog's UP supporters, vigorously opposed Smuts's war policies. Malan expressed a sense of sadness that the two pillars of civilisation, Britain and Germany, were in deadly embrace while Soviet communism posed a threat to Europe.¹⁸⁶ Erasmus complained that the use of the Red Oath used to determine those volunteers willing to serve anywhere in Africa did not serve the

¹⁸¹ *Cape Times*, 5 April 1938.

¹⁸² *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 8 March 1938, Column 1150.

¹⁸³ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 3 May 1939, Column 3897.

¹⁸⁴ *Natal Witness*, 8 September 1938.

¹⁸⁵ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 4 September 1939.

¹⁸⁶ *South Africa*, 27 January 1940.

purposes of national defence. After the fall of France in June 1940 a particularly strong feeling existed among Nationalists for withdrawal from the war as South Africa appeared to be on the losing side.¹⁸⁷ Malan spoke of the Union's possible options as "a republic or Hitler".¹⁸⁸ This uncertainty in opposition circles escalated after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. As the Wehrmacht headed towards Moscow and Leningrad Malan speculated on a post-war settlement affecting the Union:

The question is being asked how we must obtain a republic. We can "take it" that is, if Germany wins the war, it will want to weaken the British Empire. It will do this by insisting that the people within the Empire who wish to be free shall be separated from the Empire. In this point German desires are in agreement with our own efforts. In the second place, we can take it that Germany will wish to negotiate in South Africa with a government which is friendly disposed towards them and that she would wish to see such a government in this country. There is only one such government possible - the Reunited Party [HNP]. It is we, who, since the outbreak of war, have protested against the war with Germany and have demanded a withdrawal from it.¹⁸⁹

Early in the 1942 parliamentary session Malan called for the creation of a republic as this was in the nation's highest interest.¹⁹⁰ However, possible German support in this regard soon evaporated with major reverses for the Axis powers at Stalingrad and El Alamein. Erasmus in his statements reflected these new international realities. In a March 1943 debate he maintained that the government had involved itself in a war of aggression rather than defence. He was particularly critical of the legal provision to permit voluntary service in the Italian campaign which he contended had no relevance for the protection of the African continent.¹⁹¹ The war, he believed, had had a detrimental effect on the ethos of the UDF. Years of service alongside commonwealth troops "were making Britishers of our men and British officers of our officers" and "it is against that phenomena [sic] in our defence force that I severely object".¹⁹²

In their 1943 election platform the HNP made a commitment to remove the UDF from the theatre of operations for repatriation to the Union. Aware of the large military voting

¹⁸⁷ Hancock, *Smuts: The Fields of Force*, p.351.

¹⁸⁸ *South Africa*, 13 July 1940.

¹⁸⁹ *South Africa*, 30 August 1941.

¹⁹⁰ Hancock, *Smuts: The Fields of Force*, p.372.

¹⁹¹ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 16 March 1943, column 3496.

¹⁹² *Ibid*, column 3498.

constituency Malan confirmed that the party would respect and execute all obligations to future veterans, such as disability pensions, except to black personnel.¹⁹³ The concept of black troops, particularly armed, remained anathema to the Nationalists and continued to be a feature of their security policies until 1963. The HNP leadership, particularly Erasmus, made much of this issue in parliament on the occasion of rioting in March 1943 by drunken coloured servicemen on a troop train going from Cape Town to the north.¹⁹⁴

From mid-1943 onwards there was a quiet resignation among the Nationalists that the allies would eventually completely subdue the Axis powers. Residual pro-German sentiments remained. Erasmus was incensed that the resources of the Union were being spent against an anti-communist power.¹⁹⁵ He unsuccessfully moved an amendment to the 1944 supply vote which proposed to cut the UDF's expenditure from £51 million to its normal peacetime figure of £10 million as the balance was not specifically being used for the defence of the Union.¹⁹⁶ The Yalta agreements of February 1945 were savaged by Malan for the concessions made to Moscow, permitting a Soviet sphere of influence to be created in eastern Europe.¹⁹⁷ In subsequent debates on the appropriation bill Smuts was accused by the Nationalists as "crawling slavishly" before Russia and thereby giving "indirect encouragement to communism in Africa".¹⁹⁸

During the course of 1945 Malan propounded for the first time what he described as the "African Charter". The themes of this scheme were to be enunciated by him on a number of occasions until just before his retirement from politics in 1954. This would be the intellectual centrepiece of his foreign and security policies once he was in office. His grab-bag of principles included the exclusion of communism from the continent, the prohibition of Indian immigration, safeguards for the European peoples settled there permanently and black populations to be developed on western Christian lines and not to be armed.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ Stultz, *Afrikaner Politics in South Africa, 1934 - 1948*, p.88.

¹⁹⁴ Grundy, *Soldiers Without Politics*, p.72.

¹⁹⁵ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 16 March 1943, Column 3496.

¹⁹⁶ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 22 March 1944, Column 3652

¹⁹⁷ Stultz, *Afrikaner Politics in South Africa, 1934-1948*, p.121.

¹⁹⁸ US State Department - Central Files, Holcomb to Secretary of State, 24 February 1945, 848A.00/032.

¹⁹⁹ James Barber, *South Africa's Foreign Policy, 1945 -1970* (London : Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 101-3.

In the 1946 parliamentary session Erasmus produced important proposals for a future defence structure under an HNP administration. The security needs of the country would be paramount with no participation in imperial defence. True bi-lingualism would be encouraged in the UDF, which would be built up "according to South African traditions". A re-negotiation of the Simonstown agreement would commence with Britain. Maintaining a long-held position, there would not be any arming of blacks. Erasmus commented that "despite the policy of the department of defence" the war had been instrumental in "convincing our soldiers who served in the north that our defence force should have a South African character".²⁰⁰ This last statement was intriguing as Erasmus had been critical in the war years that UDF personnel through the Commonwealth connection had been turned into "Britishers". The opposition defence spokesman was open in his intention to alter drastically the armed services. In the run-up to the election radical changes in the UDF were downplayed in public statements but not extinguished. Louw claimed in May 1947 that plans had been devised for a joint defence plan with Britain with the introduction of the network of military liaison agreed by Smuts in 1946 as "the first step down that road".²⁰¹ Backbench opinion such as that represented by the Cape member, Dr. PJ van Nierop, echoed the Erasmus "line" - that the defence force had insufficient Afrikaner characteristics to make it "national":

What we want is an Afrikaans spirit just as we want a South African [sic] regiment in the defence force. When that regiment is out on parade one must be able to feel that it is typical of our country, and that it is our own regiment of which we can be proud. But under the circumstances we cannot feel that it is typical of our country because Afrikaans is not being cultivated in the army... These people [English-speakers] earn their living in this country but then sympathise with another country.²⁰²

By 1948 the anti-communist stance of the Nationalists combined with their apartheid programme were two positions attractive to many white voters. The HNP contended that unlike Smuts they took a consistent and vigorous attitude against "Bolshevism". Their anxiety towards world-wide marxism mirrored the growing fears in most of the western democracies in the second half of the decade. Policymakers were concerned with the expanding Soviet sphere of influence and control in eastern Europe and east Asia. However the sizeable section

²⁰⁰ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 4 April 1946, Columns 5033-4.

²⁰¹ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 28 May 1947, Columns 3374-5.

²⁰² *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 16 April 1947, Column 2814.

of the Union's white electorate formed by ex-servicemen was also conscious that the HNP had been in spirit collaborators with the Axis during the war years. The party's attitude would later be recollected among the massed ranks of the anti-Malan Torch Commando movement formed primarily of veterans. In the election defence was not a prominent issue, with the race question and the economy dominating the campaign. The possibility of a "revolution" within the military culture so soon after the success of the UDF in war would have startled most English and many moderate Afrikaners. Both these two political groupings were being cultivated by a Nationalist electoral machine, guided by that astute and energetic political organiser, FC Erasmus.

CHAPTER TWO

ERASMUS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DEFENCE FORCE

The Creation of a Nationally-Minded Officer Corps

The attitude of Erasmus towards the leadership of the defence force up to 1948 was discernible from his years in political opposition. He contended that the officer corps contained a sizeable "un-national" element too closely identified with the Commonwealth. Those of the rank of colonel and above he believed were largely supporters of Smuts and the UP.¹ The task of removing and neutralising those Erasmus regarded as not in accord with the new political realities of the Nationalist order commenced almost immediately. This process of expelling and replacing was to spread over his tenure as minister but was particularly pronounced up to the mid-1950s. By the time of his departure from the defence department in 1959 the government had created and cultivated a pliant military leadership, chiefly Nationalist in inclination and mostly Afrikaans-speaking. However in the interim the Union had forfeited the services of competent and experienced personnel. It was providential for the Nationalist governments of the 1950s that they were not faced with major security threats either internally or externally in this period of military flux.

When Erasmus was sworn in as defence minister by the governor-general, Major GB van Zyl, on 4 June 1948 the chief of the general staff was still van Ryneveld, who had held the post since 1933. He had served with the British army and air force in the First World War and had been knighted on the recommendation of the first Smuts government for his air exploits. During the early 1920s he had been appointed the first director of the SAAF. In the 1939-45 period he had demonstrated a personalised style of command which controlled virtually every aspect of defence. Authority to subordinates was seldom delegated with initiative rarely encouraged.² As he was scheduled to retire in May 1949 but was taking retirement leave three months earlier it was necessary for Erasmus to designate the successor to this military

¹ Interview with CWC van Heerden, Private Secretary to FC Erasmus from 1948 to 1954, Pretoria, 29 May 1992.

² Grundy, *Soldiers Without Politics*, p.88.

heavyweight. Most observers believed that this would be the 47-year old Major-General Evered Poole, deputy chief of the general staff. He had the appropriate ability and seniority and had held the prestigious combat command of the 6th armoured division in the Italian campaign. Within the UDF he was known as a very "English" officer who in the 1930s had been seconded to Britain's elite brigade of guards. It was also believed by Erasmus, through informants, that Poole had been known to have made sarcastic remarks about Afrikaners.³ Due to his age he would be expected to serve in the senior service post until 1956.

The defence minister faced the difficult situation of van Ryneveld's imminent retirement and an heir-apparent with whom he would not have had a harmonious working relationship. In these circumstances Erasmus moved quickly and adroitly. Just 43 days after the election he announced that the *post* of deputy chief of the general staff had been suppressed. Without a position on the general staff Poole was reassigned to Berlin to lead the 12-man South African military mission. The so-called "military" mission was in effect a diplomatic presence accredited to the allied military governments in Austria and Germany. For a top officer who had commanded thousands this was a clear demotion. However it had solved a major difficulty for Erasmus. Nevertheless the minister claimed in a SAPA interview that the Berlin posting "was an important one and not a malicious move nor a humiliation of a high officer".⁴

Within a fortnight Erasmus again made headlines. In the early hours of 22 July he made an unscheduled visit to defence headquarters, accompanied by van Ryneveld. The minister went directly to the offices of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Powell, director of military intelligence. Powell was summarily dismissed from UDF service and ordered to vacate his office. Subsequently two truckloads of intelligence files were removed from the headquarters by the Pretoria CID.⁵ In the course of the defence debate the following month the connection between the seizure of the files, the dismissal of Powell and a further rationale for Poole's transfer was disclosed by Erasmus. He revealed that during and after World War II military intelligence had closely monitored the activities of Afrikaner political and cultural organisations. Powell had been a senior intelligence officer from the early 1940s and was well

³ Interview with a former member of the General Staff in the 1950s, Pretoria, 15 October 1992.

⁴ *Rand Daily Mail*, 20 July 1948.

⁵ Christopher Saunders (ed.), *The Illustrated History of South Africa* (Cape Town: The Readers' Digest Association, 1989), p.374.

aware of the contents of the files. Poole, as deputy chief of the general staff had overall responsibility for intelligence and was no doubt as well informed. Erasmus could not countenance the continued incumbency of two politically hostile officers who held secret and confidential information affecting the HNP. The intelligence section was later reorganised and placed in the hands of a reliable Nationalist, Lieutenant-Colonel Robertson, the chief signals officer.⁶ The Poole and Powell episodes set the tone for Erasmus's ensuing relationship with the officer corps, providing a dramatic warning to them. Prominent servicemen associated with the "ancien regime", despite impressive credentials, could be removed and replaced by officers Nationalist in sympathy or overtly neutral.

The apparent discrimination against Afrikaners before 1948 offended Erasmus and he planned to remedy the situation. After studying statistical returns he was annoyed to learn that only 21% of officers between the rank of captain and brigadier were Afrikaans-speaking.⁷ To demonstrate his determination to uplift the position of "nationally-minded" Afrikaners he appointed Colonel RC Hiemstra to the newly created post of military adviser. To veterans and to many active service officers this was a provocative action. At the start of the Second World War Hiemstra had refused to take the Red Oath as he opposed the participation of the Union in the war. He was transferred by defence headquarters to a civilian position in the office of the controller of transport. Within weeks of the 1948 election Erasmus permitted him to return to the defence force.⁸ Questions were asked on why the minister could not have drawn upon the extensive and practical military experience already existing in the defence force. Erasmus's reasoning was simple. Hiemstra could be trusted as he was an Afrikaner who had shown moral courage against the prevailing support in the UDF for Smuts's war policies. He assisted the minister with formulating appointments and promotions.⁹ Though Hiemstra only occupied the adviser's post for several months before his posting to Stockholm as military attaché and was not replaced as adviser, his career would be furthered by Erasmus in the 1950s. He was an individual of ability and a leading Broeder who eventually became commandant-general of the defence force in 1965. The minister likewise assisted Major JSJ

⁶ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 14 April 1950, 745A.00/0869.

⁷ *South Africa*, 17 July 1948

⁸ *Cape Times*, 7 April 1949.

⁹ Interview with a former member of the General Staff of the 1950s, Pretoria, 9 September 1994.

Van Der Merwe who, as a subaltern in the war, like Hiemstra refused to take the Red Oath.¹⁰ By the end of the 1950s he had been designated as quartermaster-general.

In November 1948 the minister set about the reorganisation of the top echelons of the military establishment. With Poole in Berlin and not considered for further promotion Erasmus brought out of retirement General Len Beyers to be the new chief of the general staff. He was earmarked to take over on 15 February 1949 when van Ryneveld went on retirement leave. Beyers had the appropriate Nationalist pedigree, being the nephew of General Christiaan Beyers, the former commandant-general of the ACF who had rebelled against the Botha government in 1914. The new military chief was a capable administrator who during World War II had simultaneously held the posts of adjutant-general, director of prisons and director of internment camps. For the post of land forces director-general Brigadier CL de Wet du Toit, a veteran of the North African campaign was appointed. Confirmed in the post of SAAF director-general was Brigadier JT Durrant who had been the youngest brigadier on active service during the recent hostilities. In 1945, at the astonishing age of 32, on secondment to the Royal Air Force in east Asia he had been promoted to the equivalent rank of major-general. Director of naval forces was the Sussex-born Commodore FJ Dean, a former royal naval officer who had immigrated to the Union in the 1920s. Designated as the new quartermaster-general was Brigadier Pieter de Waal, whose posting was to be activated on his return from a British-based course. Brigadier WH Hingeston, lately the adjutant-general, was made the commanding officer of the important Witwatersrand command, with Brigadier Kriegler chosen to oversee the large Potchefstroom military training centre. Brigadier Steve Joubert was confirmed as adjutant-general.¹¹

The list of appointees was well received across the white political spectrum and tended to blunt some of the opposition's criticism of the Poole and Powell incidents. However it was noteworthy in the context of later developments 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 hierarchy of senior officers in the view of the United States legation had more than a passing resemblance to the American joint chiefs of staff system. The mission remarked that "the probable net result of the reorganisation will be

¹⁰ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 19 February 1954, Columns 871-3.

¹¹ *The Friend*, 12 November 1948.

to place greater control of the South African armed forces in the hands of the Minister of Defense".¹²

Within months of his appointment Beyers's relationship with Erasmus began to deteriorate. Despite press photographs of the supposed friendly pair on their mid-1949 tour of Britain and North America, tensions had arisen. Beyers confided to the American diplomatic mission in October that Erasmus was interfering with minor military administration.¹³ This was normally reserved to uniformed personnel under Beyers's command. By early November the military chief went over Erasmus's head and wrote to Malan directly complaining that ministerial intrusion had negatively affected the discipline, effectiveness and military value of the UDF. This was primarily due, he said, to a lack of understanding on the part of Erasmus of basic military principles and procedures.¹⁴ On 7 November Erasmus reminded Beyers that the chief of the general staff was responsible for carrying out policies approved by the cabinet. He went on to accuse him of lacking enthusiasm in altering what Erasmus described as "the foreign and un-Afrikaans" aspects of the forces. Beyers was censured for surrounding himself with a personal and co-ordinating staff which the minister would not have recommended. In Erasmus's view Beyers had erred seriously in allowing coloured personnel, though demilitarised, to have the same salaries as whites. An itemised list of appointments and transfers was then appended, indicating where there were disagreements between the two men.¹⁵

The dispute escalated. Beyers responded with his own list of complaints. Among these was Erasmus's appointment of the eccentric Senator CF Miles-Cadman as deputy chaplain-general. He was one of the few Nationalist-aligned English politicians. In addition the minister had formed a committee looking into economy measures in the defence department which was not allowed to be guided by the general staff and had a middle-ranking officer as its chairman.¹⁶ Even the prosaic matter of the association of school cadet corps with

¹² US State Department - Central Files, Legation to State Department, 16 November 1948, 848A.00/0083.

¹³ US State Department - Central Files, Military Attaché to Secretary of State, 5 October 1949, 848A.00/0614.

¹⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Beyers to Malan, 1 November 1949, MV 109/3.

¹⁵ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Erasmus to Beyers, 7 November 1949, MV 109/3.

individual ACF regiments became an issue. Erasmus was disgruntled that certain corps had been "affected" by the "foreign" (i.e. British) customs of a number of reserve units. He demanded disaffiliation. Beyers on the other hand felt disinclined to execute this order as he believed the links benefited both sides. The minister told his military chief that the cadet question was a political matter and he did "not feel inclined to argue further".¹⁷ A new contentious point followed. This centred on Erasmus's revival of the position of military censor. Beyers believed that this was unnecessary in peacetime. He wrote to his political master in a less than deferential manner - "you went ahead with the creation of the post after I told you that it was not practical".¹⁸

During mid-December the behind-the-scenes slanging match between the two men continued. Beyers raised the question of the post of land forces director-general created by Erasmus the previous year and occupied by du Toit. He was convinced that the innovation had proved a failure and suggested that it be replaced by that of the director of policy co-ordination and be filled by de Waal on his return from Britain. Military organisation fell, Beyers asserted, "within my functions as Chief of the General Staff". He was informed by Erasmus's private secretary that this proposal was "unacceptable". The position of land forces director-general had been created by government decision and "the government is not prepared to consider this abolition thereof".¹⁹

In the course of a confidential conversation with the American air attaché, Lieutenant-Colonel Edwin Bland, in late December Beyers revealed his great unhappiness with the minister. Bland was informed that the military chief had told Malan that he could not be responsible for the readiness of the defence force, due to Erasmus's "political interference". The minister had involved himself in matters so trivial that they could "be handled by some corporal". Personnel changes had been initiated by Erasmus without the knowledge of the three service chiefs. One particularly worrying development had been the inception of the two

¹⁶ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Digest of Correspondence between the Minister of Defence and the Chief of the General Staff", 9 September - 9 November 1949, MV 109/3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defences Papers, van Heerden to Beyers, 30 December 1949, MV 109/3..

welfare officer posts. They had been created ostensibly to determine whether bi-lingualism policies were being fully implemented. However the officers were perceived as Erasmus's spies. Du Toit was described as the minister's "fair-haired boy" who would be Erasmus's choice as Beyers's successor. If this were to occur it would be "a disaster" for the UDF. Beyers was himself inclined to the experienced de Waal for the post. However there was a complication: de Waal's British-born wife was a prominent member of the UP. He then claimed to Bland that certain cabinet members had informed him that they had been surprised by Malan's appointment of Erasmus as defence minister as his competence in the field was not respected.²⁰

It was finally resolved between Erasmus and Beyers that the latter would not remain in his post until the end of his two-year contract but rather to the conclusion of the following parliamentary session, May or June 1950.²¹ Beyers's term ended even more prematurely as the result of a trivial contretemps. The issue was the composition of the contingent of six senior officers who would participate in the governor-general's procession at the opening of parliament. Beyers believed the choice of personnel was in his purview and wanted Colonel Lex Sales of the Duke of Edinburgh's Own Rifles to represent the land forces. Erasmus preferred du Toit. At this juncture Beyers threatened not to participate himself unless his choice was accepted.²² On 17 January Beyers was given an instruction from the cabinet that du Toit would be involved in the ceremony and that he was not to absent himself.²³ Beyers carried out the order and after meetings with Erasmus the defence department announced that the military chief would go on leave on 15 February (precisely one year after he took up the post) with his resignation fully effective on 15 March 1950.²⁴

Erasmus for his own purposes had erred in his choice of van Ryneveld's successor. Believing correctly that in Beyers he had a firm Nationalist²⁵ he discovered that he also had a

²⁰ US State Department - Central Files, Bland to Secretary of State, 22 December 1949, 848A.00/0754.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Beyers to Erasmus, 17 January 1950, MV 109/3.

²³ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, 17 January 1950, MV 109/3.

²⁴ *The Star*, 23 January 1950.

²⁵ Interview with a former member of the General Staff of the 1950s, Pretoria, 9

fully professional soldier prepared to defend the prerogatives which he believed accrued to the post of chief of the general staff. Beyers had put the combat worthiness of the UDF before any other consideration. The episode demonstrated that Erasmus had a "hands on" approach to the defence force, wanting to control and influence every aspect of the organisation. After Beyers's departure he wished for a tamer and less argumentative military chief, beholden to him and more overtly sympathetic to the cause of Afrikaner nationalism.

In the ministerial papers of Erasmus there exists a pencilled list of the senior officers, excluding Poole, who were eligible for the top uniformed position after the resignation of Beyers. With the exception of de Waal, Kriegler and du Toit, all the names are crossed out. Du Toit, as forecast by Beyers, was appointed chief of the general staff though Kriegler and de Waal were senior to him. The new military head was a former artilleryman who had spent part of the 1930s attached to British army units. He was known as "Matie" in the UDF due to his connection with Stellenbosch University where he had been trained as a lawyer before entering the army. During World War II he had served with the 1st division in North Africa where he was awarded the DSO for his detailed planning of the retreat from Gazala. In the last stages of the war and until his appointment as land forces director-general he had commanded the 11th armoured brigade in Potchefstroom.²⁶ This was the only land force unit in the PF after 1945. In the wake of the 1948 election du Toit undoubtedly and quickly made known to his minister that his political allegiance was to the National Party.²⁷ In du Toit Erasmus had from 1950 to 1956 a willing military subordinate indebted to him personally for catapulting him to the top UDF position. As a result of du Toit's dramatic rise Erasmus had to defend his choice to the parliamentary opposition. The minister was asked whether the new military chief was designated on the basis of seniority or selection. Erasmus appreciated that the UP knew that du Toit had risen over more senior officers. As a lawyer the minister consulted permanent force regulations. He announced that he was satisfied that he had the authority to promote officers over the rank of major by selection.²⁸

September 1994.

²⁶ *The Star*, 20 January 1950.

²⁷ Interview with Lieutenant-General Keith Coster, Somerset West, 30 August 1994.

²⁸ *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 February 1950.

A lengthy note of appreciation was despatched to London by British high commission staff on the situation surrounding Beyers's departure. The former chief of the general staff, they believed, had acted in a professional non-political manner and was guided in his appointments by the need to maintain military effectiveness and efficiency. Du Toit on the other hand did not "possess to the same degree as his predecessor the professional respect of his fellow senior officers". The mission forecast that there would be a series of promotions to increase the number of "Nationalist-minded officers in key positions". Obstacles would be "put in the way of non-Nationalist candidates for promotion in future". The new appointees were less likely to have combat experience and were therefore "less fitted to command than those who had experienced active wartime conditions".²⁹

The American evaluation was similar to that of the British, describing du Toit as "universally unpopular throughout the services" and "unqualified".³⁰ There was also the perception that du Toit was somewhat eccentric. During the early 1950s the Canadian high commissioner reported a conversation between du Toit and the British commander at Simonstown, Admiral Packer. The former artilleryman told Packer that he had mastered the essentials of naval management and would have no hesitation taking a torpedo boat into action.³¹ He was prepared also to speak openly on domestic political matters, normally inappropriate for a commissioned officer. On one occasion du Toit told the Canadian envoy MacDermott of the role of supposed communists in the civil service, the African National Congress, the Indian community and the inner leadership of the Torch Commando. He said that the activities of the industrialist Harry Oppenheimer were being carefully monitored by the government. Du Toit commented with regard to one of the Union's richest capitalists - "it is not known whether or not he is a communist".³² The head of the UDF would have known that he could openly make such statements as they were in line with the inclinations of Erasmus and the cabinet. However Du Toit was acceptable to many officers in that, unlike Hiemstra and others, he had had front-line combat experience during the recent world war.³³

²⁹ UK Public Record Office, Rumbold to Secretary of State, CRO., 5 July 1950, DEFE 7/934.

³⁰ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 10 March 1950, 745A.00/0846.

³¹ Canadian National Archives, MacDermott to the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, 4 January 1952, RG 25/ 50084-40.

³² Canadian National Archives, MacDermott to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, 15 April 1953, RG 25/ 50022-40.

With the obsequious du Toit in place Erasmus was positioned to organise in earnest the creation of a "nationally-minded" officer corps. This was to be undertaken systematically, through the advancement of Nationalists, the premature departure or neutralisation of those not politically acceptable, and through military education. To assist with the latter the minister established the army gymnasium in November 1949. This provided a year's continuous service after secondary education for 300 young men, who then did not have to fulfil the requirements of ACF service. The army 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 creation of the military academy in April 1950 providing a three-year military science degree programme and a commission. Associated initially with the University of Pretoria as the degree-awarding institution and located in the Pretoria area its first intake was 40 cadets of whom 38 had Afrikaans surnames.³⁴

In the mid-1950s the academy was moved to Saldanha, coincidentally, like the naval gymnasium, situated in Erasmus's parliamentary constituency. The academy was again linked to another Afrikaans-language tertiary institution, the University of Stellenbosch. Erasmus appointed the professor of physics at the university and the commander of its ACF unit, Pieter de Vos, as the academy's first dean. In the academy's programme cadets spent the first academic year at Stellenbosch, with the second and third years at Saldanha. Erasmus wanted an institution comparable to West Point and Sandhurst, both of which he had visited in 1949, and producing young officers shaped to his concept of a South African ethos.³⁵ The principal of the University of Cape Town, Professor TB Davie, in late 1954 complained that his university had not be approached by the defence department about a possible link with the military science programme.³⁶ Indeed, through the Erasmus era there was no connection with English tertiary institutions except for a short period involving the University of Natal. It was asked to assist in the instruction of naval officers at Salisbury Island.³⁷

³³ Interview with Colonel Denzil Loveland, a former commanding officer of the Cape Town Highlanders, Cape Town, 7 February 1994.

³⁴ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 31 March 1950, 745A.00/0846.

³⁵ Interview with Brigadier Pieter de Vos, Stellenbosch, 31 August 1994.

³⁶ *Cape Times*, 12 November 1954.

³⁷ *South Africa*, 1 January 1955.

From the start Erasmus took an interest in the formulation of the academy's training programme and those who directed it. Major Gideon Jacobs of the military college organised the curriculum but wanted the academy affiliated to the bi-lingual University of South Africa. In 1949 Colonel HS Cilliers, the college commandant, informed Jacobs that Beyers had nominated Jacobs to be the first dean of the academy and that the general staff had concurred. However Erasmus vetoed this suggestion. Jacobs, a Free State Afrikaner, had been seconded in the recent war to Britain's Royal Marines in north-west Europe and east Asia and had obtained an OBE at 23. He believed that he had garnered the minister's disfavour because of mild disparaging remarks he had made about the government to a Nationalist canvasser during the March 1949 Transvaal provincial election. These he felt had been relayed to the minister. Already a suspicion had developed, which continued through the 1950s, that Erasmus received confidential information on service personnel from unofficial sources. Jacobs was advised by Beyers before the military chief's own departure that under Erasmus the career prospects of Jacobs were limited. As a result Jacobs resigned his commission and went on to a successful educational and political career.³⁸ Colonel SA Engelbrecht, "a safer pair of hands", became the first head of the military academy.

Despite du Toit's press statement of August 1950 that the general staff wanted to keep politics out of the UDF there was little evidence of this on the ground. The American embassy noted that Erasmus insisted on perusing the list of personnel for the SAAF squadron going to the Korean war theatre the same month. He changed five names. When Durrant queried du Toit on this no reason was given. By coincidence four of the five names were English and the remaining one, though an Afrikaner, was known to support the UP.³⁹ Even Erasmus did not dispute the opposition's contention that of the 146 commandants of the new skietcommando reserve units only 68 had ever had any previous military experience.⁴⁰ As all the commandants were Afrikaners, and as the defence department confirmed their appointments, it was probable that the vast majority were supporters of the National Party. American diplomats reported

³⁸ Interview with Dr. Gideon Jacobs, Johannesburg, 3 August 1994. Jacobs became Professor Emeritus of the University of the Witwatersrand Business School and was the UP member of parliament for Hillbrow from 1966 to 1977.

³⁹ US State Department - Central Files, Air Attaché to Department of the Air Force, 18 August 1950, 745A.00/0952.

⁴⁰ *Pretoria News*, 28 March 1950

that the minister 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".⁴¹

Among those not politically in favour was Durrant, the air force director-general. He was an English-speaker who held well known views on increasing the autonomy of the SAAF. The chain of command, he felt, should go directly from the head of the service to the defence minister rather than be routed through the chief of the general staff, a soldier. Durrant had risen quickly under Smuts and was an obvious non-Nationalist. By mid-1950 a rumour had spread that he would be despatched overseas as an attaché to be replaced by either the air force Colonel HJ Bronkhorst or Colonel SA Melville.⁴² Though the latter was English he was related by marriage to the Transvaal Nationalist leader, Strijdom. Before 1948 he was known as a UP supporter but after the election he projected himself as a Nationalist.⁴³

During June 1950 the method of Durrant's removal was revealed. In a conversation with Brigadier Hirsch of the British service liaison staff, du Toit remarked that he wanted the air force chief to be the Union's nominee for the year-long Imperial Defence College course commencing in January 1951.⁴⁴ Durrant was obliged to attend though aware of a warning from Beyers in 1949. The military chief had told Durrant that Erasmus would use such a ploy to remove him and had in fact persuaded the minister not to send Durrant on the 1950 course. Washington was informed by their embassy that the air force chief had confronted Erasmus telling him that "either Melville or he [Durrant] must leave the air force as he would not put up with Melville who was extremely unpopular with all air force officers and men".⁴⁵ The Americans had a particular interest in internal SAAF matters as the South African squadron in Korea was attached to one of their air wings. As it transpired Bronkhorst was made acting

⁴¹ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 19 May 1950, 745A.00(W)/0889.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Interviews with Lieutenant-General Keith Coster, Somerset West, 30 August 1994; Mr CWC van Heerden, Pretoria, 8 August 1994 and a member of the General Staff of the 1950s, Pretoria, 9 September 1994.

⁴⁴ UK Public Record Office, Commander-in-Chief, South Atlantic to the Ministry of Defence, 7 June 1950, CO537/6394.

⁴⁵ US State Department - Central Files, Air Attaché to Chief of Staff, US Air Force, 24 November 1950, 745A.00/0021.

chief of the air force on Durrant's departure. Durrant himself hoped that after completing his twelve months in London he would be returning to his former post.

In mid-1951 Erasmus initiated a skilful operation to remove Durrant from the military scene more permanently. He organised another shift in senior personnel as well as altering the title of "director-general" to "chief of staff" for each of the services. As part of the reshuffle Bronkhorst was shunted to the more mundane position of quartermaster-general. The respected and non-political Brigadier HG Willmott, the military and air adviser at the high commission in London, was recalled to the Union by Erasmus. Willmott was designated the new substantive air force chief. As he was in his early 50s he could only serve until 1954 when he would be obliged to retire. Melville was confirmed as his deputy and viewed as heir apparent.⁴⁶ In London Erasmus and du Toit, who were attending a commonwealth defence conference, told Durrant that they wanted him to take over the position vacated by Willmott. For Durrant, still in his 30s, this was clearly a sign that the minister wanted him out of headquarters for the long term. He was in a difficult position. There were no appropriate and available posts back in the Union for an officer of his rank, with Willmott ensconced as chief of the SAAF. At the end of the London course Durrant tendered his resignation, effective 1 March 1952, as he was not prepared to take up the diplomatic post. His unpopularity with Erasmus and du Toit was evident when he flew back to the Union. Few high-ranking officers were at the airfield and junior officers had been discouraged from greeting him.⁴⁷ Again the defence minister had removed another senior "un-national" officer opening up another position for a Nationalist "pal". Durrant became highly involved in the anti-government Torch Commando movement almost immediately after his release from the air force. In speeches around the country he expressed concern over the atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust in the UDF which he believed had been generated by Erasmus and du Toit.⁴⁸ His anti-Nationalist credentials were later confirmed when he became chairman of the UP in the Transvaal.

Removing politically unacceptable officers to overseas diplomatic posts was a technique employed by Erasmus on several more occasions. Brigadier Kriegler was

⁴⁶ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 13 July 1951, 745A.00(W)/0226.

⁴⁷ US State Department - Central Files, Robertson to State Department, 11 January 1952, 745A.00(W)/0377.

⁴⁸ *South Africa*, 5 April 1952.

despatched to Washington in 1951 as military attaché. A year later Brigadier Pieter de Waal, who had held the post of marine and naval chief of staff, replaced him. A former adjutant-general, Brigadier Steve Joubert, was sent off on attachment in 1952 to British forces headquarters in the Middle East. In the same year, Commodore Dean, the senior naval officer was relegated to the London high commission as the military and air adviser (sic), never again to return to the Union on active service.

Erasmus's choice to replace Dean was Commander Hugo H Biermann, a veteran of wartime naval operations in the Mediterranean. He and his brother SC Biermann (also later an admiral) were two of only seven Afrikaner commissioned officers in the navy in 1948.⁴⁹ As part of a grooming process for higher rank the defence department in the early 1950s sent HH Biermann to attend a course at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich. This was followed by a brief posting to South Africa House as naval attaché. Biermann was then recalled to the Union and on 1 December 1952 was promoted commodore from the rank of commander skipping the rank of captain, and appointed chief of the navy.⁵⁰ As it transpired he was a professional officer of ability respected by naval personnel who was asked by a later defence minister, PW Botha, to be chief of the defence staff in 1972.

The 1951-53 period was a turbulent one for white politics. As a consequence of the Malan government's effort to eliminate coloureds from the common voters roll, the Torch Commando was spawned to oppose this measure. The organisation was composed predominantly of former servicemen who participated in rallies, marches and demonstrations. In this charged atmosphere of anti-Nationalist feeling there was eventually a spillover into the UDF, particularly in the air force. Many SAAF officers were disenchanted by the policies of Erasmus, particularly by the treatment of individuals such as Durrant. In early May 1952 an incident in Upington highlighted this partisan feeling. Swart, the justice minister, deputising for Erasmus, and accompanied by du Toit and Willmott, was in the town to inaugurate North West Cape Command. On the evening of 3 May a group of air force officers, undoubtedly drunk, "stormed" the Oranje Hotel where the ministerial party was accommodated. The servicemen proceeded upstairs swearing and shouting insults against the Malan administration.

⁴⁹ Interview with Admiral SC Biermann, Muizenberg, 13 July 1994.

⁵⁰ *Paratus*, July 1987.

Swart's shoes, placed outside his room for cleaning, were kicked around the hall. Eventually the group was pacified by Willmott.⁵¹

More incidents in the air force followed. Within two months Captain Arthur Shuttleworth, who had won the DFC for wartime air operations over Crete, was court-martialled. He was indicted for removing Erasmus's portrait from the officers' mess at the Waterkloof air station and destroying it. He pleaded not guilty. At the trial the case was withdrawn by the prosecution as Shuttleworth was being "medically boarded". Because of failing eyesight he would be obliged to leave the service.⁵² However, between the original incident and Shuttleworth's court-martial, further episodes occurred at Waterkloof. Officers sat with their backs to the portraits of Malan and Erasmus; a bottle of chutney was hurled at the pictures, and on one occasion the photograph of Erasmus was daubed with tomato ketchup. By the end of June the pictures of both politicians had disappeared altogether. Eventually the Pretoria CID were called in by the defence department and for twelve hours interrogated officers.⁵³ As a result a reserve officer, Lieutenant Hugh Howarth, was dismissed from the service for his involvement.⁵⁴

Melville reported to the chief of the SAAF on the range of incidents in the Waterkloof mess. Willmott was advised that officers at mess had been overheard making sarcastic anti-government statements. His comments added credence to the belief that personnel such as waiters were reporting to defence headquarters on conversations in the mess. Erasmus's network of spies were believed to exist in all units, advising him of the political attitudes of officers.⁵⁵ This phenomenon added to the lowering of morale among many officers in the 1950s. In the case of Waterkloof Melville concluded that discipline at the air station was "extremely slack" and "that vigorous and expeditious action will have to be taken to obviate the possibility of further deterioration". He recommended that a new commanding officer be

⁵¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Arnold to Conradie, 5 May 1952, MV 173.

⁵² *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 July 1952; Interview with General Bob Rogers, Knysna, 12 February 1994.

⁵³ *The Star*, 23 August 1952.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Interviews with Lieutenant-General Keith Coster, Somerset West, 30 August 1994; and with two former members of the General Staff of the 1950s in Pretoria on 15 October 1992 and 9 September 1994.

appointed, certain officers be transferred and 12 reserve officers not be permitted to receive further air force training.⁵⁶

During the following year the minister's handling of the SAAF precipitated the resignation of two senior officers. The first was Commandant Douglas Loftus, a winner of the DFC and DSO, who had formulated the air force's first staff course (previously staff training had been undertaken in Britain). Soon he was followed into civilian life by Commandant CS Kotze, the military attaché at the high commission in Ottawa and a former commander of No. 68 air school. Kotze gave as the primary reasons for his resignation the usurping of his normal disciplinary powers by higher authorities and personal discrimination against him. Both officers expressed dissatisfaction regarding the government's interference with normal military administrative procedures.⁵⁷

In the wake of the April 1953 election, in which the Nationalists increased their majority, Erasmus created the post of inspector-general of the UDF. The position came to be occupied by Brigadier HB Klopper of the Tobruk siege who had replaced du Toit as land forces chief in 1950. His assignment was to assess the state of the defence force and promote efficiency.⁵⁸ In turn Klopper was replaced by Brigadier PH Grobbelaar, who had been known as a Smuts supporter before turning overtly Nationalist in 1948.⁵⁹ Hiemstra, rapidly moving up the ranks, was appointed adjutant-general. In a confident mood after the polls Erasmus was emboldened to initiate a further "weeding-out" process of "un-national" officers, particularly in the air force.

During August 1953 a series of in-camera courts-martial commenced at the Swartkop air base. The leading officer indicted was Colonel Jan D Pretorius, commandant of the SAAF College. He was charged with 20 offences under the military discipline code. For his trial the court president was Melville with senior officers, including HH Biermann and Brigadier

⁵⁶ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Melville to Willmott, 4 August 1952 (no ref).

⁵⁷ US State Department - Central Files, Sappington to State Department, 10 April 1943, 745A.00(W)/0857.

⁵⁸ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Memorandum-" The South African Defence Force", (undated) 1960, MV 177.

⁵⁹ Interview with a former member of the General Staff of the 1950s, Pretoria, 9 September 1994.

Blair-Hook, the surgeon-general, among the members. Subsequent to the legal proceedings Pretorius sent to de Villiers Graaff, soon to be UP leader, a lengthy memorandum giving the background to the charges. His statement illuminated the climate of suspicion and intrigue which he felt existed within the ranks of the small PF officer corps five years into Nationalist rule.

Pretorius, an Afrikaner, had seen extensive service with the SAAF in World War II. In 1946 he had been appointed by the Smuts government to be the official South African observer at the Greek general election. Four years later he was designated as the SAAF's liaison officer with the UN command in Korea. On returning to the Union in early 1953 after twelve months at the staff college of the Royal Air Force, Bracknell, he found a mood of "mistrust and secretiveness" in the senior ranks of the UDF. At Bracknell there existed, he said, freedom of discussion on all topics. This did not apply at the SAAF College. On one occasion he raised the issue of British press opinion towards the Malan government's constitutional policy. He discovered that the topic caused embarrassment among the officers present "who with hurried excuses - disappeared". The senior directing staff officer warned Pretorius that the commandant's every word was being conveyed to Melville "because the discussion of anything anti-Nationalist was just not on". Even at cocktail parties Pretorius was astonished to discern that there were two distinct social groups. One was centred on Willmott, Irvine, Bronkhorst and de Vos (the last three were dismissed later in 1953) and the other was the Melville, Hiemstra and Grobbelaar coterie. The commandant and his wife mixed with both groups. Mrs Pretorius was advised by Mrs Melville (sister of JG Strijdom) that "political" eyes were on them and that they should "not be too closely associated with the Bronkhorst faction". During March 1953 Grobbelaar, who was probably aware of the commandant's friendship with Smuts, informed him that he needed to demonstrate that he was "a reliable Nationalist" by the end of the year. If he did not do so there would be ramifications. Hiemstra was to query why the Pretorius children went to an English-medium school and suggested a transfer to an Afrikaans one.

The downfall of the commandant came about in a trivial manner. He had purchased a three-quarter ton truck at a government vehicle disposal sale. Subsequently he was accused of stealing a spare tyre and a wheel-jack. He claimed that he had been advised by an NCO that

these items were part of the equipment he had purchased. Pretorius was confident that the evidence presented supported his case - "the summing up of the judge-advocate was so one-sided in my favour that my advocates congratulated me on a successful case". However the court-martial panel convicted him on six of the twenty counts and he was dismissed from the air force. In the memorandum Pretorius stated that he believed Melville had received orders from du Toit to convict him at all costs. He admitted that he was unpopular among certain officers for criticising the appointment of Hiemstra as adjutant-general and deploring the increasing Broederbond infiltration of the defence force.⁶⁰ Hiemstra (membership no. 4152) in the 1950s was advancing up the ranks of the secret organisation and was to be elected to its top executive council, the Uitvoerende Raad, in 1958.⁶¹

Within weeks of the Pretorius conviction Erasmus conducted an even more dramatic removal of senior officers, many again associated with the air force. The SAAF remained a primary target as he believed it constituted the most important repository of anti-Nationalist feeling among the three services.⁶² The mass dismissal of 30 November 1953 later popularly became known as "The Midnight Ride". Its leading victim was Brigadier Bronkhorst. He was still officially the quartermaster-general but had been relieved on the orders of du Toit of day-to-day duties from mid-1953 by Colonel HJ Martin. Bronkhorst, meanwhile, was obliged to remain on his farm south of Pretoria. The Free State Afrikaner had had 28 years' service in the UDF including being second-in-command of the Union's coronation contingent in London in 1937. In World War II he was engaged in SAAF operations in East Africa followed by an attachment with a Royal Air Force formation in Ceylon. For several months in 1951, between Durrant's departure for London and Willmott's arrival in Pretoria he had commanded the air force. At some juncture he was informed that he would never be asked to join the Broederbond. The reasons were various, including having married an English Anglican and having sent his children not merely to English schools but to Roman Catholic convent schools.⁶³ Erasmus saw Bronkhorst as unsympathetic to the government.

⁶⁰ UNISA, UP Archives, Sir de Villiers Graaff Papers, Pretorius to de Villiers Graaff, (undated) 1954, Folio 1.8.

⁶¹ JHP Serfontein, *The Brotherhood of Power: An Expose of the South African Broederbond* (London; Rex Collings, 1979), p.86.

⁶² Interview with Dr Gideon Jacobs, Johannesburg, 3 August 1994.

⁶³ Interview with Mrs Linda Griffiths, daughter of Brigadier Bronkhorst, Constantia, Cape Town, 31 August 1994.

However Bronkhorst's unpopularity with the minister was not solely on political grounds. As quartermaster-general he had discovered in late 1952 that Erasmus had on several occasions assigned a military station wagon to convey luggage, documents and even a maid to the minister's farm near Nelspruit. Du Toit was appraised of the situation. Bronkhorst asked him - "kindly say whether these trips are to be considered as official, free or on repayment".⁶⁴ Van Heerden, Erasmus's private secretary, intervened and suggested to his minister that the private use of defence department transport could not be justified and there should be reimbursement, which was made.⁶⁵

Erasmus was also disenchanted by the way in which Bronkhorst and five other officers oversaw the SAAF regimental fund, acting as trustees for the impressive holding of £45,000. From 1951 the minister and du Toit had attempted to wrest control of the funds from the trustees. One of the reasons was that the fund had financed the unofficial *SAAF Journal* which had published editorials critical of Erasmus.⁶⁶ After two years of pressure Bronkhorst and his colleagues agreed to a new legal basis for the fund whereby the chief of the air force would automatically be the chairman. He would in turn select the trustees. On 30 November 1953 the document affecting this was ready for signature.⁶⁷ That evening after normal office hours motorcycle despatch riders were ordered from defence headquarters to deliver letters to the homes of Bronkhorst, Colonels de Vos and Irvine as well as nine other officers. Each contained a short notification that the services of the individual officer were no longer required, effective 28 February 1954. No explanation was given and no acknowledgement made for their contribution to the forces. Other notable victims were Colonel Maurice de Villiers of the marine corps and Commandant Gilroy King.⁶⁸

In the immediate aftermath of the dismissals, Hiemstra, the adjutant-general claimed to many observers' disbelief that the departure of the officers was an economy drive to save the

⁶⁴ Bronkhorst Papers, Bronkhorst to du Toit, 15 December 1952, Defence Department Ref. Q(Q)1)354/772/8 (ST).

⁶⁵ Interview with Mr CWC van Heerden, Pretoria, 8 August 1994.

⁶⁶ Interview with a former member of the General Staff of the 1950s, Pretoria, 3 November 1993.

⁶⁷ UNISA, UP Archives, Sir de Villiers Graaff Papers, Memorandum - "The South African Air Force Regimental Fund", February 1955.

⁶⁸ *The Star*, 1 December 1953.

defence department £250,000. Willmott, though head of the SAAF, had not been advised by Erasmus or du Toit of the intended dismissals, the event occurring as a complete surprise to him.⁶⁹ There was an intriguing postscript to the incident which highlighted Erasmus's evident lack of sympathy with the departing officers. They had been obliged to sign a receipt for the discharge notices before midnight. This permitted the defence department to comply with the regulation that there be a full three months' notice to the termination of employment, that being 28 February. If the officers had left after 1 March they would have been eligible for higher pensions.⁷⁰ Bronkhorst eventually entered parliament in 1960 where he used his maiden speech to savagely castigate Erasmus's role as defence minister.

In "The Midnight Ride" the minister had removed yet another layer of unsympathetic senior officers which permitted protégés in the mould of Melville and Hiemstra to replace them. The aim of Erasmus was to have all senior officers supporters of the National Party⁷¹ and he was prepared to lose even those of talent.⁷² At the middle-ranking level there had been a haemorrhaging of experienced commissioned ranks unhappy with the Nationalist regime for several years. Between June 1950 and April 1951 an average of 22 officers a month resigned their commissions in the ACF or the reserve of officers.⁷³ One ACF naval unit *HMSAS Unities* in Cape Town lost ten officers in 1950 and 1951. In late 1953 the commanding officer of an ACF regiment and all his officers but one resigned their commissions. This mass resignation centred on the renaming of Die Middellandse Regiment (DMR) by the defence department to the Regiment Gideon Scheepers. The UP's Cape leader, de Villiers Graaff, had served in the unit during World War II. There had been no consultation between Pretoria and the regiment's commanding officer, Commandant WG Kingwill, over the change of a name popular among the people of the Cape midlands. Scheepers was a boer guerrilla leader executed by the British in Graaff-Reinet in 1902. Kingwill believed that Erasmus's ulterior motive was to prompt a mass walkout by the regiments' officers.⁷⁴ To head the regiment defence headquarters appointed a former captain, Friedrich Setzkorn, who had not taken the

⁶⁹ UNISA, UP Archives, Sir de Villiers Graaff Papers, de Vos to Mostert, 3 May 1955.

⁷⁰ Interview with Sir de Villiers Graaff, Cape Town, 9 February 1994.

⁷¹ Interview with Brigadier Frans Erasmus, son of FC Erasmus, Pretoria, 9 June 1992.

⁷² Interview with Lieutenant-General Keith Coster, Somerset West, 30 August 1994.

⁷³ *Challenge* (UP), 20 July 1951.

⁷⁴ Interview with Commandant WG Kingwill, Graaff-Reinet, 6 February 1994.

Red Oath in the early 1940s and had been later interned by the Smuts government as a subversive.⁷⁵

Defence headquarters made other promotions of Nationalist-aligned officers which bore the hallmarks of the minister, who took a detailed interest in the composition of the officer corps. On occasion promotions were approved by Erasmus without the individuals having completed appropriate examinations, and there were instances where warrant officers were made captains on the parade ground during ministerial inspections.⁷⁶ In 1953 a captain of less than three months' standing was designated as commander of the 1st Anti-Aircraft Regiment of the marine corps, passing over four more highly ranked personnel.⁷⁷ During the same year a geology lecturer from the University of the Orange Free State, commissioned only in 1950, became the commanding officer of Die Regiment President Steyn when the incumbent with African combat experience was not re-appointed.⁷⁸ Then there occurred the unexplained, but obvious, reasons for the lack of advancement by personnel such as Bob Rogers. He was one of the most highly decorated SAAF officers with experience of air operations both in World War II and Korea. After he had been superseded as a major 25 times by more junior officers in the 1950s he stopped counting. Rogers recalled the promotion criteria deployed by the defence department. A Major de Wet was promoted over him as Pretoria believed that he was a descendent of General Christiaan de Wet and therefore had the appropriate leadership qualities. He was not.⁷⁹ Rogers, in a later and more tolerant period, was appointed chief of the air force. The capricious approach taken by the minister to officer advancement often without regard to experience and competence had a debilitating effect on the morale of many commissioned ranks. To dilute further English influence in the officer corps Erasmus refused to allow former British officers to join the ACF. This privilege however existed in South African regulations and was customary among Commonwealth forces.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 August 1954.

⁷⁶ Interview with a member of the General Staff of the 1950s, Pretoria, 15 October 1992.

⁷⁷ *Cape Times*, 7 October 1953.

⁷⁸ *The Star*, 6 November 1953.

⁷⁹ Interview with General Bob Rogers, Knysna, 12 February 1994.

⁸⁰ Killie-Campbell Library, Heaton Nicholls Papers, Sholto Douglas to Nicholls, 9 March 1951, KCM 3575.

By the mid-1950s army and air force personnel unhappy with career prospects and the prevalent partisan atmosphere had a nearby avenue of escape. The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland had been constituted in 1953. With British assistance the federal government was building up its land and air forces. As there appeared to be considerably less political interference and better conditions of service the federation became a mecca for disgruntled South African servicemen. Among them was Major Keith Coster who like many others had wartime experience; he had also served at the military college and the quartermaster-general's department. Unhappy about political promotions he moved north in 1955. Thirteen years later he was appointed commander of the Rhodesian army by the Ian Smith government at the rank of lieutenant-general.⁸¹ Joining him across the Limpopo was Commandant Frank Harpur, a former military liaison officer at South Africa House, London.⁸² Major RP Stableford, one of the Union's leading authorities on maritime air operations and senior instructor at the SAAF College, also left for the Rhodesias. He was singularly disgruntled that he had not been promoted since 1948.⁸³ Particularly affected by the exodus was the military college. By September 1955 it had lost a major, four captains and eight staff sergeants to the federation. At the end of the decade 40% of the European element of the Rhodesian forces were South African, with a particularly high proportion in the air force.⁸⁴

In 1955 Erasmus removed one of the last of the senior officers of the "old order"; again in an unorthodox manner. This was Brigadier Hingeston, the very "British" head of Natal command and a former adjutant-general. He was ordered from Durban to Cape Town to see du Toit. To his surprise Erasmus was 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 fit and did not wish to leave the service; he still had seven years to go to normal retirement. He was then informed more bluntly that he could resign immediately or in the near future be dismissed, with the implied threat to his pension rights. Soon afterwards he resigned and like many others emigrated to Southern Rhodesia.⁸⁵ Hingeston was replaced at Natal command by an overt Nationalist more congenial to Erasmus, Colonel PJ Jacobs.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Interview with Lieutenant-General Keith Coster, Somerset West, 30 August 1994.

⁸² *South Africa*, 11 February 1956.

⁸³ *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 March 1957.

⁸⁴ Public Record Office, London, Bass to Stanley, 20 October 1960, DO 38/7529.

⁸⁵ EP Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: Purnell, 1960), p.214.

⁸⁶ Interview with Colonel Denzil Loveland, Cape Town, 7 February 1994.

Despite the loss of talent to the federation Erasmus took an almost flippant public attitude to the issue. In parliament he admitted in 1956 that only "six or eight" South Africans had gone north. He took the position, consistent with the "cordon sanitaire" approach to regional security, that the creation of a strong federation defence force enhanced the protection of South Africa.⁸⁷ There was also an admission by Erasmus that personnel had left the UDF, attracted by the better pay and conditions in the civilian world.⁸⁸ The defence department did not take such a relaxed stance, particularly as the PF was short of its establishment of officers. In order to slow down the drift of servicemen from the forces a service regulation was altered in September 1955. In future it would be necessary for staff to give three months' notice of intention to ask for a discharge. Previously there had been no term of notice.⁸⁹

A dramatic change was also occurring in the ethnic composition of the PF officer corps, particularly in the air force. In 1948 English-speakers constituted a clear majority in the SAAF officer complement. From 1950 there was a noticeable shift to Afrikaners, who became a majority in 1955. By the time Erasmus left the defence department at the end of the decade the English element was down to 25% - noticeably lower than their percentage in the white population. The primary reason for the departure of the English when later questioned was "political interference" which affected their career prospects adversely as they tended not to be sympathetic to the government.⁹⁰ In a survey of resignations from the pilot complement 97 English officers resigned between 1948 and 1960 in comparison to just 14 Afrikaans-speakers.⁹¹ 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

⁸⁷ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 21 May 1956, Column 5826.

⁸⁸ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 22 March 1955, Columns 3051-3053.

⁸⁹ UK Public Record Office, British High Commission to CRO, 22 September 1955, DO 35/5278.

⁹⁰ Willem van der Bos, "An Investigation into the Resignation of Officers from the South African Air Force (Permanent Force) During the Period 1946 - 1971)", unpublished MA Thesis (University of South Africa, 1978) p.57; Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p. 96.

⁹¹ Van der Bos, "An Investigation into the Resignation of Officers from the South African Air Force (Permanent Force)", p.77.

treatment from later defence ministers the English were only 15% of the total PF strength of the army, still 25% of the SAAF and down to 50% in the traditionally anglophone navy.⁹²

In September 1956 du Toit retired as chief of the general staff and was replaced by Klopper carrying the new "national" rank of commandant-general. Grobbelaar and Hiemstra were both promoted to major-generals. The defence department announced that Biermann would become the nation's first rear-admiral just before the transfer of the Simonstown naval base on 1 April 1957. A few days before the take-over the British diplomatic mission in Cape Town sent London a major evaluation of the Union's defence posture. They concluded that as a result of Erasmus's "jobs for pals" policy, only Klopper in the top echelon of officers remained friendly to Britain. The remainder were convinced Nationalists of varying degrees.⁹³ On the same day as the British assessment 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.⁹⁴

By the time that Klopper himself retired in September 1958 to be succeeded by Melville, Erasmus had a docile and politically-aligned general staff. However the British believed that the minister was disturbed to learn in 1959 that Melville had misled him over the true state and combat worthiness of the defence force. In the course of an audit of the services it had been discerned that a number of units existed only on paper. A considerable amount of waste had also been found along with instances of duplication of manpower effort.⁹⁵

As the 1950s closed the minister had succeeded in forming an officer corps with which he was generally satisfied. Through the decade a generation of young men imbued with "national" characteristics had passed through the training institutions. They filled the ranks depleted by the departure of those who fell out of favour. They would be the Viljoens,

⁹² Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers*, p.125.

⁹³ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to Home, 28 March 1957, DEFE 7/1523.

⁹⁴ *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 March 1957.

⁹⁵ UK Public Record Office, Maud to Home, 23 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

Geldenhuijs's and Magnus Malans of the 1970s and 1980s. Protégés of Erasmus such as Grobbelaar and Hiemstra were eventually rewarded with the position of commandant-general in the 1960s. However by then a new and more open atmosphere, one somewhat less politicised, had been created in the defence department by Erasmus's successor, JJ Fouche.

Fouche assumed the defence portfolio in mid-December 1959. As administrator of the Orange Free State he had built up a reputation of pursuing a policy of reconciliation between the white English and Afrikaans-speaking populations. Symbolically he had been the member of parliament for Smithfield, the constituency once held by Hertzog who promoted the "two streams" approach to national unity. Before his departure from Bloemfontein Fouche said that he would try to build up a strong defence force "without prejudice to anyone at home or abroad".⁹⁶

From the outset the new minister made it manifest within the department but not yet publicly that he was going to take a different tack from his predecessor. Erasmus was still a cabinet colleague as justice minister. In an early and candid conversation with Melville he stated that he was not going to tolerate political nepotism within the defence force. All promotions were to be on merit. English-speaking personnel, provided they were bi-lingual, would be given an equal opportunity with Afrikaners. In future the military attaché posts were no longer to be dumping grounds for unpopular officers. Instead the positions would be occupied by suitably qualified and specially selected personnel at the right level of representation.⁹⁷ Fouche's first major promotion list in late 1960 was seen by the English press as refreshingly neutral politically and based on professional competence.⁹⁸ Morale among officers rose. By September 1962, with Erasmus off in Rome as South African ambassador, Fouche spoke more openly of his approach to military career development. Ability within the confines of the apartheid system would be the criterion for promotion.

Erasmus had wanted to form an officer corps moulded to the general advancement and ethos of the National Party. As first and foremost a political organiser he was unable to perceive the wider strategic picture. This was that the self-interest of the South African state

⁹⁶ *Rand Daily Mail*, 19 December 1959.

⁹⁷ UK Public Record Office, Rump to Maud, 8 February 1960, DO 35/10545.

⁹⁸ *Cape Times*, 21 December 1960.

demanded that its security be conducted by the most gifted and qualified white personnel, not necessarily Nationalist. Erasmus preferred a more congenial leadership group, overtly sympathetic to his party and often lacking talent. However even members of the general staff who had advanced under him were eventually dissatisfied by his browbeating of the senior ranks and lack of affinity for the defence force. In the words of one who was later to become commandant-general, the minister was "completely insensitive to the people he was handling" and "had a talent for creating opposition".⁹⁹ Permeated with years of Nationalist activism Erasmus never comprehended, unlike Fouche, the important legacy bequeathed by Britain, that of a defence force institutionally non-partisan and loyally serving the nation whatever the political complexion of the government. The minister treated disagreements with senior uniformed personnel as individualised attacks on him with the perpetrators needing to be purged. In 1980 it was noted by Enloe that the defence department was calling for more English-speaking officers. The object of the call was not to give the English more military power but to make members of the minority white group feel that they had a stake in the existing political order.¹⁰⁰ Erasmus had eroded much of the sense of identity many English commissioned ranks had with the defence force and for decades afterwards Nationalist governments attempted to restore this damage.

The Combat Worthiness of the Defence Force

Smuts's legacy in 1948 to Erasmus was a PF 2,718 men short of its establishment strength of 8,834. The ACF, the backbone of the UDF, was a disturbing 16,374 below its authorised ceiling of 29,078.¹⁰¹ The allocation devoted to defence was £ 9,500,000 or 7% of the revenue budget. During the Second World War the Union had been spending annually an average of £89 million.¹⁰² With post-war demobilisation Smuts had fallen back on the

⁹⁹ Interview with a former member of the General Staff of the 1950s, Pretoria, 3 November 1993.

¹⁰⁰ Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers*, p.181.

¹⁰¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "ACF Strength at 31 May 1948", MV 8/10.

¹⁰² SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Wilkens to Erasmus, 2 February 1951, MV 18/5.

inter-war pattern of low expenditure and a small defence force. Erasmus altered the model only marginally in his period as defence minister. He and his cabinet colleagues faced similar political and economic constraints to previous administrations, militating against high outlays on the military.

The development of the UDF's capability under Erasmus was essentially a holding action, with a limited acquisition of new equipment and weapons, particularly for the air and land forces. Only in the navy did there occur a notable expansion of capacity from the mid-1950s onwards. This was due partly to Erasmus's own maritime instincts and partly to the obligation to assume the British navy's regional role coinciding with the hand-over of Simonstown. Only in the aftermath of the Sharpeville crisis did South African governments have the sense of urgency to execute a marked programme of rearmament.

One of the minister's first acts reflected his nationalist inclinations. Within two weeks of entering the defence department he announced that the exchange of military instructors between Britain and the Union would be discontinued.¹⁰³ British personnel at the military college and the single South African officer at the school of infantry in Wiltshire would not be replaced at the end of their tours. For decades the UDF had gained from the overall training link with Britain. In the two years up to May 1948 a total of 113 South Africans had attended British courses. For the 1948-49 financial year Poole, who was responsible for defence force training, intended to send 121 servicemen overseas, mainly to the United Kingdom.¹⁰⁴ The air force had benefited particularly from the arrangement by which airmen from the Union (there were 10 in 1948) were attached to No. 24 (Commonwealth) squadron of the transport command of the Royal Air Force.¹⁰⁵ From 1948 Erasmus was never again to sanction the scale of overseas training as envisaged by Poole, ostensibly and legitimately on financial grounds. He undoubtedly lacked enthusiasm for any schemes by which the British model for the UDF could be continually reinforced. Military personnel would be despatched for training only when it was imperative for the Union. By early 1952 despite a major commitment in the Middle East the number of UDF personnel undertaking training or on attachment in Britain

¹⁰³ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Poole to Willmott, 14 June 1948, PS 29/1.

¹⁰⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, General Staff Officer (Training) to Poole, (undated) July 1948, MV 22/1/22.

¹⁰⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 July 1948.

was down to 17.¹⁰⁶ Ironically the order to end instructor exchanges was rescinded in September 1948; a decision probably made to show solidarity with the West in the midst of the Berlin airlift crisis.

Erasmus's unease with the Commonwealth link was not mollified when after reading intelligence files seized from defence headquarters he realised that the Union did not have its own secret military code, relying on Britain's instead. The United Kingdom authorities therefore, he surmised, could if they were so inclined decipher material transmitted by the UDF.¹⁰⁷ In exasperation he exclaimed in parliament that the Union's military "was a cog in another system over which we have no control".¹⁰⁸ He was determined to shape the UDF into a truly autonomous formation reflecting uniquely South African attributes.

The minister soon demonstrated his commitment to introducing "national" characteristics. Wedded to the notion of encouraging boer traditions he announced that he was forming skietcommando units. They were in essence a revamped and greatly enlarged defence rifle association by which Erasmus hoped to harness platteland Afrikaners for local internal security. In statements the minister saw the formations as a shield against fifth column "communist" penetration of the countryside.¹⁰⁹ Officers for the units were not formally commissioned by the governor-general but appointed by the defence minister. Nominations, usually three, were made for the commanding officer or "commandant" by the local formation with the final selection made by the defence department. The boer rank of "field cornet", equivalent to captain, was also introduced. All of the 175 skietcommando units until the Fouché era were Afrikaans-speaking and were mainly armed with .303 rifles. Personnel needed only to meet a minimum of three times a year for small arms training and shooting competitions.¹¹⁰ The minister's enthusiasm for a system of partly-trained and part-time servicemen was not shared by Erasmus's first chief of the general staff. On 22 October 1948 van Ryneveld minuted his minister:

¹⁰⁶ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 25 January 1952, Columns 203/204.

¹⁰⁷ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 19 August 1948, Column 543.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *South Africa*, 19 March 1949; *South Africa*, 10 June 1950.

¹¹⁰ SANDF Documentation Centre, Military Adviser-London Papers, du Toit to Military Adviser, 10 June 1954, MA/15/2/M.

The Defence Rifles Association as conceived by the 1912 Act no longer fits into the organisation of a modern army and whatever the government may now decide to do, the General Staff wishes to put the point that the genuine defence value of the system should not be exaggerated.¹¹¹

Van Ryneveld's view was later vindicated at the time of Sharpeville. During this period of major unrest defence headquarters mobilised a mere 7% of the skietcommando units, relying instead on the professionalism and competence of PF and citizen force regiments.¹¹²

In his memorandum the retiring military chief went on to suggest that the upgrading of the ACF be a priority rather than shifting limited resources to the skietcommandos. The force, he believed, was the backbone of an effective military structure which ideally should "be extended deep into the Platteland". This was not possible "due entirely to financial restrictions and associated problems." The general staff opined that in light of the increasingly dangerous East-West security situation Erasmus might consider "a modest form of compulsory service". They considered that "the task of organising and mobilising the UDF on a volunteer basis for the real and practical defence of South Africa would impose, as it did in the last war, a well-nigh intolerable burden and handicap on the General Staff".¹¹³

As events transpired Erasmus took very little regard of these recommendations formulated by his experienced general staff. The establishment, initially pegged at 80,000, would eventually have a ceiling of 100,000 - an astonishing figure for a total white population of 2,500,000. The size of the skietcommando force under Erasmus was at least three times the size of the defence rifle association structure under Smuts.¹¹⁴ On the other hand the ACF's position was not greatly enhanced with its official strength never going beyond 30,000 in the 1950s. Conscription on the lines envisaged by van Ryneveld did not occur under Erasmus. Even the voluntary aspect of external service was retained in the minister's landmark defence

¹¹¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, van Ryneveld to Erasmus, 22 October 1948, MV 22/11.

¹¹² UK Public Record Office, Rump to the Under-Secretary of State, War Office and Under-Secretary of State, Air Ministry, 17 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

¹¹³ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, van Ryneveld to Erasmus, 22 October 1948, MV 22/11.

¹¹⁴ Sheila Patterson, *The Last Trek: A Study of the Boer People and the Afrikaner Nation* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), p.87.

act of 1957. From these early days Erasmus demonstrated that he would be master in the defence department.

Erasmus had more than a passing interest in the maritime field. As a long-term resident of Cape Town, a yachtsman and a stalwart of the Royal Cape Yacht Club it was natural that he would be drawn to the needs of naval defence. He was always to like the navy and felt it needed to be larger.¹¹⁵ Early in 1949 he contacted the British high commission alerting them to the Union's desire to acquire its first naval destroyer. The fleet's three existing Loch-class frigates were assessed as being inadequate for convoy duties.¹¹⁶ On offer from the British in fact were two "W" class destroyers, moored at Simonstown, both at reasonable prices. The cabinet agreed to confirm the purchase of one destroyer - *HMS Wessex* - which was handed over to the Union in March 1950 and renamed the *Jan Van Riebeeck*.¹¹⁷ Three years later the navy took possession of its second "W" class destroyer, *HMS Whelp*, which became the *Simon Van Der Stel*.¹¹⁸

The business of re-equipping the UDF was a costly one. Even the favoured skietcommandos were found to be deficient in rifles. A task force from the defence department discovered that less than 50% of the forces' mobile equipment was effective.¹¹⁹ However with the absence of any significant external or domestic threat enthusiasm at the cabinet level did not exist for greater budget allocations to the military. Erasmus had to accept at the beginning of the 1950s a land element of the PF 39% understrength, an air force 21% understrength, no planned re-equipment programme and a serious shortage of tanks. The minister was not a formidable advocate for increased expenditure. Much of local and foreign opinion believed that he was ignorant of the whole field of national security. The American embassy reported to Washington in late 1949 -"the Minister of Defense is not capable of running the office of Minister of Defense, because he has no conception of military operations, strategy, equipment, or of the Union's military capabilities. He cannot discuss

¹¹⁵ Interview with Brigadier Frans Erasmus, Pretoria, 9 June 1992.

¹¹⁶ UK Public Record Office, Acting British High Commissioner to the CRO, 19 January 1949, DEFE 7/175.

¹¹⁷ *The Star*, 25 March 1950.

¹¹⁸ *South Africa*, 14 February 1953.

¹¹⁹ US State Department - Central Files, Military Attaché to Secretary of State, 27 June 1949, 848A.00/0458.

intelligently any type of military equipment or strategy".¹²⁰ The mission believed that he had proved to be so incompetent that he would be rapidly removed from the defence portfolio by Malan.¹²¹ Probably aware that even his cabinet colleagues did not respect his judgement he had du Toit speak on his behalf in 1950 on the important financial issue. At a ceremonial parade the military chief contended that the 7½ % of the budget allocated to defence was too small to make the defence force effective and he needed 10%.¹²²

Possibly because of the cabinet's distaste at witnessing a uniformed officer criticising their budget decisions du Toit was subsequently obliged in an interview with the *Pretoria News* to state that the armed forces were up-to-date and modern. No more men needed to be recruited and no more additional resources were required to meet a national emergency.¹²³ This statement was made just after the North Korean invasion of South Korea. Within days du Toit's comments were contradicted by a cabinet spokesman who announced that the defence force needed modernisation due to the Asian conflict.¹²⁴ The result of these statements was public confusion over the true state of the UDF.

The reality was that the forces were not in a position to contribute effectively to the defence of Africa on behalf of the West as formally confirmed to the British and American governments on 15 June 1950. This was followed by a pledge by Erasmus during the subsequent September that an armoured division and several air force squadrons would serve alongside Britain in the Middle East. The 11th armoured brigade of the PF, which would form the nucleus of such a formation, was in a pitiable state. Understrength and with obsolete equipment, it had not conducted tactical training since 1945. The ACF regiments which would fill out a combat division were also seriously short of men. It was estimated that the ACF would require six to nine months' training to reach the appropriate battle efficiency, instead of the 90 days claimed by defence headquarters.¹²⁵ On top of these difficulties there

¹²⁰ US State Department - Central Files, Bland to Secretary of State, 22 December 1949, 848A.00/0754.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *South Africa*, 15 April 1950.

¹²³ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 11 August 1950, 745A.00/0952.

¹²⁴ *The Times* (London), 5 August 1950.

¹²⁵ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 11 August 1950, 745A.00(W)/0952.

was a marked lack of technicians for armoured warfare. The commitment to Britain did not look credible.

In late 1950, as the Korean conflict escalated with the participation of the Chinese, the 11th armoured brigade held its first post-war field exercise. The result highlighted the land forces' ill-preparedness for war. Although its peacetime establishment was 1300 officers and men (30% of wartime strength) the brigade actually only had 600 men due to recruiting difficulties. During the exercise officers were seen to be rusty on armoured warfare tactics. Blunders were committed by a number of them, including failure to make ground reconnaissance before issuing attack orders. Infantry were allowed to lag behind the tanks to such an extent that they were often unavailable to push an attack forward. Armoured and infantry communications were totally lacking due to inadequate radio equipment. Only a few key officers working as umpires managed to demonstrate a solid knowledge of the use of tanks in battle.¹²⁶

The overall situation with regard to other components of the UDF was not much better. The majority of tanks and trucks in the land forces were in storage and badly in need of a complete overhaul. The general state of the air force was as critical, despite the presence of a SAAF squadron in Korea and an ambitious pledge of nine squadrons to the Middle East. A serious loss of personnel had occurred, particularly on the technical side. In early 1951 it was reported that the air force had lost six of its antiquated Spitfires within a week. Five of these had been the result of mechanical failure.¹²⁷ Because of budget constraints flying time for air crew had been cut by 25%.¹²⁸ When Britain called in March 1951 for the creation of a division of Commonwealth troops to fight in Korea, Willmott, the military adviser in London was obliged to admit that there were not enough PF personnel in the Union to make an offer. The government was also not in a position to call up the ACF.¹²⁹ While the United Kingdom and the other "old" dominions sent units at battalion and brigade strengths to the Far East Erasmus

¹²⁶ US State Department - Central Files, Air Attaché to Chief of Staff, US Air Force, 8 December 1950, 745A.00/0052.

¹²⁷ US State Department - Central Files, Dougherty to Secretary of State, 2 February 1951, 745A.00(W)/0091.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Military Adviser - London Papers, "Meeting of Commonwealth Attaches", 19 March 1951, MA/TS/1014/1.

could only make the token gesture of releasing at intervals groups of five officers at subaltern and captain rank on attachment with British formations in Korea.¹³⁰

Despite evidence to the contrary, Erasmus made a parliamentary statement in late January 1951 in which he claimed that never before in peacetime had the various elements of the armed forces been so well equipped. He then made the astounding assertion that an armoured as well as an infantry division could be mobilised *immediately*.¹³¹ The official opposition was well aware that this was not the case. Heaton Nicholls, the UP's defence spokesman in the senate, had received confidential and detailed information on the state of the ACF from Sholto Douglas, the commanding officer of the Cape Town Highlanders. He and other unit commanders had many complaints. There was a lack of intelligence summaries, with inadequate briefings on the commitment made in the Middle East and nothing on the Union's role in regional security. Regiments were faced with a steadily decreasing allocation of ammunition, such as grenades, PIAI bombs and 2-inch mortar bombs, as well as signals equipment, engineer stores and heavy armament. There existed a general lack of consultation between defence headquarters and unit commanders. In one instance the colonel of the Regiment Westelike Provinsie did not realise that his formation had been converted from the infantry to armoured role until he had read Cape command orders. Douglas revealed that ACF top ranks wanted sound planning, adequate equipment, a higher defence budget and conscription. Too much of the limited resources were being dispensed to the skietcommandos by Erasmus. Many like Douglas believed that the skietcommandos were not only ill-trained but were tying up the ACF's shooting range allocations, to the detriment of their regiments. In addition skietcommando officers attended non-examination courses at the military college, reducing time for ACF qualifying courses.¹³²

Even the minister's favourite service - the navy- was not in much better condition than the army and air force. The commander at Simonstown, Vice-Admiral Packer advised London that the navy was treated as unimportant at defence headquarters, having to report to du Toit, a soldier. In Packer's estimation "the CGS is completely ignorant of navy matters,

¹³⁰ *The Star*, 3 May 1951.

¹³¹ US State Department - Central Files, Dougherty to Secretary of State, 2 February 1951, 745A.00(W)/0091.

¹³² Killie-Campbell Library, Heaton Nicholls Papers, Sholto Douglas to Nicholls, 9 March 1951, KCM 3575.

and his staff, which is also army officered and manned, is as ignorant". Commodore Dean had no naval staff comparable to that in other Commonwealth navies. Administrative matters were handled by the adjutant-general and there existed only one lieutenant-commander who dealt with planning but on a part-time basis. The navy lacked the requisite number of specialists and technical officers. Due to a marked absence of adequate technical maintenance naval vessels were proving to be inefficient. Whitehall was bluntly told by Packer that "the SANF is quite incapable of running any sort of show of its own".¹³³ By April 1951 six ships were laid up, including two of the three frigates. In the following year it was reported that while the navy establishment was 975 there were only 772 personnel despite a continuous recruiting drive. Erasmus still remained ambitious. In 1951 he created a marine corps for shore protection, primarily around the ports. However it was wound up due to being too expensive just four years later with its servicemen split between the army and navy.¹³⁴

The difficulties produced by the low defence expenditure were compounded by the SAAF involvement in Korea. To the defence department's consternation the commitment of just one squadron was tying up 20% of the entire defence budget.¹³⁵ Erasmus had the additional difficulty of fulfilling his pledge to Britain in the Middle East which included the acquisition of 200 new Centurion tanks. For this he was able to persuade Havenga, the finance minister, to agree in 1951 to a special rollover account over a seven-year period to acquire equipment.¹³⁶

The American government was also worried about the deficiencies in the UDF. A detailed evaluation was made by their diplomatic mission in April 1951 on the disposition of the Union's defence. This was a contribution to a world-wide survey conducted by the state department to catalogue western capabilities in the light of communist aggression in Korea and military probes elsewhere. As expected it was a gloomy assessment. It confirmed the lamentable state of the navy with a number of key vessels not available for active service.

¹³³ UK Public Record Office, Packer to the Minister of Defence, 22 January 1951, DO 35/2368.

¹³⁴ *Cape Times*, 22 January 1955.

¹³⁵ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Cuff to the Secretary for Finance and Secretary to the Treasury, 28 April 1951, MV 158.

¹³⁶ US State Department - Central Files, Davis to Department of the Army, 11 May 1951, 745A.5/037.

Within the land force element there was a shortage of tanks and anti-tank weapons. The SAAF had completely obsolete aircraft except for Vampires and Devons. Other than the small-arms cartridges manufactured by the mint there existed no local production of war goods. Morale generally was low due to insufficient pay and poor living conditions and also to "political interference". Washington was advised of the position of Nationalists on defence - "business as usual without increase in the armed forces is the present attitude. So far as can be ascertained, their attitude will prevail until such time as world events will indicate that war is imminent".¹³⁷ The view was prescient. However the conflicts which did eventually occur in the 1960s would be internal and regional. The Americans were also to reach the conclusion late in 1951 that du Toit was misleading Erasmus to the true state of the forces.¹³⁸

The ballot provision for the manning of the defence force had been a feature of the Union's defence legislation for many years. However it had not been activated due to the strong voluntary tradition in the country. Erasmus decided however that it would be activated from 1952 onwards. The rationale for this was to obtain a spread of young white men from each magisterial district. About one third of the potential white manpower was balloted to do several weeks' basic training followed by annual camps with specific ACF units for three more years. An immediate by-product of the decision was that the ACF became increasingly Afrikaans-speaking. The sudden skewing towards Afrikaans meant that 14 English regiments had to be "coupled" to have enough personnel to be effectively viable. In September 1951 the minister announced at the Cape party congress that he was sanctioning the raising of the establishment of the Skietcommando movement to 100,000.¹³⁹ However the system of conscription suggested earlier by the general staff was not to be introduced.

During the course of a speech to the senate in May 1952 Malan said that the Union was on a "war footing", claiming that the country was making major sacrifices in the fight against communism. The American embassy pointed out that the army section of the PF consisted of an under-strength infantry "battalion" of 100 men, an armoured unit of about 100 and an artillery section of about 111 personnel.¹⁴⁰ Even these troops, comprising the 11th

¹³⁷ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 30 April 1951, 745A.00/0137.

¹³⁸ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 9 November 1951, 745A.00(W)/0337.

¹³⁹ *Cape Times*, 6 September 1951.

armoured brigade, were scheduled to be dispersed in late 1952 to three regional centres to form training cadres for the ACF. The claim of the prime minister was made despite the comments of the auditor-general in his report on the UDF made earlier in 1952:

...At the depot visited by my inspectors, a large number of vehicles and large quantity of stores ...were in the open or inadequately or unsuitably housed, and in a state of rust and disorder. The Air Force is seriously handicapped by the lack of up-to-date navigational equipment and a crippling lack of technicians. At the Union's main ports and cities there is a complete lack of modern anti-aircraft defences.¹⁴¹

The assertions of the government as the country moved into the mid-1950s of the battleworthiness of the UDF appeared on the surface plausible, due to high profile equipment acquisitions. Klopper announced that the land forces would be issued with the new 7.62 mm. FN rifle used by NATO "as circumstances demand".¹⁴² Under the Simonstown agreement the navy was obliged to enlarge rapidly its sea-going capacity to protect the Cape route. To assist in this role Shackleton Mark III maritime reconnaissance aircraft were ordered from Britain, for delivery in 1957.¹⁴³ One of the defence force's rare non-British purchases was for 34 F-86 Sabres from Canada, which were first flown operationally in the Union in September 1956.¹⁴⁴ Frequently Erasmus spoke of the need for South Africa to have a modern radar screen to protect strategic areas such as the Rand. Erasmus made ambitious claims for public consumption that he could quickly mobilise 60,000 men of the land forces and 13 squadrons of the air force if necessary.¹⁴⁵

On the surface there appeared to be a rejuvenation of the rearmament programme in this period. However there were alarming signals to perceptive observers of difficulties to be faced by the defence force in the short to medium term. The FN rifles were not acquired until the early 1960s; the F-86 Sabres used by the SAAF stages of the Korean conflict were to become obsolescent in the same period,¹⁴⁶ and of the complement of eight Shackletons only

¹⁴⁰ US State Department - Central Files, Robertson to State Department, 16 May 1952, 745A.00/0475.

¹⁴¹ *Natal Mercury*, 19 March 1952.

¹⁴² *Cape Times*, 22 January 1955.

¹⁴³ Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force*, pp 102-3.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 59-60.

¹⁴⁵ *South Africa*, 26 June 1954.

¹⁴⁶ Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force*, p.60.

two were being flown by the end of the decade due to shortage of trained crew.¹⁴⁷ In fact Erasmus would have been fortunate to have five squadrons of the air force operational.¹⁴⁸ Klopper told the British military liaison staff in 1955 that the SAAF system of buying different types of aircraft was "sheer madness" and attenuated the air force's limited resources. There were ground crew shortages and many good pilots had left after the end of the Korean operations. The inspector-general's view of the minister's concept of a radar screen was that it was "nonsense".¹⁴⁹ In the land forces estimates by the mid-1950s indicated that it would take a full year to produce just one trained armoured *brigade*. Though the modern Centurion tank had been acquired there were virtually no soft-skinned vehicles of post-1948 manufacture.¹⁵⁰ Even in the navy there had been a reduction of the frigate element in the naval expansion programme from six ships to four. The officer commanding coastal command, Captain Fougstedt, asserted in early 1956 that there had been a steady stream of resignations in the navy though this was later denied by the defence department.¹⁵¹ However the PF ship companies were insufficient to man the vessels so it was necessary to use supplements of ACF ballotees on their annual training periods.¹⁵²

In April 1956 Erasmus decided to show off his "new look" army in a major exercise, "Operation Oranje", which utilised 5000 PF and ACF troops. In the training area of De Brug, close to Bloemfontein, personnel trained with Centurion tanks in mock combat operations following a nuclear attack.¹⁵³ The minister speaking of the event said that it demonstrated that the UDF was "moulding a mighty iron fist" with English and Afrikaans-speaking units "standing shoulder to shoulder to defend the Fatherland".¹⁵⁴ However the "mighty iron fist" of the armed forces, supposedly exemplified by the operation, was in actuality less attractive for a sizeable section of the white population. In May 1956 the defence department revealed that

¹⁴⁷ UNISA, UP Archives, Central Head Office Files, De Villiers Graaff to Horak, 27 July 1959, Folio 18.2

¹⁴⁸ Interview with a former member of the General Staff of the 1950s, Pretoria, 15 October 1992.

¹⁴⁹ UK Public Record Office, Joint Planning Staff to the Chiefs of Staff, 2 June 1955, DEFE 4/77.

¹⁵⁰ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to Home, 3 June 1955, ADM 116/6049.

¹⁵¹ *Cape Argus*, 17 January 1956.

¹⁵² UK Public Record Office, Campbell to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 23 May 1955, ADM 116/6049.

¹⁵³ *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 April 1956.

¹⁵⁴ *Natal Mercury*, 3 May 1956.

nearly 11,000 of the 27,000 seventeen year olds who were to register for the ACF ballot had asked for exemptions. Reasons included disruption of education, family obligations, physical incapacity and religious considerations.¹⁵⁵ What was not stated was that there was a general assumption within the white population that there was no military threat to the Union. The July 1956 ACF manpower figures indicated this particular lack of interest in national defence. There existed a shortage of 1,381 officers in its establishment of 2,856 and of 4,085 men in the rank and file figure of 28,538.¹⁵⁶ In the PF the only encouraging developments for the defence department were to be seen in the navy. In the late 1950s there was a marked increase in the recruitment levels, due to the clear role and purpose of the maritime forces after the Simonstown agreement. By 1957 the intake level was twice that of 1954.¹⁵⁷ The several years after 1955 produced one of the two periods of notable naval development since the inception of the South African service in 1922, the other being the growth during 1939-1945.¹⁵⁸

A major appraisal was begun in 1957 by both the Union's political and military leadership on the future direction of the defence force. There were significant external considerations. South Africa's primary ally, Britain, in a defence white paper in April of that year resolved to reduce conventional forces, including the navy, and depend more on nuclear weaponry. In the wake of the Suez crisis British prestige had diminished in the Middle East. Her granting of independence to the Gold Coast demonstrated that she was not planning to remain on the African continent for the long term. There was therefore the possibility of black-ruled states appearing near to the borders of the Union. In these circumstances the senior South African military personalities made their conclusions. At a special meeting of the general staff committee on 3 May 1957 Commandant-General Klopper contended that the Union could not rely entirely on Britain and the United States for material support. The production of military equipment by local industries was a matter "requiring serious consideration" with "self-sufficiency" the aim. The inspector-general, Melville spoke of the need to create "a hard-hitting and highly mobile force, possibly also air-transportable".¹⁵⁹ At a

¹⁵⁵ *Cape Argus*, 24 May 1956.

¹⁵⁶ *South African Affairs*, (State Information Office), 6 July 1956

¹⁵⁷ *Cape Times*, 13 June 1957.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Vice-Admiral RA Edwards, Pretoria, 28 July 1994. Edwards was Chief of the Navy from 1980 to 1982.

¹⁵⁹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Minutes of the General Staff Committee Special Conference", 3 May 1957, MV 178.

subsequent meeting of the defence resources board Klopper spoke of the need for an "immediate start" to be made on the deployment of guided missiles.¹⁶⁰

While the military "top brass" were convinced of the need for expensive defence systems for national security the civilian leadership appeared less than persuaded. The 1957-58 budget allocation approved by cabinet was the lowest of the decade, except for 1950-51. Erasmus spoke increasingly of the "reorganising and streamlining" of the defence force. Brigadier Barstow of the British military liaison staff commented on Erasmus's new task - "the minister's desire to learn how to streamline forces is in itself admirable, except there are no forces to streamline".¹⁶¹ By the end of 1957 the crucial change in defence policy occurred. The Strijdom cabinet resolved that the defence department "should concentrate more on internal security and less upon the preparation of a task force for use outside South Africa".¹⁶² The individual concerns of the Union rather than those of the West were to be paramount in guiding defence planners. Though black unrest was always in the political consciousness of the Nationalists there was not yet a sense of alarm. However a few steps were taken. A number of units of the ACF in 1957 had their first internal security courses.¹⁶³ The introduction of "mobile watches" was an indication that defence department thinking was tending towards the control of local disturbances. A "watch" was a "battalion" of the PF tasked to assist the civil power whenever necessary and also to help in natural disasters.¹⁶⁴ By the time of Sharpeville there were two mobile watches each with an establishment of 250 men.

During June 1958 Erasmus announced that planning for the reorganisation of the defence force was underway. He forecast that the forces would have reduced manpower but that they would be more intensively trained, which would produce a greater striking power. There would probably be a combining of air force squadrons and they would be distributed to meet "tactical and strategic needs". Flying time for citizen force pilots would be cut.¹⁶⁵ With

¹⁶⁰ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Minutes of the Meeting of the Defence Resources Board", 27 June 1957, MV 55/4/1.

¹⁶¹ Canadian National Archives, Acting Canadian High Commissioner to the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, 10 September 1957, RG 25/50084-40.

¹⁶² SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Steyn to de Villiers, 12 December 1957, MV 18/10.

¹⁶³ Interview with Colonel Denzil Loveland, Cape Town, 14 July 1994.

¹⁶⁴ UK Public Record Office, British High Commission Memorandum - "Law and Order", 4 January 1958, DO 35/8069.

the enhanced domestic and regional role for the defence force Erasmus undoubtedly saw his favoured commando movement as a vital component. He was soon disabused of this at a conference of commanders of military regions in mid-1958. In their opinion these part-time forces could not be considered "trained" or dependable in the event of substantive unrest. London was advised by its liaison staff that Erasmus was dispirited by these comments and it was "reasonable to suppose his most immediate thoughts are towards building a reliable internal security force".¹⁶⁶ Soon afterwards the minister lowered the establishment figure for the commandos to 60,000 but as a "sweetener" announced that they would eventually be armed with automatic weapons.¹⁶⁷ He also expressed the hope that the number of mobile watches would be increased.¹⁶⁸

The details of the reorganisation were finally made known in early December 1959 just before Erasmus moved to the justice ministry. The primary role of the army and air force was to be focused on "conventional warfare against lightly armed forces of aggression apart from its internal security task". Equipment to be purchased would be adapted to this new situation. Intrusion by subversive elements would be discouraged by "fast, lightly armed security forces". To ensure success there would be closer cooperation between the SAAF and the army.¹⁶⁹ It was believed that Erasmus was influenced by the French experience in Algeria, where French forces were stationed on the borders of Morocco and Tunisia to combat infiltration by pro-independence guerrillas.¹⁷⁰ Within South Africa citizen force units were to be distributed to various regions if backup was needed for the police. Their profile was to encompass more infantry regiments with a corresponding reduction in cavalry and artillery formations. However the requisite equipment for these reserves could only be obtained "as and when funds become available". The navy was to be guided by the provisions of the Simonstown agreement with the expansion of the fleet to be completed in 1963. Erasmus had set the armed services in a new direction. He saw the threat of anti-apartheid forces using the territory of neighbouring countries to launch attacks. This eventually occurred with the

¹⁶⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 June 1958.

¹⁶⁶ UK Public Record Office, Duke to Younger, 25 July 1958, DO 35/10545.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ UK Public Record Office, Aston to Morrison, 9 September 1958, DO 35/10545.

¹⁶⁹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Press Statement by Mr. FC Erasmus, Minister of Defence Regarding the Reorganisation of the South African Defence Force", 2 December 1959, MV 13/3 Vol.II.

¹⁷⁰ UK Public Record Office, Maud to Home, 23 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

commencement of the SWAPO campaign in South West Africa in August 1966. He and the general staff also foresaw the need for troops to be deployed aiding the civil power to quell black uprisings in the townships and homelands. However by the lack of urgency demonstrated in the late 1950s this was felt to be some years off.

The Sharpeville disturbances took place just three months after Erasmus left the defence portfolio and threw in sharp relief the unpreparedness of the defence force. After the initial outbreak of violence on 21 March 1960 around the Sharpeville police station unrest spread to other areas, particularly the Rand, Natal and the eastern and western Cape.¹⁷¹ Both PF and citizen force personnel were mobilised for several weeks assisting the overstretched police force. In fact the events of 21 March might have developed differently if Erasmus had streamlined the cumbersome method of activating the citizen force and deploying the PF. The crowd had gathered around 10.00 am and about an hour and a half later the deputy commandant-general, Grobbelaar, was asked to send troops to the site by Rademeyer, the police commissioner. However the citizen force could not be "stood to" except by a proclamation signed by the governor-general. There were no mobile watches in the area of the Vaal triangle so the only action that the PF could undertake on the day was for the SAAF to make low level passes over the crowds at Sharpeville and also Evaton.¹⁷² The shooting incident took place at about 1.15 p.m.¹⁷³

In the days that followed disturbances spread around the black townships of the Union. By the end of March Swart, the governor-general, on behalf of the Verwoerd government had ordered the full mobilisation of the citizen force to provide additional support to the police. States of unrest were declared in 122 of the country's 265 magisterial districts.¹⁷⁴ Despite this only 12 of the 175 commando formations nation-wide were activated.¹⁷⁵ Troops were used, until stood down in early May, primarily for cordoning off unrest areas to facilitate police search operations. Because of a shortage of land force personnel in the western Cape sailors

¹⁷¹ Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p.14.

¹⁷² UK Public Record Office, Rump to the Under-Secretary of State, War Office and Under-Secretary of State, Air Ministry, 17 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

¹⁷³ Lapping, *Apartheid: A History*, p.138.

¹⁷⁴ Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History*, p.397.

¹⁷⁵ UK Public Record Office, Rump to the Under-Secretary of State, War Office and Under-Secretary of State, Air Ministry, 17 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

took part in operations in the Nyanga township of Cape Town. Air force aircraft, besides their use for crowd dispersal flights, were deployed for the transport of reinforcements and reconnaissance of disturbances. Two of the four helicopters owned by the SAAF were deployed for various tasks in the Cape Town area.¹⁷⁶

The state of emergency taught the defence force a number of lessons and revealed the consequences of low expenditure during the Erasmus years. It showed up inappropriate training and an antiquated call-up procedure for the citizen force. For this the government resolved that SABC radio would be utilised for future mobilisation announcements. It had also taken several days for a joint operations centre to be established and efficiently run. Defence headquarters decided that individuals from the centre would constitute a small planning staff. Their role would be to study all likely security operations and make intelligence assessments. In the course of the disturbances the general staff had realised that they did not have enough troops to man the various mobile headquarters. There existed no means of controlling units situated out of wireless range of static command bases. Difficulties had been discovered in communications between brigade headquarters and aircraft in support of land operations.¹⁷⁷ Units such as the Cape Town Highlanders operating in the western Cape found their radio equipment "ancient and lacking range".¹⁷⁸ The most glaring deficiency on 21 March was that the land force element of the PF comprised only the two mobile watch detachments. One was based at Potchefstroom with approximately 120 men, with the other at Bloemfontein with even fewer. Each had an official establishment of 250. In reviewing the air operations the defence department made the evaluation that the crowd dispersal operations were largely ineffective. Immediately after the state of emergency Harvards and Dakotas were equipped with tear gas bombs. They were soon used. In June 1960 a crowd near Lusikisiki, Transkei was scattered by aircraft dropping tear gas as well as smoke bombs.¹⁷⁹

Fouche set about rectifying the deficiencies of the 1950s. An anxious Verwoerd cabinet quickly approved the creation of the joint operations centre and three combat headquarters. A third mobile watch was formed, with plans for a fourth by the end of 1961.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ UK Public Record Office, Maunihan to the Under-Secretary of State, War Office and Under-Secretary of State, Air Ministry, 16 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Colonel Denzil Loveland, Cape Town, 14 July 1994.

¹⁷⁹ Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p. 15.

In addition a security battalion of the PF was constituted to guard strategic installations. Though the commandos were to retain a role in rural defence "shock units" of the citizen force were to be assigned to specific regions to assist the commandos if an unrest situation got out of control. New regulations obliged commando officers to receive a minimum of training alongside citizen force commissioned ranks in internal security operations.¹⁸⁰ To facilitate wider public participation in local defence Fouche announced in 1960 that the first English-medium commando formations would be established. His stated policy was "that both language groups of our people must do their share of military duty and must be offered the opportunity of doing their duty".¹⁸¹ To expand the armoury of counter-insurgency techniques a training cadre was sent to the British army's parachute training centre at Abingdon to form the nucleus of a South African paratroop unit.¹⁸² In September 1960 a police-defence force interdepartmental committee was set up to co-ordinate anti-unrest programmes.¹⁸³ Fouche introduced legislation in the following parliamentary session to give the armed services greater powers to commandeer vehicles and even trains to assist in the movement of forces to areas of disturbance.¹⁸⁴

In the midst of the state of emergency Fouche made a speech to the senate and spoke of the equipment needed in the new situation by the defence force. One important item was the British-built Saracen armoured vehicle which would increase the mobility of the land forces used for "fire brigade tasks". Helicopters would also be more extensively employed.¹⁸⁵ Within weeks Alouette helicopters were ordered from France. There was a speed-up in the acquisition of the FN rifles for the land forces with the first citizen force unit, Die Regiment Vaalrivier, taking possession of them in March 1961.¹⁸⁶ Sir John Maud, the British high commissioner, reported to London that Fouche, unlike Erasmus, "seems sincerely determined to be guided by military rather than by political criteria". However Maud's liaison staff advised

¹⁸⁰ UK Public Record Office, Maunihan to the Under-Secretary of State, War Office and Under-Secretary of State, Air Ministry, 16 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

¹⁸¹ *Cape Argus*, 26 April 1961.

¹⁸² *Cape Argus*, 31 August 1960.

¹⁸³ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Fouche to Erasmus, 13 September 1960, MV 55/14.

¹⁸⁴ Robert Jaster, *South Africa's Narrowing Security Options* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1980), p.10.

¹⁸⁵ *Cape Argus*, 4 April 1960.

¹⁸⁶ *Cape Argus*, 25 March 1960

him that the defence force had "a long way to go in the organisation of command and communications" before it could handle any widespread internal uprising. Their assessment concluded that the armed services were not in a position to deal simultaneously with a cross-border threat and extensive local disturbances.¹⁸⁷

Fouche believed that the army was over-equipped with heavy armour ordered by Erasmus in the early 1960s for Middle East service. A sale of one hundred of the 203 Centurions and ten armoured recovery vehicles were made to Switzerland in 1960.¹⁸⁸ This released £2½ million for the defence department to obtain more appropriate equipment. In October the minister said that whenever and wherever possible all arms and ammunition were to be manufactured in the Union.¹⁸⁹ In the meanwhile items for regional defence had to be obtained overseas. During the following year the South Africans ordered Mirage IIIC fighters from France, C-130 Hercules aircraft from the United States as well as Buccaneer jets and Canberra bombers from Britain.¹⁹⁰ Defence expenditure rose from £11 million in 1960 to £105 million within four years of Fouche's arrival in the defence department.¹⁹¹ By the time he left the portfolio in April 1966 to be succeeded by PW Botha there was a greater sense of confidence in the forces, with increased numbers, better equipment and training, and a heightened morale.¹⁹²

During the early 1960s the Verwoerd government was on the road to defence self-sufficiency. However the political landscape was rapidly altering. In the era of widespread African decolonisation white-ruled South Africa had become a pariah state with a growing security problem both internally and externally. During the previous decade the land and air forces had grown slowly and had been equipped essentially for a role in the Middle East. The navy had on the other hand received an important assignment in maritime protection, guided by the Simonstown agreement. In 1960 the important land element of the SADF was badly provisioned, ill-trained and under-staffed to face the internal unrest sparked

¹⁸⁷ UK Public Record Office, London, 23 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

¹⁸⁸ *Cape Times*, 29 July 1960.

¹⁸⁹ *Cape Times*, 19 October 1960.

¹⁹⁰ Dennis Austin, *Britain and South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.129.

¹⁹¹ Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p.16.

¹⁹² Barber and Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, p.103.

by Sharpeville, though this had been designated as its primary task in 1957. For too many years Erasmus had been beguiled by military side shows, such as the skietcommandos, which on the day of reckoning were barely used. If the incidents of 1960 had been as concentrated and widespread as those of the 1970s and 1980s the security apparatus would not have been able to cope. Verwoerd's administration had been fortunate. Erasmus's undynamic and leisurely style doubtless reflected the attitudes of the cabinets of the 1950s towards defence, which had continued the Smuts tradition of low expenditure between wars. However the approach, to be rectified by Fouche, had endangered the survival of the white supremacist state.

Altering the Ethos of the Defence Force

Before 1948 Erasmus had spoken of the UDF as being insufficiently "South African". On becoming minister he promoted the displacement of the forces' British traditions and the substitution of boer/Afrikaner customs, conventions and symbols. In this way he wanted to forge a distinctive South African military appearance and demeanour. Changes were introduced gradually. However, by the time he had left the defence department, the defence force had lost most of the style which it had originally shared with other members of the Commonwealth.

To aid in the transformation process Erasmus appointed a three-man committee under the chairmanship of Professor AN Pelzer of Pretoria University. The brief of the committee was to delve into the origin and forms of the various defence systems of the boer republics and the former British colonies in South Africa. They were asked particularly to scrutinise "military flags, regimental colours, standards, badges, characteristics and uniforms".¹⁹³ One of the other two committee members was Major JS Van Der Merwe who had not taken the Red Oath during the recent war. When the Pelzer report was complete Erasmus had the information he needed to launch his assault on the British legacy. The committee had made recommendations with regard to rank nomenclature. "Commandant" could be substituted for

¹⁹³ SANDF Documentation Centre, Secretary for Defence's Papers, Cuff to Agar-Hamilton, 2 February 1949, DC 3/170.

lieutenant-colonel, "field cornet" for captain, and "commandant-general" for chief of the general staff. As it transpired Erasmus moved cautiously and deliberately. Commandant was introduced in 1950, commandant-general in 1956 and field cornet in the last weeks of his ministry. 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".

A redesign of service uniforms was also on the mind of the minister. The navy director was minuted by Erasmus's private office in early 1949. Dean was advised that the department wanted an investigation into altering the naval ratings uniform so that "in some way" it would have "a South African identity".¹⁹⁴ Two months later the cabinet requested drawings not just for new naval uniforms but additionally for the army and air force.¹⁹⁵ 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 two-tone uniform for the first time. This comprised the normal baratheia tunic but with lighter gabardine trousers with no turnups.¹⁹⁶ 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.

Throughout 1949 Erasmus chipped away at other imperial links. In June he decided to terminate the services within the Union of Sir Gerald Woollaston, Britain's inspector of regimental colours.¹⁹⁷ Subsequently the treasury ruled that the King's colours presented to ACF regiments in future would have to be paid for by the units themselves and not by government.¹⁹⁸ The traditional British officers "pips" were replaced by a five pointed star representing the four provinces and South West Africa.¹⁹⁹ Another target for the minister was the "red tab" which appeared on the uniforms of individuals and units which had served outside the Union during the Second World War. This symbol highlighted South African

¹⁹⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, van Heerden to Dean, 17 January 1949, MV 22/8.

¹⁹⁵ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Erasmus to Beyers, 17 March 1949, MV 55/7.

¹⁹⁶ *South Africa*, 7 May 1949.

¹⁹⁷ SANDF Documentation Centre, Secretary for Defence's Papers, Acting Adjutant-General to Cuff, 7 June 1949, DC 3/170.

¹⁹⁸ *The Star*, 25 August 1950.

¹⁹⁹ *South Africa*, 5 January 1950.

solidarity with the Commonwealth and its active participation in the hostilities. Erasmus ordered that the tab be discontinued in the PF from 1 December 1949 with the initials "SA" substituted.²⁰⁰ The tab would continue to be displayed in many formations of the ACF and as late as 1952 there were 22 regiments still wearing it.²⁰¹

Early in the 1950 parliamentary session the house of assembly was informed by Erasmus that a new naval rating uniform was going to be introduced. He advised that the uniform design was in the purview of his department and parliamentarians would not be consulted. Meanwhile his officials were making other alterations. In March the graduates of the military academy wore German Afrika-Korps headgear for the first time, though Erasmus claimed that these were Swiss Army ski caps.²⁰² These were also given to the army cadet corps.²⁰³ Personnel at the new army gymnasium were issued with ceremonial hats resembling ones used in the pre-1914 Austro-Hungarian empire.²⁰⁴ During April 1950 an announcement was made that the air force would have distinctive blue uniforms. This brought the SAAF in line with other world air forces, as previously it had its airmen in uniforms of an army-style colour and cut. The new design was very popular within the air force after its introduction in April 1952.²⁰⁵ 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.²⁰⁶

All British customs and conventions were questioned by the minister and even by service personnel. In March 1950 a number of skietcommando officers scheduled to attend a dinner at the military college asked to be excused, wanting to avoid the loyal toast to the King.²⁰⁷ The minister was queried by the UP in parliament on whether disciplinary action

²⁰⁰ *South Africa*, 1 October 1949.

²⁰¹ Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p.95.

²⁰² *Commando*, December 1950.

²⁰³ Patterson, *The Last Trek*, p.89.

²⁰⁴ *Commando*, December 1950.

²⁰⁵ Interviews with General Bob Rogers, Knysna, 12 February 1994; Major-General Edward Pienaar, Stellenbosch, 14 July 1994; Pienaar was the military secretary to Erasmus from April 1954 to December 1955.

²⁰⁶ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Acting Quartermaster-General to du Toit, 31 October 1951, MV 75.

²⁰⁷ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 7 April 1950, 745A.00(W)/0869.

would be set in train against the officers in question. Erasmus fell back on legal arguments and announced that he could not discern any breach of regulations.²⁰⁸ While in opposition he had been well known for saying that if he had been a UDF officer he would have resigned his commission before giving the loyal toast.²⁰⁹ By 1953 the crown had disappeared from all unit insignia of the republican-minded skietcommando movement.

The more traditionally-minded navy was by mid-1950 worried about the changes being wrought by Erasmus. The predominantly English-speaking SANF had lifted almost intact the conventions of the British navy as there had been a close relationship between the two forces since the creation of the Natal Naval Volunteers in 1885.²¹⁰ Unease over Erasmus's intentions began with the announcement of the new ratings uniform to replace the one inherited from Britain. Anxiety increased with a speech by the minister in August describing the British uniform as consisting of a woman's jumper, funny bell-bottomed trousers and soup plate hat.²¹¹ Already 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, with peaked hat, white collar, black tie, blue battledress blaze, creased trousers with no turnups and black boots.²¹²

When the design was finally revealed in September it was not similar to the press sketches but more a facsimile of the pre-1945 German navy uniform. In January 1951 ratings of *HMSAS Unitie* wore the uniform publicly for the first time at the opening of parliament and it became general issue in March 1952. The design was immediately unpopular with navy personnel and adversely affected recruitment. By late 1953 the defence department was obliged to announce that yet another uniform would be introduced.²¹³ This was a modification of the petty officer design and was seen initially in mid-1954 when Biermann inspected the ship's company of the *Simon Van Der Stel*.

²⁰⁸ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 18 April 1950, Column 4452.

²⁰⁹ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 3 May 1939, Column 3914.

²¹⁰ Helmoed-Romer Heitman, *The South African War Machine* (Johannesburg: Bison Books, 1985), p.74.

²¹¹ *The Star*, 19 August 1950.

²¹² *The Star*, 28 August 1950.

²¹³ *South Africa*, 28 November 1953. The UP publication *Challenge* in its issue of 28 June 1952 reported a rumour that Erasmus's disappearance from parliament for several weeks (he had had a heart attack) soon after the introduction of the unpopular naval uniform was because he had been shot at by two sailors and been wounded.

The arrival of the German-patterned ratings uniform in March 1952 coincided with a significant shift towards an increased republican ethos in the navy. The cap tallies of the new uniform deleted the initials "HM" (Her Majesty's) before the ship's name, only retaining "SAS" (South African Ship). In official documentation ships and shore installations were also designated without the HM prefix.²¹⁴ Many white English-speakers and naval veterans saw this as an insensitive move by Erasmus and his government. No pre-warning had been given as in the case of the uniform and no consultation offered. To these critics the action appeared as particularly obtuse as the new sovereign, Elizabeth II, had only assumed the throne the previous month. 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 Queen's coronation. Despite a warm invitation extended by the British admiralty to the SAN to participate in the Spithead naval review, no vessels were despatched. The SAAF was not involved in the air review in Hampshire, although aircraft came from countries as far afield as New Zealand. In 1937 South African troops had mounted guard at Buckingham Palace at the time of King George VI's coronation. Sixteen years later no UDF personnel mounted guard, despite Commonwealth states as small as Ceylon engaging in this prestigious function. In the Union itself there were official military parades in honour of the monarch; however none was attended by members of the cabinet. Eventually a UDF regulation was introduced that "God Save the Queen" could be played at official ceremonies only when the governor-general or a member of the royal family was in attendance.²¹⁵ While this diminution of the link with the crown was regretted by many English-speakers there was quiet satisfaction among many Nationalists that there was occurring an incremental process bringing the republic closer.

Various cultural aspects of UDF life were affected in making the forces "national". During 1953 Biermann introduced the practice of serving KWV brandy as a tot to the ships' companies. This replaced what the naval chief described as "the foreign practice" of providing rum, which had been the custom on South African vessels, derived from the British one.²¹⁶ In the army it was decided to drop the tune "Auld Lang Syne" when regimental colours were

²¹⁴ *The Star*, 18 March 1952.

²¹⁵ UK Public Record Office, Le Rougetel to CRO, 1 September 1953, DO 35/8100.

²¹⁶ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Biermann to du Toit, 23 June 1953, MV 22/8.

interned, replacing it with "Vaarwel Ou Vriend".²¹⁷ The appellation "sir" was discontinued in 1956 throughout the forces. Officers were to be addressed by their rank, a practice already common in Afrikaans-medium units.²¹⁸ The term "private" had already been replaced by "rifleman" in infantry units three years previously.²¹⁹ Erasmus had also been eager to inaugurate a unique range of South African medals and decorations. In 1950 he had commissioned Warrant Officer George van Rhyne to investigate possible designs. By the following year he was able to tell parliament that new decorations were to be launched. These were finally unveiled at the van Riebeeck festival in Cape Town in April 1952.²²⁰ The new medals 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 bravery.

A programme of renaming the existing or new ACF regiments after Nationalist heroes was begun 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. Many veterans believed that it was inappropriate to commemorate an individual who had led a rebellion against the legally constituted government.²²¹ The most controversial retitling was that of the Die Middellandse Regiment which was renamed after Gideon Scheepers. As it transpired the process was not particularly popular even among Nationalist voters. The policy with regard to the citizen force was revised at the time of the 1959 defence force reorganisation so that new units would be named after geographical regions. Die Regiment Gideon Scheepers was in the 1960s retitled by Fouche Die Regiment Groot Karoo.²²²

On the occasion of du Toit's retirement as chief of the general staff in September 1956 and replacement by Klopper, Erasmus took the opportunity of introducing the title "commandant-general". This replaced not only the previous title but additionally became the highest general rank.²²³ The change permitted the defence department to remove the crown

²¹⁷ *Rand Daily Mail*, 15 April 1953.

²¹⁸ *Cape Times*, 16 November 1956.

²¹⁹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 February 1953.

²²⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, 11 April 1952.

²²¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Wakefield to Erasmus, 5 December 1951, MV 8/1.

²²² Interview with Commandant WG Kingwill, Graaff-Reinet, 14 February 1994.

²²³ UK Public Record Office, British High Commission to the CRO, 17 September 1956, DO35/5278.

from the rank insignia of the military chief, but retain the crossed swords and stars. Speaking to his Moorreesburg constituents Erasmus described this action as part of "a move inexorably towards a republic".²²⁴ 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.

The removal of symbols of the Commonwealth link in the defence force paralleled the marked republican tone of the Strijdom government. The year 1957 was a particular watershed. In March the Union Jack was discontinued as a national flag, followed within weeks by the dropping of "God Save the Queen". The officer commanding Natal command, Colonel Jacobs, had already raised the hackles of many anglophile Durbanites by substituting "Ons Land, Suid Afrika" for the words in honour of the sovereign in the loyal toast.²²⁵ From that year further regimental alliances were discontinued between the Union and Commonwealth countries. Erasmus forbade sea cadets from attending the Commonwealth youth day service in Cape Town as the British national anthem was to be played.²²⁶ In the case of members of the navy they were restricted from attending Trafalgar Day ceremonies from 1957 onwards. They were advised by the defence department that "no member of the permanent force is now allowed to take part in the national celebrations of any foreign country. The British celebrations also fall in this category".²²⁷ This instruction encapsulated the policy shift by the government since the early part of the decade. In 1950 it had been quite acceptable for Erasmus to attend a Trafalgar Day dinner. In November 1957 defence force units were not permitted to participate in Remembrance Day activities if the Union Jack was displayed or the British national anthem played. Within two years the symbol of a leaping springbok had replaced all monarchical representations on uniform buttons. The attenuation of the outward and visible military ties to Britain and the Commonwealth with the substitution of distinctive South African aspects was almost complete as the decade closed.

²²⁴ *South Africa*, 6 October 1956.

²²⁵ *Natal Mercury*, 20 December 1956.

²²⁶ *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 October 1957.

²²⁷ *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 October 1957.

In the defence reorganisation of December 1959 Erasmus introduced a new set of rank titles, largely influenced by the boer prototypes. "Field cornet" replaced captain in the army and air force, with "sub-lieutenant" superseding second lieutenant. The ranks of major-general and lieutenant-general were merged into the single rank of "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.²²⁸ Earlier in the year Colonel Jacobs, who commanded Witwatersrand command after leaving Durban, had forbidden cadet corps under his control to wear items such as slouch hats and kilts.²²⁹ This was believed to be the first steps in creating homogeneity in uniforms. The new ranks brought in by Erasmus in 1959 were eventually dropped in the Fouche period as they attracted little popular appeal in 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 defence 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".²³⁰ However, as the defence force entered the 1960s, it was sufficiently "national" in appearance and customs not to be mistaken for armed services of any other nation. This was clearly the achievement of Erasmus.

The Consolidation of Bi-Lingualism

Parallel to the process of modifying many of the aspects of the UDF derived from Britain, Erasmus directed a programme of guaranteeing parity of treatment for the two official languages. He believed that Afrikaans had been in a subordinate position in the forces under the UP government despite the existence of constitutional equality for both languages since 1925. A step taken by the minister early in his administration was his instruction that

²²⁸ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Press Statement by Mr F C Erasmus, Minister of Defence, Regarding the Reorganisation of the South African Defence Force", 2 December 1959, MV 13/3 Vol II.

²²⁹ *Cape Times*, 18 February 1959.

²³⁰ UK Public Record Office, Maud to Home, 23 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

departmental correspondence be in Afrikaans exclusively during one month followed by English the next.²³¹ After perusing the military intelligence files collected by the Pretoria CID in July 1948 he was disturbed to see that almost all the documentation was in English. He announced that a four-man commission was being despatched to the Netherlands. They would study terminology in the Dutch armed forces to assist in the expansion of Afrikaans usage in the UDF.²³²

Two years later Erasmus inaugurated another committee to revise handbooks and training pamphlets so that they would be available in both languages.²³³ The new military chief, du Toit, affirmed that bi-lingualism would be rigidly applied in the PF and for successful completion of military college courses; in the ACF the commanding officer and the second in command needed to be proficient in the official languages. PF commanding officers were obliged to stipulate whether personnel recommended for promotion were sufficiently conversant in both English and Afrikaans.²³⁴ This applied to all members of the force 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 SAAF. As a result of the ruling many who had not learned Afrikaans and therefore had little prospect of promotion decided to leave. Most had been using English almost exclusively as aircraft engineering documentation tended to be in English. They either did not renew their contracts or bought themselves out;²³⁵ with many experienced technicians not being replaced. As a device to stem the outflow the defence department quadrupled the buying out rate from £25 to £100.²³⁶

In 1950 Erasmus initiated a policy of designating units of the ACF as either English or Afrikaans medium. The skietcommando movement, launched in December 1948 was already exclusively Afrikaans-speaking for instructions and orders. By the end of the 1950s less than 4% of its personnel were English-speaking.²³⁷ In the ACF the first unit to be affected by the

²³¹ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 19 August 1948, Column 551.

²³² *South Africa*, 14 August 1948.

²³³ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 10 February 1950, column 1093.

²³⁴ *The Friend*, 15 November 1950.

²³⁵ *The Friend*, 5 January 1951.

²³⁶ US State Department - Central Files, Birch to State Department, 2 July 1951, 745A.00(W)/0226.

²³⁷ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Bierman to Melville,

linguistic regulation was the 2nd Royal Natal Carbineers. Against the wishes of most of its personnel the regiment was declared Afrikaans-speaking. After rigorous protests in the province Erasmus partly relented by allowing the regiment to retain English but its strength to be cut down to two squadrons. The next step by defence headquarters was more dramatic. Du Toit produced a comprehensive list of units divided into the two language mediums. Klopper, the army chief of staff, was not consulted over this decision but had the task of touring the Union to pacify local commanding officers where there were controversies.²³⁸ While touring coastal artillery batteries suddenly designated as Afrikaans-speaking the army chief was advised that there would be difficulties teaching gunnery in the language. In Port Elizabeth, the senior instructor, himself an Afrikaner, said that many technical terms in the field did not yet exist in Afrikaans. One commanding officer believed that he would have great difficulty retaining his 22 commissioned officers as his regiment was no longer English-medium. The American military attaché who accompanied Klopper on the tour estimated that 90% of the officers saw the changes in language regulations as a political ploy.²³⁹

During October 1952 the controversy over the bi-lingualism policy came to the fore. The issue highlighted in the eyes of many English an unnecessary and retrograde rigidity in the programme. The dispute centred on the dismissal of Miss D M Dixon, matron-in-chief of the medical service of the UDF. An individual of wide professional experience and training she had served with the 6th armoured division in Italy. Dixon and two of her nursing sisters failed to obtain passes in Afrikaans tests. The latter were permitted to remain on short service commissions without pension rights but Dixon was forced to leave, less than five years before her retirement. Her departure occurred while there was a serious nursing staff shortage in the defence force.²⁴⁰ Though the nurse establishment was 183 there were only 123 personnel. At the important Voortrekkerhoogte military hospital there was half the official nursing complement.²⁴¹ The Afrikaans media supported the defence department's action over Dixon, and the enforcement of the bi-lingualism regulations. They believed that after so many years in

17 October 1958, MV 22/11.

²³⁸ US State Department - Central Files, Dougherty to State Department, 2 March 1951, 745A.00/0112.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *Cape Times*, 30 October 1952.

²⁴¹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 20 October 1952.

the forces she should have been proficient in both languages.²⁴² Conversely the English press suggested that the UDF could not afford to sacrifice talent on the altar of inflexible language policy, particularly where a shortage of well-trained professionals existed. In the Dixon case it was noted that the Afrikaner nursing staff were not obliged to sit English tests and opposition observers queried whether there was balance in the policy.²⁴³

With the activation of the ballot mechanism the linguistic profile of the ACF significantly altered. The English had a particularly strong volunteer tradition with their proportion of the force normally higher than their percentage of the white population. In the new arrangements less than 10% of the first intake were permitted to be volunteers. As a result Afrikaners made up 65% of the inducted trainees.²⁴⁴ In these circumstances the defence department announced the "coupling" of 14 English-medium regiments and an increase in Afrikaans units. There was dissatisfaction among a number of English regiments over the action, particularly in the First City Regiment and the Kaffrarian Rifles in the eastern Cape and the Rand Light Infantry in the Johannesburg area.²⁴⁵ However, in the period of 1956-57 with an increased number of English ballotees, these regiments were "uncoupled".²⁴⁶

By the mid-1950s the bi-lingualism policy was gradually being accepted through the ranks of the UDF. Many English-speakers who tended in many cases not to be fluent in Afrikaans had left the forces. In this period regulations were further tightened so that staff courses could only be attended by officers suitably proficient in the official languages. The department decided that there needed to be further usage of Afrikaans in the traditionally English-dominated navy. Under the chairmanship of Commander Gideon Joubert, a committee was created to formulate a naval terminology handbook in Afrikaans.²⁴⁷ To ascertain how the language could be utilised in the navy, the flagship *SAS Good Hope* was assigned to be Afrikaans-medium for a period of three months in 1956.²⁴⁸

²⁴² *Die Burger*, 21 October 1952; *Die Vaderland*, 21 October 1952; *Die Transvaler*, 24 October 1952.

²⁴³ *The Star*, 17 October 1952.

²⁴⁴ *South Africa*, 22 August 1953.

²⁴⁵ BG Simkins, *The Rand Light Infantry* (Cape Town: Howard Timmins, 1965), p.100.

²⁴⁶ Francis Coleman, *The Kaffrarian Rifles* (East London: The Kaffrarian Rifles Association, 1988), p.245.

²⁴⁷ Interview with Commander Gideon Joubert, Somerset West, 29 August 1994.

²⁴⁸ *Cape Argus*, 24 September 1955.

"Operation Oranje" occurred during the same year. This was designated as Afrikaans-only for the operational handbook and between units. Within normally anglophone regiments English was permitted. The army chief of staff, Grobbelaar, said that a vital linguistic lesson had been learnt from the exercise. This was that "the requirements of war did not interfere with a citizen's cultural aspiration as far as the two official languages are concerned. It would be a pity if one or other language should have to disappear temporarily under the pressure of our military commitments".²⁴⁹

After "Oranje" the defence department introduced even more rigid language tests, comparable to those given to civilians in the public service, for promotion and entry to staff courses. Knowledgeable observers believed that these new regulations would affect many middle-aged officers, predominantly English. They had not had the opportunity of experiencing the more concentrated bi-lingual programmes offered at the gymnasia and military academy.²⁵⁰ One officer was quoted as saying that "there are many of us here with 15 or 20 years service, who regard a system of promotion based on the ability to speak both official languages to a laid-down standard in which ability and efficiency take second place as utterly unfair and extremely stupid".²⁵¹ The English press speculated that servicemen in positions such as pilots, naval technical officers and staff involved in the servicing of equipment were most at risk if not sufficiently bi-lingual. In these cases English remained the leading language for manuals and handbooks. In his enthusiasm for his native tongue Erasmus wanted military air traffic control to be in Afrikaans until it was disclosed that English was recognised and accepted internationally as the language for this purpose.²⁵² 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 1957.²⁵³

Erasmus's attitude towards the equality of the two national 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

²⁴⁹ *Cape Argus*, 27 April 1956.

²⁵⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 November 1956.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² Interview with General Bob Rogers, Knysna, 12 February 1994.

²⁵³ *South Africa*, 1 December 1956.

performance of the forces. While innocuous on the surface the emphasis on bi-lingualism tended to discourage the recruitment of English-speakers who were more likely not to be fully bi-lingual.²⁵⁴ The stance on this question by Erasmus would have been straightforward. The Union was officially bi-lingual 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.

The Defence Force and Apartheid Structures

As a staunch Nationalist and supporter of Malan the new defence minister in 1948 would have been a strong adherent of apartheid ideas. A cardinal principle of the HNP in opposition had been that there should be no arming of blacks. There existed a strong belief among Afrikaners that blacks could not be trusted to protect the white regime - indeed, it was feared that they might well turn their guns on whites. In this context one of Erasmus's first acts on entering the defence department was to announce on 19 August 1948 that the Native Military Corps and the Cape Corps, a coloured unit, would be disbanded.²⁵⁵ This was officially completed in April 1949.²⁵⁶

Just before their dissolution the adjutant-general, acting on Erasmus's orders, set out the future position of blacks in the UDF. Henceforth they would cease to assume any conventional military functions. They could volunteer for the uniformed Essential Services Protection Corps (ESPC) as guards and fire-pickets and for car duties. Non-uniformed staff were to be employed for duties where low-paid black labour normally was required.²⁵⁷ In 1950 the ESPC itself was reorganised into two bodies - the Cape Corps Auxiliary Service and the Bantu Labour Service. Personnel of both could not hold military rank or status but were permitted to wear specially-designed uniforms. Until the reintroduction of coloured armed

²⁵⁴ Grundy, *The Militarization of South African Politics*, p.8.

²⁵⁵ Eileen Riley, *Major Political Events in South Africa, 1948-1990* (Oxford: Facts on File, 1991), p.12.

²⁵⁶ Grundy, *Soldiers Without Politics*, p. 90.

²⁵⁷ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Adjutant-General's Circular No. 2, 22 January 1949, MV 94.

troops in 1963 by Fouché black military participation in the defence force ceased. The 1957 defence act reconfirmed the well-established prohibition on armed black soldiery.

The policy of refusing to deploy soldiers of colour affected the government's relations with the African colonial powers. Particularly up to the mid-1950s when the process of sub-Saharan decolonisation commenced Erasmus tried to persuade Britain, France, Belgium and Portugal to follow the Union's example. This was highly unrealistic. The metropolitan powers were not in a position to garrison their colonies exclusively with their own nationals. Britain itself in 1950 had 62,500 black troops in its African territories.²⁵⁸ This policy divergence between South Africa and the European powers militated against the more formalised African defence cooperation desired by the Union.

After 1948 Nationalist governments depended almost exclusively on the police to quell black protest. The major exception was the Durban riots of January 1949. On this occasion the ACF regiments, the Royal Durban Light Infantry and Natal Mounted Rifles were mobilised. Even naval personnel from Salisbury Island were activated.²⁵⁹ When the security situation deteriorated for the Indian community, two of its leaders, GM Naicker and AS Kajee, sent a telegram to Erasmus. They informed the minister that the police were not numerous enough to protect their community and appealed "in the interests of humanity, to take adequate measures in Durban to stop continuing outbreaks of violence and systematic destruction of homes".²⁶⁰ The combined police/UDF forces were able to calm the disturbances which in their wake left 142 dead. Within weeks the minister had set up under the director of policy co-ordination and planning, Colonel HS Cilliers, a small intelligence section to monitor possible future unrest.²⁶¹ However during the following decade the defence force only became involved in riot duties in Kimberley in November 1952 when ACF personnel were sworn in as special constables.²⁶²

²⁵⁸ David Killingway, "The Idea of a British Imperial African Army", *Journal of African History*, vol. 20, no.3, 1979, p. 434.

²⁵⁹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, O C Natal Command to Erasmus, 17 January 1949, MV 111.

²⁶⁰ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Naicker and Kajee to Erasmus, 17 January 1949, MV 111.

²⁶¹ US State Department - Central Files, Winship to Secretary of State, 15 April 1949, 848A.00/0390.

²⁶² UK Public Record Office, British High Commission Memorandum - "Law and Order",

Periodically in the years up to Sharpeville there had been outbreaks of violence in townships in various parts of the Union. Towards the end of 1949 and early 1950 rioting took place in the southern Transvaal in such localities as Krugersdorp, Randfontein, Newclare, Benoni and Newlands.²⁶³ During the last stages of the Defiance Campaign riots occurred in Port Elizabeth on 18 October 1952.²⁶⁴ These were soon followed in early November by disturbances in East London and Kimberley.²⁶⁵ By the end of the decade there was unrest in Natal. In response to these events expenditure on the South African Police (SAP) rose rapidly from the 1952-53 financial year.²⁶⁶ From £10.19 million in that year it had increased to £15.99 million in 1958-59, with much of the extra monies being earmarked for the modernisation of SAP technology.²⁶⁷ Change in police strength was not particularly dramatic, increasing from 18,524 in 1952 to 25,724 at the time of Sharpeville.²⁶⁸ However the Nationalists viewed the police, with 90% of its white personnel Afrikaners since 1927, as the first line of defence against black violence.²⁶⁹ They seemed reassured of this for much of the decade. The experience of the 1960 state of emergency proved to policymakers, however, that the SADF was a vital component in domestic security and reliance could not be placed solely on the SAP. The divergence of expenditure in the early 1960s highlighted this realisation. In 1960 the allocation for the police was just 8% lower than that for the defence force. Four years later the police were receiving only one-quarter of the figure for the SADF.²⁷⁰ Erasmus in the late 1950s had begun the process of repositioning the defence force for an increased domestic role. However he did not possess the foresight to appreciate how quickly and widespread black disorder would occur. He had been lulled into a false sense of security by the "success" of the SAP in putting down violent incidents while he had been at

4 January 1958, DO 35/8069.

²⁶³ Troup, *South Africa: An Historical Interpretation*, p. 325.

²⁶⁴ Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (London: Longman, 1983), p.59.

²⁶⁵ Riley, *Major Political Events in South Africa, 1948-1990*, p.33.

²⁶⁶ John D Brewer, *Black and Blue: Policing in South Africa* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1994), p.186.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p.210.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p.239

²⁶⁹ Gavin Cawthra, *Policing South Africa: The SAP and the Transition from Apartheid* (London: Zed Books, 1993), p.12; Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p.93.

²⁷⁰ Brewer, *Black and Blue*, p.244.

defence. In this regard the normally hard-headed Verwoerd was also not prescient. If he had suspected the possibility of the degree of violence which would occur in March 1960, he would not have transferred the ailing Erasmus to the very department controlling the police.

Erasmus, the Defence Secretariat and the Administration of the Defence Force

The direction of the department of defence was vested in Erasmus's hands for over eleven years. It was an area of government which he enjoyed and which he was hesitant to leave when asked to be justice minister, though he had been a lawyer.²⁷¹ Defence was not blessed with government largesse in the 1950s as it was not viewed as important by the cabinet. In 1948 the civilian head of the defence secretariat, the secretary for defence, was Herbert Francis Cuff. He was an English-speaker who had seen active service with the UDF in the Tanganyika campaign of the First World War. Appointed secretary by the Smuts government in January 1946²⁷² he would remain at the post until his retirement at 60 in August 1955. In his position he was responsible for all funds voted for defence by parliament, the execution of ministerial policy, the economic distribution of civil and military activities and the control of civilian staff within the department.²⁷³ He had no control over appointments or promotions of uniformed personnel.²⁷⁴ In the 1948-49 financial year Cuff and his colleagues monitored an allocation of just over £9½ million or 7% of the government's revenue budget, a low percentage when compared to the Fouche era and one which would continue through the 1950s.

In an important evaluation of the defence secretariat undertaken in the mid-1960s it was characterised as a department of financial and accounting clerks. It was not providing political advice to the minister, guiding military education, developing scientific advice or armament acquisition. The position of the secretary for defence was in many ways

²⁷¹ Interview with CWC van Heerden, Pretoria, 29 May 1992.

²⁷² *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 January 1946.

²⁷³ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Memorandum- "The South African Defence Force", (undated) 1960, MV 177.

²⁷⁴ Canadian National Archives, MacDermott to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 19 February 1951, RG 25/50084-40.

indistinguishable from that of a senior staff officer. There were no clear lines of command and control and no unity of command. Much of the problem lay with the defence act of 1912 which had been ambiguous over the relationship between the chief of the general staff and the secretary. This had not been clarified in Erasmus's own defence act of 1957.²⁷⁵ The minister in his tenure in the department had not been innovative in reforming the secretariat though he long had the opportunity. It would eventually be wound up by PW Botha when he became defence minister and not revived until 1994 when the Mandela government resolved to emphasise clear-cut civilian control over the military.

One of Erasmus's first actions within the department was to organise a scrutiny of the personnel policy of his predecessor. This encompassed an investigation into any discrimination which might have occurred against Nationalist-leaning servicemen during the Smuts period. In the August 1948 defence debate the minister had asserted that Smuts had "trampled" on those in the UDF who took exception to the Union's participation in war.²⁷⁶ On 22 October 1948 the minister informed Cuff that he had appointed a five-man committee to look into the grievances of former PF members. A second three-man committee was empanelled to delve into the complaints of those still in uniform who alleged that they had been penalised for their wartime sympathies.²⁷⁷ In the end 271 individuals appeared before the previous service committee and 231 before the serving personnel grievances committee. The two bodies reported in late 1949 that they had found instances of "hardship" for servicemen who had suffered "humiliation" or had lost promotion prospects for having not taken the Red Oath. However they were unable to find any more than a few isolated cases of alleged persecution and victimisation as a result of the former government's war policy. Even these cases were not fully substantiated.²⁷⁸ The Smuts administration had generally been even-handed in its approach towards unsympathetic servicemen in a wartime emergency.

²⁷⁵ Deon Fourie, "A Ministry of Defence for a New South Africa - Lessons from Past Experience" in William Gutteridge (ed.), *South Africa's Defence and Security into the 21st Century* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing, 1996), p.22.

²⁷⁶ Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p.97.

²⁷⁷ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Acting Adjutant-General to Heads of Departments, 29 October 1948, MV 55.

²⁷⁸ Canadian National Archives, McGreer to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, 11 November 1949, RG 25/6438-40.

Erasmus was resolved to try to expand the activities of his department within the tight financial constraints. On 29 November 1948 he convened the first meeting of the defence resources board in Pretoria. The purpose of the board was to survey the nation's industrial capacity for "supplying the UDF requirements of stores and equipment" and to make recommendations. In turn the board created a system of committees to liaise with the various branches of industry linked to defence requirements.²⁷⁹ The American embassy reported that the board did not meet again until May 1950.²⁸⁰ Later in the 1950s its chairman, Dr FJ du Toit, was to complain that the minister was not giving the board adequate funding to investigate methods of defence procurement in overseas countries, such as Australia.²⁸¹ On 1 October 1951 Erasmus launched a defence production office tied to his department, under the direction of Colonel Driver. He and his staff were to administer the production and repair of military stores, plant and equipment by civilian contractors. They also had the brief to create the nucleus of a procurement operation to be rapidly expanded in war.²⁸² During October 1953 the minister opened an ordnance workshop outside Pretoria set up in conjunction with the British-based Birmingham Small Arms Company. Initial production concentrated on small arms components, American bazooka rockets and 3" British rockets. With this Erasmus laid the foundations of Armscor which was officially launched in 1968.²⁸³ However the production level in his era was still modest. At the time of the hand-over of defence to Fouche the value of arms manufacture in the Union was less than £158,000 annually but was to grow to £16½ million in 1964-65.²⁸⁴

With his fondness for creating boards Erasmus announced at Tulbagh in 1951 that a defence manpower board had been constituted.²⁸⁵ Its purpose was to advise him of the most economic and well-balanced use of the Union's manpower in wartime. However by the beginning of 1952 the board could not obtain figures for military requirements or training from

²⁷⁹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Notes for Meeting with Industrial Heads - Cape Town", 7 February 1951, MV 55/4/1.

²⁸⁰ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 14 August 1950, 745A.5/0037.

²⁸¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Minutes of the Meeting of the Defence Resources Board - 27 June 1957", MV 55/4/1.

²⁸² US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 28 September 1951, 745A.00(W)/0282.

²⁸³ Heitman, *The South African War Machine*, p.122.

²⁸⁴ Barber and Barrett, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, p.103.

²⁸⁵ *South Africa*, 13 October 1951.

Erasmus and du Toit. In one instance the marine corps commander had no idea of the size of his formation several months after its establishment.²⁸⁶

The dissemination of defence information was a field in which the minister took a personal interest. During 1949 the department launched a bi-lingual, well-illustrated magazine for the UDF entitled *Kommando/Commando*. This related defence activities but with overt and subliminal messages outlining the creation of a "national" defence force and the need for vigilance in the anti-communist struggle. In the final stages of his quarrel with Beyers Erasmus decided that access to the military hierarchy needed to be muzzled. He removed their discretion in dealing directly with journalists, with information on defence issues to be obtained only through the state information office.²⁸⁷ At the same time two public relations officers were appointed to act on behalf of the department, GA De Bruyn and HM Pansegrouw, both on the editorial staff of the minister's favoured newspaper, *Die Burger*.²⁸⁸ As Erasmus did not countenance criticism of his policies which he viewed as personal attacks he ordered the closure of the *SAAF Journal* in late 1951. This was edited by personnel of the air staff college and funded by the regimental fund and had carried editorials dismissive of the minister's direction of the air force. Officially the publication ceased publication because it was in competition with *Commando*.²⁸⁹ The next two targets were *Wings*, the publication of the SAAF Association, and *Sailor*, produced by the navy league and naval officers association. Both were unsympathetic to Erasmus because of his altering of the defence force ethos and personnel policies. As they were not financially supported by his department the minister could not shut them down. However he was able to blunt their influence in the UDF. In 1952 and 1953 both were banned from departmental installations, including messes, for about a year. This prohibition was ostensibly due to the detrimental effects of certain editorials on service recruiting.

²⁸⁶ Canadian National Archives, MacDermott to Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, 4 January 1952, RG 25/50084-40.

²⁸⁷ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 20 January 1950, 745A.00/0817.

²⁸⁸ *South Africa*, 7 January 1950.

²⁸⁹ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 16 November 1951, 745A.00(W)/0337.

By the mid-1950s there was significant critical comment of the Union internationally. Erasmus decided that UDF staff going abroad for training courses needed to be prepared for discussions on internal developments in South Africa. During August 1956 the defence department inaugurated its first "enlightenment course". In the minister's own words the purpose of the course "was to equip them to stand against all comers" when it came to questions and arguments about the country. Military intelligence directed the briefings and officers were issued with pamphlets produced by the state information office containing 100 questions and answers. An opposition MP, Badenhorst Durrant, a former army officer, expressed the suspicion that the programme "might be used to enlighten military personnel not so much about South Africa but about Nationalist ideology".²⁹⁰

Throughout his period at defence Erasmus had to get by with limited financial resources allocated to his department. This set constraints on the scope of his activities and reflected the lack of importance placed on the portfolio by cabinet. One of the most important of the finance ministers was Havenga who held the post from 1948 to the end of 1954. The Free Stater had also been in the position from 1924 to 1939 so he was perceived as a "heavyweight" not only domestically but in the Commonwealth. During the pre-war period he had been frugal with defence and this pattern was repeated after 1948. In late 1949 he shaved £1½ million off the estimates to bring them down to £11½ million.²⁹¹ In the following year, despite the involvement of the Union in the Korean conflict, the service chiefs' estimates which came to £25 million, were reduced to £16 million.²⁹² This indicated that Erasmus was not a powerful minister in cabinet and had not won the battle of the allocations.²⁹³ South African outlays on the military were modest by the standards of their Western partners. Canada, in comparison, spent £600 million annually in the early years of the war in Asia.²⁹⁴ In 1950 the United Kingdom was devoting 7.7% of GNP to defence, Australia - 3.3%, Canada - 3.3%, New Zealand - 2.5%, with the Union, notwithstanding its claim to be one of the world's most virulent anti-marxist powers, down at 1.2%.²⁹⁵ The pattern of low expenditure continued

²⁹⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 August 1956.

²⁹¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Erasmus to Cuff and Beyers, 12 December 1949, MV 18/10.

²⁹² US State Department - Central Files, Air Attache to Chief of Staff, United States Air Force, 22 December 1950, 745A.00/0052

²⁹³ Canadian National Archives, MacDermott to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 27 March 1951, RG 25/50084-40.

²⁹⁴ *Canadian News Bulletin*, 3 April 1951.

through the decade. In 1955 defence was set at 8% of the revenue budget and was dropped to 6% by Erasmus's Cape colleague Donges, the finance minister from September 1958.²⁹⁶ However, with the marked apprehension of the Verwoerd administration after the events of March - April 1960, spending skyrocketed, with a five-fold increase by 1966.²⁹⁷

Not only was Erasmus faced with limited financial resources but the whole process of equipment purchase from outside the Union was a laborious one. If the chief of the general staff made a bid for a certain item there needed to be approval by the general staff, by the civilian chairman of the committee that decided on defence purchases, by Erasmus who was required to confirm that money had been allocated in the budget after consultation with the secretary for defence, by the minister of finance, and finally by the minister for economic affairs for the approval of import licences.²⁹⁸ The last post was held by Louw until 1955 (he was also finance minister in 1954-56). He did not believe that South Africa should expend its financial assets on equipment, which he long held ought to be provided in wartime by the Western allies. In this he was supported by Havenga when he was finance minister. Between them they were a formidable pair in cabinet on this subject.²⁹⁹ The only major innovation to assist Erasmus to fulfil his pledges to Britain to provide substantial armoured forces for the Middle East was the defence special equipment account. This was a roll-over account which was initiated in the 1952-53 financial year and lasted seven years. Though the total allocation came to £48 million there was an underspending in the end of nearly £9 million.³⁰⁰

In August 1955 Cuff retired as defence secretary. Though a conscientious civil servant Erasmus was never fully to trust him. This was due to the secretary being an English-speaker, in all likelihood UP in sympathy,³⁰¹ and seemingly indiscreet.³⁰² Probably unbeknownst to the

²⁹⁵ Correlli Barnett, *Lost Victory: British Dreams, British Realities* (London: Pan Books, 1995), p.60.

²⁹⁶ Barber and Barrett, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, p.57.

²⁹⁷ Chester Crocker, "Current and Projected Military Balances in Southern Africa" in Richard Bissell and Chester Crocker (eds.), *South Africa into the 1980s* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979), p.82.

²⁹⁸ UK Public Record Office, Snelling to the CRO, 3 February 1954, DO 35/8252.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Memorandum-"Defence Special Equipment Account", 21 December 1959, MV 18/10.

³⁰¹ Interview with a former member of the General Staff of the 1950s, Cape Town, 29 July 1992.

minister, Cuff had advised the British high commission of the Union's thinking on defence procurement in December 1952. The diplomatic mission informed the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO) just before the negotiations on Simonstown that Cuff "is a friend of ours".³⁰³ He also talked rather openly to the Canadians. In 1951 he told MacDermott, their envoy, that the machinery of consultation and planning on defence was primitive. The secretary had been pressing for some time for the creation of a cabinet committee on defence. Though approved without enthusiasm by ministers it had not come into existence by that year. He had also wanted a larger defence budget. When he retired he was replaced by JP de Villiers who had been his deputy since 1950 and a reliable Nationalist.³⁰⁴ He was seen by British observers as competent and straightforward in business matters. Even he was prepared to pass on to Whitehall what appeared to be secret departmental information on conversations between his minister and the Portuguese in Lisbon at the end of 1955.³⁰⁵

In the mid-1950s Erasmus and de Villiers considered the contents of the first consolidated defence bill since 1912. This was to encompass the various amendments made over a number of years and give a distinctly "national" character to the defence force. The draft of the bill was introduced in the 1956 parliamentary session, the same session in which the Strijdom government passed its own official secrets act, replacing Britain's act of 1911 which had applied in the Union.³⁰⁶ To examine the defence legislation a parliamentary select committee of both major parties was constituted and the bill was eventually passed by both legislative houses in the following year.³⁰⁷ Under the act the UDF renamed the South African Defence Force (SADF), the ACF became the Citizen Force (CF) and the skietcommandos were to be known as the commandos. The latter were brought more fully within the scope of defence legislation. Regulations on bi-lingualism were included. Despite bringing into question the credibility of an external military commitment the act retained the clause that only volunteers could serve outside the Union.³⁰⁸ This item catered to the traditional Nationalist

³⁰² Interview with Brigadier Frans Erasmus, Pretoria, 9 June 1992.

³⁰³ GR Berridge, "The Ethnic 'Agent in Place': English-speaking Civil Servants and Nationalist South Africa, 1948-1957", *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.4. no.2, April, 1989, p.263.

³⁰⁴ Interview with CWC van Heerden, Pretoria, 8 August 1994.

³⁰⁵ Berridge, "The Ethnic 'Agent in Place'", p. 263.

³⁰⁶ *South Africa*, 25 February 1956.

³⁰⁷ Grundy, *Soldiers Without Politics*, p.94.

³⁰⁸ *Cape Argus*, 27 March 1957.

resentment of being co-opted for Britain's wars. People of colour were still refused combatant roles in the armed services. This was despite the arguments of the native representatives that as blacks already constituted an important element in the police and therefore could be trusted for SADF service.³⁰⁹ Extra discretion was also given to the governor-general for creating and awarding military decorations without the need for reference to the sovereign.³¹⁰

Due to a susceptibility to Afrikaner pressure groups Erasmus enacted a regulation in 1958 that proved unpopular within the defence force but found favour with many outside. On 1 August alcohol was banned from all defence force messes.³¹¹ This action had a depressing effect on service morale. A week before the regulation came into effect the minister told parliament that outsiders had been using service facilities and consuming the cheaper liquor available. From a departmental survey he disclosed that 15,404 visitors had utilised the messes in a five month period.³¹² In the run-up to 1 August Erasmus received through the commandant-general representations from unit commanders asking that the regulation be revoked. What the minister was not saying publicly was that in the previous months there had been a barrage of depositions from church and temperance organisations. In 1957 the powerful NG Kerk in the Transvaal had requested a ban.³¹³ Opinion within the defence force was that church pressure had been the deciding factor for Erasmus.³¹⁴ Further measures followed, including a ban on SADF personnel taking accommodation at Cape Town's United Services Club. This private facility catered to forces personnel and provided alcohol on its premises.³¹⁵ Later Fouché was to withdraw the general liquor ban.

Even in his final days as defence minister Erasmus went to great lengths to denigrate the pre-1948 era. In early 1959 the department of defence initiated investigations as to whether General Smuts, long since deceased, deserved to be awarded the 1939-45 medal, the France-Germany Star and Italy Star. These decorations appeared on Smuts's uniform which was on display in the Transvaal museum. To verify the field marshal's credentials the defence

³⁰⁹ Grundy, *Soldiers Without Politics*, pp. 95-7.

³¹⁰ *Natal Mercury*, 25 February 1956.

³¹¹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 May 1958.

³¹² *Cape Times*, 25 July 1958.

³¹³ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Secretary of Public Affairs, NG Kerk, Transvaal to Erasmus, 25 June 1957, MV 71(Vol.II).

³¹⁴ *The Rand Daily Mail*, 24 May 1958.

³¹⁵ *Cape Times*, 25 May 1959.

department consulted, ironically, the British war office. After months of examining the records Pretoria was advised that the former prime minister was entitled to wear them.³¹⁶

The Smuts medals incident epitomised much of Erasmus's administration of the defence secretariat and the department overall. A comment of Sir Evelyn Baring, the British high commissioner in 1948, on the minister's actions had as much validity in 1959, that it was "difficult to deduce future policy from presentations".³¹⁷ Except for a few solid achievements, such as the laying of the foundations of Armscor and the defence act, much of the internal activity of his department was perceived by many as peripheral to national security. No significant effort was made to expand the role of the civilian staff from that of an accounting organisation to being an important component of overall defence policy. Instead there was a series of politically motivated side-shows, such as the closure of journals, the grievance committees, and the indoctrination of personnel sent overseas. Defence as a department was never the beneficiary of significant resources from the various Nationalists cabinets, all of them seemingly unaware of the danger to their regime from a black majority brutalised by the system of apartheid.

³¹⁶ *Cape Times*, 6 March 1959.

³¹⁷ UK Public Record Office, Baring to CRO, 15 October 1948, DO 35/3141. Baring characterised the conduct of affairs in the defence department as comparable to "the atmosphere of a novel by E. Philips Oppenheim" with the minister described as "mercurial".

CHAPTER THREE

ERASMUS AND THE WIDER WORLD

South Africa, Britain and the Defence of the Middle East

With the advent of the Cold War the principal ally of South Africa, the United Kingdom, assessed its position overseas in the light of possible Soviet aggression. The Middle East was one of its most vital spheres of interest, primarily as the leading source of oil for Britain. The region also served as the land bridge between Europe, Asia and Africa and an important link in the Commonwealth system of sea and air communications.¹ After 1945 London retained significant political and military resources in the zone. Even in the wake of the evacuation from Palestine in May 1948 British armed forces were still to be found in Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Iraq, Jordan, the Gulf emirates, the Aden protectorate and on the island of Cyprus. The area was of such importance to Whitehall that the cabinet of Clement Attlee in early 1949 resolved that in a general war with the Russians it would not send reinforcements in support of the two British divisions on the European continent but rather to the Middle East.² However by the end of the 1940s Britain, in straitened financial circumstances, could not bear the responsibility for Middle East defence alone and required the assistance of the dominions.³ There was little possibility of an American contribution as the United States government had recognised in 1947 that the region was a British and Commonwealth sphere of influence.⁴

The search by Britain for allied support paralleled South African overtures to the West in the months after the HNP election victory. The Nationalists were determined to confirm their anti-communist credentials and demonstrate that they had shifted from their neutralist position of the 1939-45 period. Malan was well aware that the apartheid programme and his party's ambiguous position towards Nazism had created an unfavourable impression in

¹ Ritchie Owendale (ed.), *British Defence Policy Since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p.76.

² Barnett, *The Lost Victory*, pp. 83-4.

³ Owendale, *The English-Speaking Alliance*, p.119.

⁴ *Ibid*, p.94.

Western capitals. In this context he was convinced that his administration should take a pro-active approach in the security sphere in concert with the established allies of the Union. This he hoped would allow the South Africans to be fully accepted as an indispensable partner in the free world coalition. In 1948-49 South African political and British military self-interest coincided in the Middle East.

From his first days in office Malan made it clear that he desired harmonious relations with the United Kingdom, despite the anglophobe tendencies of the Nationalists in the past. Britain remained the Union's leading trading partner and investor, held wide tracts of African territory and was a pivotal component of both the Western alliance and the Commonwealth. Attlee was told by Malan in June 1948 that he looked forward "to close and cordial collaboration" with Britain "in the many matters of common concern which confront us in this troubled world".⁵ London itself placed great importance on close imperial relations. Its 1948 defence statement declared that "the United Kingdom alone, without the support of the Commonwealth, would lose much of its influence and power". In this symbiotic relationship Britain would have to play "its part in defending the resources on which the Commonwealth must rely".⁶

Both governments had an early opportunity of demonstrating Commonwealth solidarity. In late August 1948 Attlee wrote to Malan requesting SAAF air crew for attachment to the Royal Air Force's transport command. They would be used in air supply operations in support of West Berlin which had been blockaded by the Soviet Union since the previous June.⁷ Within twenty-four hours Malan had discussed the matter with Erasmus who agreed to release 60 air force personnel to Europe.⁸ South African participation lasted six months and involved 1240 sorties on the Lubeck-Berlin route with air crew accumulating half a million miles.⁹ At the end of the airlift operations Attlee told the Union's premier that South

⁵ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Malan to Attlee, 6 June 1948, PS 4/9.

⁶ HM Stationery Office, *Statement Relating to Defence*, February 1948, Cmd. 7327.

⁷ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, Baring to Malan, 27 August 1948, MV 93.

⁸ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, Malan to Baring, 28 August 1948, MV 93.

⁹ Steenkamp, *The Aircraft of the South African Air Force*, p.34.

Africa's role exhibited "a striking example of the spirit of cooperation which animates our Commonwealth".¹⁰

In his first parliamentary session Erasmus characterised defence relations with Britain and the other dominions as friendly.¹¹ Meanwhile Malan spoke of the need of the Union to be strong enough to take action against the communist threat.¹² If war were to occur with the Soviet Union his government would not assume a position of neutrality.¹³ As a means of conveying the importance of South Africa to the West the prime minister authorised the state information office to operate not only domestically but at several diplomatic missions.¹⁴ A "roving ambassador" Charles te Water, a former high commissioner to Britain, was appointed. His brief was to tour Europe, the Americas and Africa to portray a South African nation and government anchored to the West and to outline its strategic significance. During the Commonwealth prime ministers conference in late 1948 Louw, substituting for Malan, said that the Union welcomed defence cooperation, particularly that of Africa and its approaches.¹⁵ In the meantime Leif Egeland, the Union's envoy in London, was instructed to inform Philip Noel-Baker, the Commonwealth secretary, that Pretoria supported "co-operative action" in defence matters. Particular reference was made to "those matters which arise from a common interest in the security of a particular region".¹⁶ The South Africans were already making an accommodation with British and American strategic needs in the field of uranium supplies. In 1949 representatives of the United States atomic energy agency and the British ministry of supply were invited to the Union to discuss the supply of the metal, vital for their respective atomic weapons programmes.¹⁷

¹⁰ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Baring to Malan, 3 August 1949, MV 93.

¹¹ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 17 September 1948, Columns 1084-85.

¹² *South Africa*, 23 October 1948.

¹³ *South Africa*, 14 October 1948.

¹⁴ US Department of State - Central Files, "Talk by Dr. Otto Du Plessis, Director of the State Information Office to the South African Institute of International Affairs - 29 September 1949", 5 October 1949, 848A.00/0614.

¹⁵ Owendale, *The English-Speaking Alliance*, p. 82.

¹⁶ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Egeland to Noel-Baker, 27 January 1949, PS 26/23/9.

¹⁷ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Deputy High Commissioner to Undersecretary of State, CRO, 7 August 1949, PS 64/237.

Sir Evelyn Baring, British high commissioner, advised Whitehall that the top echelons of the Malan government would support the United Kingdom in a war with the Russians. However there existed a substantial coterie of "backwoodsmen" in the parliamentary caucus who felt that the Union had once again been drawn into armed conflict in support of British interests.¹⁸ Malan proceeded with a number of "sensitisation" speeches educating party members to the realities of the country's security responsibilities. He was assisted by an "inspired" leader in the 28 March 1949 edition of *Die Burger* which argued that the strengthening of the anti-communist West was in the national interest: "A communist conquest from without or within will mean the beginning of an endless night of barbarism for South Africa".¹⁹ In an address to the senate early the following month the prime minister declared that the critical point of African defence against the communists was in the Middle East.²⁰ This view synchronised with that of the British. In March Erasmus had made a confidential approach to Baring informing him that the cabinet had agreed to invite a small party from Britain's defence planning staff. There would be a dual purpose to their visit. South African policymakers could be briefed on the current strategic picture vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and could also assess a possible external military role.²¹

In preparation for the tour the British defence ministry forwarded a discussion document to Erasmus called *The Regional Defence of Africa*. In the British view Egypt was the key country. If it were to fall to a Russian drive southwards communist power would be projected into the sub-Saharan regions. Marxist subversion was most likely to occur among the black populations of the continent just before and during the conflict. South Africa might assist the West in time of war by availing itself of its natural resources, ports, storage facilities and training and transit areas for troops. A direct military contribution to the Middle East could be in the form of land and air forces which ideally would need to arrive in the vital early stages of a Soviet offensive.²²

¹⁸ UK Public Record Office, Baring to Liesching, 31 March 1949, DO 35/2752.

¹⁹ Ritchie Owendale, "The South African Policy of the British Labour Government-1947-1951", *International Affairs*, Vol. 59, no.1, Winter 1982/83, p.45.

²⁰ *The Times* (London), 9 April 1949.

²¹ UK Public Record Office, Baring to CRO, 30 March 1949, DO 35/2752.

²² SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Memorandum - "The Regional Defence of Africa", 23 March 1949", MV 61.

The high-level delegation of British planners arrived in the Union in May 1949. Among them were the senior air force planner, Air Commodore MacFadyen, deputy planners for the army and air force and a representative of the security service which was responsible for intelligence work in British territories. The latter had been requested by Erasmus to protect him from possible domestic political criticism, as measures to combat communist infiltration were popular among the Nationalist rank-and-file while cooperative defence planning with London was not.²³ At the suggestion of the South Africans the meetings were informal and secret, with the planners flying to Cape Town in separate aircraft and in mufti.²⁴

On 16 May the meetings commenced. Baring confirmed that arrangements were being formulated by Britain for the protection of the Middle East and "such plans would be unrealistic without knowing to what extent the Union of South Africa would participate". Discussion centred on the African defence memorandum. The planners proposed that if the Union was "inclined" to aid Britain an armoured division backed up by four SAAF fighter-bomber squadrons and a transport squadron would be appreciated. The profile of an appropriate naval force to protect the essential Cape sea lanes was also detailed. Erasmus informed his visitors that any arrangements made on the lines envisaged would be at the discretion of the South African government.²⁵ A note of the British recommendations was left with the minister. Back in London the planners reported that they were very satisfied with the discussions.²⁶

Baring was well aware of Erasmus's thinking in mid-1949 on the external security role. His informant was DD Forsyth, the secretary for external affairs. Of both English and Afrikaans parentage, he was a diplomat of wide-ranging experience. Though he had become departmental head under Smuts in 1941 he served Malan with loyalty and dedication.²⁷ He

²³ Ovendale, *The English-Speaking Alliance*, p.252.

²⁴ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, Baring to Erasmus, (undated) April 1949, MV/G1.

²⁵ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Minutes of Meeting between the Union of South Africa Authorities and the Joint Planning Staff - London", 16 May 1949, MV 1/ G 1.

²⁶ State Archives, Files of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Hamilton to Sole, 14 June 1949, PS 29/1.

²⁷ Deon Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation: South African Foreign Policy* (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1984), p.21.

was also particularly close to the British, to such an extent that Baring advised the CRO that the South African could "be trusted exactly as he was a United Kingdom official".²⁸ In June 1949 Forsyth disclosed to Baring the contents of a recent discussion with Erasmus. He had warned the defence minister that the British and Americans would not provide the Union with needed modern defence equipment unless there was a pledge of a fixed external obligation. Erasmus was clearly shaken by this and discussed with Forsyth the most appropriate responses to Western requests for a contribution. The secretary confirmed to Baring that the cabinet wanted to support traditional allies but was clearly aware of certain "nationalist" backbench opinion. In this situation Malan and Erasmus might make a secret defence pledge subject to the exigencies of the internal security situation at the time. Forsyth did not think that Erasmus was regarded as an able minister by his cabinet colleagues but held a high reputation for his successful organisational work for the party. Due to the sensitivity of the minister the British were advised to pitch meetings in London during his forthcoming visit at a high level. If he could be "reconciled" it could form the basis for further defence cooperation, if not the Malan government might return to its formerly isolationist position.²⁹

A few days later Beyers confided to Baring that he had told Erasmus of the necessity of presenting concrete proposals to the British while in London. In fact he recommended that the number of air squadrons should be greater than that suggested by the planning team. Erasmus was said to be sympathetic to the Beyers approach. Like Forsyth the military chief believed that there would be dissension in the Nationalist parliamentary ranks if a public commitment to Britain was made. He suspected that Erasmus might even give an unqualified pledge. This would be on the lines that the actual internal situation in the Union at the beginning of a war would not be considered a hindrance to the despatch of troops abroad.³⁰

In the run-up to the London visit the British government was made aware by their high commission of Erasmus's desire to acquire an extensive range of defence equipment. They were also cognisant that the financing of these items would not be straightforward. The chancellor of the exchequer, Stafford Cripps, was informed by his officials that the South

²⁸ Berridge, "The Ethnic 'Agent in Place': English-speaking Civil Servants and Nationalist South Africa, 1948-1957", p.262.

²⁹ UK Public Record Office, Baring to Liesching, 28 June 1949, DEFE 7/175.

³⁰ UK Public Record Office, Baring to CRO, 1 July 1949, DEFE 7/175.

African minister wanted payment to be made "by some form of lend lease - if possible". This was assessed as wanting the equipment "free".³¹ The treasury reminded the CRO and the armed services departments of a long-standing Commonwealth principle. Each member state paid for its own defence and the Union was not a special case for subsidisation. It was noted that the percentage of the South African budget devoted to defence was "far below the present cost of defence to the UK taxpayer".³² Cripps's officials had exposed two salient features of the Union's national security policy - a consistently low expenditure on defence and a naive belief that the Western allies would pay for their equipment.

Erasmus visited London in July 1949. In his entourage was Jack Bruce, chef de protocol of the department of external affairs. Bruce had been assigned by Malan to advise the inexperienced minister on diplomatic conventions and guide him through possible pitfalls.³³ On arrival Erasmus described his tour as one in which he would be looking for defence equipment. He reminded his audience of the strategic role of the Union due to its key geographical position. The preliminary briefing, held in the prime minister's map room, was given by Lord Tedder, the chief of the Royal Air Force. He outlined the scenario of a possible general war during which the forces of the Soviet Union advanced into the Middle East. Tedder told Erasmus that London was not looking for a binding military commitment by the Union but rather some sort of agreed plan which could be modified by events. The minister thanked Tedder but advised him that the Union would not make an undertaking on the extent of any pledge. But he reconfirmed that his government was a participant in the struggle against communism. If he and his colleagues were aware of British plans South Africa could slot into the overall defence arrangements, if necessary.³⁴

In a later meeting with his British counterpart, AV Alexander, Erasmus besides complaining over the cost of Vampire jets ordered by the Union, declared that he was not

³¹ UK Public Record Office, "Treasury Brief for the Chancellor of the Exchequer", 12 July 1949, DEFE 7/175.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Interview with Ambassador Donald Sole, Cape Town, 11 July 1994.

³⁴ UK Public Record Office, "Minutes of Meeting of Ministers", 12 July 1949, DEFE 7/175.

convinced that joint planning with London over the Middle East was appropriate.³⁵ Alexander noted Erasmus's somewhat ambiguous attitude:

Mr. Erasmus made heavy weather of this. He wished a South African armoured division to be trained so if it were needed it would be ready for action but politically he did not see how any such promise would be given. He hastened to assure me, however it was his view that, in the event of war against Communism, South Africa would not stay neutral. I suggested that we should therefore, be justified in assuming for planning purposes, that a South African armoured division could be trained and available if needed. He did not dissent.³⁶

For the duration of the visit the British government ensured that Erasmus and his delegation were provided with red carpet treatment. Besides a series of meetings with Whitehall ministers a tour programme was arranged to service installations. At a royal garden party Erasmus and his wife were introduced to the King. The senior echelons of the British military establishment were in attendance at a South Africa House reception in honour of General Beyers.³⁷ The minister was also given the opportunity of recording a talk on the BBC external radio service. In this he spoke of the close association of the Union to Europe and of its distaste for communism.³⁸

On his return to South Africa there was little evidence that Erasmus was to provide a military pledge to the United Kingdom. London did not apply any pressure during the following months, aware of the Afrikaner nationalist ferment focused on the opening of the Voortrekker Monument in December 1949.³⁹ However early in the new year the British foreign secretary, Bevin, attending the Colombo Commonwealth conference, suggested to Paul Sauer, the Union's delegate and to Forsyth that joint defence planning might be initiated.⁴⁰ Within weeks Baring sent a lengthy despatch to the new CRO secretary, Patrick Gordon-Walker, on the shadings of the Nationalist approach to external security. The Malan

³⁵ UK Public Record Office, "Note by AV Alexander on Meeting with FC Erasmus", 28 July 1949, DO 35/2368.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *South Africa*, 23 July 1949.

³⁸ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Draft of BBC External Service Radio Address", 28 July 1949, MV 128.

³⁹ Owendale, "The South African Policy of the British Labour Government, 1947-1951", p.48.

⁴⁰ Ritchie Owendale (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of the British Labour Governments - 1945 - 1951* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1984), p.124.

government was instinctively anti-communist. However this was more than just the fear as in other Western nations of an alien political system. It also encompassed a "horror" of black uprisings stimulated by marxist infiltration and subversion eventually resulting in black majority rule. Due to a greater apprehension of a perceived Soviet threat with significant domestic ramifications than of antipathy to their traditional opponent, Britain, the Nationalists were prepared to cooperate with the United Kingdom.⁴¹ Any opposition to apartheid became synonymous with "communism" in the minds of many government ministers and their supporters during the 1950s.

In June 1950 the Malan cabinet was confident enough that it had widespread voter support to confirm to the British and to the American governments in writing that the Union would assist the West in the defence of "Africa".⁴² The letters were sent, significantly, during the second reading of the suppression of communism bill in the house of assembly.⁴³ Baring was already at that juncture aware of the details of the pledge. Du Toit had told Brigadier Hirsch of the British defence liaison staff that the cabinet had made a decision on 1 June to offer an armoured division with air and administrative support. However ministers would not allow the Union to be used as a transit area in time of war for black troops from colonial territories or the United States. Du Toit indicated that the government had been assured that there would remain sufficient security forces in the country to quell possible domestic disturbances while the expeditionary force was overseas.⁴⁴ The military chief himself was not convinced that the British could hold the Middle East in the face of a Soviet onslaught and wanted to be persuaded that the Union had not involved itself "in a suicide pact".⁴⁵

Erasmus met Baring and informed him that the size of the Union's contingent would depend on future discussions in London and the internal situation in the Union at the outbreak of war. He went on to register the Malan cabinet's concern over possible bombing and submarine attacks on or near South African territory. To counter these the government needed coastal defence artillery, fighters and radar.⁴⁶ The mention of an air threat to the

⁴¹ UK Public Record Office, Baring to Gordon-Walker, 24 March 1950, DEFE 7/175.

⁴² UK Public Record Office, Erasmus to Shinwell, 15 June 1950, DEFE 7/934.

⁴³ Carter, *The Politics of Inequality*, p. 165.

⁴⁴ UK Public Record Office, Baring to CRO, 5 June 1950, DEFE 7/934.

⁴⁵ Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and African Defence*, p.32.

⁴⁶ UK Public Record Office, Baring to CRO, 5 June 1950, DEFE 7/934.

country created scepticism in British minds over the Union leadership's grasp of strategic realities, given the great distances between communist-held areas and South Africa. The air defence issue grew into major importance for Erasmus by the mid-1950s.

In early July Whitehall was advised by the British high commission that Erasmus hoped that the British and Americans in whole or in major part would cover the cost of the re-equipping of any expeditionary force. This information had been received from Forsyth, who believed that Erasmus was unclear how the Union would pay for the requisite items as well as for a possible radar screen.⁴⁷ It was estimated that an expeditionary force would cost the Union somewhere between £40 and £50 million.⁴⁸ In the meantime South Korea had been invaded by communist North Korea on 25 June. Western policymakers were uncertain whether there might be Soviet-backed probes in other regions. The question of Middle East defence and possible South African participation had become even more crucial for Britain. In the Union itself the government continued to re-position itself publicly from its former neutralist party position. During the South West Africa election in August the prime minister stated that any attack by the communists on the African continent would be considered by his administration as an attack on South Africa.⁴⁹ This was followed by an affirmation by Malan at the Natal party congress that "the anti-British and isolation bogies are dead".⁵⁰

Gordon-Walker presented the British cabinet with a major paper on the importance of South Africa to the United Kingdom in late September 1950, when Erasmus arrived in London. The Union, besides being a major trading partner, could provide Britain with storage areas and ports in time of war; it had made a pledge on Middle East defence, and he reminded his colleagues of the importance of the Cape sea route when the Mediterranean had been closed during the recent war.⁵¹ The paper was endorsed by the cabinet. In the meantime Emmanuel Shinwell, the defence minister, had been briefed by his joint planning staff of the detailed South African offer leaked by du Toit. The planners advised that "Mr Erasmus is

⁴⁷ UK Public Record Office, Rumbold to CRO, 5 July 1950, DEFE 7/934.

⁴⁸ GR Berridge and JE Spence, "South Africa and the Simonstown Agreement" in John W Young (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of Churchill's Peacetime Administration, 1951 - 1955* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988), p.183.

⁴⁹ *The Star*, 21 August 1950.

⁵⁰ *South Africa*, 23 September 1950.

⁵¹ Ovendale, *British Defence Policy Since 1945*, pp. 80-1.

unaware that this information had been passed to the UK service liaison staff" and the British negotiators were not to indicate "that we have foreknowledge of these generous proposals".⁵²

During the talks Erasmus offered an armoured division, an air wing of nine fighter squadrons and personnel for air transport squadron, all earmarked for the Middle East and certain naval elements for the protection of the Cape route. From London Erasmus advised Malan that Shinwell had expressed doubts over the need for a radar screen proposed for the Union. It was agreed by both sides that discussions would occur later on the financing of matériel, which Erasmus hoped could be spread over seven years. Malan was reassured by his defence minister that any commitment to Britain was based on the extent to which the UDF could "be provided with modern equipment".⁵³ His meetings in London were swiftly followed by discussions between the British and American chiefs of staff in which it was confirmed that the Middle East was a United Kingdom and Commonwealth area of responsibility. The Americans were not designating troops for the region.⁵⁴

Donges, the interior minister, deputised for Malan at the Commonwealth prime ministers conference in London, just three months after the visit of Erasmus. Before his departure for the British capital he was briefed by the external affairs department and advised that Britain had been supportive of the Union particularly in the area of military intelligence.⁵⁵ To the other delegations Donges reconfirmed the Middle East pledge but admitted that there were "difficulties" in obtaining the needed financial resources to fulfil the commitment.⁵⁶ In the course of the conference Forsyth was told by the CRO that the British treasury was prepared to stagger the equipment schedule - items could be delivered in four years but paid for in six.⁵⁷ Cuff was also advised from London by Forsyth that the British chiefs of staff felt that the South Africans were too slow in obtaining equipment.⁵⁸ There remained the difficulty

⁵² UK Public Record Office, Joint Planning Staff of the Chiefs of Staff Committee to the Minister of Defence, 18 September 1950, DEFE 7/937.

⁵³ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Erasmus to Malan, 7 October 1950, PS 18/5/3/2.

⁵⁴ Ovendale, *British Defence Policy Since 1945*, p.83.

⁵⁵ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Policy Review - Conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers", December 1950, PS 26/23/11/A.

⁵⁶ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Minutes of Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference- 8 January 1951", MV/G 9.

⁵⁷ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Record of Meeting on Defence Questions held in the Commonwealth Relations Office- 13 January 1951", MV/ G 23.

appreciated in 1949 by the treasury. Gordon-Walker was reminded by the CRO permanent secretary, Sir Percivale Liesching, that Whitehall needed to "make the South Africans understand that they must order and *pay for* all the equipment received for an armoured division".⁵⁹ By the end of the prime ministers conference it was resolved that there be a meeting of the defence ministers of Britain and the white dominions the following June. Regional defence, particularly that of the Middle East, would then be explored in detail.

Early in 1951 Gordon-Walker undertook a six-week tour of southern Africa. While in the Union he emphasised in his discussions with South African ministers that speed was necessary in the formation of the armoured division. He suggested that it was pointless for Malan and Erasmus to look to the Americans as an alternative source of supply for equipment as Washington would not provide the needed items free of charge.⁶⁰ The British were aware of a continued lack of enthusiasm by du Toit over the whole enterprise. Hirsch had been told by the military chief that Britain's recent granting of internal self-government to the Gold Coast would inflame black populations throughout the continent. This worrying development in the eyes of the white government could ultimately affect the Union. In these circumstances South Africa's ability "to provide an expeditionary force at all" was unlikely.⁶¹ Du Toit's doubts would continue and be accepted progressively by the political leadership, particularly Erasmus.

Just prior to the commonwealth defence conference a key British military personality visited the Union who was sensitive to the nuances of the South African political and military situation. This was General Sir Brian Robertson, commander of the United Kingdom's land forces in the Near East. Born in Durban, he had served with the British Army in the Great War and eventually returned to Natal as a leading businessman in the 1930s. At the beginning

⁵⁸ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, Forsyth to Cuff, 23 January 1951, MV/G 12.

⁵⁹ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to Gordon-Walker, 13 February 1951, DO 35/2368. Liesching who was appointed permanent undersecretary of the CRO in 1949 had been a soldier in the Tanganyika campaign alongside the South Africans in 1916. He was later to serve in the high commission in Pretoria in 1933-35 and as high commissioner to the Union in 1955-58.

⁶⁰ UK Public Record Office, Gordon-Walker to Liesching, 16 February 1951, DO 35/2368.

⁶¹ UK Public Record Office, Hirsch to Baring, 15 February 1951, DO 35/2368.

of the Second World War he joined the UDF and served in North Africa before transferring to the British Army. He began his April-May 1951 tour of the Union on a diplomatic note - "I was a Springbok throughout the war and I am no stranger to this country for which I have an abiding affection".⁶² Before leaving Egypt Robertson had been told by the joint planning staff that the South Africans still needed to implement their Middle East pledge and had a strong hesitancy to pay for the requisite equipment. Erasmus, they suspected, still wanted these at concessionary rates. The minister's statement of 26 January 1951, that an armoured division *as well as* an infantry division could be mobilised, was characterised as "misleading". The Union's military leadership group was assessed as mediocre. Undue importance was also being given by policymakers to the radar screen.⁶³

While Robertson was touring the Union, Erasmus, to demonstrate the seriousness of his commitment to London, announced the creation of the defence special equipment account, to be implemented in the 1952-53 financial year.⁶⁴ A pessimistic evaluation was made by Robertson for Whitehall. Notwithstanding continuous rhetoric over the Middle East pledge it would take a considerable amount of time to have a division ready for Egypt. As a result the British chiefs of staff decided to give priority to the SAAF over the land forces. It was more likely in their view for the Union's air force to be earlier in the theatre of operations than the South African army.⁶⁵

The June 1951 London conference brought Erasmus together with the defence ministers of Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Southern Rhodesia. Canada sent an observer. The stated rationale of the deliberations was to consider "certain problems in regions of common concern, including the Middle East".⁶⁶ The British hoped that at the conclusion of the talks there would be pledges of at least token Commonwealth formations in the area in peacetime.⁶⁷ New Zealand and Australia subsequently earmarked a fighter squadron and fighter wing respectively in 1952 for service in Cyprus and Malta.⁶⁸ It was

⁶² *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 May 1951.

⁶³ UK Public Record Office, Joint Planning Staff of the Chiefs of Staff Committee-"Brief for General Robertson's Visit to South Africa", 6 April 1951, DEFE 6/16.

⁶⁴ US State Department - Central Files, Military Attache to Department of the Army, 11 May 1951, 745A.00/037.

⁶⁵ Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and "African Defence"*, pp. 43-4.

⁶⁶ *Keesing's Contemporary Archives*, 1951-52, p.11701.

⁶⁷ *The Times* (London), 22 June 1951.

anticipated that at the outbreak of war Britain could provide 1 1/3 divisions immediately in the region, another 2 divisions after three months and another 3 1/3 divisions after six months. Both Australia and New Zealand were in a position to provide a division each but only twelve months after war commenced.⁶⁹ Erasmus divulged that the Union would not be in a position to offer forces before the outbreak of war. He however was attracted to the idea, floated at the conference, of a possible Middle East defence organisation (MEDO) centred on Egypt. It was anticipated that the membership would involve the United States, France, Turkey, Greece, Britain and the Commonwealth nations with defence interests in the region, such as the Union. Erasmus said that he wanted South Africa to be represented "at the highest possible level" in the contemplated grouping.⁷⁰ At the end of the conference Erasmus made a commitment that his expeditionary force would be fully operational by September 1953 and in position in the Middle East six months after the commencement of hostilities.⁷¹ He also registered South African equipment requirements for the division, worth £25 million. London subsequently decided to facilitate the supply of matériel by organising this on a government-to-government basis rather than between the Union and British manufacturers.⁷²

On his return to Pretoria Erasmus did not comment on the details of the Union's Middle East role.⁷³ However in the months that followed he was quick to assure local opinion that the nation would not be defenceless during a war which encompassed an overseas involvement. Adequate protection would be provided for the white population - "the greater the danger of communism, the more men we shall have to retain in the Union to meet that danger and to safeguard the security of South Africa which is paramount".⁷⁴ Already the government was conscious of a possible domino effect arising from Gold Coast self-government. Malan spoke of the granting of political rights to blacks as resulting in "nothing less than driving the white man out of practically all that lies between us and the Sahara".⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez, 1947-1968*, p.30.

⁶⁹ Owendale, *The English-Speaking Alliance*, p.128.

⁷⁰ Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and "African Defence"*, pp. 47/8.

⁷¹ UK Public Record Office, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations to the Cabinet, 21 May 1952, PREM 11/274.

⁷² State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Le Rougetel to Erasmus, 15 November 1951, PS 18/5/3/2/.

⁷³ *The Star*, 7 July 1951.

⁷⁴ *Cape Times*, 6 September 1951.

For public consumption, despite growing doubts, Pretoria gave the impression of being fully in accord with the pledges made to the Commonwealth partners. Du Toit affirmed to a Cape Town audience in October 1951 that the UDF had been assigned its part in the operational theatre and would fulfil its obligations - "today every single detail of organisation has been worked out in complete cooperation with the allied armies".⁷⁶ The statement was followed up by an announcement that the British, American, French and Turkish governments intended to establish a Middle East command.⁷⁷ This was an encouraging development for Erasmus who wanted the Union enveloped in the folds of multi-national defence, thereby enhancing the international acceptability of the country.

In preparation for the important confidence debate in the house of assembly in early 1952 du Toit presented a briefing document to Erasmus on the on-going Near East commitment. The military chief was evasive in declaring that "all possible measures have been taken by the department for obtaining equipment" and then went on to mislead his minister by asserting that "nothing has been promised that we are not capable of complying with".⁷⁸ In the debate itself Erasmus told the opposition leader, JGN Strauss, that he could not give particularised information on the external military role. The Commonwealth defence conference delegations had resolved not to sanction this step.⁷⁹ Within weeks Le Rougetel, the British high commissioner, informed the new Winston Churchill government that the UDF still lacked preparedness for the Middle East, with Erasmus and du Toit unable "to appreciate the larger issues" involved in the role.⁸⁰

With the British increasingly perturbed over the apparent lack of firmness in the Union's pledge the South Africans were themselves questioning their agreed stance. The much vaunted concept of a MEDO had run into difficulties. One of the pivotal players, Egypt, in the dying days of the Farouk regime had decided that it would not participate.⁸¹ The

⁷⁵ Deon Geldenhuys, "South Africa's Foreign Policy" in Robert Schrire (ed.), *Leadership in the Apartheid State*, p.253.

⁷⁶ *South Africa*, 27 October 1951.

⁷⁷ *South Africa*, 17 November 1951.

⁷⁸ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, du Toit to Erasmus, 24 January 1952, MV 103.

⁷⁹ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 28 January 1952, Columns 295-96.

⁸⁰ UK Public Record Office, Le Rougetel to CRO, 13 February 1952, PREM 11/274.

positioning of the Union's forces in the region had been predicated on the availability of facilities in the kingdom. Added to this difficulty was the slowness in planning arrangements. Willmott complained to the air adviser at South Africa House in March 1952, that while the defence conference had earmarked nine SAAF fighter squadrons and personnel for a transport squadron, detailed arrangements had not been initiated. Without these Willmott felt it was "impossible to form any concrete opinion" on how the air force would "be able to contribute to the Middle East war". However he did not want the British not to gain the impression that the Union was unwilling to cooperate with them.⁸²

During May 1952 the defence committee of the Churchill cabinet received a lengthy despatch from Le Rougetel which set out his misgivings over the battleworthiness of the UDF. He was particularly concerned over the disappearance of non-Nationalist officers who tended to have combat experience, the slowness in obtaining equipment for the expeditionary force and the dwindling size of the SAAF. The CRO secretary, Lord Swinton, appended his own views to the high commissioner's comments. Swinton was known to be close to the prime minister and had been familiar with defence matters as air minister between 1935 and 1938.⁸³ While admitting it had been auspicious to have a military pledge by a Nationalist government in peacetime there were major problems. The Malan government in pursuance of domestic political policies was "fast destroying the strength and the efficiency of such South African forces as at present exist". The question had arisen on whether any *real* help could be expected in any future war and whether items of equipment should be sent to the Union when the South Africans were not in a position to use them efficiently. Le Rougetel was advised not to push for the removal of Erasmus and du Toit as this would cause resentment. Rather he was given discretion to indicate unease over the state of forces assigned to go overseas. Britain for its part would fulfil its undertaking to deliver 75 Centurion tanks during the 1953-54 financial year.⁸⁴

⁸¹ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, De Villiers to Forsyth, 22 February 1952, PS 29/3.

⁸² SANDF Documentation Centre, Files of the Military Advisor - London, Willmott to Military Advisor, 22 March 1952, MA/TS/47/1.

⁸³ Anthony Seldon, *Churchill's Indian Summer: The Conservative Government 1951-55* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), p.96; JA Cross, *Lord Swinton* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1982), p.295.

⁸⁴ UK Public Record Office, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations to the Cabinet Defence Committee, 21 May 1952, PREM 11/274.

By mid-1952 Erasmus and Malan had evidence that the British military position in the Near East was shaky. Pretoria was privy to the CRO cable of 4 August 1952 to its high commissions world-wide confirming that MEDO was stillborn. Putting a brave face on the predicament London still maintained that "H.M. Government have a continuing responsibility for defence in the Middle East and are therefore constantly in touch with other interested countries, but plans have not yet gone beyond the consultative stage".⁸⁵ Increasingly in public statements South African ministers were speaking of the protection of the Union nearer home. In a February 1952 speech in Graafwater Malan warned his audience of the need for domestic vigilance against communists who would target the black population for subversion.⁸⁶ In Bethel he castigated Britain for its programme of African decolonisation with its evident implications for South African security. Erasmus at Tiervlei during late 1952 declared that while the Union was one with the West in its struggle with communism the West also had an obligation to come to its assistance.⁸⁷ He claimed that the recent outbreak of Mau-Mau activity in Kenya was evidence of communist activities which also encompassed the on-going disturbances in the Union triggered by the Defiance Campaign.⁸⁸

Doubts over the need for an extensive financial outlay on military commitments were also in the mind of the already sceptical finance minister, Havenga. By late 1952 he was aware that even Britain was slowing down on rearmament and believed that South Africa was entitled to follow suit. His conclusion was supported by the Union's shortage of overseas capital for major civil projects to which it was committed and by the need for strict economy in public expenditure.⁸⁹ Returning from the Commonwealth economic conference in London where he had made soundings on the international security situation Havenga was convinced that the danger of general war had receded.⁹⁰ As a result Erasmus was obliged to ask the British government in January 1953 to slow down the shipment of arms already ordered. This was met by disappointment in Whitehall circles. However a new schedule of arms shipments

⁸⁵ SANDF Documentation Centre, Files of the Military Adviser - London, CRO to British High Commissions, 4 August 1952, MA/TS/47/3.

⁸⁶ *The Friend*, 1 March 1952.

⁸⁷ *The Friend*, 20 October 1952.

⁸⁸ *Cape Times*, 17 October 1952.

⁸⁹ Berridge and Spence, "South Africa and the Simonstown Agreement", p. 186.

⁹⁰ US State Department - Central Files, Sappington to Defense Department, 30 January 1953, 745A.00(W)/0747.

and payments was agreed by the end of the year. Even this schedule was not met by the Union as the economic affairs minister, Louw, was cutting back expenditure. By March 1954 the CRO was complaining that the South Africans were not spending anything like the amounts arranged particularly on army trucks and fighter aircraft.⁹¹

Despite the demise of MEDO the British kept up the pressure on the Union to fulfil their Middle East commitment, sometimes in an imperious manner which proved unpopular with the South Africans. During January 1953 the war office told Dean, the military advisor at the Union's high commission that "whilst the United Kingdom appreciated the contribution South Africa had agreed to make" they wanted the UDF to supply medium anti-aircraft regiments rather than light anti-aircraft units. The rationale was - "we see no possible air threat to South Africa whilst the Allies remain in the Middle East".⁹² Du Toit was incensed by this communication. He told Dean that "we naturally cannot endorse this appreciation of the possible air threat to the Union. They are either closing their eyes to fact or have no idea of the industrial development which had taken place and the set-up in uranium production". Dean was ordered to turn down the request.⁹³

Whitehall's appraisal of the allied position in the eastern Mediterranean began to alter in 1952. Though disappointed by the lack of success in creating a Middle East command British policy-makers were heartened by the entrance of Turkey and Greece into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) that year.⁹⁴ By December 1952 the foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, was advising that with Turkey firmly in the Western camp the Near East defence scene had been transformed.⁹⁵ Britain was also facing the more hostile anti-Western Naguib and Nasser regime in Cairo which had overthrown the Farouk monarchy in July 1952. Pressure was being applied by the Egyptians for the removal of British forces from the Suez canal zone. These developments were to affect the practical deployment of South African forces in the region and their *raison d'etre*.

⁹¹ Berridge and Spence, "South Africa and the Simonstown Agreement", pp. 186-7.

⁹² SANDF Documentation Centre, Files of the Military Adviser - London, War Office to Dean, 19 January 1953, MA/TS/47/3.

⁹³ SANDF Documentation Centre, Files of the Military Adviser - London, du Toit to Dean, 11 February 1953, MA/TS/47/3.

⁹⁴ Barber, *South Africa's Foreign Policy, 1945-1970*, p.83.

⁹⁵ Ovendale, *British Defence Policy since 1945*, p.103.

Havenga returned to London in June 1953 for the coronation and the Commonwealth prime ministers conference, substituting for Malan at the session on defence at the latter. He repeated the pledge of non-neutrality in war and reminded participants that for the first time in peacetime the Union had made a military commitment. He claimed that the government was spending a great deal of its financial resources in acquiring defence equipment. In fact so much had been ordered that as finance minister he had been obliged to ask Britain for a deferment of the delivery dates.⁹⁶ Havenga had "puffed up" a South African military contribution about which he was decidedly dubious. As in the case of the Berlin airlift and the SAAF squadron in Korea the Middle East pledge had become a "political asset" to be deployed in Western policy circles to garner acceptance for the Malan government.

Erasmus arranged for a visit to the United Kingdom in the late northern summer of 1954 to meet his opposite number, Lord Alexander of Tunis. By this juncture Britain's expenditure on defence was becoming excessive, given its resources. An evacuation from the Suez Canal zone with its garrison of 80,000 troops would make for substantial savings.⁹⁷ In June 1954 the chief of the British air staff, Sir William Dickson, told the Churchill government that with the development of the hydrogen bomb the strategic picture in the Middle East had been modified. The Soviets, after sustaining an atomic attack, would be less likely to develop a substantial offensive out of the Caucasus region. The allies in these circumstances would need to hold north-east Iraq, with Egypt less crucial for sector defence.⁹⁸ By the following month, just before Erasmus's arrival, the British cabinet agreed that negotiations would commence with the Nasser government for an evacuation of British forces.⁹⁹

While in London Erasmus was to appreciate quickly the new Middle East realities. He reported to Malan that a military alliance on the lines of MEDO was no longer viable, Australia and New Zealand had withdrawn their air units from the Mediterranean without consultation with the Union government and Britain's long-term position in the Suez Canal

⁹⁶ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Minutes of the Meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Government - 8 June 1953", PS 26/23/12.

⁹⁷ Ritchie Owendale, "Egypt and the Suez Base Agreement" in Young (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of Churchill's Peacetime Administration, 1951 - 1955*, p.147.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p.150.

⁹⁹ Owendale, *British Defence Policy since 1945*, pp. 105-6.

zone looked untenable. After his discussions with British ministers Erasmus was concerned over the whole undertaking made to Britain in 1950. From London he advised his prime minister that "there is a danger that our commitment to contribute manpower to African defence may tend to become one-sided in that there are no definite guarantees of mutual assistance for the defence of South Africa".¹⁰⁰ With this anxiety in mind Erasmus publicly called for the formation of an African defence organisation (ADO) while in the British capital.¹⁰¹

A growing lack of interest in the Middle East role began to be manifested in South African defence circles. The British service liaison staff reported in November 1954 that the SAAF had produced nothing in the provision of radar for the Near East or even communications equipment for the assigned air force tactical group. Active planning had not been undertaken. The liaison staff concluded that "South African assurances in this direction are not to be trusted".¹⁰² Defence thinking, it was reported, was concentrated on a domestic radar screen which was described as "fantastic".¹⁰³ It was believed that the radar project had been given priority over the expeditionary force, with Erasmus and du Toit exaggerating the air threat to the country. Ironically there was a shortage of trained personnel to man the screen and of modern aircraft to create an effective air defence.¹⁰⁴

In early 1955 GP Jooste, the Union's high commissioner in London, notified Forsyth that the British wanted a quid-pro-quo scenario in their future defence relationship with Pretoria. The Simonstown naval base would be ceded to the South Africans in exchange for concrete assurances that an expeditionary force for the Middle East would be constituted.¹⁰⁵ Whitehall had reached the point where an inducement was required to produce movements by the South Africans. Swinton told Jooste that the British preferred "an early availability of

¹⁰⁰ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Erasmus to Malan, 7 September 1954, PS 29/5.

¹⁰¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Speech at Dinner Hosted by Lord Swinton - 2 September 1954", MV 128/6.

¹⁰² UK Public Record Office, Cassells to the Air Ministry, 18 November 1954, DO 35/8335.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ UK Public Record Office, Paul to the Air Ministry, 18 November 1954, DO 35/ 8335.

¹⁰⁵ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Jooste to Forsyth, 7 March 1955, PS 18/25.

forces, preferable to larger forces at a later date".¹⁰⁶ Erasmus wanted a different arrangement. He advised Liesching, the new high commissioner, in March 1955 that the Union needed to be confident that it would be protected by its allies if the bulk of the UDF was overseas. It would obtain this assurance if a multi-lateral defence organisation for Africa was devised.¹⁰⁷ The liaison staff had learnt from du Toit that the military chief was particularly wary of allocating forces "up north" fearing that the British could not hold the Middle East in the circumstances of an all-out Soviet attack. With the UDF in the northern hemisphere he was alarmed that "the natives might be emboldened to attempt a wholesale massacre of the whites". The Russians would also use the opportunity to attack the Union with long-range bombers and submarines.¹⁰⁸ It was believed that Erasmus's views coincided with du Toit's:

Erasmus probably realises that if he came out frankly with du Toit's concept in his talks to us he would forfeit Simonstown (which I gather he badly needs to bolster up his waning political prestige) and lose a great deal of cooperation which he at present gets from us in defence matters. He therefore reaffirms to us that the Union stands by its commitment whilst at the same time doing little (on the army side) or nothing (on the air force side) to implement his promises.¹⁰⁹

The joint planning staff in London echoed these doubts to the chiefs of staff. They surmised that the South Africans did not accept the concept of several years' standing that the defence of Africa had to be pursued in the Near East. The chiefs of staff were reminded that Erasmus had not accepted the planners' conclusions on the threat to the Union when they briefed him in September 1954. By mid-1955 Whitehall estimated that the potential initial contribution from the South Africans was down to one armoured brigade and just three fighter squadrons. In general the land and air forces of the Union required a re-equipment and training programme consistent with modern war.¹¹⁰ The military chiefs also wanted elements of the UDF dedicated for the Middle East "to arrive within at most a few days of D-Day" in comparison to the more leisurely 1950 schedule.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, 17 March 1955, DEFE 13/36.

¹⁰⁸ UK Public Record Office, Cardale to Poett, 20 May 1955, ADM 116/6064.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ UK Public Record Office, Joint Planning Staff to the Chiefs of Staff, 2 June 1955, DEFE 4/77.

¹¹¹ Berridge and Spence, "South Africa and the Simonstown Agreement", p.197.

Erasmus soon vindicated British doubts over his acceptance of their scheme for regional defence. He deleted the words "Middle East" in the clause "the defence of Africa in the Middle East" in the British-produced draft agenda for their June 1955 meetings.¹¹² Liesching confirmed that Erasmus would only contemplate a worthwhile military contribution if Britain supported his ADO scheme. However, even the possibility of this arrangement was put in doubt by the poor condition of the defence force. A useful input was unlikely reported the envoy. Even if the minister was himself to place the UDF on a more efficient level it was improbable that Strijdom, the prime minister, would seek a political mandate on the issue because of the added expenditure this would incur.¹¹³ Erasmus would have been aware that British policy in the Near East had significantly altered. In April 1955 the United Kingdom had joined Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan and Iran in the Baghdad Pact (known as the Central Treaty Organisation or CENTO from 1957). This created an important "northern tier" of security against the Soviet Union making the lines of defence to the south less vital and compensating for the failure of MEDO.¹¹⁴

At the first meeting in London with Erasmus the British defence minister, Selwyn Lloyd, restated London's long held position that the Middle East was the key region for African defence. In a later private meeting, aware of his visitor's sensitivities, Lloyd apologised to him for not having liaised over the evacuation of Australian and New Zealand forces from the Mediterranean.¹¹⁵ In the talks Erasmus shifted the Union's position. While elements of the UDF would contribute to the defence of southern Africa, Africa and the Middle East gateways to the continent, there was a new condition. The commitment would "depend on satisfactory arrangements being arrived at between the countries mainly concerned as to the nature and extent of the contribution each will make". In the meantime until these "arrangements" were formulated the Union would continue to build up a task force for use outside the nation's boundaries.¹¹⁶

¹¹² State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Erasmus to Liesching, 22 April 1955, PS 18/25.

¹¹³ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, 3 June 1955, ADM 116/6049.

¹¹⁴ Brian Holden Reid, " 'The Northern Tier' and the Baghdad Pact" in Young (ed.), *The Foreign Policy of Churchill's Peacetime Administration, 1951-1955*, p.181.

¹¹⁵ UK Public Record Office, Memorandum - "Points to be Raised at Private Meeting with Mr. Erasmus", 13 June 1955, FO 371/113483.

¹¹⁶ UK Public Record Office, "Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth

Lloyd discerned the change of tack and reported to the cabinet of Anthony Eden that "there was little prospect of obtaining a firm promise of South African cooperation in the Middle East". The prime minister commented that he himself did "not put too high a value" on any undertaking by the Union in this regard.¹¹⁷ The reality of the UDF's unpreparedness and the evident lack of zeal by Pretoria for the agreed role had cheapened the much trumpeted attachment by the South Africans to Western security. Erasmus was perceived as a salesman pedalling shoddy goods. There would be less and less inclination on the part of Britain to offer favourable treatment to the Union especially as its government's domestic agenda had become increasingly repellent to the world community. In the final agreements there was no offer by Britain to assist in the internal security of the Union.¹¹⁸

Negotiators on the British side inferred that the only device to rescue any of the land and air contribution was to offer participation by the South Africans in military staff talks. Without enthusiasm Erasmus agreed to the suggestion. A secret letter from the minister to Lloyd was appended to the Simonstown agreements finalised during the discussions. Erasmus stated that:

While the Union's participation in the Middle East would depend on arrangements arrived at after negotiations between the governments primarily interested, I would authorise the South African service staff to include in their discussions with your service staff, matters relating to South Africa's participation in the defence of that area. *This would have to be on a provisional basis and without commitment* [my italics].¹¹⁹

Much of the South African pledge made in 1950-51 had fallen away. The residue was possible staff talks and a promise to build up a task force. Within days of the public disclosure of the agreements in early July 1955 the SAAF chief, Melville, announced that the air force was acquiring 34 F-86 Sabre aircraft from Canada.¹²⁰ They would be used for the high altitude daylight interceptor and ground attack role. Immediate concern was shown by the

Relations, Minister of Defence and First Lord of the Admiralty", 23 June 1955, CP(55)51.

¹¹⁷ UK Public Record Office, "Minutes of Cabinet Meeting - 23 June 1955", CM (55) 17.

¹¹⁸ Dennis Austin, *Britain and South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p.127.

¹¹⁹ Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and "African Defence"*, p.189.

¹²⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, 13 July 1955.

British over the purchase of an American-designed aircraft which would not slot easily into the servicing arrangements to be provided by the Royal Air Force in the Middle East.¹²¹

In the months which followed no staff talks occurred. Du Toit in his last year as military chief complained to the British liaison staff that Whitehall did not have a proper plan for Middle East defence. The quartermaster-general, Brigadier HJ Martin, spoke of his own misgivings on the overall British position in the region once the Suez Canal zone was finally evacuated in June 1956. Apprehension centred on precisely where the UDF would be positioned in time of war. Du Toit was additionally hesitant to spend more money on items of equipment expecting that the Union's principal allies would provide these when necessary.¹²² By October 1955 the liaison staff reported that du Toit had discounted the usefulness of staff talks.¹²³ This view was supported by his minister who, it was believed, was not prepared to initiate discussions until he knew the extent of possible American participation in the region.¹²⁴

Lloyd and Erasmus met again in London in October 1955. The South African minister, having obtained the key prize of the transfer of Simonstown, was even more elusive over the Middle East role. He told the British side that the Union would build up a task force but it had not entered into any land or air agreements. Nothing could be contemplated until there had been *further* talks on the nature and extent of the military support each country would make. Until these had been formalised, he informed his disillusioned British hosts, it was not possible to discuss details such as command arrangements, size, composition and deployment of the UDF overseas.¹²⁵

The British discerned that Erasmus in effect had taken the Union back to its pre-1950 position. This was one of a government sympathetic to Western security interests in the

¹²¹ UK Public Record Office, British High Commission to CRO, 14 July 1955, DEFE 7/1523.

¹²² UK Public Record Office, "Report by the Military Advisor to the Union, 1 July - 30 September 1955", DO 35/8252.

¹²³ UK Public Record Office, British High Commission to CRO, 13 October 1955, FO 371/113484.

¹²⁴ UK Public Record Office, Snelling to CRO, 7 September 1955, FO 371/113483.

¹²⁵ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Minutes of Meeting between Mr. FC Erasmus, Minister of Defence and United Kingdom Ministers", 24 October 1955, PS 29/5/1 Vol. 1.

Middle East but unwilling to make any firm pledges. Lloyd hoped to rescue something from this falling house of cards. He suggested that there be the frankest of exchanges at staff level on the possibilities and problems involved in the Near East. Erasmus indicated that he was content with close liaison and information exchange but did not want any conference or agenda to imply *in any way* that the South Africans were obliged to follow any plan or operate in a specific regional theatre.¹²⁶ During his visit to Washington the following month Erasmus advised the state department that the Union was no longer bound by the 1950 agreement with Shinwell.¹²⁷

The still hopeful Lloyd wrote to Erasmus after the latter's return to Pretoria. Whitehall was irritated by the Union's efforts to create a domestic radar screen siphoning valuable resources from the Middle East commitment. It was revealed to the South African minister that British officials had evaluated the radar system. They were "very doubtful" over its "possible effectiveness" with the costs "colossal". Even the Americans with their great material reserves had not been able to finance a radar screen in depth in North America. Lloyd expressed his great scepticism on whether the screen would give *additional* protection to the Union and stressed the view that the defence of all of Africa should be centred in the Middle East.¹²⁸

In March 1956 Erasmus was still being quoted as saying that his government retained an interest in the Near East. However he said that there was no obligation on the part of the Union to intervene militarily unless and until a threat of aggression against South Africa occurred in the region, with any contribution dependent on "satisfactory arrangements".¹²⁹ Liesching reported to London that the minister and his close associates had an *idée fixe*: "They have no confidence in the effectiveness of Western defence policy in the Middle East against the threat posed by Arab nationalism and the progressive expansion of Russian influence in Egypt and elsewhere in the area". Erasmus was cautious over sending forces so far afield

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Notes of A Discussion between Mr FC Erasmus and Mr George V Allen, Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs, Department of State", 9 November 1955, MV 128/8.

¹²⁸ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Lloyd to Erasmus, 24 November 1955, PS 29/5/1.

¹²⁹ *Cape Argus*, 7 March 1956.

particularly in the circumstances of a general war in which the white regime's very existence could be threatened by black unrest.¹³⁰ The South Africans were also less inclined after the acquisition of Simonstown to fulfil *unwritten* defence obligations to Britain. Their support for involvement in the Middle East offered in the early 1950s was clearly made without firm commitment, in order to obtain Britain's backing for South African objectives.¹³¹

The Suez crisis of October/November 1956 marked the termination of Britain's paramountcy in the Middle East. Despite their purported interest in the area the Union did not openly side with Britain, as did Australia and New Zealand, and abstained in the vote in the United Nations condemning the Anglo/French invasion.¹³² Even if the South Africans had wanted to involve themselves militarily they were not pre-warned of British intentions or asked to participate. Whitehall had not liaised with Pretoria over Eden's ultimatum to Nasser to withdraw Egyptian forces from the Canal zone. Louw was incensed. He told Liesching that "in this very serious case... the accepted policy of consultation was departed from".¹³³ The incident would not have been lost on the Nationalists. Their country, despite being a Commonwealth member, had not been a significant enough international player to be taken into Britain's confidence. The episode confirmed what had been apparent for years, that the Commonwealth did not act together as a military unit. A number of member states were already participating in alliances in their particular regions.¹³⁴

In the wake of the evacuation of the British invasion forces under American and United Nations pressure much of the United Kingdom's military influence in the Middle East rapidly evaporated. In March 1957 Jordan abrogated its defence agreement with London and British forces were withdrawn. Sudan which had obtained its independence the previous year moved towards a neutralist path. In July 1958 the anglophile monarch of Iraq, Faisal, was

¹³⁰ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to CRO, 1 June 1956, DO 35/7137. By late 1955 Egypt and Syria had begun for the first time to accept large arms shipments from the Soviet Union.

¹³¹ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p. 357; p.357; Barber and Barrett, *South Africa's Foreign Policy: The Search for Status and Security 1945-1988*, p.56.

¹³² Barber, *South Africa's Foreign Policy, 1945-1970*, p.90. The traditionally pro-British UP was particularly incensed that the Union did not give support to Britain in the world body.

¹³³ The Institute for Contemporary History, Bloemfontein, Louw Papers, Louw to Liesching, 5 November 1956, PV 4.

¹³⁴ Barber, *South Africa's Foreign Policy, 1945-1970*, p.91.

overthrown and assassinated. The new Kassem regime insisted on the removal of the remaining Royal Air Force detachments in the country. By December 1958 the Middle East committee of the British cabinet resolved that the use of British forces against Arab nationalism did not serve the interests of the United Kingdom. Britain in future was to come to terms with this national spirit "even when controlled by Nasser, to counter Soviet penetration".¹³⁵ Her remaining military bases were in Libya, the Gulf and Aden with offshore establishments in Cyprus and Malta. As viewed from Pretoria the position of the Union's primary military partner, Britain, was weakening incrementally in the Near East.

Lord Home, the CRO secretary, had been told by Liesching in a major despatch in March 1957 of South Africa's growing lack of interest in the British defence link. The expeditionary force was no nearer fruition than two years previously, there had been no staff talks and defence headquarters considered Kenya as the Union's forward defensive position. However interest in the radar screen remained high, with the Americans and Canadians approached for assistance. The continued voluntary nature of external military service in Erasmus's defence bill undoubtedly reflected a dearth of serious concern over a Middle East role. Restrictions had been placed on access by the British liaison staff to defence headquarters combined with a disinclination to accept visits by United Kingdom specialists or to attend overseas service conferences. The envoy postulated on the important underlying rationale for the low priority given to defence on the domestic agenda:

Nor should we too readily condemn as irresponsible the pursuit of better living standards at the expense of the achievements of a defence effort comparable with our own. Among other things the economic development and material well-being of this country plays a vital part in keeping down the inter-racial temperatures.¹³⁶

The narrowing horizons of the Union's overseas defence role were confirmed at a special conference of the general staff in May 1957. Klopper admitted that while accepting that the task force concept was sound he believed that precedence needed to be given to security nearer home.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Ovendale, *British Defence Policy Since 1945*, p.121.

¹³⁶ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to Home, 28 March 1957, DEFE 7/1523.

¹³⁷ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Minutes of Special General Staff Conference", 3 May 1957, MV 178.

In mid-1957 the British chiefs of staff made their own evaluation of the Union's position on an expeditionary force in anticipation of Erasmus's return to London the following September. They concluded that it was important that the principle remain that South African forces should be deployed outside the country in the interests of Commonwealth solidarity. The development of distinctive Union defence policies "which might be politically embarrassing to the United Kingdom" they also wished to discourage. In their assessment they candidly recognised that any pledge by Pretoria to take part in the initial land battle in the Middle East was "unrealistic". Moreover any deployment plans "had to be capable of interpretation by the South Africans as being in their direct interests". The chiefs of staff surmised that Britain's own purposes would best be served by the Union providing a supply and support area available after a nuclear exchange, air and naval forces for the defence of sea communications, an air transportable brigade group available to support Commonwealth interests and machinery to raise additional forces. The possibility of sending a brigade to Kenya they evaluated as consistent with South Africa's own requirements.¹³⁸

After the chief of the Rhodesian air staff visited the Union in July 1957 he confirmed to the British liaison staff in Salisbury that the top echelons of the South African military had lost confidence in Britain's ability to retain its position in the Middle East. This was due to the steady erosion of their various base footholds such as Egypt and Jordan.¹³⁹ Erasmus and his general staff were well aware of the major cuts in the United Kingdom's world-wide military capabilities forecast in defence minister Duncan Sandys's white paper of April 1957. The South Africans would not have wished to be "hitched to a falling star". The London meetings in September 1957 demonstrated the growing divergence of interests between the two countries. As Sandys was visiting New Zealand his place in the discussions with Erasmus was assumed by Lord Mancroft, the government's defence spokesman in the House of Lords. From early on in the deliberations Erasmus set out the Union's marker. As a price for South African participation in the Middle East Britain had to assist in the establishment of a NATO-style defence organisation for Africa.¹⁴⁰ Mancroft noted:

¹³⁸ UK Public Record Office, Chiefs of Staff Committee Memorandum - "South African Defence Policy", 11 June 1957, C of S(57)137.

¹³⁹ UK Public Record Office, UKSLS Salisbury to UKSLS Pretoria, 27 July 1957, DEFE 7/1530.

¹⁴⁰ UK Public Record Office, British High Commission to CRO, 10 September 1957, DEFE 7/1530.

The position is in short, that the United Kingdom is being asked to subscribe to a regional defence arrangement, which is opposed to our general concept of the defence of the Middle East and Africa, to cover overtly a risk which we believe to be non-existent, and covertly to perform a task which is one of internal security and thus the responsibility of individual countries.¹⁴¹

By this juncture neither country had a particular interest in each other's project.

In the aftermath of the London meetings Erasmus announced on 16 October that the Union had no obligation to take part in a possible war in the Middle East. What the government would do, in the event of war would be decided when the question arose and in the light of circumstances. In the interim the defence department was prepared to assemble a task force for use in the land and in the air.¹⁴² Within weeks the Strijdom cabinet instructed Erasmus that in future the defence priority would be domestic security rather than the preparation of an expeditionary force.¹⁴³ On 20 November the general staff was informed by the defence minister that with a MEDO no longer a possibility "we have no responsibilities for the moment outside the Union". The task force would be assigned primarily to an internal role. However if an emergency arose outside the country's boundaries it would be mobilised "for use where, when and how as determined by the government of the time".¹⁴⁴ A watershed had been reached. The policy position of the previous seven years had become inoperative with the Union looking to its own safekeeping.

British diplomats recognised in 1958 that there was a "political" dimension to the Erasmus "task force". The minister needed to retain the *idea* of South African assistance in war as part of his scheme to maintain favourable public relations with the Western powers. The high commission drew attention to this device in a despatch to London:

Indeed to abandon the intention to produce the task force would considerably weaken Mr. Erasmus's tactical position both in parliament and his endeavour (which he continues

¹⁴¹ UK Public Record Office, "Note by Lord Mancroft on Defence Discussions with the Union of South Africa", 10 September 1957, DEFE 7/1530.

¹⁴² *Cape Argus*, 17 October 1957.

¹⁴³ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Steyn to De Villiers, 12 December 1957, MV 18/10.

¹⁴⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, De Villiers to Steyn, 23 January 1958, MV 18/10.

to pursue at every possible opportunity) for a South African NATO. (Indeed during the budget debate he again referred to the need for building up a bulwark against a southward drive of communism on the African continent).¹⁴⁵

British expectations by mid-1958 of a significant Middle East contribution by the Union had almost evaporated. They estimated that it would take a full year just to field one brigade group with one squadron of Dakotas and one squadron of fighters (one-ninth of the original 1950 SAAF commitment).¹⁴⁶ Erasmus was already declaring in July 1958 that the presence of a British strategic reserve in Kenya and the creation of a large new military base by the Belgians at Kamina in the Congo constituted major barriers against the advance of communism through Africa.¹⁴⁷ The attenuating nature of the Union's defence relationship with Britain was the decision by Erasmus in late 1958 to downgrade the military adviser's post in London from the rank of brigadier to colonel and cutting in half the staff complement.¹⁴⁸

During a parliamentary debate in September 1958 the defence minister confirmed that the sole overseas military commitment of the Union affected the navy and had been set down in the Simonstown agreements of 1955. The possibility of deploying a task force externally depended on the conclusion of an agreement with other countries linked to the land defence of southern Africa.¹⁴⁹ The British by this point realistically accepted that the land and air elements of the SADF, particularly the former, had as its only function the ensuring of internal security "for which it has both equipment and men" (later contradicted by the events of Sharpeville). The navy was "making the only serious contribution to extra-territorial defence concepts".¹⁵⁰ By November 1958 the British defence officials had in practice ceased to include the Union in their planning arrangements for the Middle East. A resigned war office told the high commission in Pretoria that it did not "think it necessary on military grounds to press" the South Africans "to undertake an obligation of this kind in the present circumstances".¹⁵¹ There was further chagrin in Whitehall over the substantial amount of defence information they had supplied to Pretoria while receiving almost no intelligence reports from the South Africans.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁵ UK Public Record Office, Aston to CRO, 25 July 1958, DO 35/10545.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Barber, *South Africa's Foreign Policy, 1945-1970*, p.86.

¹⁴⁸ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, Erasmus to Louw, 10 November 1958, MV 44/1.

¹⁴⁹ UK Public Record Office, Belcher to Oliver, 19 September 1958, DO 35/10545.

¹⁵⁰ UK Public Record Office, Aston to Morrison, 9 September 1958, DO 35/10545.

¹⁵¹ UK Public Record Office, Oliver to Belcher, 26 November 1958, DO 35/10545.

When Erasmus visited Britain for the last time in March 1959 for discussions the notion of South African participation in Near East defence was moribund. By July Commandant-General Melville was to tell a British visitor, Major-General Bastin, that the air and land components of the SADF were fully committed to domestic security with external assistance only to neighbouring territories, if necessary. In these circumstances it was probable, Melville advised, that the Centurion tanks purchased for Middle East service would be sold.¹⁵³ In his final defence statement in December 1959 Erasmus described the concept of the defence of Africa in the Near East as no longer operative. With the closure of British installations in the region and the abandonment of the idea of a MEDO he accepted that it had been necessary to embark on a major re-evaluation of the role of the armed forces. Their future function was primarily internal.¹⁵⁴

Fouche made it quickly clear to the top echelons of the military after assuming the defence portfolio that in his view Britain was the Union's only true ally.¹⁵⁵ He recognised that the Union needed to pledge elements of the SADF to the West in time of war and this was not conditional on the creation of a defence organisation.¹⁵⁶ Contacts with Britain placed under strain in the last years of the Erasmus era were improved. A competent senior officer, Brigadier Martin, was sent as the new military adviser to Britain; defence headquarters was instructed to cooperate fully with the British service liaison staff; greater financial resources were allocated to permit more personnel to attend British-based training programmes and Melville was directed to accept the invitation to the chief of the imperial general staff's conference. For the first time in several years an SADF officer was nominated for the year-long imperial defence college course.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵² Canadian National Archives, Hurley to the Undersecretary of State for External Affairs, 14 November 1958, RG 25/50084-40.

¹⁵³ UK Public Record Office, "Report by Major-General GER Bastin on Visit to South Africa and Rhodesia - 20/27 July 1959, DO 35/8252.

¹⁵⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Press Release by Mr FC Erasmus, Minister of Defence Regarding the Reorganisation of the South African Defence Force", 2 December 1959, MV 13/3 Vol. II.

¹⁵⁵ UK Public Record Office, Kemp to High Commissioner, 8 February 1960, DO 35/10545.

¹⁵⁶ UK Public Record Office, Maud to Home, 23 June 1960, DO 35/10544.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Unfortunately for the warmer relationship with the United Kingdom being developed by Fouche, British policymakers were divided after Sharpeville over the usefulness of defence links with the Union, other than that of Simonstown. The foreign office, which had a wider global perspective than the CRO, criticised a ministry of defence decision to send between 20,000 and 30,000 rifles to the Union in mid-1960. They suggested that "if this transaction became public knowledge there would inevitably be criticism both at home and at Africa (sic) of our readiness to arm the white population against the blacks".¹⁵⁸ The CRO, still responsible for South Africa and retaining its traditional affinity for the old dominions, supported the sale. "Our view is that there should be no exceptions to the principle that we meet all responsible requests from any Commonwealth country for defence supplies".¹⁵⁹ In 1964 with South Africa out of the Commonwealth the foreign office view prevailed under the new Labour government of Harold Wilson. There was a complete cessation of arms shipments after the delivery of Buccaneer aircraft ordered by Fouche earlier in the decade.¹⁶⁰

The weakening position of Britain in the Middle East throughout the 1950s had been recognized by Erasmus. He had ascertained that the disposition of South African forces in the region in the circumstances of a war with the Soviet Union might be untenable. As the decade wore on he and ministerial and military colleagues had become more conscious that the accelerated decolonisation programme in Africa would eventually reverberate on the Union with major implications for domestic security. The UDF was required at home. Moreover Erasmus's pledge to Britain in 1950-51 was essentially political rather than strategic in nature - to obtain diplomatic acceptability for the Union from the Western powers and lay the groundwork for the transfer of Simonstown. However the incremental downgrading of South Africa's commitment in the Near East, in conjunction with an evident lack of defence preparedness, disillusioned the Union's most important ally, one on which white South Africa relied most for political support in an increasingly hostile international environment.

The whole issue of the Union's involvement in Middle East defence typified the quandary which faced Nationalist foreign policymakers such as Erasmus after 1948. Their political pedigree was one of unremitting opposition to the link with Britain. They believed

¹⁵⁸ UK Public Record Office, Ballantyne to Jones, 24 June 1960, DO 35/8254.

¹⁵⁹ UK Public Record Office, Adair to Jones, 27 June 1960, DO 35/8254.

¹⁶⁰ Austin, *Britain and South Africa*, p.130.

that this demeaned South Africa's formal independence and was a continuing reminder of the volk's defeat at the beginning of the century. Disdain for imperial ties had assured the HNP's unswerving commitment to neutrality in the world conflict of 1939-45. In the postwar climate however the strategic and political picture had altered dramatically and with it the old Nationalist certitudes. After the defeat of the fascist powers the worldwide communist movement with the Soviet Union in its vanguard had moved to the international centre stage. Within three years of the end of the war Soviet-controlled regimes dominated eastern and much of central Europe and communist insurrections were spreading through the Far East. Since the late 1930s Nationalists had come to view atheistic marxism as an insidious threat to white domination of the levers of power in the Union. Communist parties were known to be committed to the emancipation of black, brown and yellow peoples from European control around the globe. The black population of South Africa, the NP leadership believed, would be highly susceptible to this appeal from Moscow.

For the members of South Africa's new Nationalist government there came the recognition that in the unstable international situation there needed to be a reappraisal of their previously strongly-held foreign policy position. They were obliged to ask themselves which international power would be more detrimental to the apartheid regime's long-term future, Britain or the Soviet Union. It was overtly the latter. The United Kingdom by 1945, nearly bankrupt by war, had neither the inclination, intention or resources to keep South Africa in neo-colonial subordination. Since the mid-1920s Whitehall had recognised the complete sovereignty of the dominions. Britain saw the Union in the growing Cold War as in the conflict against the fascism in terms of a strategic Commonwealth *partner*, sharing many of the political assumptions of the west. The Nationalist leadership realised that complete Soviet domination of Europe would inject communist influence and control into the territories of Africa. In these circumstances the Union would quickly succumb to black and marxist rule. For Malan, Erasmus and their colleagues there could only be one appropriate option. They had to openly associate South Africa militarily with the old enemy, Britain, in the common cause of anti-communism. It would take over two years for them to influence party supporters that the intentions of Britain toward Afrikanerdom and the Union were not inimical and that neutrality was no longer a useful political preference. Only in June 1950 was Erasmus in a position to confirm to London that South Africa would stand with the west with its forces.

The defence minister had to "compartmentalize" his policies towards the British link. Domestically he undertook to remove the vestiges of the British heritage in the armed services which would allow them to become "national". On the external agenda he pursued a programme through much of the 1950s attempting to demonstrate that in the Union Britain had a firm Commonwealth friend. These approaches, though appearing to many outsiders as contradictory, were both suited to the political demands of Afrikaner Nationalism. They were to raise the ethos and power of the volk and simultaneously to use the tie with London to help ensure protection for white South Africa against one of its most virulent enemies, marxist-leninism. By the time of Sharpeville the defence force was clearly "South African" in its orientation but the true threat to the adherents of apartheid by then came from within the confines of the Union. In this event the defence relationship with Britain was irrelevant to the Verwoerd government's dilemma.

The Defence of Colonial Africa South of the Sahara

There existed two themes running through Erasmus's policy towards the defence of colonial Africa south of the Sahara. One was a desire to fabricate an international defence organisation comparable to NATO. The attraction of a supranational grouping for the minister and his fellow Nationalists was multifold. It would establish that the Union had military partners other than Britain; allow South Africa to be discerned as an indispensable player in the overall Western alliance, thus creating political dividends; and provide added security for the country against the perceived communist threat on a multilateral basis. Erasmus was particularly drawn to the NATO concept of an attack on one alliance member being considered an attack on all. The lesser theme was the de facto incorporation of the British high commission territories of Basutoland, Swaziland and Bechuanaland into the Union's defence sphere. There had long been a desire by successive Union governments since 1910 for the three countries to be incorporated into South Africa, as envisaged in section 151 of the Act of Union.¹⁶¹ From the time of Hertzog's government various administrations had

¹⁶¹ Richard P Stevens, "The History of the Anglo-South African Conflict over the Proposed Incorporation of the High Commission Territories" in Christian Potholm and

been concerned that the territories could be jumping off points for agitation against the Union.¹⁶² The fear became more acute for Pretoria after 1945 with the rise of communist power world-wide, something which Afrikaner Nationalists associated with black political advance. The two themes were associated in that they represented an effort to develop a corridor of friendly countries to the north of the Union to help insulate the white regime.

In 1949 Erasmus and his government witnessed the beginning of a flurry of global activity in the creation of Western defence alliances to contain communist expansionism. NATO was constituted in April 1949 bringing together the United States, Canada and Western European nations. During September 1951 the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) Treaty was signed forming a tri-national body for the defence of the Pacific.¹⁶³ Three years later the South East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) was launched joining Thailand, Pakistan, the Philippines and several Western powers involved in the region.¹⁶⁴ Finally in 1955 the Baghdad Pact was signed creating CENTO which involved Britain, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and, until 1959, Iraq. By the mid-1950s the various groupings encompassed 21 nations. The Commonwealth did not itself develop into a military alliance. Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Pakistan and Canada each joined associations in their part of the globe. Despite having one of the world's most virulent anti-communist governments the Union was not a constituent member of any defence pact, though it had been anticipated that she would have joined MEDO if it had been formed. During much of his period as defence minister Erasmus actively attempted to forge a security partnership with those European metropolitan powers with territories on the African continent. To his great disappointment it transpired that nothing of substance or of long duration had been achieved by the conclusion of the 1950s.

Baring, the British high commissioner, informed London in March 1949 that while the Malan administration took a friendly attitude towards Britain there was a greater possibility of support from Pretoria within the context of a multi-national alliance: "No voices would be raised against participation in war since all Nationalists would see South Africa as not joining Great Britain but the Western world".¹⁶⁵ Early the following month Malan in a speech to the

Richard Dale (eds.), *Southern Africa in Perspective: Essays in Regional Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1972), pp. 101-2.

¹⁶² Hyam, *The Failure of South African Expansion*, p.104.

¹⁶³ Seldon, *Churchill's Indian Summer-The Conservative Government, 1951-1955*, p.344.

¹⁶⁴ Tunstall, *The Commonwealth and Regional Defence*, p.35.

senate called for a coalition of African colonial powers and the Union. South Africa would, he asserted, not stand aside from its traditional allies in a war with the Russians.¹⁶⁶

The prime minister was anxious that the Union be able to join NATO. Even while the negotiations for its formation were underway in late 1948 te Water told the state department in Washington that South Africa desired to be a member state.¹⁶⁷ During his visit to London for the Commonwealth conference in April 1949 Malan informed Bevin that the Union wanted in some way to be associated with the Atlantic alliance, which had been formed just weeks before. The foreign secretary disclosed that the American congress had opposed the involvement of colonial territories in NATO.¹⁶⁸ It had been finally agreed that the treaty area would only extend as far south as the Tropic of Cancer,¹⁶⁹ which would permit France's north African possessions such as Algeria to be included.¹⁷⁰ Despite this disappointment Malan and Forsyth canvassed support in the British capital for a sub-Saharan African conference bringing together the metropolitan powers to discuss mutual security.¹⁷¹ He hoped that the issue of arming blacks could be covered and warned that the wartime conscription of blacks had led to a subsequent revolt in French Madagascar in 1947.¹⁷²

Meanwhile in the Union Erasmus pursued the Malan line. In June he announced that he was liaising with other African governments on the question of defending the colonial territories.¹⁷³ In London the following month he called upon the Attlee government to demilitarise the tens of thousands of black troops which it controlled in its various colonies across the continent.¹⁷⁴ This had already been accomplished under South African pressure in the high commission territories, or "protectorates" as they were known in the Union. The issue of the incorporation of the three countries had been raised by Malan the previous September when he declared that the situation had been "dragging on" since the foundation of

¹⁶⁵ UK Public Record Office, Baring to Liesching, 31 March 1949, DO 35/2752.

¹⁶⁶ *The Times* (London), 9 April 1949.

¹⁶⁷ Ovendale, *The English-Speaking Alliance*, p.251.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, p.254.

¹⁶⁹ Tunstall, *The Commonwealth and Regional Defence*, p.24.

¹⁷⁰ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p.165.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.156.

¹⁷² *Ibid*.

¹⁷³ *South Africa*, 18 June 1949.

¹⁷⁴ *South Africa*, 23 July 1949.

the Union.¹⁷⁵ Erasmus quickly followed this up with discussions with the British high commission, asking for the termination of the practice of arming black troops in the protectorates. In October 1948 Brigadier Hirsch announced that the 3,650 high commission territory soldiers, then stationed in the Middle East, would be disarmed on their return to southern Africa the following January.¹⁷⁶ This move could be undertaken as Britain was anxious to run down manpower levels of its forces in the post-war period and it was aware that the protectorates were far from areas of potential armed conflict. Internal security for the three countries with their sparse populations would be provided by the local British-officered police forces. In this matter Whitehall could afford not to be acrimonious with the new Nationalist government in Pretoria, knowing the sensitivity of the issue of armed black soldiery.

A defence alliance for the continent remained on the Union's political agenda as the new decade dawned. In the speech from the throne at the beginning of the 1950 parliamentary session the governor-general, Major van Zyl, called for closer links between the various African colonial administrations for continental security.¹⁷⁷ During the course of a visit by the commander of British land forces in East Africa, General Dowler, in April 1950 Erasmus put forward a proposal for an "exploratory" conference to exchange ideas between the African powers on action needed to be taken in time of war.¹⁷⁸ By the time of the South African minister's discussions with his British opposite number, Shinwell, five months later, Whitehall was agreeable to supporting an African defence facilities conference. Its main focus would be on the technicalities of moving forces in wartime from southern and eastern Africa to the Mediterranean littoral. The British hoped that their backing of one of the Union's most sought-after projects would assist the Union in committing forces to the Middle East.¹⁷⁹ It was resolved that the issuing of invitations to other participating nations was to be made both by Britain and the Union.¹⁸⁰ While in Europe Erasmus also took the opportunity of

¹⁷⁵ *South Africa*, 4 September 1948.

¹⁷⁶ Canadian National Archives, McGreer to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, 19 October 1948, RG 25/10283-40.

¹⁷⁷ US State Department - Central Files, Snow to Labouisse, 20 January 1950, 745A.00/0001.

¹⁷⁸ UK Public Record Office, Baring to CRO, 3 May 1950, DEFE 7/934.

¹⁷⁹ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth,

p.167.

¹⁸⁰ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Memorandum-

undertaking deliberations with the French and Portuguese governments on avenues to further security cooperation in Africa.¹⁸¹

In the course of a speech in Tulbagh in late October Erasmus admitted that while there was a considerable measure of agreement with African colonial governments on various issues there also existed "a wide breach" with the metropolitan powers on racial policies to be pursued. Because of the Malan government's strong adherence to "white supremacy" a "wall of prejudice" had been created against the Union.¹⁸² The American embassy which monitored the address was convinced this view was "likely to be one of the major stumbling blocks in the forthcoming defence conference".¹⁸³ Specifically the question of arming black troops, it was believed, would bedevil cooperation between the Union and the Europeans. A number of observers, such as Owendale, Tunstall and Darby, have maintained that the South Africans insisted that their potential alliance partners follow the Union practice of demilitarising their black African forces as the price for Pretoria's participation. The fact that little was built on the defence facilities conferences at Nairobi and Dakar was said to have resulted from Erasmus's persistence in promoting this aspect of apartheid policy.¹⁸⁴ However Henshaw has pointed out that in Erasmus's London discussions with Shinwell just before the Tulbagh speech he told the British that the Union accepted that the colonial powers were planning to maintain black forces.¹⁸⁵ However the Nationalist government was anxious that black troops from the colonies not be permitted to transit or train in the Union. Erasmus advanced the "demilitarisation" platform almost as an evangelist hoping to win converts to a position originally set out in Malan's African Charter. To the detriment of Pretoria's own aims the issue itself highlighted to many European policymakers the unacceptable domestic programme of the Union's ruling party and how "out of step" the Nationalists were with the spirit of

"Proposed Conference on Defence Facilities in Africa", 26 September 1950, MV/G23.

¹⁸¹ *The Star*, 28 September 1950.

¹⁸² *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 November 1950.

¹⁸³ US State Department - Central Files, Air Attache to Chief of Staff, United States Air Force, 3 November 1950, 745A.00/0021.

¹⁸⁴ Owendale, "The South African Policy of the British Labour Government, 1947- 1951"; Tunstall, *The Commonwealth and Regional Defence*; Darby, *British Defence Policy East of Suez 1947-1968*.

¹⁸⁵ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p. 168.

emancipation sweeping the continent. The Union by the early 1950s was already increasingly developing a pariah status.

The defence facilities conference for southern and eastern Africa convened in Nairobi in August 1951. Participating nations included the Union, Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, Southern Rhodesia and Ethiopia. The South African department of external affairs persuaded Malan to send the quick-witted Paul Sauer as the co-leader of the Union's delegation along with Erasmus. This was on the pretext that transport, Sauer's portfolio, was an important component of the agenda.¹⁸⁶ The British insisted on a "general discussion" on "practical and technical questions" as the main concern of the talks rather than more formal military cooperation. They signalled this by sending their civil aviation minister, Lord Ogmores, as their delegation leader and as conference chairman rather than a service minister. Ogmores emphasised that the gathering could only make recommendations rather than binding decisions.¹⁸⁷ Working groups covered the areas of transport facilities, telecommunications and navigational aids, local protection for defence facilities, health, passport and visa regulations, as well as customs facilities for the forces and their supplies.¹⁸⁸ At the conclusion of the conference an agreement was produced in principle for the freest possible use of transportation and communications between the countries of east, central and southern Africa "in time of war". However the South Africans had been unable to obtain a "continuing organisation" which they had hoped could have based in the Union.¹⁸⁹ For Erasmus there was the consolation of a conference report recommendation that the British and South African governments might want to consult in future on action to implement conference recommendations. On their return to Pretoria both South African ministers reported that the Nairobi meeting had been very successful with the Union accepted as a defence partner in concert with the European powers.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁶ Interview with Donald Sole, Cape Town, 11 July 1994; Dirk en Johanna De Villiers, *Paul Sauer*, p.108.

¹⁸⁷ Barber and Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, p.57.

¹⁸⁸ Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and "African Defence"*, p.65.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.69.

¹⁹⁰ UK Public Record Office, British High Commission to CRO, 6 September 1951, DEFE 7/937.

The British foreign office produced a somewhat more critical assessment of the South African role at the conference:

They sent two ministers, Sauer and Erasmus who have not contributed anything of note to the discussions. The power behind the scenes in the delegation had been Forsyth... and most of the work has been done by Sole, the young head of the Political Department who has been the outstanding personality of the conference. He has had a busy time wet-nursing his rather inexperienced colleagues and has done a lion's share of the work of the secretariat. Their main disappointment is that they failed to get a firm understanding to follow up action. We advised them to go warily and make their proposals as informal as possible but they suggested rather clumsily the setting up of a Bureau, which they expected they would pay.¹⁹¹

Donald Sole, the South African joint secretary, believed that Nairobi was a technical success but less so on the political plane. Erasmus and du Toit who also attended did not inspire British delegates in their handling of the UDF or their grasp of strategic concepts. The senior British officers, in Sole's words, "might have been prepared to accept in politics any country can for a time be saddled with an incompetent minister of defence, but they could not overlook the incompetence of a chief of the general staff".¹⁹² One of the predictable positions Erasmus took at the conference was to espouse the need for black African forces to be disbanded.¹⁹³ Despite certain disappointments Erasmus viewed Nairobi as an incremental step en route to a fully fledged defence organisation.

Nearer to the Union the Malan government was pursuing its twin-track policy of attempting to persuade Britain to allow the incorporation of the high commission territories. During the January-February 1951 visit of Gordon-Walker the prime minister at the banquet in honour of the Commonwealth secretary called for an early resolution of the issue.¹⁹⁴ Particular attention had been drawn to the protectorates question during the previous year with the controversial marriage of the Tswana leader, Seretse Khama, to a white Englishwoman.¹⁹⁵ Malan was also disturbed in early 1951 with the Gold Coast elections and the granting of self-government to a sub-Saharan British territory which he saw as completely altering the

¹⁹¹ UK Public Record Office, Lockhart to Allen, 30 August 1951, FO 371/90065.

¹⁹² Donald Sole, *This Above All: Reminiscences of A South African Diplomat* (Private Printing, 1989), p.145.

¹⁹³ Interview with Ambassador Donald Sole, Cape Town, 11 July 1994.

¹⁹⁴ Barber, *South Africa's Foreign Policy, 1945-1970*, p.109.

¹⁹⁵ Owendale, *The English-Speaking Alliance*, p.250.

nature of the Commonwealth.¹⁹⁶ In his estimation the three neighbouring territories needed to be safely within the confines of the Union to reinforce the protection of the nation against the increased possibility of black subversion from the north. The issue had increasingly become a security one. In a May 1952 speech he characterised the problem as "acute" which could not be allowed to continue "into eternity".¹⁹⁷ This was followed up with an assurance to delegates at the Transvaal party congress that a strong approach would be made to London on the territories.¹⁹⁸

In the months after the Nairobi conference the belief in the need for multi-national African defence remained in the minds of the Pretoria leadership. Malan announced in 1951 that the aim of the Union's military policies was, in so far that agreement could be reached with other countries, to assist in the protection of colonial areas north of South Africa.¹⁹⁹ During the course of a November 1952 interview with the Paris journal *La Revue Francaise* Malan took the view that, though NATO was confined to the region down to the Tropic of Cancer, any future war could not be confined by such geographical limits. As a number of the treaty signatories also had African territories they also retained a direct interest in the colonial defence of the continent.²⁰⁰ The South Africans were the strongest supporters of a French suggestion at Nairobi that there be a follow-up conference to investigate defence facilities in the region of West Africa which would need to be activated in the time of general hostilities.²⁰¹ The conference finally took place in March 1954 in Dakar and explored the same technical areas as on the previous occasion. However it was low-key, with only senior officials present, and no final communiqué was issued. The previous participating nations attended, except for Ethiopia and Southern Rhodesia, and with the addition of Liberia.²⁰² Cuff, the leader of the Union's delegation was instructed by the cabinet to tell the other participants that if the Mediterranean was closed to convoys there was not to be a blanket acceptance of black troops transiting South Africa. In each instance permission had to be sought from Pretoria.²⁰³

¹⁹⁶ Stevens, "The History of the Anglo-South African Conflict over the Proposed Incorporation of the High Commission Territories", p. 107.

¹⁹⁷ *South Africa*, 17 May 1952.

¹⁹⁸ *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 September 1952.

¹⁹⁹ Barber, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, p.82.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Barber, *South Africa's Foreign Policy, 1945-1970*, p. 85.

²⁰² Tunstall, *The Commonwealth and Regional Defence*, p.48.

²⁰³ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Erasmus to Cuff, 22

Again there had been very limited progress towards a structured project to continental security. However, publicly, Erasmus claimed after Dakar that South Africa had become closely associated with the metropolitan powers in African security matters.²⁰⁴

Malan in August 1954 called for the establishment of a Western Indian Ocean equivalent of NATO.²⁰⁵ When Erasmus visited London later that month the idea of a multilateral colonial defence body for Africa was foremost in his mind. Worried that with the abandonment of MEDO there did not exist a possible security guarantee for South Africa by the Western powers he suggested the formation of an ADO.²⁰⁶ In follow-up discussions with British officials he emphasised that an ADO could not be subordinated to any regional group such as NATO and needed to be self-contained. Erasmus strongly suggested that in the chain of world-wide alliances a gap existed in the African sector which needed to be urgently covered.²⁰⁷ Swinton was somewhat sympathetic to ADO believing that the South Africans would be more accommodating to an international obligation than to a commonwealth one. It would also be a device for helping Erasmus to commit forces to the Middle East.²⁰⁸ However even at this early juncture the British foreign office had been alerted that two African powers, Belgium and Portugal after participation at Nairobi and Dakar were not interested in a formal defence organisation.²⁰⁹

The defence minister was also concerned to close any security loopholes caused by the continued existence of the protectorates. On 12 April 1954 the Malan government introduced a resolution in the house of assembly urging incorporation.²¹⁰ On the very next day in the house of commons Churchill confirmed that there was no question of the United Kingdom agreeing to transfer at that time.²¹¹ London had for long taken the view that any major

February 1954, MV 128/5.

²⁰⁴ Barber and Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy*, p.57.

²⁰⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, 14 September 1954.

²⁰⁶ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Speech at Dinner Hosted by Lord Swinton", 2 September 1954, MV 128/5.

²⁰⁷ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Notes on Discussion between Mr Erasmus, Lord Alexander, Lord Swinton and Mr Jooste", 10 September 1954, PS 29/3.

²⁰⁸ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p. 241.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p.243.

²¹⁰ Seldon, *Churchill's Indian Summer*, p.607.

constitutional alteration would only occur if the chiefs and the various populations indicated willingness for such a change.²¹² There was never this desire. With the political route to incorporation blocked by Whitehall Erasmus decided however to press on with a campaign of at least merging the protectorates in the Union's defence sphere. An article by Brigadier Hendrik Zinn in the September 1954 issue of *Commando* outlined the perceived threat posed by the territories remaining outside South Africa. Communist agitation was increasing while "the Union has to sit by and watch a germinating danger without being able to lift a finger". He went on to argue that "the most important case for their incorporation is a military one".²¹³ The article's theme was developed in a speech by Erasmus to the Nasionale Jeugbond in which he claimed that the protectorates besides providing "breeding grounds for communism" also constituted a void in the Union's air defence system, including the proposed radar screen.²¹⁴ To press the latter point SAAF signal staff were instructed by defence headquarters when conducting briefings on the radar project to highlight the importance of coverage over the three territories.²¹⁵ Erasmus continued the pressure even after Malan left office in November 1954.

In the first few months of the Strijdom administration the defence minister told the new British high commissioner, Leisching, that he hoped Britain would be a co-sponsor with the Union of ADO. Erasmus was obviously aware that the support of a heavyweight power in the venture could greatly assist its creation. The British envoy was informed that the South Africans envisaged a system of bases in French, Belgian and Portuguese as well as British colonies at the disposal of Western forces around Africa. Arrangements might be made for the staging of SAAF aircraft at various points on the continent leading to north Africa from the Union. It was stressed by Erasmus that the (white) people of the Union wanted to be confident that they would be protected if the UDF was deployed to the Middle East. He considered that they would receive this assurance if South Africa was a constituent member of a defence organisation involving other African powers.²¹⁶ In his defence statement in the

²¹¹ Hyam, *The Failure of South African Expansion*, p.191.

²¹² Lord Hailey, *The Republic of South Africa and the High Commission Territories* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.37.

²¹³ *Commando*, September 1954.

²¹⁴ *South Africa*, 27 September 1954.

²¹⁵ UK Public Record Office, Paul to Air Ministry, 18 November 1954, DO 35/8335.

²¹⁶ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, 17 March 1955, DEFE 13/36.

senate on 7 March 1955 the minister said that ADO would particularly assist the security of the east coast of Africa. If the Soviets occupied the Persian gulf they could use its airfields for long-range attacks on distant targets, including Africa, and enter the Indian ocean.²¹⁷

As Erasmus promoted his ADO idea his rival Louw had similar ideas. Three months after Strijdom became premier on 30 November 1954 he divested the portfolio of external affairs to the internationally experienced Louw. Within weeks the new minister called in the ambassadors of France, Belgium, Portugal and the British and Rhodesian high commissioners and spelt out the merits of what he described as a pan-African conference. Under this scheme participating nations could discuss measures against communism, a line against United Nations interference, a common policy to limit Indian immigration into Africa (these were all primarily South African concerns) as well as deliberations on *defence* questions.²¹⁸ The last item infringed on Erasmus's purview. Louw saw his conference as a counterpoise to the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia, scheduled for April 1955.²¹⁹

Swinton, in his last days as CRO secretary, reacted negatively upon reading Louw's proposed agenda. He told his cabinet colleague Harold Macmillan that "I am afraid that we shall be asked to join this awful party".²²⁰ He believed that if Britain did not agree to Louw's plan she might have to be more forthcoming on the idea of an ADO. This was due to the perception that Erasmus's ideas had "a different and less objectionable purpose" and could be made the counterpoint of a scheme for the defence of colonial Africa.²²¹ Among other Whitehall ministers there were varying views on ADO. Lord Reading of the foreign office felt that serious consideration needed to be given to Erasmus's scheme so as "to prevent the South Africans lapsing into an isolationist policy".²²² The colonial office's Alan Lennox-Boyd however suggested that a defence organisation could be a platform for South African "interference into British territories".²²³ Erasmus, who by this point was telling Nationalist supporters that the Union had joined "the first rank powers", decided to keep up the

²¹⁷ *Keesings Contemporary Archives*, 1955-1956, p.14144.

²¹⁸ UK Public Record Office, Swinton to Macmillan, 21 March 1955, DEFE 13/36.

²¹⁹ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p. 290.

²²⁰ UK Public Record Office, Swinton to Macmillan, 21 March 1955, DEFE 13/36.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² UK Public Record Office, Reading to Home, 18 April 1955, DEFE 13/36.

²²³ UK Public Record Office, Lennox-Boyd to Swinton, 5 April 1955, DEFE 13/36.

momentum.²²⁴ For his June 1955 meetings in London he appended an item to the British-produced draft agenda - "the setting up of a defence organisation South of the Sahara to ensure from the military aspects effective cooperation in the defence of that area in the event of communist aggression".²²⁵

Before the bi-lateral discussions British planners concluded that there was hardly a recognisable strategic danger to the Union, therefore ADO had limited *military* aims. Its only feasible purpose would be to ensure lines of communications through and around Africa. However the concept had *political* advantages for the South African government. "It would provide tangible evidence of cooperation between the Union and its nearest neighbours and, since she would expect to be the leader of such an organisation, she would hope that it would materially enhance her prestige throughout the world in general and within Africa in particular".²²⁶ At a party rally that same month Strijdom said that the Union "must convince all Europeans of our viewpoint (on apartheid)" and if successful South African influence would "spread right through Africa".²²⁷

With British policymakers lacking enthusiasm for an organisation on the lines of NATO Selwyn Lloyd was only able to advise Erasmus in their June 1955 talks that Britain was prepared to sponsor another multi-national conference to build on the planning initiated at Nairobi. However London did agree in *principle* to a limited defence body.²²⁸ Erasmus was able to obtain something more substantial from British ministers with regard to the protectorates. The Union was given the right to survey sites in Swaziland and Bechuanaland for the establishment of possible radar locations.²²⁹ In a follow-up meeting with Lloyd in October 1955 Erasmus asked also for permission to survey Basutoland. This was on the pretext that the territory contained a high mountain range, the Malutis, which presented a hazard to air navigation.²³⁰ British ministers were already aware of this approach and refused

²²⁴ *South Africa*, 14 May 1955.

²²⁵ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Erasmus to Liesching, 22 April 1955, PS 18/21.

²²⁶ UK Public Record Office, Joint Planning Staff to the Chiefs of Staff, 2 June 1955, DEFE 4/77.

²²⁷ Patterson, *The Last Trek*, p.128.

²²⁸ Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and "African Defence"*, p.128.

²²⁹ SANDF Documentation Centre, "Annual Report of the Department of Defence for the Year ended 31 March 1956", 20 February 1957.

to give an immediate answer. The CRO had already advised that chiefs in Swaziland and Bechuanaland had perceived the agreed radar surveys in their countries as "a foot in the door" towards eventual integration with the Union.²³¹ Unfortunately for Erasmus the "ploy" of using radar coverage as an entrée to the territories proved less than convincing. American air defence specialists invited to the Union under the command of Colonel ES Newbury, creator of the DEW (defense early warning) Line in North America, ascertained that there were as suitable sites in the Union as in the protectorates.²³²

In the months after the Simonstown agreements negotiated by Erasmus his cabinet colleague Louw continued to market the idea of a pan-African conference. The new CRO secretary, Sir Gilbert Laithwaite, called the latter's technique "rude, combative and highly controversial" with his project being used to boost his personal prestige. He suggested that Louw be told that apartheid had created "an extent of resentment" that could not be ignored.²³³ Whitehall circles noted that the external affairs minister had found little enthusiasm in European capitals for his proposals which were looked upon "with considerable distaste" by some.²³⁴ Erasmus on the other hand had the satisfaction of British support for a defence organisation, though circumscribed in its aims. He was further encouraged by the meeting in late 1955 of an Anglo-South African committee formed to exchange defence facilities information compiled as a by-product of the Nairobi meeting. During the course of early 1956 the minister also invited Belgian, French and Portuguese military missions to the Union to explore security links,²³⁵ though little of substance occurred.

With Erasmus still basking in the glow of the Simonstown agreements and with no movement on the pan-African conference scheme Louw decided to make a dramatic move in

²³⁰ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Minutes of the Meeting Between Mr. F.C. Erasmus and United Kingdom Ministers", 24 October 1955, PS 29/5/1 Vol. I.

²³¹ UK Public Record Office, "CRO Secret Brief for the Lord Privy Seal", 21 October 1955, DO 35/8335.

²³² Canadian National Archives, Gill to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, 19 September 1956, RG 25/61111-40.

²³³ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", pp. 301-302.

²³⁴ UK Public Record Office, "Mr Louw's Proposal for Pan-African Conference", 11 July 1955, DEFE 7/1523.

²³⁵ *South Africa*, 30 June 1956.

February 1956 to regain the international limelight from his "provincial" colleague. Without consulting departmental officials he closed the Soviet consulate-general which had existed in Pretoria since 1942 and the consular agency in Cape Town. He also threatened to wind up the Czechoslovak consulate in Cape Town, the last remaining Warsaw Pact diplomatic mission in the country.²³⁶ In the end, despite these vigorous anti-communist actions Louw never received the support of the metropolitan powers for his conference scheme. By 1957 even Erasmus's ADO idea had run into the sand with London, particularly in light of the new African realities heralded by Ghana's independence in March that year. In June the CRO told a cabinet committee that the defence organisation plan was "politically and militarily unsound". It would weaken the "northern tier" of Baghdad Pact nations and be seen as an association of colonial powers.²³⁷ Mancroft in his September meeting with Erasmus emphasised that Britain was not prepared to participate in a body designed to provide mutual help against communist-fermented "native insurrections" in the Union or British territories.²³⁸ ADO was practically of no benefit to the United Kingdom.²³⁹ Erasmus countered this by suggesting that the West had been too slow in the past in creating regional defence bodies and had only done so after Soviet infiltration had commenced. He went on to claim, without evidence, that more and more people throughout Africa were turning to the idea of a defence organisation.²⁴⁰ By the conclusion of the discussions no additional ground had been gained by the South Africans, only that talks would continue with the British to build on the planning undertaken at Nairobi and Dakar.²⁴¹

While in London Erasmus broached the subject with Mancroft of the supposed danger to regional security posed by the protectorates. The British were informed that the Union felt it was in its ambit to assist in suppressing communist-inspired outbreaks in neighbouring British possessions. The CRO suspected that the South African visitor sought "to seek maximum opportunity for encroachment in respect of the territories".²⁴² The British side was

²³⁶ *South Africa*, 11 February 1956.

²³⁷ UK Public Record Office, "Commonwealth Relations Office Brief for Cabinet Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference Committee", 18 June 1957, DEFE 7/1791.

²³⁸ UK Public Record Office, CRO to Liesching, 6 September 1957, DO 35/6989.

²³⁹ UK Public Record Office, "Note by Lord Mancroft on Defence Discussions with the Union of South Africa", 10 September 1957, DEFE 7/1530.

²⁴⁰ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, van Schalkwyk to Jooste, 19 October 1957, PS 29/5/1.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

however prepared to be accommodating, in the spirit of Commonwealth solidarity, on some of the contentious issues. While making it explicit that the ultimate security responsibility lay with Whitehall Mancroft offered certain overflying rights for South African military aircraft over the protectorates along with approval for further radar surveys. Despite these gestures Erasmus complained that UDF personnel involved with the surveys were obliged to be in mufti, that air rescue operations had been hampered because the Union did not have details of airfields in the territories, and that high ranking departmental officials and military officers had not been permitted to enter the protectorates.²⁴³ In a further meeting with Liesching back in the Union Erasmus urged permission for a South African reconnaissance of the protectorates to make rescue and defence work possible, arguing that the nation's defence policy was incomplete without the inclusion of the three territories in overall planning. He was particularly apprehensive over what he believed was a growing communist movement in Basutoland.²⁴⁴ Within days of the Liesching discussions London had discouraging news for Erasmus. No radar survey of Basutoland would be allowed as local politicians were convinced that this would be an incremental step to eventual amalgamation.²⁴⁵

The minister was having even less success with ADO. By January 1958 he was speaking of a policy of drift by the metropolitan powers in the defence of the continent against the supposed tightening grip of the Soviets.²⁴⁶ British policymakers however had become more and more convinced that the minister's scheme was primarily to provide a cover for concerted planning for local protection rather than to deter Moscow.²⁴⁷ In his last year as defence minister Erasmus characterised the lack of action by the Europeans as a "tragedy". He admitted that pressure was on the various governments to divest themselves of their colonial possessions and depart Africa.²⁴⁸ While he recuperated in Europe following a coronary thrombosis which occurred during his final London talks, the Johannesburg *Sunday*

²⁴² UK Public Record Office, CRO to Liesching, 6 September 1957, DO 35/6989.

²⁴³ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, van Schalkwyk to Jooste, 19 October 1957, PS 29/5/1.

²⁴⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Minutes of Discussions between the Minister of Defence and the High Commissioner for the United Kingdom", 28 October 1957, MV 207.

²⁴⁵ *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 November 1957.

²⁴⁶ *South Africa*, 1 February 1958.

²⁴⁷ UK Public Record Office, Belcher to Oliver, 19 September 1958, DO 35/10545.

²⁴⁸ *South Africa*, 3 January 1959.

Times declared that there was "no outward sign of progress" over the creation of a defence organisation.²⁴⁹ Speaking in the defence debate after his return Erasmus said that he recognised that the fast-moving events in sub-Saharan Africa had not enabled the European powers "to give their attention to closer cooperation in respect of defence matters". He acknowledged that "attempts to establish such cooperation would have to be postponed indefinitely".²⁵⁰ The minister nonetheless remained optimistic even until the end of his tenure at the defence department that something could be rescued from his overall scheme. Just weeks before moving to the justice portfolio he spoke of Britain and the Union continuing the defence planning begun at Nairobi eight years before.²⁵¹

During his last two years at defence Erasmus had been able to make some inroads into the defence arrangements for the protectorates. In early 1958 over-flying rights for north-east Bechuanaland were approved. This would form part of the route of an SAAF aerial patrol of the northern frontiers of the Union and South West Africa. Other reciprocal over-flying flights were soon offered. Britain then gave permission to Pretoria for defence force personnel to inspect airstrips in Bechuanaland and to reconnoitre a route to South West Africa through the south west corner of the territory. In Basutoland the South Africans were also given clearance to use a short access road through a sparsely populated area of the Malutis to a radar site in the Union's Drakensberg range.²⁵² In July 1958 a defence force party under a senior army officer, Brigadier JN Bierman, undertook the route survey of Bechuanaland as agreed with Whitehall. However it was not permitted to operate in the northern part of the territory.²⁵³

Two months after the survey Erasmus announced that the Nationalist government had only two major goals still to accomplish - the creation of the republic and the incorporation of the protectorates. The latter policy aspiration was declared despite the fact that the populations and the political leadership in the three territories remained adamantly opposed to unification with South Africa. The British continued to be worried over efforts by Erasmus to infringe the integrity of the protectorates. London refused requests for the SADF to be allowed to use the road across north-east Bechuanaland to the Caprivi Strip, the site of the

²⁴⁹ *Sunday Times* (Johannesburg), 12 April 1959.

²⁵⁰ UK Public Record Office, Aston to O'Leary, 11 July 1959, DO 35/10545.

²⁵¹ *Cape Argus*, 28 September 1959.

²⁵² *Natal Mercury*, 18 July 1958.

²⁵³ *Cape Times*, 25 July 1958. Bierman became chief of the army in September, 1958.

designated jungle warfare school. Pique over this action led to the initial cancellation of a naval exercise with Britain in early in 1959. When Erasmus was in London in March that year he bickered with the CRO secretary, Lord Home, over the Bechuanaland route. He was eventually obliged to accept the preferred British route through Southern Rhodesia and then west from Livingstone to the Caprivi.²⁵⁴ In his few remaining months as defence minister Erasmus had no further success in integrating the defence of the protectorates with that of the Union. Pretoria gradually conceded that the three territories were moving in parallel with other British colonial possessions in Africa towards full independence. Finally on 3 September 1963 Prime Minister Verwoerd announced that he recognised that the protectorates were not going to be incorporated.²⁵⁵ This ended a campaign by various South African governments lasting more than half a century to create a larger white-dominated power at the southern end of the continent.

Fouche on becoming defence minister in late 1959 did not attempt to revive the ADO scheme of his predecessor. By 1960 the idea of a defence organisation composed of European colonial nations in Africa had become redundant. With most of the metropolitan powers, except Portugal, leaving the continent the territorial scope for an organisation of anti-communist nations was rapidly contracting. The ADO idea, even in the 1950s, had not been viable. In the estimation of Western policymakers Africa was a strategic sideshow. The Europeans themselves interfaced closely with perceived more immediate communist military threats in central Europe, the Middle East and south-east Asia. Africa south of the Sahara was far from areas of communist control and possible East-West conflict. In the 1950s the colonial powers became cognisant that their remaining presence on the continent was to be for the short-term. In these circumstances there was even less impetus to form binding military commitments on the lines promoted by Erasmus. Moreover any scheme involving the Union was tainted for many Europeans by the system of apartheid. The system had progressively come to be deplored by the international community. Self-interest dictated to the metropolitan powers that little advantage would be secured by an association with an increasingly isolated state and one whose military capability at the time was questionable. Erasmus was never able

²⁵⁴ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Minutes of Meeting between Mr F.C. Erasmus and the Earl of Home", 12 March 1959, PS 29/5.

²⁵⁵ Hyam, *The Failure of South African Expansion*, p.196.

to cast off the impression to possible allies that a defence organisation's primary purpose would be to bolster the Union's political position.

The Union and Maritime Defence

For most Nationalists in 1948 the issue of the seaward defence of the Union focused on the continuing occupation of the Simonstown naval base by Britain. The item, which had appeared on the GNP/HNP political agenda since the mid-1930s, was "unfinished business" which proclaimed to a wider world that South Africa was not truly independent. As a politician of the Western Cape Erasmus took a particular interest in the matter. After becoming minister he became well aware that the Union needed to convince Whitehall that the SANF could adequately assume from the Royal Navy the responsibility of protecting the Cape route. This in turn would facilitate the transfer of Simonstown and the British naval munitions dump at Ganspan, near Kimberley.

In the aftermath of the HNP election victory the British themselves intimated that they foresaw the day when the Union would control the naval base. The commander-in-chief (C-in-C) South Atlantic, Vice-Admiral McCarthy, publically called in October 1948 for greater participation by the South Africans in Commonwealth naval activities. Britain, he said, was no longer in a position to shoulder the great financial burden of a world-wide defence role. He forecasted the transfer of Simonstown. However he noted that the SANF was comparatively smaller than its counterparts in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.²⁵⁶ When the British planners visited the following May Erasmus and his officials were appraised of the possible profile of a navy which could contribute to Western defence in the light of the Soviet threat.²⁵⁷ Negotiations began soon afterwards for the purchase of the first destroyer for the SANF.

²⁵⁶ *Forum*, 23 October 1948.

²⁵⁷ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Minutes of Meeting between the Union of South Africa Authorities and the Joint Planning Staff", 16 May 1949, MV/G1.

In anticipation of Erasmus's July 1949 visit to London officials in Whitehall discussed the British position if the South African minister were to ask for a base transfer. One school of thought took the view that a handover would strengthen the electoral position of the traditionally anglophobe Nationalists at the expense of Britain's firm friend, Smuts. There was also the possibility that when the "moderate" Malan left the political scene more extreme elements of the government party might not fulfil the obligations of the agreement. Many British officials had memories of the Irish ports controversy when the Irish Free State refused in 1939 to become a belligerent a year after London had handed over three naval installations. An alternative view was that a transfer would generate goodwill for Britain in the Union. On balance the consensus of the Attlee government was that the issue was problematic - the base needed to be retained for the moment and the question "played long".²⁵⁸

During the subsequent discussions in London the British defence minister, AV Alexander, hinted to Erasmus that the Labour government might be prepared to deliberate over the cession of Simonstown. However before serious consideration could be given to the matter, the Union's naval capabilities needed to be broadened and enhanced. Alexander alerted his South African opposite number to the possibility of a naval agreement in the future covering the South Atlantic "in which possibly the Union of South Africa could be a partner".²⁵⁹

On his return to Pretoria the Simonstown question remained on the mind of Erasmus. Among his ministerial papers is a typed letter of October 1949 to Alexander with an addressed envelope but not signed or posted. It confirmed that the base's transfer remained of key importance with a pledge to London that the Union accepted the principle of building up the SANF. This would be undertaken so that "in due course we would assume responsibility for the defence of our coastline". Alexander was asked to give consideration "to the handing over of the Simonstown naval base" and to "the conditions of transfer, financial or otherwise you have in mind".²⁶⁰ No reason was given for Erasmus's decision not to raise the issue at that point, but his hesitancy was probably due to the upcoming general election in Britain, to be

²⁵⁸ UK Public Record Office, CRO Memorandum - "Simonstown", 19 July 1949, DO 35/2368.

²⁵⁹ Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and "African Defence"*, pp.26-8.

²⁶⁰ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Erasmus to Alexander, (undated) October 1949, MV/ G 16.

held in February 1950. No British government would have resolved an issue of such importance in the weeks up to polling.

During the course of his visit to London the following September Erasmus affirmed to Gordon-Walker that South Africa accepted the obligations of its own naval protection. After any contemplated handover the ships of the Royal Navy would not be excluded from Simonstown or any other port of the Union.²⁶¹ In his reply the CRO secretary said that there were "a number of considerations which we have to go into very carefully on this matter".²⁶² The British had initiated delaying tactics. During his visit to the Union four months later Gordon-Walker was armed with arguments to defer an immediate decision on the base. The main rationale to be deployed against Erasmus was that "the modern world recognises the need for reciprocal facilities between countries who are determined to stand together against aggression". London also recognised that the cession of Simonstown would put pressure on Britain by Spain and Egypt for the return of Gibraltar and the Suez Canal zone respectively.²⁶³ Erasmus was prepared. He presented the British minister with a memorandum on the base. Only with the ownership of Simonstown, he argued, could the Union have effective control over its fleet and have the additional facility necessary for the naval force to develop. Again Gordon-Walker stalled. He advised Erasmus that he could not give a definitive decision on the question until it had been referred to cabinet.²⁶⁴ While in Cape Town the British minister had already learnt from Admiral Packer that the Malan government had no idea of the cost of running the base or the difficulties in training their own personnel to assume its management.²⁶⁵

The issue of Simonstown was raised by Erasmus at the Commonwealth defence conference the following June. In plenary session he said that he hoped that the installation

²⁶¹ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Erasmus to Gordon-Walker, 28 September 1950, PS 18/5/3/2.

²⁶² State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Gordon-Walker to Erasmus, 28 September 1950, PS 18/5/3/2.

²⁶³ UK Public Record Office, CRO Brief - "The Secretary of State's Visit to Southern Africa", December 1950, DO 35/3885.

²⁶⁴ UK Public Record Office, Gordon-Walker to Liesching, 9 February 1951, DO 35/2368.

²⁶⁵ UK Public Record Office, "Note of Meeting Between Gordon-Walker and Packer", 8 February 1951, DO 35/2368.

might be ceded as this would facilitate the Union's efforts to assume responsibilities for coastal defence and assist the Commonwealth further afield.²⁶⁶ In a separate meeting with the first lord of the admiralty, Lord Pakenham, the South African minister confirmed that the Union's navy would be prepared to patrol beyond its borders on both coastlines. However the implementation of this offer would depend on discussions on the expansion of the SANF (renamed the South African Navy (SAN) just after the conference).²⁶⁷ By the end of the London deliberations both governments published an agreed statement. This confirmed the South African desire to strengthen its navy and to assume progressively control of Simonstown while allowing access by the Royal Navy. The British side, while welcoming naval expansion, declared that there needed to be a full and expert examination of the base question.²⁶⁸

During his sojourn in the British capital Erasmus despatched Cuff to the Canadian high commission to discuss the possibility of the navy acquiring destroyers and minesweepers from Canada.²⁶⁹ No purchases in the naval field were made but Erasmus continued to look to other nations so that the naval link was not monopolised by Britain. In 1954 he received assistance from the Netherlands in the form of twelve seconded ordnance, electrical and radar specialists for the SAN.²⁷⁰ Three years later he made another approach to the Canadians to enquire whether they would assume the training role from the British.²⁷¹ No offer was made by Ottawa. The SAN remained in the end closely linked to the Royal Navy, particularly after the Simonstown agreement which made Britain the exclusive supplier of naval equipment and of training.

On his return to Pretoria Erasmus was anxious for movement on Simonstown. The contentious issue with London was the availability question. In wartime he wanted the

²⁶⁶ Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and "African Defence"*, p.48.

²⁶⁷ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Minutes of Meeting between the First Lord of the Admiralty and Mr. Erasmus", 28 June 1951, PS 18/25.

²⁶⁸ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Shinwell to Erasmus, 29 June 1951, PS 18/25.

²⁶⁹ Canadian National Archives, High Commissioner, London to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, 29 June 1951, RG 25/11044-AR-40.

²⁷⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 November 1954.

²⁷¹ Canadian National Archives, Gill to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, 12 April 1957, RG 25/50084-40.

installation to be accessed by the Union and *her* allies.²⁷² However in August 1951 Gordon-Walker advised that there would be difficulties if there were any restrictions on the use of the base after a transfer.²⁷³ Erasmus wrote to the CRO secretary arguing that the South African qualification was a valid one: "Is it not perhaps a little unreasonable to expect a State to guarantee facilities to another State in any future war against any one and whether or not the former State is involved". He thought it highly unlikely that the Union and Britain "would not find themselves allied in any future war".²⁷⁴ In a letter to an old friend, AL Geyer, the South African high commissioner in London, Erasmus took the view that the British were temporising on the transfer on the basis of minor details: "The Brits (die Britte) are unswerving on the point pertaining to facilities 'in time of war' where we would like to be limited 'to allies in time of war'. Their allegation of misunderstanding is plain rubbish and apparently an effort to find a way out".²⁷⁵

Lord Ismay, the CRO secretary in the new Churchill government, reviewed the Simonstown situation for the cabinet in late 1951. He believed that the presence of the Royal Navy at the Cape made it difficult for the South Africans to remain neutral in a future war. The SAN, he assessed, was not in a position to take over the base. However Erasmus was using the ploy of suggesting that the facilities at Salisbury Island and Saldanha were inadequate for the SAN so he needed Simonstown. In addition the South African minister did not seem to comprehend "full naval responsibilities" with regard to Commonwealth defence. Erasmus seemed to believe that only exceptionally would his navy operate outside the waters of the Union. Ismay went on to suggest that the "Afrikanerisation" process had weakened the UDF and it would be to Britain's advantage to induce the Pretoria government to modify this policy "at any rate in respect of the navy". The CRO secretary admitted that Malan and his colleagues had moved the country from the traditional neutralist position of the Nationalists. Britain could not forever maintain the case for unqualified user rights at Simonstown; the efficient operation of the base required South African cooperation.²⁷⁶ As a result of the

²⁷² Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and "African Defence"*, p.51.

²⁷³ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Gordon-Walker to Erasmus, 3 August 1951, PS 18/25.

²⁷⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Erasmus to Gordon-Walker, 23 September 1951, MV/G 22.

²⁷⁵ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Erasmus to Geyer, 17 October 1951, PS 18/25.

²⁷⁶ UK Public Record Office, Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations to the

briefing the cabinet decided not to proceed further on the issue for the moment. The evidence presented had given further ammunition to an already sceptical Churchill who described Simonstown as "an essential link in imperial communications" to which there was "no obvious alternative".²⁷⁷

The British cabinet need not have worried about South African pressure on the base question at this juncture. Malan decided early in 1952 that he wanted the issue of the three high commission territories resolved first. Erasmus advised Geyer that the cabinet did not want to approach Churchill "simultaneously on two important matters".²⁷⁸ By September 1952 with little progress on the incorporation of the protectorates, Malan elected to place Simonstown once again on the political agenda. At the hard-line Transvaal party congress he spoke in an aggressive tone on the base question: "Simonstown does not belong to South Africa but the fort does. If we want to take it we shall have to use force. It belongs to us. At an appropriate time negotiations will commence with Britain".²⁷⁹ Despite this spirited approach there was little activity on Simonstown by the Malan government. Thoughts were concentrated on the Union's general election slated for April 1953.

In early 1954 Erasmus made it known to the British that he wanted to return to London for the first time since the Conservative government came to power. He desired to meet the new ministers and to raise a number of issues particularly with regard to Simonstown.²⁸⁰ The meetings were set for the following August-September and in the intervening months Erasmus put on an overt display of cooperation with the British. He sanctioned South African participation in naval exercises with the French and British navies off the Natal coast in mid-1954.²⁸¹ Shackleton aircraft used for maritime reconnaissance were ordered to replace the SAAF's ageing Sunderland flying boats.²⁸² Meanwhile the Union's second destroyer, the *Simon Van Der Stel*, spent much of the northern summer on a goodwill cruise in the waters of the British Isles, demonstrating the "blue water" capability of the SAN.

Cabinet Defence Committee, 18 December 1951, ADM 116/5979.

²⁷⁷ Berridge, *South Africa, the Colonial Powers and "African Defence"*, p.95.

²⁷⁸ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Erasmus to Geyer, 12 February 1952, MV 142.

²⁷⁹ *Cape Argus*, 24 September 1952.

²⁸⁰ Berridge and Spence, "South Africa and the Simonstown Agreement", p.188.

²⁸¹ *The Star*, 23 June 1954.

²⁸² *Rand Daily Mail*, 12 January 1954.

While in the region the Royal Navy extended an invitation to the South African vessel to participate in manoeuvres with the Home Fleet off the coast of Northern Ireland.

Within the British cabinet there was a growing consensus that an accommodation needed to be made with the South Africans on Simonstown, particularly as the Union was responsible for the land defence of the base.²⁸³ However Churchill was still doubtful, particularly not wanting to give up the installation at the same time that Britain was negotiating to remove its forces from the Suez Canal zone.²⁸⁴ After he reached London Erasmus reported to his hosts that the efficient development of the SAN had been hampered by lack of adequate dockyard facilities in the other ports of the Union. In short, his navy required the base. Lord Alexander, the British defence minister, replied that British public opinion was very conscious that Simonstown provided an essential component of the Royal Navy's global operations and of Commonwealth communications. It was agreed by both sides that a small admiralty mission under its deputy secretary, Clifford Jarrett, would visit South Africa and consider all aspects of the transfer question.²⁸⁵ Erasmus gave the British the satisfying news that his government would probably offer an unqualified guarantee of availability of the base to Britain and *its* allies in time of war.²⁸⁶ By the conclusion of the discussions even Swinton who had been, like his prime minister, wary of a possible cession concluded that Simonstown was useless without the full cooperation of the Union.²⁸⁷

On his return to Pretoria Erasmus made certain that warm relations existed with British defence personnel in the Union. Vice-Admiral Campbell, the C-in-C at Simonstown reported to London that the liaison staff were being treated by defence headquarters "with frankness and cordiality which had not hitherto been evident".²⁸⁸ The minister released few details of the on-going developments to the South African public or parliament. Before leaving the Union

²⁸³ UK Public Record Office, Cabinet Conclusions, 8 September 1954, CAB128.

²⁸⁴ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p. 239.

²⁸⁵ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Notes of Discussions between Mr. Erasmus, Lord Alexander, Lord Swinton and Mr. Jooste", 10 September 1954, PS 29/3.

²⁸⁶ UK Public Record Office, Garner to Powell, 8 September 1954, DEFE 7/841.

²⁸⁷ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p. 240.

²⁸⁸ UK Public Record Office, Campbell to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 8 October 1954, DEFE 7/1523.

at the end of his investigations in November 1954, Jarrett met Erasmus. The latter who was very confident that transfer was a near-certainty did admit that the requisite funding for naval expansion had not yet received the approval of Havenga. However he was assured that the monies would be forthcoming.²⁸⁹ The prescient Jarrett noted after his discussions "that the present enthusiasm of the Union government would wane once they had secured possession of the base". Simonstown was important to the Nationalists for domestic political reasons but meant "little to them for its own sake".²⁹⁰ And within weeks of the successful 1955 negotiations Erasmus began to pull back from the commitments he had made with London on the Middle East.

By the end of December 1954 the new Strijdom government asked GP Jooste, the Union's high commissioner in London, to push for discussions over the conclusions of the Jarrett mission as a prelude to a further visit by Erasmus.²⁹¹ His interlocutor, Swinton, decided to prevaricate. The CRO secretary suggested that another visit by the defence minister would not be convenient until after the February 1955 Commonwealth prime ministers conference.²⁹² Behind the scenes British ministers were apprehensive over right-wing backbench opinion which would not countenance a handover of Simonstown so quickly after the October 1954 agreement with Nasser to evacuate the Suez Canal zone.²⁹³ In the wake of the Commonwealth conference the British cabinet had a further difficulty - a general election scheduled sometime in 1955. Negotiations over such a sensitive subject as the base's future was one which the Conservative government would prefer to have undertaken after an election victory. Whitehall was relieved to learn in March that Erasmus himself was not pushing for an early meeting, preferring to remain in the Union for most of the parliamentary session. The cabinet were informed on 7 March that the South Africans "are almost as anxious that we shall win the election as we are ourselves". However there was the warning that "we cannot stall off Mr. Erasmus".²⁹⁴ Eight days later ministers were told that "a

²⁸⁹ UK Public Record Office, "Note of Talk with Mr Erasmus by Clifford Jarrett", 12 November 1954, ADM 116/6049.

²⁹⁰ Berridge and Spence, "South Africa and the Simonstown Agreement", p. 194.

²⁹¹ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Jooste to Swinton, 17 December 1954, PS 18/25.

²⁹² State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Swinton to Jooste, 31 December 1954, PS 18/25.

²⁹³ UK Public Record Office, Thomas to Macmillan, 20 January 1955, ADM 116/6049.

²⁹⁴ UK Public Record Office, "Memorandum by the Minister of Defence, Secretary of

practicable and workable plan" had been completed for the base and for the future command structure. Therefore at an appropriate time Erasmus could be invited to London.²⁹⁵ In the Union Erasmus continued to impart little information on the on-going Simonstown question except to indicate to parliament in February that discussions would resume after the Jarrett report was completed.²⁹⁶

On 19 April 1955 Liesching presented Erasmus with an invitation to visit Britain after the general election. Churchill, who had been cautious on the transfer issue, had resigned earlier in the month to be replaced by the foreign secretary, Eden. The latter almost immediately called an election for May. Conservative governments by the mid-1950s became convinced that they needed to divest themselves of certain of their overseas security commitments. Defence expenditure in 1955 was estimated to be £1,527 million and projected to rise in just four years to £2,000 million.²⁹⁷ The freeing of an installation such as Simonstown and the assumption of increased naval responsibilities by the Union would be of great financial benefit to Britain. There also existed opportunities for British shipbuilding in the naval expansion programme announced by Erasmus on 11 May. This envisaged an extra twenty ships for the SAN to the value of £18½ million to be acquired over an eight-year period.²⁹⁸ Liesching told London that Erasmus was very anxious personally to reach an agreement with Britain. In the Strijdom cabinet "he lacks friends and supporters" and badly needed to obtain the base "to restore his waning prestige" and to "strengthen his hand vis-à-vis Louw".²⁹⁹

Negotiations began on 15 June with Lloyd taking the lead on the British side. Disagreement centred on the length of the transition period up to complete transfer. Erasmus preferred one year while London held out for three years. Eventually a compromise was reached of twenty-one months. The South African side reiterated that they would provide

State for Commonwealth Relations and the First Lord of the Admiralty", 7 March 1955, ADM 116/6049.

²⁹⁵ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p. 245.

²⁹⁶ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 17 February 1955, Column 1261.

²⁹⁷ CJ Bartless, *The Long Retreat: A Short History of British Defence Policy, 1945-1970* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p.105.

²⁹⁸ *Cape Times*, 12 May 1955.

²⁹⁹ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to Home, 3 June 1955, ADM 116/6049.

access to Britain and her allies in time of war. If the Union was a co-belligerent with the United Kingdom priority in the use of the installations would be settled in mutual consultation. The base would be maintained by the SAN after April 1957 at the current state of efficiency; two berths were to be set aside for Royal Navy ships and British specialists would be engaged for a period after the handover. The C-in-C South Atlantic could continue to fly his flag in the Cape Town area after cession. In wartime he would be designated the commander of a new maritime strategic zone around the coastline of the Union and South West Africa. The order of ships under the navy's expansion plan was secured for British yards. On these various points the British negotiators were very satisfied.³⁰⁰ The area of most delicacy was in regard to the position of the coloured civilian staff. After 1948 the British had not introduced apartheid labour practices on the base. Eden was anxious that if there were not employment guarantees for these workers his government could be censured for permitting discriminatory regulations to be put in place.³⁰¹ Even on this domestically sensitive item Erasmus was prepared to concede to the British view. In the final agreement there was to be "no ban to the recruitment and employment at the base of non-Europeans" who would receive equal pay with whites for comparable jobs and have the same security of tenure.³⁰²

On 30 June the Simonstown agreements were concluded. Included in the agreements was the requirement that a joint war planning committee be established to co-ordinate maritime facilities within the strategic zone.³⁰³ Article 16 of the agreement on the defence of the sea routes said the Anglo-South African accords could also permit "the association of other governments with the defence of the strategic zone".³⁰⁴ It was envisaged that a multi-national conference on the sea routes at some point in the future could be convened. The Royal Navy additionally was allowed to retain wireless telegraphy installations at three localities in the Union. The agreed sale figure for the base plant was £750,000 with the South Africans accepting the total of £500,000 for annual running costs which they would assume.³⁰⁵ It is believed that the Strijdom cabinet thought that Erasmus had accepted too high a figure for

³⁰⁰ UK Public Record Office, "Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Minister of Defence and First Lord of the Admiralty", 23 June 1955, CP(55)51.

³⁰¹ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p.295.

³⁰² Austin, *Britain and South Africa*, p.128.

³⁰³ *Ibid*, p.127.

³⁰⁴ Tunstall, *The Commonwealth and Regional Defence*, p. 50.

³⁰⁵ *Cape Argus*, 5 July 1955.

the base plant.³⁰⁶ The ammunition storage facility at Ganspan was also to be ceded, which was eventually accomplished in March 1958.

In 1955 Erasmus had been prepared to concede to the British more than had been contemplated in 1951. London had obtained a naval command structure with their local commander in overall charge of the SAN as well as the Royal Navy in time of war. The sticking point of the early part of the decade - that of user availability - had been resolved to Britain's benefit. With Whitehall anxious to cut overall defence expenditure the agreements came as a boon. Erasmus's obliging attitude had permitted British policymakers to feel confident with the accord. To South Africans their defence minister's diplomatic skills in this instance had brought a major political prize with the removal of an irritating symbol of a colonial past. The SAN itself had a clear-cut programme of growth and an agreed role as a custodian of the Cape route. The agreement stood the test of time lasting until June 1975 when it was unilaterally abrogated by Britain.³⁰⁷

Public announcements were made simultaneously by Strijdom and Eden on 4 July. In the case of the former the transfer was set in the context of "South Africa's development towards independence". Erasmus came in for considerable praise by his prime minister for his achievement. Strijdom said that "the policy of ours has at last now also been crowned with success, thanks to the good work of the Minister of Defence and the officials who assisted him, and the kind cooperation of the Government of the United Kingdom".³⁰⁸ The settlement constituted a watershed for Erasmus's defence career. Having acquired Simonstown he was demonstrably less amenable from mid-1955 onwards to British security objectives. Progressively on the agenda were his ideas on an ADO and a multinational structure for the protection of the African sea routes.

Within weeks of the agreements Erasmus was badgering Lloyd to enact steps to invite other governments to a sea routes conference. When the two ministers met in late October 1955 relations between them were considerably cooler. The British believed the South

³⁰⁶ Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p. 108; Interview with a former member of the General Staff of the 1950s, Pretoria, 3 November 1993.

³⁰⁷ Eric Grove, *Vanguard to Trident: British Naval Power Since World War II* (London: The Bodley Head, 1987), p.323.

³⁰⁸ *Cape Times*, 5 July 1955.

African was moving too quickly on the conference project. This was particularly the case as a decision on the location of the maritime command headquarters had not been made and the bilateral planning committee had not yet met. They were further incensed that Erasmus had decided to drop two frigates (of 6) from the shipbuilding programme. He claimed that the cost of the first outfits and base spares would be £3 million and would bring the total cost of the programme to well over the £18½ million ceiling allocated by the Strijdom cabinet.³⁰⁹

The maritime planning committee of the strategic zone composed of Union and British naval officers convened just before Christmas 1955 to consider control of shipping, logistics, signals intelligence and exchange of naval intelligence.³¹⁰ In April 1956 Strijdom added his voice with a call to other nations to become involved in the Simonstown agreement.³¹¹ However in the months that followed there was no movement on the conference on the defence of the sea routes involving the European metropolitan powers. Erasmus saw this project as a maritime version of ADO which could enhance South African political acceptability and importance. By early 1957 he believed that lack of progress on the conference was due to a lack of interest by Britain. He showed his displeasure by initially refusing to allow Biermann to attend a meeting of Commonwealth chiefs of naval staff scheduled to occur in Greenwich during April 1957. The decision was only reversed when the CRO persuaded South African officials that the delay was caused by the hesitancy of the French.³¹² London suspected that Erasmus was anxious to have a conference before the 1958 election, at least at the vice chief of naval staff level, to bolster his position in cabinet.³¹³

The realisation of a personal ambition occurred for Erasmus on 2 April 1957 with the formal handover of Simonstown. To the accompaniment of a marine band from *HMS Ceylon* the British white ensign was hauled down and replaced by that of the SAN.³¹⁴ Two days later

³⁰⁹ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Minutes of the Meeting Between Mr. F.C. Erasmus, Minister of Defence and United Kingdom Ministers", 24 October 1955, PS 29/5/1 Vol. 1.

³¹⁰ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Minutes of Joint Maritime Planning Committee- S.A. Strategic Zone", 20-21 December 1955, PS 29/5/1 Vol. 1.

³¹¹ Barber, *South Africa's Foreign Policy, 1945-1970*, p.86.

³¹² State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Minister, South African High Commission, London to Jooste, 9 January 1957, PS 29/5/1 Vol.1.

³¹³ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to Home, 28 March 1957, DEFE 7/1523.

³¹⁴ Canadian National Archives, Gill to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, 12 April 1957, RG 25/50084-40. For the handover the ever dapper Erasmus wore a formal

Sandys, the British defence minister, issued a major white paper. In all three services there were to be swingeing cuts as the scale of expenditure was "beyond the country's capacity". Defence had been absorbing on average 10% of GNP annually during the previous five years.³¹⁵ Set against this background the cession of Simonstown had provided Britain with a number of benefits. The Royal Navy retained permanent facilities for its vessels without sustaining substantial running costs; the British economy had been assisted by ship orders and the continuous supply of spares; and, as important, the protection of Western interests in the South Atlantic and south Indian Oceans had been assumed by a Commonwealth partner. Ironically the yearning of Erasmus and the Nationalists to remove this remaining imperial outpost had in effect obliged the Union to assume a role militarily and financially as Britain's proxy.

For the remainder of the decade Erasmus devoted much of his energy to the bringing to fruition of a multi-national approach to the maritime defence of Africa. In May 1957 he despatched Biermann to Paris to discuss the possible participation of France, Portugal and Belgium in a naval conference. The three metropolitan powers agreed on the importance of the sea lanes, that co-ordination was necessary for their defence, and that peacetime planning was desirable in case of a future war. Biermann discovered that beyond these considerations the Europeans were not eager to proceed further.³¹⁶ The Union's defence minister faced an uncomfortable lack of enthusiasm among the nations he was wooing for one of his pet projects. He wrote to Sandys the same month urging the convening of a conference at ministerial level by the end of 1957. This, he hoped, "would lead to some understanding being reached with other countries in the region in regards the maritime defence of the strategic zone".³¹⁷ Louw echoed the call to Britain while representing the Union at the Commonwealth prime minister's conference. Nothing occurred, though Mancroft assured Erasmus in September 1957 that London was still promoting the active participation of other powers in a

morning suit and top hat. He and other ministers probably viewed as a studied insult "the rig" worn by Britain's first lord of the admiralty, the Earl of Selkirk. This was described at the time as "a coolie suit"- a white tropical suit, yachting cap with no braid or medals.

³¹⁵ HM Stationery Office, *Defence - Outline of Future Policy*, April 1957, Cmnd. 124.

³¹⁶ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, "Notes of Meeting held in the Admiralty between Rear-Admiral HH Biermann and the Vice Chief of the Naval Staff", 10 May 1957, PS 29/5/1.

³¹⁷ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Erasmus to Sandys, 20 May 1957, MV 128.

gathering at the rank of minister.³¹⁸ At the end of the year the minister was advised by his own officials that the decided absence of interest in the scheme by Paris was the major block to further movement.³¹⁹

As in the case of ADO Erasmus was publicly saying at the advent of 1958 that an agreement on the security lanes by the African powers could not be long delayed.³²⁰ Finally in the following June vice chiefs of naval staff from Britain, Belgium, France and Portugal met with Biermann in Cape Town. The senior officers made recommendations rather than decisions which were to be laid before their individual governments. These included the establishment of an organisation for the wartime control of merchant shipping and the setting up of two maritime zones with headquarters at Cape Town and Dakar. At each of these localities co-ordinating machinery could be inaugurated. Within each zone, areas would be allocated to national authorities for detailed planning and control. While these recommendations were later ratified by the Union and British governments, the three other participating nations favoured the idea of American involvement.³²¹ As it transpired nothing was eventually organised. As important for Erasmus as the actual discussions was the political benefit that accrued to him and his government. There was widespread media coverage with *Die Transvaler* describing a fairly routine event as one "of great historical import".³²²

The minister hoped that the Cape Town conference would be an incremental step to the formation of an international body for African maritime defence which would encompass the Union. In fact the meeting signalled the zenith of a multilateral approach to the protection of the continent's sea routes. Within three months a major player, France, began a major decolonisation programme with the granting of independence to Guinea and internal self-government to most of its remaining African territories.³²³ At the beginning of 1959 Brussels announced that it envisaged that the Belgian Congo would become independent.

³¹⁸ *Cape Times*, 19 September 1957.

³¹⁹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Memorandum - "Defence of the Sea Routes and Southern Africa-Summary of Action Taken", 12 December 1957, MV 194.

³²⁰ *South Africa*, 1 February 1958.

³²¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Annual Report of the Secretary for Defence for the Year Ending 31 March 1960".

³²² *Digest of South African Affairs*, 20 June 1958.

³²³ *Keesings Contemporary Archives*, 1958-1959, pp.16542-16543.

This eventually occurred in June 1960.³²⁴ In the case of coastal British colonies, Ghana was already free with Nigeria scheduled to be completely autonomous in 1960. Other British territories were earmarked for independence. The idea of a naval defence organisation for the continent only involving colonial powers as favoured by Erasmus was defunct by the end of the decade.

Erasmus in 1959 was despondent over the attitude of Britain towards his various initiatives. The lack of progress on ADO and the ministerial conference on the sea routes, together with the hindrance Erasmus felt Britain was placing on the military integration of the protectorates, eventually came to a head and affected the SAN. That year he cancelled the Union's participation in the "Capex" naval manoeuvres with the Royal Navy off the coast of the Union. This was an anti-submarine exercise, considered vital by the admiralty for the South African fleet, as this was one of its designated roles in war.³²⁵ Biermann himself had warned the general staff in February 1958 that Soviet submarines with shipboard missiles could be deployed off the Union's coast as early as 1962.³²⁶ Erasmus had also shown his displeasure by not releasing any ships to accept the invitation to exercise with the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean.³²⁷ The admiralty reported that "if Capex became a political football" the SAN had no chance of being "even reasonably proficient in its primary role".³²⁸ It surmised that the Union's minister was annoyed over the sluggish movement on the sea routes conference. Ironically for Erasmus his impulsive decision on "Capex", it was noted, would hardly inspire naval cooperation with other nations.³²⁹

Erasmus was scheduled to meet British ministers and senior defence personnel in London in mid-March 1959. Lord Mountbatten, the first sea lord, was advised by his officials with regard to the naval exercise that it was the South African's "habit to lash out in this irrational way when he is thwarted, using any weapon which may come to hand however

³²⁴ *Ibid*, 1959-1960, p.16755.

³²⁵ UK Public Record Office, Cullen to O'Leary, 27 February 1959, ADM 1/27077.

³²⁶ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Minutes of Meeting of the General Staff Committee", 17-19 February 1959, MV 178.

³²⁷ Canadian National Archives, Hurley to the Undersecretary of State for External Affairs, 12 March 1959, RG 25/6411-40.

³²⁸ UK Public Record Office, Cullen to O'Leary, 27 February 1959, ADM 1/27077.

³²⁹ UK Public Record Office, "Brief for Minister of Defence for Discussions with Mr. Erasmus", 5 March 1959, ADM 1 /27077.

inappropriate or damaging it is to his own interests".³³⁰ Biermann, who wanted "Capex" retained, told Mountbatten in London that Erasmus's real motive was Britain's refusal to allow the SADF access to the Caprivi strip through Bechuanaland. Mountbatten noted that "it was a novel way of applying pressure on Britain, by letting them off a commitment which was difficult for them to fulfil". In a subsequent conversation between Mountbatten and Erasmus no mention was made of the Caprivi route issue. The cancellation of "Capex" was explained by the minister as due to the need of the navy to take the governor-general, Jansen, on an official cruise.³³¹ Erasmus said that he recognised the importance of anti-submarine training and new dates were drawn up for "Capex".³³² This eventually occurred late in 1959 and also involved the United States, French and Portuguese navies.³³³

On his return to the Union from his period of recuperation in Europe after his heart attack Erasmus still referred to the possibility of a sea routes conference. Speaking at the military academy he mentioned that the Union and Britain hoped to convene an international gathering.³³⁴ However by the end of his tenure at defence there had been no progress. He had to be content with a ministerial visit to the Union by Britain's first lord of the admiralty, Thomas Galbraith, in August 1959. His tour highlighted a condition of South Africa's status that was unsatisfactory to Erasmus and the Nationalists. This was the pronounced one-way traffic of the Union's cabinet ministers to the north, almost in the role of supplicants. In the case of the defence minister he never received an overseas opposite number on the soil of the Union from the time of the 1948 election. In twelve years he had undertaken eight official visits to Britain as well as tours through north America, the Far East and western Europe. He had keenly hoped to have brought prestige to his government by hosting return visits by his Western counterparts. In this his quest was fruitless.

³³⁰ UK Public Record Office, Head-Military Branch, Admiralty to First Sea Lord, 11 March 1959, ADM 1/27077.

³³¹ UK Public Record Office, "A Record of First Sea Lord's Conversation with Mr. Erasmus, South African Minister of Defence and Rear-Admiral Biermann, South African Chief of Naval Staff at the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations Luncheon at Lancaster House, 12 March 1959", ADM 1/27077.

³³² *Ibid*

³³³ Thomas Karis, "United States Policy towards South Africa" in Gwendolen Carter and Patrick O'Meara (eds.), *Southern Africa: The Continuing Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1979), p.324.

³³⁴ *Cape Argus*, 28 September 1959.

Erasmus and the United States

After 1945 the United States for the first time came to be a significant player in the Union's external relations. Britain remained South Africa's principal partner but the Americans were recognised world-wide as having assumed the leadership of the West. The Malan government believed it was necessary to ingratiate itself with Washington, using South Africa's strategic position and mineral wealth as an entree. A close association with the United States would be seen as bolstering Pretoria's international position and demonstrating that the Union could enter a partnership with a Western power outside the Commonwealth framework.³³⁵ The Americans were in the forefront of moves to bring together anti-communist nations in a united front against Soviet expansionism. With this shared antipathy to marxism there was no "mileage" to be gained for the Nationalist government in retaining a neutralist foreign policy; one which had developed in the 1930s over the unresolved relationship with Britain. Both Nationalist South Africa and the United States in the post-war world shared a common enemy which had not been the case during the recent world conflict. It was therefore politically expedient for Pretoria to encourage the warmest possible association with Washington.

In the aftermath of the 1948 election the American legation surmised that the initial announcement by Erasmus terminating the military training exchange programme would lead to stronger defence ties with the United States. Washington was advised "that in pulling away from Britain they (senior UDF officers) anticipate that South Africa will seek closer cooperation with the US in military affairs especially in the training field".³³⁶ During the following month the state department's office of intelligence research confirmed their diplomatic mission's view that the evident cooling of military links with London would draw the Union closer to the United States.³³⁷ The administration of Harry Truman accepted that

³³⁵ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p.190.

³³⁶ US State Department - Central Files, Winship to Secretary of State, 17 June 1948, 848A.00/0029. On 21 December 1948 the state department announced that the American legation in Pretoria would be raised to a full embassy.

³³⁷ Thomas Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle: The United States and Southern Africa in the Early Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 90.

year a paper prepared by the state department on the stance to be adopted towards Pretoria. While critical of South African racial policies, the Union's attempt to spread its influence further north and the efforts to keep South West Africa away from United Nations supervision, the state department recommended the status quo of friendly but limited relations with the Nationalist government. The paper kept open the possibility that the region might gain in importance.³³⁸

The Malan government initiated an opening to the United States with a visit to its capital by the Union's "roving ambassador", te Water, in late 1948. During his briefings at the state department he promoted the various planks of Malan's "African Charter". Emphasis was also placed on the strategic value of the Union to the West. The acting secretary of state, Robert Lovett, was informed that there existed the strong possibility of worrisome marxist infiltration among the black populations of the African continent. It was vital, the envoy asserted, that the United States appreciate the importance of the Union which "demanded a realistic mutual understanding between our two governments".³³⁹

Erasmus made his own approach to the Americans in a discussion with Ambassador North Winship in June 1949 before the South African's first trip to Washington. In the course of the conversation the minister indicated that the Union was eager to be a participant in any regional pact involving the United States and Britain. He was additionally anxious to learn to what extent the Americans were prepared to finance, equip and even train South African recruits "without interfering with the complete independence of the UDF".³⁴⁰ The embassy's military attaché alerted the Pentagon that Erasmus wanted to discuss the purchase of bombers, jet fighters and equipment for an armoured division. However the attaché warned that the South Africans were short of dollars for such acquisitions and indeed of an adequate equipment budget to cover the anticipated requirements.³⁴¹

³³⁸ Barber and Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy: The Search for Status and Security, 1945-1988*, p.49.

³³⁹ Institute for Contemporary History, Bloemfontein, Eric Louw Papers, te Water to Malan, 8 November 1948, PV 4.

³⁴⁰ US State Department - Central Files, Winship to Secretary of State, 14 June 1949, 848A.00/0458.

³⁴¹ US State Department - Central Files, Military Attache to Defense Department, 2 July 1949, 848A.00/0476.

On arriving in Washington Erasmus spoke about the possibility of communism spreading through Africa "where vast masses of primitive people offer fertile ground for unscrupulous propaganda".³⁴² He was in the country, he disclosed, to purchase military aircraft; it was his endeavour "to have nothing second-rate about the Union's defence force".³⁴³ In his meeting with the defence secretary, Louis Johnson, the minister disclosed that the South Africans were looking for equipment to position themselves in the West's battle order and would like to be associated with the recently created NATO. Erasmus was bluntly informed by his hosts that the Union would have to pay for any military items acquired in the United States. Even if this difficulty could be overcome there was a shortage of matériel as Western Europe had been designated as the priority area for American strategic interests. HT Andrews, the South African envoy in the meeting, suggested that uranium resources held by his country and at the disposal of the Americans "provided a quid pro quo for the military assistance which the Union was seeking". The American officials then argued that uranium sales would produce dollars. With this income the Union would be in a position to take advantage of the liberalised military assistance program (MAP) then being devised by the Truman administration and the congress.³⁴⁴ The mention of the supply of vital uranium linked to military assistance raised the stakes in the bi-lateral relationship. As a result the American side suggested that they would seek an early amendment to the MAP legislation to give the administration flexibility in making provision for the Union.³⁴⁵

Within weeks of the completion of his North American journey Erasmus wrote to the state department enquiring whether the Union could be a recipient of military equipment. Washington acknowledged that consideration was being given to clauses in the military assistance act whereby the United States government could extend procurement facilities to those countries "whose security is of importance to the United States". For this, evidence needed to be gathered by the state department for congressional perusal to make evident that the Union was vital to American strategic interests.³⁴⁶ This proved a lengthy process. Only in

³⁴² *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 August 1949.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ US State Department - Central Files, "Minutes of Meeting with MR. F.C. Erasmus", 17 August 1949, 848A.00/0507.

³⁴⁵ Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle*, p.127.

³⁴⁶ US State Department - Central Files, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European Affairs to Under-Secretary of State, 14 November 1949, 848A.00/0671.

early 1951 was South Africa declared eligible under the mutual defence assistance act for *reimbursable* military equipment. And it was not until November 1951 that an agreement was reached between the two countries by which the Americans would actually supply any items requested.³⁴⁷ Even more irritating to the Malan government was that certain countries, deemed by the Americans to be of key importance, were receiving equipment free of charge under the act.³⁴⁸

The South Africans were to become closely involved militarily with the Americans after the commencement of the Korean War in June 1950. This was to be the only occasion during the Erasmus era that the UDF was deployed for combat operations. On 25 June the army of North Korea invaded Western-aligned South Korea signalling the first incursion by the armed forces of the communist world since the commencement of the Cold War in 1945-46. The United Nations security council subsequently authorised member states to despatch elements of their armed forces to the defence of the south. They were to assist American forces being pushed into a strategic pocket around the port of Pusan. In this perilous situation the Truman administration was particularly desirous of substantial back-up for their troops from like-minded Western nations.

Within days of the invasion Erasmus flew to Umdoni Park on the Natal south coast where the prime minister was spending his winter holidays. They conferred on the action, if any, the Union might take in the international crisis. A press statement was released shortly afterwards setting out the government's position. The Union would give "careful and sympathetic consideration" to any appeal for assistance made by the United Nations or Western nations "most directly concerned".³⁴⁹ For a further three weeks there was no indication by the Malan cabinet that it intended to implement any measures to assist the Western alliance, most notably the Americans in Korea. On 17 July the Union, along with other member states, received a communiqué from Trygve Lie, the United Nations secretary-general, asking for "effective" and not just token military assistance.³⁵⁰ Three days later after a lengthy cabinet meeting the Malan government gave a more definitive response to

³⁴⁷ Riley, *Major Political Events in South Africa, 1948-1990*, p.29.

³⁴⁸ Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa*, p.104.

³⁴⁹ *The Star*, 1 July 1950.

³⁵⁰ *Cape Argus*, 17 July 1950.

requests for a contribution by the UDF in east Asia. "It is self-evident, having regard to distance and other considerations, that it would be impracticable and unrealistic for the Union government to provide direct military assistance however small". Malan and Erasmus however ensured that they were not boxed into this position by adding that "contact would be maintained with Washington to ascertain what practical and realistic effect could be given to the Union's declared support for the UN resolution on Korea".³⁵¹ It was evident though that the Nationalist government did not consider Korea to be within its sphere of security interests. Indeed their stated position to the American and British governments on 15 June 1950 (just ten days before the Korean invasion) confirmed that their contribution in support of the West was to be in the defence of the African continent.

In early August, just two weeks after the statement of 20 July, the cabinet reversed its stance and announced that No 2 squadron of the SAAF would be offered for service in Korea. It would eventually be attached to the 18th fighter bomber wing of the United States Air Force.³⁵² The reasons given for this dramatic turnaround in policy have been varied and controversial. The cabinet's hesitancy had much to do with the Nationalists' distaste for the UN.³⁵³ The world body since its inception in 1945 had been critical of both the Smuts and Malan administrations. This had largely focused on the Union's control of South West Africa and the treatment of Indians in the Union. Malan after committing the air force unit as part of the UN forces, criticised the world body for attempting to place "power into the hands of the non-European population".³⁵⁴ After the inception of the Korean crisis this disinclination to assist the international body had to be tempered by considerations of the Union's need of support from the West. On 12 July GP Jooste, the South African envoy in Washington, met Dean Acheson, the secretary of state. Acheson strongly urged that ground forces be offered by the Union for the Asian conflict. Subsequently the Pentagon suggested that it would welcome South African troops at battalion strength if fully equipped.³⁵⁵ After his Washington deliberations Jooste flew to Pretoria. The envoy, who had close links and access to Malan, believed that it would be of major political benefit to support the Truman administration³⁵⁶ If

³⁵¹ *Cape Times*, 21 July 1950.

³⁵² Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force*, p.34.

³⁵³ Interview with Ambassador Donald Sole, Cape Town, 11 July 1995.

³⁵⁴ JE Spence, "South Africa and the Modern World" in Leonard Thompson and Monica Wilson (eds.), *The Oxford History of South Africa - Vol II*, p.521.

³⁵⁵ US State Department - Central Files, Perkins to Acheson, 21 July 1950, 745A.5/0037.

the Union did not back the Americans there could be long-term detrimental effects for the South Africans; Washington would be less amenable at some important juncture in giving Pretoria support.

The unease felt by the Nationalist government in late July was compounded by Attlee's address to the British nation on the 30 July when he outlined the contribution of the old dominions to the Korean war effort alongside the Americans. South Africa was not included.³⁵⁷ The Union appeared to be isolating itself from the Western mainstream. On 2 August the action committee of the UP lambasted the Malan administration. While appearing to be vociferously anti-communist the Nationalists, they claimed, had foregone an opportunity to contribute militarily against marxism-leninism. An early despatch of UDF forces was called for.³⁵⁸ Closely associated with the official opposition's appeal was the knowledge that the South West Africa elections were scheduled to occur in late August. The conservative-minded electorate in the territory would be voting for six valuable seats. If the Nationalists won these they would no longer be dependent on their coalition partner, the more centrist AP of Havenga, to remain in power. On the other hand, if the UP won most of the constituencies, the parliamentary arithmetic for the government would be perilous. Malan and his associates could not afford to allow the party of Smuts to be presented as more demonstrably anti-communist than the HNP.

As a result of a six-hour cabinet meeting on 4 August the government announced that the 200-man squadron would be sent to Korea. The American embassy reported to Washington their view that the change of policy after the 20 July declaration occurred "due to concern over possible U.S. government reaction towards the Union's unwillingness to help in Korea". The despatch remarked that the decision was made without enthusiasm with the cabinet "under the circumstances" making "the least possible acceptable gesture".³⁵⁹ The squadron left the Union on 25 September and was fully activated alongside the Americans on

³⁵⁶ Interview with Dr Brand Fourie, former secretary for external affairs and ambassador to the United States, Pretoria, 17 August 1994.

³⁵⁷ *The Times* (London), 31 July 1950.

³⁵⁸ *The Star*, 3 August 1950.

³⁵⁹ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to Department of State, 11 August 1950, 745A.00(W)/0952.

26 November.³⁶⁰ Known as "the flying cheetahs" the unit was equipped with F-51D Mustangs supplied by the United States.

While No 2 squadron prepared in Japan for its Korean role Erasmus made a return visit to the United States in early October. The appointments were pitched at a high level. In New York he met Acheson and advised him that the Union government had resolved that any communist attack on the African continent would be viewed as an attack on the Union. To fulfil this important obligation, Erasmus stressed, the South Africans needed appropriate defence equipment. Acheson while welcoming the Union's position was non-committal.³⁶¹ He was well aware however that negotiations with Pretoria on the important uranium agreement were in their final stages (eventually completed on 23 November) and warmly thanked Erasmus for sending the SAAF to the Far East.³⁶² In a meeting in Washington with the new defence secretary, General George Marshall, the South African minister was nonetheless warned that payment was expected by the Americans for any and all equipment released to the Union.³⁶³ Within hours Jooste prepared on the minister's behalf a memorandum on the defence policy of the Union. In this it was requested that the Americans "extend the least onerous financial terms" for equipment. This was due to the Union having "already incurred and is committed to heavy expenditure on equipment" for the "purposes of equipping 125,000 [sic] in time of war".³⁶⁴ Malan was alerted by Erasmus from Washington that it appeared that the Americans were not at all encouraging with regard to beneficial terms for the purchase of matériel.³⁶⁵ Du Toit who had accompanied his minister indicated, that while in the United States, his delegation had been treated with politeness but also with secretiveness and as "foreigners". In London however the South Africans had been dealt with in a genuinely friendly manner by their British hosts.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁰ Riley, *Major Political Events in South Africa, 1948-1990*, p.22.

³⁶¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Notes of Discussion with Secretary of State, United States of America", 4 October 1950, MV/G 12.

³⁶² Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle*, p.164.

³⁶³ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Erasmus to Malan, 7 October 1950, PS 18/5/3/2.

³⁶⁴ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Jooste to Marshall, 8 October 1950, PS 18/5/3/2.

³⁶⁵ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Erasmus to Malan, 7 October 1950, PS 18/5/3/2.

³⁶⁶ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p.166.

In the following months there was a growing disillusionment in both countries over their security relationship. During November 1950 the United States air attaché noted to his chief of staff that despite a dangerous international situation the UDF had not speeded up its training programme because of a lack of funding. The position of the South African ground troops had been allowed "to coast along as usual".³⁶⁷ In a further appreciation in early 1951 the Embassy reported that white South Africans seemed "to be content to rest on their laurels, once having acknowledged their importance". In general the public appreciated that there were world tensions "but had no sense of urgency in the matter or interest in the size or status of equipment and training of their army".³⁶⁸ From the Union's standpoint the partnership was proving financially worrisome. Erasmus was informed by Cuff in mid-April 1951 that Washington was demanding that all arms shipments "be paid for at the time the order is placed and not against delivery as is customary". In addition the prices for equipment items had reached a new high in the United States and were increasing.³⁶⁹ Later that month the defence secretary reported that the allocation of £2.7 million for the SAAF squadron during the 1951-52 financial year would tie up 20% of the whole defence budget.³⁷⁰ The South Africans were obliged to pay in *dollars* for all matériel, facilities and services provided by the American air force since the arrival of No 2 squadron in Korea. This was eventually concluded in an agreement signed on 24 June 1952.³⁷¹

In September 1951 Erasmus decided to demonstrate his irritation with what he perceived as a lack of partiality towards the Union on the part of Washington. He pointed out to the American embassy that the South Africans were obliged to supply certain strategic ores such as manganese as a condition for access to the mutual defence assistance programme. However he warned that the Union government's legal advisers were dissatisfied with the "vague" terms of the accord. The South Africans therefore might not be able to supply all the

³⁶⁷ US State Department - Central Files, Air Attache to Chief of Staff, US Air Force, 10 November 1950, 745A.00/0021.

³⁶⁸ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to Department of State, 5 January 1951, 745A.00/0021.

³⁶⁹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Cuff to Erasmus, 12 April 1951, MV/G 12.

³⁷⁰ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Cuff to Secretary for Finance and Secretary to the Treasury, 28 April 1951, MV 158.

³⁷¹ *Keesings Contemporary Archives*, 1950-1952, p.12343.

minerals requested.³⁷² In a follow-up conversation with Ambassador Waldemar Gallman the defence minister stated that the supply of manganese ore was problematic as the reserves in the Postmasburg area would not last more than fifteen years. The embassy's minerals attaché however advised Gallman that Erasmus's statement was incorrect. A survey commissioned by the economic affairs minister, Louw, had established that the reserves would in fact last at least fifty years.³⁷³ The provision of strategic minerals was of key importance to Washington as the Korean conflict was still not resolved. After noting Gallman's despatch detailing his conversation with Erasmus, Acheson sent a firm response to the mission which he wanted the Malan government to appreciate. "The importance of South African chrome and manganese for the United States defense effort and the security of the Free World should be carefully emphasised. It should be pointed out that manganese ore are [sic] declining and that production will be jeopardised by continuing delay".³⁷⁴ Erasmus's petulant comments had called into question the Union's reliability as a strategic partner of the United States.

The Americans had already been alarmed by the minister's statement the previous April, made without clearance by the department of external affairs, that the SAAF would be withdrawn from Korea if the Asian conflict widened. Soon aware that his comments would be negatively interpreted internationally and particularly by Washington, Erasmus quickly issued a retraction through SAPA. The air force, he confirmed, would remain in the Far East "as long as they are needed to fight communist aggression there".³⁷⁵ However the plane which the SAAF was using had become an issue between the two governments. The squadron had been utilising the propeller-driven Mustang which was deployed for dangerous close support and armed reconnaissance operations. By the time they were phased out, of the total of 95 used, 74 were eventually lost in 10,000 sorties.³⁷⁶ The South African government and public were aware that the F-86F Sabre jet aircraft had been introduced in many American squadrons to combat the Mig jet flown by the communists. They wanted No.2 squadron to be also

³⁷² US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to Secretary of State, 20 September 1951, 745A.00/0037.

³⁷³ US State Department - Central Files, Gallman to State Department, 5 November 1951, 745A.13/0053.

³⁷⁴ US State Department - Central Files, Acheson to Gallman, 29 December 1951, 745A.13/0081.

³⁷⁵ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 27 April 1951, 745A.00(W)/0137.

³⁷⁶ Heitman, *The South African War Machine* p.58.

equipped with this latest aircraft. Serious hints emanated from Pretoria that the unit might be grounded. Jooste was instructed to approach the American authorities to facilitate the introduction of the Sabre jet, particularly as the British were unable to offer their Vampire or Venom jet fighters as possible replacements. The envoy presented a threat as well as a request. If the SAAF unit was not equipped with jet aircraft by the first quarter of 1952 it might have to curtail its operations.³⁷⁷ The American under-secretary of state, James Webb, advised Jooste that a number of United States air force formations were still flying Mustangs in Korea. It was envisaged that the South Africans would convert to jets at the same time as their associated American units would begin the process. Under probing by Webb on why there was the possibility of the squadron being grounded the ambassador admitted that Erasmus during the 1951 parliamentary session had pledged that a conversion would take place.³⁷⁸ He was conscious of the belief in many quarters that "the flying cheetahs" were using antiquated aircraft.³⁷⁹ Jooste was asked by the Americans not to publicise the conditions set for the future involvement of the SAAF. Early in 1952 the state department was informed that the South African squadron would cease sorties for three months from 31 March if the Mustangs had not been replaced. At the end of June the whole position of the air force in Korea would then be assessed. An internal state department memorandum of 21 March noted the wider international ramifications of this action: "We are concerned that the grounding of the force at this time might start a chain reaction with regards to other forces in Korea".³⁸⁰

Tension with Washington was not abated by the statements of Erasmus in the 1952 no-confidence debate on the condition of the UDF. Embassy observers disparaged the claim that the organisation of an expeditionary force against communist aggression had been worked out to the final details. The actual scale of equipment for the ground troops had not been finalised except for certain items such as tanks and armoured cars. No survey had been conducted by the defence department to ascertain manpower levels needed by the economy during wartime. A mobilisation programme had also not been established.³⁸¹ Besides the fact

³⁷⁷ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Hamilton to Liesching, 19 October 1951, PS 33/4/1.

³⁷⁸ US State Department - Central Files, Memorandum-"Equipping of South African Air Squadron in Korea", 23 October 1951, 745A.5/0037.

³⁷⁹ State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, Jooste to Malan, 24 October 1951, PS 33/4/1.

³⁸⁰ US State Department - Central Files, Memorandum -"Proposed Grounding of the South African Air Squadron in Korea", 21 March 1952. 745A.00/0426.

that Erasmus was obscuring the true condition of the UDF in a period of world tension, the Americans were unhappy over the excuses made by the minister for a lack of certain equipment. The embassy reported in March that the minister was stating publicly that the United States "had curtailed defence production to a dangerous extent" the previous year and as a result there were deficiencies in matériel. His comments were characterised as "typical of the growing tendency of Erasmus, du Toit and Klopper to bamboozle the public". In fact the defence department by this juncture had placed only modest orders with the Americans, specifically for only two M-41 tanks and a few bazookas.³⁸²

For Washington the sense of unreality over defence preparedness reached new heights with the May 1952 speech by Malan to the senate. In this he asserted that the Union was "on a war-footing", claiming that the armament programme (possibly alluding to the special defence equipment account which commenced on 1 April) might result in a steadily higher cost of living, a scarcity of commodities and a drop in the value of the South African pound. This was the price, he said, to be paid by those who adopted the same anti-communist stand as South Africa. The statement was considered risible by the Americans in the light of the lack of combat readiness of the UDF and the commitment of only 2% of national income devoted to defence.³⁸³

The one encouraging development on the bilateral horizon was the success by Acheson in persuading the South Africans before the 30 June deadline not to ground the Korean squadron in exchange for an accelerated programme of conversion to the Sabre jets.³⁸⁴ The decision was made public in the Union and allowed Erasmus to announce that he was undertaking a trip to the Far East to see the squadron in October-November.³⁸⁵ The minister had come under a barrage of UP criticism in the previous parliamentary session for not having inspected the unit. The news from the conflict was not completely encouraging for the defence department. The acting adjutant-general told du Toit that "it was progressively more

³⁸¹ US State Department-Central Files, Birch to State Department, 8 February 1952, 745A.00(W)/0400.

³⁸² US State Department - Central Files, Birch to State Department, 14 March 1952, 745A.00(W)/0426.

³⁸³ US State Department - Central Files, Robertson to State Department, 16 May 1952, 745A.00(W)/0475.

³⁸⁴ Borstelmann, *Apartheid's Reluctant Uncle*, p. 185.

³⁸⁵ *Die Transvaler*, 1 September 1952.

difficult to ensure the necessary flow of replacements to the Far East" with the possibility of insufficient voluntary personnel to sustain the squadron's operations.³⁸⁶ Willmott, the air force chief, was obliged to assure the South African public that there would be enough pilots and ground staff for the SAAF to fulfil its mission, though he admitted that the Asian task was causing a drain on the service's establishment.³⁸⁷

By the time Erasmus arrived in the Korean theatre, a number of air force pilots had completed their conversion courses to the Sabres, under American supervision.³⁸⁸ In March 1953 the squadrons began using the jets in the fighter role and then reverted to close support missions. By the time of the armistice in July 1953 the SAAF's Sabres had accumulated 2030 sorties. For their efforts between 1950 and 1953 the squadron was awarded a United States presidential unit citation for "extraordinary heroism".³⁸⁹ However the involvement had also cost the Union 12 dead and 30 personnel missing and presumed dead.³⁹⁰ The participation in Korea, as in the case of the Berlin airlift, had political benefit for the Nationalist government. For the remainder of the decade ministers such as Erasmus and Louw were able to demonstrate to Western powers, particularly the United States and Britain, that the country had contributed men and national treasure to the anti-communist struggle. The South African leadership hoped this accumulated "credit" would produce reciprocal support from their allies.

After their Korean involvement South African forces were not linked again formally with their American counterparts. Very little equipment was purchased from United States sources, with Britain viewed as the most appropriate supplier. However Erasmus and his government were still determined to remain close to the leading Western power. One avenue was to involve Washington in the ambitious radar screen project Erasmus planned to construct for the protection of the Union's industrial areas and ports. In late April 1955 the cabinet authorised the defence minister to approach the Americans to ascertain whether he could again

³⁸⁶ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Acting Adjutant-General to the Chief of the General Staff, 4 October 1952, MV 158.

³⁸⁷ *South Africa*, 25 October 1952. The shortage of air force aircraft in late 1952 meant that no SAAF planes participated in the ceremonial opening of the Port Elizabeth airport in October 1952.

³⁸⁸ US State Department - Central Files, Robertson to State Department, 21 November 1952, 745A.13/0179.

³⁸⁹ Steenkamp, *Aircraft of the South African Air Force*, p.34.

³⁹⁰ Heitman, *The South African War Machine*, p.22.

visit the United States to discuss radar and the supply of fighter-bombers.³⁹¹ Before Erasmus left South Africa the Americans sent a small military mission under Major-General Arthur Trudeau to tour military installations in the Union.³⁹² Melville, the air force chief, meanwhile visited aircraft factories around the United States.³⁹³

While in Washington in early November Erasmus told Pentagon officials that he had been allocated £5 million for radar coverage and was most anxious for information transfer in the field from the Americans. He was bluntly informed that intelligence in this regard could not be given to the Union because of current congressional legislation.³⁹⁴ At the state department he requested an allocation of aircraft available to be handed over to the Union at the commencement of war. The Americans remained circumspect on this plea.³⁹⁵ While he had had very limited success in Washington the minister remained optimistic. He told du Toit that there were to be no further radar purchases from Britain as he hoped that the Americans would be the supplier, thus creating a practical bond between the two nations.³⁹⁶ The British envoy, Liesching, believed that the South Africans were so desirous of a solid security guarantee from the United States that they would be prepared to offer base facilities to Washington, though they had been attempting to remove the British from Simonstown and Ganspan for a number of years.³⁹⁷ Erasmus felt satisfaction when the Pentagon in April 1956 authorised Colonel Newbury to visit the Union to investigate the proposed air defence system. However the American air force chief of staff had instructed Newbury and his team not to "commit the U.S. Government to assistance in building up or maintaining the system".³⁹⁸ The Americans proved to be sceptical, like the British, over the radar scheme, particularly on the

³⁹¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Forsyth to Holloway, 28 April 1955, MV 128/8.

³⁹² *Economist*, 27 October 1955.

³⁹³ *Cape Times*, 3 September 1955.

³⁹⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Notes of Discussion Between Mr. F.C. Erasmus and Mr. G. Perkins McGuire, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for International Security Matters, Department of Defence", 8 November 1955, MV 128/8.

³⁹⁵ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Notes of Discussion between Mr. F.C. Erasmus and Mr. George V. Allen, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern, South Asian and African Affairs, State Department", 9 November 1955, MV 128/8.

³⁹⁶ UK Public Record Office, Liesching to Home, 23 March 1956, DO 35/7137.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁸ U S National Archives, "Memorandum by the Chief of Staff, US Air Force to Joint Chiefs of Staff", 28 April 1956, RG 218/092 (4-20-50) Sec.2.

grounds of its high cost. Between the lines of the report Newbury was also doubtful whether the Union was a probable target for an enemy air force.³⁹⁹

During May 1956 Erasmus used a mere courtesy call by the American assistant secretary of state, George V Allen, to the Union as an opportunity to demonstrate to the South African public that he had built a solid working relationship with the United States. Allen had been the minister's host at the state department the previous year and was on a familiarisation tour of Africa. The meeting was promoted by the South Africans as an important one for the two countries. Setting aside the normal diplomatic pleasantries Erasmus raised a number of key topics such as American support for the radar screen, ADO, and the provision of aircraft for the SAAF in wartime. Allen made the point that the local media had exaggerated the significance of his visit. He was obviously annoyed by Erasmus's proddings and took away with him the impression that the South Africans "greatly overestimated" American interest in the Union.⁴⁰⁰

This view was reflected in an assessment and recommendation by the joint chiefs of staff to the American defence secretary later in 1956. They set as a principle that in the sharing of resources with selected allies at the commencement of war, priority would be given to those countries which contributed "most to the accomplishment of U.S. military objectives". The South Africans were not considered to be in this category. The defence chiefs recommended that the United States "make no commitment direct or implied, to provide military equipment including aircraft to the Union of South Africa in time of war". The Union government was to be told that if it desired to acquire American-built aircraft it would be under the normal pricing policies.⁴⁰¹ Early in January 1957 WC du Plessis, the Union's ambassador in Washington, was informed by the state department that the South Africans would not be assured of the supply of 153 fighters they had wanted available at the beginning of any hostilities.⁴⁰²

³⁹⁹ Canadian National Archives, Gill to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, 19 September 1956, RG 25/61111-40.

⁴⁰⁰ Canadian National Archives, High Commissioner to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 25 May 1956, RG 25/5903-40.

⁴⁰¹ US National Archives, Chief of Staff, US Air Force to Secretary of Defense, 11 December 1956, RG 218/CCS 092 Africa (4-20-50).

⁴⁰² State Archives, Files of the Department of External Affairs, du Plessis to Jooste, 23 January 1957, PS 41/42.

For Erasmus there was no possibility of obtaining American military equipment on special conditions. He probably felt that the Americans could be not considered reliable as partners of the Union, as the congress could overturn military assistance at any time.⁴⁰³ In July 1957 the Rhodesian air chief who had toured the Union reported that South Africans were wary of the United States' long-term intentions in Africa. They believed that Washington would involve itself in the continent militarily primarily to dominate sources of mineral production.⁴⁰⁴ American policymakers were more cognisant of the drive for freedom occurring south of the Sahara. Vice-President Nixon, who had attended the Ghana independence celebrations in March 1957, stated that African political developments could be "the decisive factor in the conflict between the forces of freedom and international communism".⁴⁰⁵ By mid-1958 the state department set up a bureau for African affairs, dealing with the colonies on a separate basis from the metropolitan powers. Sauer, speaking at a SABRA conference in May 1958, said the growing interest by Washington in Africa demonstrated that they felt the white populations were expendable. The Americans preferred to obtain the allegiance of blacks in the struggle against communism.⁴⁰⁶ Just three months later the joint chiefs of staff recommended to the Eisenhower administration that "political accommodation" be made with the new forces in Africa. This would be "to assure base rights if they are needed in future" recognising that there was communist infiltration in Africa.⁴⁰⁷ The shift in policy against the Union was demonstrated on 30 October 1958 when the United States voted against South Africa for the first time at the United Nations, rather than abstaining, on its domestic policies.⁴⁰⁸ Britain was not to follow suit until April 1961, three weeks after the Verwoerd government announced that the Union would leave the Commonwealth.⁴⁰⁹ Despite the political reorientation by Washington at the end of the 1950s

⁴⁰³ Interview with Dr Brand Fourie, Pretoria, 17 August 1994.

⁴⁰⁴ UK Public Record Office, UKSLS Salisbury to UKSLS Pretoria, 27 July 1957, DEFE 7/1530.

⁴⁰⁵ Thomas Karis, "United States Policy towards South Africa" in Carter and O'Meara (eds), *Southern Africa: The Continuing Crisis*, p.323.

⁴⁰⁶ Canadian National Archives, Hurley to Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, 27 May 1958, RG 25/6411-40.

⁴⁰⁷ US National Archives, Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense, 1 August 1958, RG 218/CCS 092 (4-20-50).

⁴⁰⁸ Thomas Karis, "United States Policy towards South Africa", p.323.

⁴⁰⁹ Henshaw, "South Africa's External Relations with Britain and the Commonwealth", p.278.

Erasmus remained hopeful that a relationship could still be forged. He welcomed the commander of the South Atlantic force of the American Atlantic fleet to Cape Town in November 1958. He spoke then of the possibility of the United States navy in South African waters drawing other navies into the safeguarding of the sea routes around Africa.⁴¹⁰

The South African defence minister never accomplished the goal of making the United States a long-term security partner like Britain. The Americans saw the Union as a Commonwealth country in Africa and therefore in the British sphere of influence and competence. The mineral wealth of the country and its continuing and unhindered supply to the United States remained at the forefront of American thinking but this was not viewed by Washington as a basis for special strategic solicitude. During the 1950s the Americans were particularly disillusioned by Pretoria's evident lack of interest in creating a substantial and efficient defence force at the disposal of the west. By the end of the decade the value of a white-ruled Union was far outweighed by the need to adapt to the realities of an increasingly black-dominated continent. For United States policymakers there was the necessity of winning influence in the newly independent states, in competition with the Soviet Union and China. A too close public relationship with South Africa politically or militarily militated against this objective. In any case Washington appreciated that Pretoria with its growing polecat status had no alternative but to remain associated with the west.

⁴¹⁰ *Die Transvaler*, 10 November 1958.

CHAPTER FOUR

ERASMUS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN POLITICAL REALM

His Role in Cabinet Government

As one of the architects of the Nationalists' victory of 1948 Erasmus was destined to be rewarded with a ministerial position in the twelve-man Malan cabinet sworn in on 4 June. Along with southern colleagues Sauer and Donges he was considered to be personally close to the prime minister.¹ Nevertheless he was only eleventh in precedence, just above Ben Schoeman, the labour and public works minister. The Cape dominated the cabinet numerically until the retirement of Malan in November 1954. Though the Transvaal held 32 of the 70 HNP seats cabinet membership was skewed towards the south with the latter holding seven of the portfolios. The Transvaal had three, with their leader Strijdom occupying the relatively minor post of lands, which he retained for the duration of Malan's premiership. In the estimation of his provincial party this was a political humiliation. Verwoerd and the editorial committee of *Die Transvaler* were contemplating an attack on Malan and his associates in an editorial and resigning en masse. They were eventually persuaded by Strijdom to desist² but the incident highlighted the tensions between the northern and southern wings of the party. However the public face of the new government was one of unity.

The defence minister was a member of an administration with a distinct and dedicated tone. For the first time in the Union's history the cabinet was composed entirely of Afrikaners. Its foremost aspiration was not only to raise the position of the Afrikaner nationally but also to achieve domination vis-à-vis the English in the political and social spheres and a greater role in the commercial. This broad policy ambition was in tandem with a firm belief in the need for tighter control over the majority black population. The words of Malan at the time of the election victory encapsulated the feelings of many in the volk - "at last we can feel at home

¹ Ben Schoeman, *My Lewe in Die Politiek* (Johannesburg: Perskor-Uitgewery, 1978), p.181.

² O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p.89.

again in our own country".³ An article in *Die Burger* articulated the same mood - "the Afrikaner nation has risen from the dust of humiliation".⁴ Erasmus's own inclinations were revealed in an October 1949 speech in George. 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".⁵ This was the centrepiece of the feelings and emotions of the Erasmus era of Afrikaner Nationalist politicians - the reversal of the outcome of the conflict at the beginning of the century. They would be the last generation of the party leadership who would have had personal memories of the defeat. To this end the systematic removal of symbols of the volk's subjugation became of prime importance. The process would encompass the disappearance of monarchical emblems and the union jack from the national scene years before the proclamation of the republic. For the defence minister it meant a Union flag flying over Simonstown and Ganspan and with the armed forces first and foremost exemplifying non-British characteristics.

In this atmosphere of triumphant regeneration Erasmus pursued his task as steward of national defence. His handling of the portfolio was finely tuned to the government's desire to project an increasingly Afrikaner veneer to the life of the nation. Nevertheless the issue of the Union's defence was not viewed as a vital one by the Nationalists at this time.⁶ During Erasmus's eleven years at the department there was no evidence of any desire by other ministers to secure the portfolio. Indeed his successor Fouché was not only brought in from outside the cabinet but from outside parliament. The received political wisdom among the Nationalist leadership in the 1950s was that the first line of national security was the police. The Strijdom government's 1958 police act formally gave the SAP responsibility "for the preservation of internal security in the Union". This was a power they had in practice but which had not been legally defined.⁷ The only significant occasion on which the UDF had been deployed for aid to the civil power role in the Erasmus era was the Durban riots of January 1949. Externally the various cabinets saw the Union surrounded by a chain of friendly British and Portuguese territories. And though there was a growing fear of "communism" this

³ Hermann Giliomee, "The Leader and the Citizenry" in Robert Schrire (ed.), *Leadership in the Apartheid State*, p.104.

⁴ Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation*, p.10.

⁵ Gibbs, *Twilight in South Africa*, p.194.

⁶ Interviews with Brigadier Frans Erasmus, Pretoria, 9 June 1992; Brigadier Deon Fourie, Pretoria, 24 June 1994; Professor Piet Cillie, Cape Town, 1 September 1994; and with a member of the general staff of the 1950s, Pretoria, 9 September 1994.

⁷ Brewer, *Black and Blue*, p.207.

was equated largely with organised but controllable black agitation, some of it linked to the banned South African Communist Party.

Due to a marked apathy towards defence matters by ministerial colleagues, with the exception of Louw, Erasmus had considerable latitude in undertaking his various innovations. Unlike his predecessor Smuts, Malan gave a great deal of freedom to his ministers, believing in the concept of leadership-in-council. Ben Schoeman admitted that "there was absolutely no discipline in the cabinet at all".⁸ However there was never a serious leadership challenge to Malan as he had created for himself a special and popular niche in the hearts and minds of Nationalists.⁹ While able to do much as he liked, the defence minister was placed under firm monetary constraints by ministers of finance. Though Erasmus had been a close associate of the prime minister for two decades, he was not considered to be a member of the cabal of policymakers who assisted Malan. These were believed to be Strijdom, Louw, Swart, the justice minister, and Donges, the interior minister. This small coterie dominated government strategy. Erasmus and Schoeman were thought to have had the least influence in cabinet.¹⁰ Malan did not always prevail over his ministers. For instance, in the first few months of his premiership he indicated that he favoured a limited but continuing association with the international labour organisation. However his ministers took a contrary view and he was overruled.¹¹

In August 1949 Erasmus was also given the additional portfolio of posts and telegraphs which was also responsible for broadcasting. In this position he attempted to make the domestic media "national". Just after his appointment the cabinet resolved to discontinue the relay to the SABC of the BBC English-language news. The Afrikaans news service relay had already been terminated. The governors of the SABC stated that they could not sanction external broadcasts which contained items of a South African political nature.¹² Erasmus himself complained that a BBC sports (sic) announcer had said that all members of the Malan

⁸ David Welsh, "The Executive and the African Population" in Robert Schrire(ed.), *Leadership in the Apartheid State*, p.142.

⁹ Nic Olivier, "The Head of Government and the Party" in Robert Schrire(ed.), *Leadership in the Apartheid State*, p.85.

¹⁰ US State Department - Central Files, Winship to Secretary of State, 4 November 1948, 848A.00/0671.

¹¹ UK Public Record Office, Baring to Noel-Baker, 15 October 1948, DO 35/3141.

¹² *South Africa*, 27 August 1949.

cabinet were "Nazis".¹³ In November 1949 the minister threatened to monitor and if necessary cut off the transmission of overseas press items which he believed misrepresented the country. "I want to say to those who sent reports slandering South Africa that they must not expect of me that all their reports will reach their destination".¹⁴ For this remark the minister was not only assailed by the English press but also by the normally uncritical *Die Burger*. In an editorial it remarked that "certain words of the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs must be regarded as an utterance of reasonable annoyance than a declaration of deliberate policy. The only thing which will result in slanderers doubling their evil work harming South Africa is censorship".¹⁵ Erasmus had added that while the conditions for blacks in the Union were better than anywhere else in the world the government had still come under a ferocious attack by the English press. These criticisms by the media obliged the interior minister, Donges, to announce on 31 January 1950 that a commission of enquiry into the domestic press would be established.¹⁶

During the same month the posts and telegraphs minister made yet another controversial statement. He informed a Western Cape audience that there was "sabotage" in the public service and he pledged that this would be "exterminated root and branch". There also existed a pattern of discrimination against the Afrikaner in the top echelons of the service "as much as six against sixty".¹⁷ Again unusual for a Nationalist minister he was taken to task by certain sections of the Afrikaans press. The Havenga-leaning *Die Vaderland* regretted his assertions particularly as the grievances commission delving into the posts and telegraphs department had not yet published its findings. Erasmus was castigated by the newspaper for "unnecessary frankness".¹⁸

With the 80th birthday of Smuts occurring in May 1950 Erasmus released a press statement concerning a scheduled radio broadcast celebrating the life of the former premier.

¹³ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to Secretary of State, 21 April 1950, 745A.00/0809.

¹⁴ US State Department - Central Files, Embassy to State Department, 9 December 1949, 848A.00/0754.

¹⁵ *Die Burger*, 28 November 1949.

¹⁶ Riley, *Major Political Events in South Africa, 1948-1990*, p.18.

¹⁷ *Pretoria News*, 28 January 1950.

¹⁸ US State Department - Central Files, Denbo to State Department, 3 February 1950, 745A.00/0001.

Erasmus was unhappy with the SABC management for allowing the programme to take place while Smuts was still an active politician. However he disingenuously attempted to show that the corporation was an autonomous entity: "The SABC is in the terms of the law, an independent body. The government was not consulted about the nature and contents of programmes. The decision lies entirely with the SABC". Despite this clarification Erasmus went on to telegraph the chairman suggesting that the broadcast would land the corporation "in a political turmoil". The programme was cancelled.¹⁹

By October 1950 Erasmus was back with defence as his only portfolio as the result of the expansion of the cabinet from 12 to 14 members. His contentious tenure at posts and telegraphs had revealed a behaviour pattern similar to that which he had already demonstrated at defence. This had been marked by intemperate statements, a pronounced interest in promoting Nationalist Afrikaners, and the sanctioning of political interference in what had previously been accepted as neutral national institutions.

On the issue of Beyers's resignation the defence minister had the support of the cabinet as he was asserting the civil power over the military. Nevertheless there was undoubtedly some unease on the part of ministerial colleagues on how Erasmus could have disillusioned a Nationalist sympathiser such as the former chief of the general staff so quickly and comprehensively. With Erasmus under sustained opposition attack after the incident Malan was obliged strenuously to defend his colleague in a speech to the senate in May 1950: "Let me say with utmost clarity that Mr. Erasmus is one of the best, most efficient and conscientious cabinet ministers I have met and I will not take the slightest notice of all the agitation that has been afoot".²⁰ The necessity of the premier to go to these lengths indicated that Erasmus's virtues were not evident to many. Subsequently Malan would on occasion publicly back his defence minister in his policies. In 1952 he stated that the UDF "needed to be cleansed" and "I hope we will succeed in this".²¹

The prime minister still valued Erasmus's political acumen. Within weeks of the senate statement Malan despatched the minister and his successor as chief secretary in the Cape, PW

¹⁹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 May 1950.

²⁰ *Eastern Province Herald*, 5 May 1950.

²¹ *Cape Times*, 15 March 1952.

Botha, to South West Africa. Their task was to prepare HNP structures in the territory for the August 1950 elections with the possibility of adding up to six valuable seats to the parliamentary caucus.²² The position of the Nationalists was somewhat uncertain nationally at this point. Though the party had made some gains in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State in the March 1949 provincial elections, they were not as substantial as they hoped.²³ They were particularly concerned that Paarl and Bredasdorp which they had won in 1948 had reverted to the UP in the provincial election.²⁴ During the following August the HNP held the Mayfair seat in a by-election by a margin of only ten votes. Malan was also aware that despite efforts in the 1948 election to woo the English constituency there was no evidence that the Nationalists had been successful.²⁵ The provincial election had demonstrated that the HNP continued to draw only a large minority of the electorate.²⁶ After the South West Africa election, in which Erasmus was an active campaigner, the situation altered significantly and favourably for the HNP. The party had won all the seats and therefore was no longer dependent on Havenga's AP to maintain a majority in the house of assembly. Just six weeks after the poll the two parties agreed on a system for eliminating coloureds from the common voters roll, removing the last obstacle to their merger.²⁷ With even less of a *raison d'être* to remain separate from the Nationalists the AP moved towards merger with the HNP. This was finalised on 22 October 1951 and the National Party (NP) was formed. The strength of Malan's government had been further consolidated. They had also been assisted by the closing down of mass British immigration in August 1948 and the more stringent criteria to become a Union national as set out in the 1949 citizenship act. These actions had restricted a further infusion of English support to the opposition. From August 1950 the Nationalists never looked back.

The work of Erasmus in South West Africa had assisted his party at a critical juncture. Though no longer secretary of the federal council he was chairman of its important information committee, responsible for the issuing of pamphlets, party propaganda and the

²² US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 2 June 1950, 745A.00/0909.

²³ UK Public Record Office, Baring to Noel-Baker, DO 35/3135, 25 March 1949.

²⁴ David Welsh, "The Politics of White Supremacy" in Leonard Thompson and Jeffrey Butler (eds.) *Change in Contemporary South Africa*, p.62

²⁵ Interview with Mr Dan O'Meara, Montreal, 29 January 1997.

²⁶ Riley, *Major Political Events in South Africa, 1948-1990*, p.15.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p.23.

publishing of the party newspaper *Die Kruithoring*.²⁸ Throughout the 1950s Erasmus was closely identified with the campaign to lower the voting age from 21 to 18, aware of the demography of young white South Africa which increasingly favoured the Nationalists. At the 1952 Orange Free State party congress he said that the party "without its youth was strong but with its youth it was invincible".²⁹ Later in the decade he argued that if he had to call up young men for military service they should also have the right to vote.³⁰ In the wake of the 1958 election Erasmus's efforts were finally rewarded with the franchise for 18 year-olds. In the previous election in April 1953 Erasmus's information committee had orchestrated submissions for the party's main campaign booklet - *The Fruits of the National Regime*. In the list of achievements in the defence field the publication proclaimed that the UDF under Smuts had been "an appendix and servile imitation of the British armed forces". Under Erasmus the defence force "had been reorganised and improved" and was "South African in character and identity". The minister himself had "tackled a difficult task with diligence and perseverance" and had "served his country well".³¹ Malan had characterised the main points of contention with the UP as colour, the constitution and communism with the most important being colour.³² Defence was not seen as a leading issue. The Nationalists were assisted by the rising tide of prosperity³³ with an average growth in GDP of 4.8% annually in the 1950s.³⁴ Members of the constituency important to the Nationalists, the farmers, saw agricultural prices rise by over 9% per annum in the five years from 1948.³⁵ As a result of the poll the government increased its seats in the house of assembly to 94 from the 80 they held five years earlier. The official opposition were down to 57.³⁶

By the end of 1953 there were prospects of changes in the Nationalist leadership with Malan approaching his 80th birthday. The hoofleier resolved that while he would remain

²⁸ Carter, *The Politics of Inequality*, p.234.

²⁹ *Cape Times*, 11 September 1952.

³⁰ Heard, *General Elections in South Africa*, p.74.

³¹ The Institute for Contemporary History, Bloemfontein, National Party Pamphlet - *The Fruits of the National Regime*, March 1953, P.24.578.

³² US State Department - Central Files, Johnson to State Department, 25 March 1953, 745A.00/0150.

³³ Heard, *General Elections in South Africa*, p.55.

³⁴ Price, *Apartheid in Crisis*, p.34.

³⁵ O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p.77.

³⁶ DW Kruger, *A History of the Union of South Africa, 1910-1961* (Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1969), p.275.

prime minister he would give up the leadership of the Cape party. Donges, a man of facile speech and deft intellect, but rather devious, was made his successor.³⁷ The event highlighted the fact that though Erasmus was a well-known personality in the provincial party he did not have the political "gravitas" necessary for the top role. Doubts about Erasmus's competence probably existed due to his sometimes exaggerated statements and opinions. In a notable speech in Porterville in May 1954 he reported that, due to the good work overseas of South African officials, foreign newspapers previously hostile to the Union had "completely changed" their attitude. Slanders, such as those put out by the anti-apartheid Anglican priest Michael Scott were "largely a thing of the past". He went on to assert that the Union had a wonderful future, particularly for its young people as it held enough basic resources "for the next 1000 [sic] years". Shortages "were a thing of the past" with unemployment "not worth mentioning".³⁸ Serious party commentators saw the approach as self-defeating, fearing that the government could not deliver all that was promised. Even the normally well-disposed *Die Burger* was wary of the minister's judgement. Its editor in the 1950s, Piet Cillie, said of Erasmus that "he seemed to rush ahead". Cillie and the *Nasionale Pers* were concerned with on-going rumours that Erasmus planned to launch another newspaper in the Cape which was even more party-aligned than *Die Burger*.³⁹ During the decade the newspaper decided not to endorse the campaign identified with the minister to lower the voting age to 18.⁴⁰ Erasmus was not viewed by leading party members as a particularly original thinker as a minister or as a politician. However he was not known to lose his temper easily with party or cabinet colleagues, normally acting in a pleasant and correct manner.⁴¹ The minister was also known as a fastidious dresser.

In mid-October 1954 Malan announced that he planned to retire the following month. The primary candidates for the leadership were Strijdom and Havenga, the Natal party leader, who had grown close to Malan after 1948. Strijdom and his strong supporter Verwoerd, the native affairs minister, believed that the strategy of the Cape party was for Havenga to be an interim premier who after a few years would hand the leadership over to Donges. This was seen as a direct attack on the Transvaal party.⁴² Havenga's candidature was strongly

³⁷ Carter, *The Politics of Inequality*, p.238.

³⁸ *South Africa*, 22 May 1954.

³⁹ Interview with Professor Piet Cillie, Cape Town, 1 September 1994.

⁴⁰ Potter, *The Press as Opposition*, p.148.

⁴¹ Interview with Professor Piet Cillie, Cape Town, 1 September 1994.

supported by Malan at a meeting of the cabinet on 18 November and at a public meeting in Paarl eight days later.⁴³ Strijdom was in a strong position however, being supported by the strong Transvaal contingent in the parliamentary caucus and being recognised throughout the party as a consistent Nationalist since the early 1930s, unlike Havenga. When it became apparent to the finance minister that in the vote on 30 November he would lose he withdrew and also announced his retirement from government.

With the election of Strijdom the power in the party shifted from the Cape to the north, particularly to the Transvaal, and was to remain there until PW Botha became party leader in 1978. Erasmus's position was not particularly strong in the Strijdom cabinet. He was more exposed and without the cloak of protection which had been offered by Malan. Sir de Villiers Graaff, the Cape opposition leader, suggested on the day after Strijdom assumed the leadership that Erasmus was possibly on the way out.⁴⁴ In fact he was to retain the portfolio for a further five years. Defence remained a minor post in the cabinet and Erasmus was not closely involved with the important economic and apartheid programmes being implemented in the 1950s. He thus was spared the fate of Ernest Jansen who had been native affairs minister in the first years of the Malan premiership. Jansen was not an apartheid ideologue and worked happily with the mainly English officials in his department.⁴⁵ However the native affairs study group in the Nationalists' parliamentary caucus wanted a more dynamic implementation of apartheid policies. Through this pressure Jansen was removed in October 1950 to be replaced by the more committed Senator Verwoerd. In the case of the secretary for native affairs, Nationalist MPs were able to force the government to overrule the public service commission and bring in an outsider, the academic Dr WM Eiselen, to take over the post from a long-serving English official.⁴⁶ Eiselen, the professor of Bantu languages at Pretoria University, was a founding member of SABRA and considered a major theoretician of the apartheid system.

⁴² O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p.90; Interview with Mr Dan O'Meara, Montreal, 29 January 1997.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.89.

⁴⁴ UNISA, UP Archives, Sir de Villiers Graaff Papers, de Villiers Graaff to Theron, 1 December 1954, Folio 127.

⁴⁵ Lapping, *Apartheid: A History*, p.106.

⁴⁶ Adam and Giliomee, *Ethnic Power Mobilised*, pp. 221-2.

Because of a marked lack of interest in defence by the 1948 intake of party MPs, half of whom were connected with agriculture,⁴⁷ Erasmus was not under the same threat of removal. There was also no demand from within the caucus to force him to appoint a firm Nationalist as defence secretary before Cuff's retirement in 1955. Erasmus was also known as a convinced republican in a cabinet more marked than Malan's in wanting to remove the Union's links with the crown. Moreover, as Erasmus was one of the ministers most maligned by the opposition and English press, his forced departure might have appeared to justify their critique. The defence minister moved up in precedence to seventh among the fourteen members of Strijdom's cabinet, one more tightly controlled by the prime minister than by his predecessor.⁴⁸

Strijdom was a charismatic figure who embodied the spirit of *kragdadigheid* (tough and vigorous action).⁴⁹ He, like Malan, was against Broederbond involvement in politics and policymaking, and he opposed the creation of a special parliamentary cell when parliament was in session.⁵⁰ In the field of foreign affairs he was not particularly comfortable, having journeyed outside of Africa for the first time just a few weeks before becoming premier. Early in 1955 he divested the portfolio of external affairs held by prime ministers since the creation of the Union to his close supporter, the experienced diplomat, Louw. He permitted Erasmus to have considerable leeway in the continuing negotiations with Britain over the transfer of Simonstown.⁵¹ The agreements announced in July 1955 gave Erasmus kudos in the cabinet and party, as he had shown himself capable of achieving an act of genuine international statecraft.

In August 1956 Strijdom reshuffled his cabinet. While retaining defence Erasmus also gained the minor post of forestry. Louw who held both the external affairs and finance portfolios had the latter removed so that he could concentrate exclusively on international relations. Liesching reported that, having lost finance, Louw "might not have the same means of hampering Erasmus's activities, at least on paper".⁵² The external affairs minister would

⁴⁷ Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, p.282.

⁴⁸ Kenney, *Power, Pride and Prejudice*, p.86.

⁴⁹ Le May, *The Afrikaners: An Historical Interpretation*, p.211.

⁵⁰ Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom*, p.283; Posel, *The Making of Apartheid*, p.242.

⁵¹ Geldenhuys, *The Diplomacy of Isolation*, p.14.

⁵² UK Public Record Office, Liesching to Laithwaite, 3 August 1956, DO 35/10573.

have seen Erasmus as a "rank amateur" overseas in the light of his own twelve year record as a senior envoy in western Europe and the United States. In comparison the defence minister had not been outside the African continent until 1949. Erasmus had also not served in the military, whereas Louw had been in the South West Africa campaign of 1914-1915.⁵³ Unlike the defence minister Louw was very loyal to his officials and felt confident enough of his position in the cabinets of the late 1950s not to feel the necessity of purging the external affairs department of "un-national" personnel.⁵⁴ Particularly galling to Louw was the initial success Erasmus was having with the British in the mid-1950s with his ADO idea in comparison to his own pan-African conference initiative. Personal antipathy came to a head at the September 1955 Cape party congress. Louw attempted unsuccessfully to remove Erasmus's close protégé, PW Botha, as provincial chief secretary. This was seen as an indirect attack on Erasmus who had in Louw's estimation supported the Cape's attempt the previous year to deny Strijdom the premiership in the leadership contest with Havenga.⁵⁵ The continuing tension between the two men was apparent in the tendency of Erasmus not to consult with the external affairs department before embarking on overseas journeys.⁵⁶

In 1958 Erasmus contested his last (and sixth) general election. This was a much less charged event than the previous poll, with the absence of agitation by the Torch Commando and with the resolution two years earlier of the coloured franchise issue. The more peaceful atmosphere was reflected in fewer electoral meetings being broken up by political opponents.⁵⁷ White Afrikaner unity and the realisation of a republic were the two primary themes of the campaign.⁵⁸ Erasmus, like his Cape colleagues, desired republican status but remained resolute in a commitment to continued Commonwealth membership. Under the system of imperial preference this provided access to that world-wide market for, for example, Western Cape fruit farmers. Indeed the Nasionale Pers newspapers *Die Burger* and *Die Volksblad* called the victory result for the NP as a mandate for a republic *within* the Commonwealth.⁵⁹

⁵³ Interview with Brigadier Deon Fourie, Pretoria, 1 July 1994.

⁵⁴ Interview with Donald Sole, Cape Town, 11 July 1994.

⁵⁵ O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p.90.; Interview with Dan O'Meara, Montreal, 29 January 1997.

⁵⁶ UK Public Record Office, "Ministry of Defence Brief for Lord Mancroft", 30 August 1957, DEFE 7/1530.

⁵⁷ Edwin S Munger, "Self-Confidence and Self-Criticism in South Africa", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 36, no. 4, July 1958, p. 660.

⁵⁸ Heard, *General Elections in South Africa*, p.74.

On the hustings Erasmus castigated certain English-dominated municipalities for continuing to fly the union jack a year after it had ceased to be a national flag. The need for consolidating the volk vote for the governing party produced a memorable phrase from the defence minister - "a good Afrikaner is a Nationalist and a good Nationalist is a member of his party".⁶⁰ After the result was declared on 16 April the NP held 103 seats in the 163-seat lower house of parliament, though still with under 50% of the vote.⁶¹ They appeared to be in an unassailable position. Even the UP leader, de Villiers Graaff, lost his seat at Hottentots-Holland.

Four months after the election Strijdom died after a long illness. The contenders for the leadership were eventually to be Verwoerd, Swart and Donges. The British envoy, Liesching, early in the contest saw Erasmus as a possible compromise candidate, as he had cleverly positioned himself in the Strijdom cabinet. As a firm republican he was acceptable to the Transvaalers and had won nationwide prestige for concluding the agreement over Simonstown.⁶² Liesching unfortunately was not familiar with the Nationalists' practice of only nominating provincial leaders for the party leadership.⁶³ Erasmus was closely identified with the Donges camp and nominated him for the leadership in the party caucus.⁶⁴ The contest was eventually won by Verwoerd who probably had minority support in the cabinet and who had depended on many votes from the enlarged senate to capture the prize.⁶⁵

As a resolute opponent of Verwoerd, Erasmus was fortunate to retain his post in the new cabinet. Another Cape member, van Rhijn, the economic affairs minister, was quickly despatched to London as high commissioner. Verwoerd decided not to be unduly antagonistic to the south by giving Donges, an individual he did not like, the important finance portfolio.⁶⁶ Gradually the new prime minister turned what had been an anti-Verwoerd ministerial team into one with a more pronounced pro-Verwoerd leaning. This was accomplished not only by reshuffling but by creating four new posts of deputy minister. Of the latter, only PW Botha was not associated with the premier.⁶⁷ Under Verwoerd there was increased Broederbond

⁵⁹ Potter, *The Press as Opposition*, p.182.

⁶⁰ *South Africa*, 22 March 1958.

⁶¹ Barber, *South African Foreign Policy 1945-1970*, p.120.

⁶² UK Public Record Office, Liesching to Laithwaite, 15 August 1958, DO 35/10573.

⁶³ Interview with Dan O'Meara, Montreal, 29 January 1997.

⁶⁴ Schoeman, *My Lewe in Die Politiek*, p. 240.

⁶⁵ Kenney, *Power, Pride and Prejudice*, p. 148.

⁶⁶ Interview with Dan O'Meara, Montreal, 29 January 1997.

influence in the government, with the inclusion of such staunch members as Dr N Diederichs, a former chairman of the organisation, at economic affairs, Albert Hertzog at health and posts and telegraphs, and WA Maree at bantu education.⁶⁸

Erasmus found the atmosphere of the cabinet of the late 1950s much changed to the one of ten years previously. He was barely tolerated by Verwoerd who saw him as a principal member of the "Keeromstraat clique" which had opposed the advancement of the Transvaal party, and particularly Strijdom, since the 1930s.⁶⁹ The prime minister retained Erasmus in defence for a further fifteen months after he chose his cabinet in September 1958. Ben Schoeman, who served alongside Erasmus in administrations from 1948, suggested that cabinet members were never confident with the defence minister's approach to policymaking:

His one big weakness was that he could never raise a matter openly or straightforwardly. He always got side-tracked and tried to conceal important matters, in such a way to make them appear more acceptable, especially to the Cabinet. I always knew that when Erasmus said he had a minor matter he wished to conclude quickly, we all had to be on guard, because the minor matter was usually a large and important one.⁷⁰

This indicated that Erasmus was not really confident of his political "clout". It was probable that the three prime ministers he served were not particularly assured of his judgement. Though the portfolio of defence was relatively important in the international dimension Erasmus never substituted for the three premiers at meetings of the Commonwealth or UN, unlike Swart, Louw, Donges and Sauer. Around Erasmus in the 1950s there always existed the aura of an apprehensive, somewhat lightweight politician, with his position in cabinet only secured because of past services to the party and his closeness to Malan. The death of the governor-general, Jansen, in November 1959 provided Verwoerd with an opportunity for a cabinet reshuffle and the chance to move Erasmus out of defence. Schoeman believed that the prime minister had for some time been unhappy with Erasmus's management of the portfolio, evidenced by low morale in the SADF, and was particularly concerned with the minister's handling of senior officers. Erasmus was told by Verwoerd that he wanted him for justice,

⁶⁷ Henry Kenney, *Architect of Apartheid: HF Verwoerd - An Appraisal* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1980), p. 148.

⁶⁸ Charles Bloomberg, *Christian Nationalism and the Rise of the Afrikaner Broederbond in South Africa 1918-1948* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 207.

⁶⁹ Interview with Dan O'Meara, Montreal, 29 January 1997.

⁷⁰ Schoeman, *Die Lewe in Die Politiek*, p. 253.

which was being vacated by Swart the new governor-general and which needed a lawyer. The defence minister indicated that he would prefer to stay in his portfolio. He was bluntly informed by Verwoerd that it was either justice or out of the cabinet. Erasmus accepted the new assignment.⁷¹ The prime minister may well have seen Erasmus as not conforming to the spirit of white Afrikaner-English unity which Verwoerd had strongly promoted at the Natal party congress in October 1958.⁷² In defence Erasmus had become a "bete-noir" to too many English voters with his overt appeal to the volk. Verwoerd needed the support of some English in the republic referendum. His cause eventually was won by a small majority in the referendum of October 1960.

The choice of Fouche as the next defence minister received a warm response across the white political spectrum. He became quickly aware of the unpopularity of certain actions outlined in Erasmus's last defence statement in December 1959. These included the disbanding of two English regiments and a new system of rank titles. After a press statement by the defence department in early 1960 that the ranks would revert to the old style there was a "clarification". The ranks of "cornet" and "combat-general" were to be retained. Cape cabinet members had seen the original turnabout on ranks as a personal slap in the face of Erasmus. They were doubly annoyed that Fouche's announcement had been approved only after discussions between himself and Verwoerd whereas the December 1959 proposals had been laid by Erasmus before the whole cabinet.⁷³ Fouche was obliged to protect Erasmus's reputation and the two new ranks were preserved until it was politically feasible to drop them.

Erasmus remained in cabinet until July 1961 when he was given the retirement post of ambassador to Italy for two years. He died of a heart attack in January 1967. While at justice he had overall responsibility for the SAP and dealt with the Sharpeville state of emergency and its aftermath. In the portfolio he did not impress his colleagues. He was believed to be insufficiently kragdadig (forceful) in his dealings with what the Nationalists considered radicals and agitators.⁷⁴ He was succeeded by a younger and more determined individual, John Vorster. While in justice Erasmus again demonstrated an old hobby-horse by renaming a

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Kenney, *Power, Pride and Prejudice*, p. 110.

⁷³ UK Public Record Office, Aston to O'Leary, 13 April 1960, DO 35/10545.

⁷⁴ Kenney, *Power, Pride and Prejudice*, p. 174.

number of police ranks to such titles as "inspector-general", "detective-general" and "adjutant-general" (unlike the UDF the SAP never introduced "commandant" for "lieutenant-colonel"). Vorster subsequently abolished these in May 1962.⁷⁵

As would be expected Fouche made no public comment on his predecessor's policies while Erasmus remained in the cabinet, though he was rapidly but quietly reversing them. However at a regimental dinner in Bloemfontein in September 1962 he proclaimed that there would be no political discrimination within the armed services:

I am a Nationalist and I am a minister in the National Government. But I will consider my officers in the Defence Force only on merit. This is my firm policy. I have the greatest faith in the South African Army. There will be differences of opinion among my officers, naturally on policies and the way they are carried out. But we have built mutual trust which has led to higher morale in the army than ever before.⁷⁶

The fact that Fouche was able to make such an open statement indicated that his policies for the SADF had been recognised as successful within cabinet circles and that an oblique criticism of Erasmus's conduct of defence could be countenanced.

Throughout the early years of Nationalist rule Erasmus remained in the second rank of ministers, never fully trusted to assume more influential responsibilities in cabinet. Despite the high point of Simonstown and his radical transformation programme in the defence force his shortcomings over 11½ years were exposed to government colleagues during the Sharpeville crisis. His scheme of constructing "nationally-minded" armed forces had led to a situation where the security of the white state itself was compromised. Verwoerd's instincts that the SADF was not being correctly handled were vindicated.

⁷⁵ *Cape Argus*, 19 May 1962.

⁷⁶ UK Public Record Office, "British Defence Liaison Staff Report for the Period -1 July to 30 September 1962", FO 371/161923.

Erasmus and the Nationalist Milieu

Outside the confines of the cabinet room in the 1950s Erasmus was well aware of his position in the Nationalist world. In the party branches, on the parliamentary backbench and in the Afrikaans print media he was a popular figure. Throughout his tenure at defence he had their unstinting support (though there had been an element of press criticism while he was at posts and telegraphs). Their backing supported his position on the front bench. The innovations he made at the defence department fulfilled promises made to constituency Nationalists in the years of opposition. They desired a UDF reflecting a more assertive Afrikaner ethos and the minister, with great enthusiasm, was prepared to achieve this object.

The transfer of Poole to Berlin just weeks after Erasmus took over defence signalled that the process of promoting "nationally-minded" senior officers had commenced. As Cross has pointed out, the move to place departmental leadership quickly in the hands of Nationalists after 1948 was most pronounced in defence and transport. In the latter case the general manager of the railways, W Marshall Clark, was forced into retirement with thirteen years of service still to go and replaced by a Broeder, WH Heckroodt. However ministers such as Louw, and later van Rhijn at economic affairs, were quite prepared to allow non-Nationalists in senior positions in their department and in a number of parastatals that they directed until the late 1950s.⁷⁷ There remained a lack of consistency in the implementation of "affirmative action" across public life, though it eventually led to the levers of state power being handled almost exclusively by Nationalists by the early 1960s. In the case of Erasmus he wanted to have a clique of top military officers with whom he would be comfortable politically. And he wanted this process completed more urgently than most of his ministerial colleagues.

The minister often used the congenial atmosphere of party congresses and town meetings to make important statements on policy. At the 1948 Cape congress he discussed the revitalisation of the skietcommando movement.⁷⁸ During the Transvaal congress the same

⁷⁷ Tim Cross, "The Afrikaner Takeover: Nationalist Politics and the Colonization of South Africa's Parastatals, 1948 to 1960", *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Vol. 20, 1994.

⁷⁸ Canadian National Archives, McGreer to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 26 October 1948, RG 25/6438-40.

year he rejected a resolution that key posts in the PF be given to those who supported the Malan administration. Erasmus stated that this had been the pattern under Smuts and then disingenuously announced that he was not going to follow that precedent.⁷⁹ Throughout his ministerial years Erasmus was a favourite speaker at party branch meetings. CWC van Heerden, the minister's private secretary, was often obliged to refuse many invitations as they could not be fitted into Erasmus's schedule.⁸⁰ This was a legacy of Erasmus's long service in the NP. As chief secretary in the Cape and as secretary of the federal council up to 1948, he had become a well-known figure in party structures across the Union. For many members he was probably more familiar than much of the cabinet. His actions, particularly those diluting Commonwealth symbolism in the UDF, were of great popularity to the Nationalist rank-in-file.⁸¹ He was appreciated as a minister who had remained consistent with a long held belief of providing the "nationally-minded" Afrikaner a place in the military "sun".

The Nationalist press gave fervid backing to the minister's initiatives. When the Pretoria-based *Die Volkstem* ceased publication in March 1951 there were no other Afrikaans UP-supporting newspapers.⁸² As a result the government had a monopoly of the Afrikaner dailies. At various pivotal points in his defence career Erasmus received robust and often unctuous support from the editorial writers; for example, *Die Transvaler* in 1957: "it must be clear to the outsider how patiently and conscientiously Advocate Erasmus works year by year on the formidable task that rests on his shoulders. For that he is owed thankful recognition".⁸³ They energetically accepted and endorsed extravagant statements made by the minister. *Die Vaderland* in 1951 stated that "at short notice two divisions - one infantry and one armoured - could be mobilised in the field and an armoured division can be ready in a month or two. As a result of the government's defence measures Minister Erasmus could announce that this country had never been in such a position of battleworthiness".⁸⁴ During the following year *Die Burger* asserted that the UP while in office had promoted politics "shamelessly" and that Erasmus had "cleansed" it.⁸⁵ The minister was portrayed as a white knight unpartisan in his

⁷⁹ *South Africa*, 12 November 1948.

⁸⁰ Interview with CWC van Heerden, Pretoria, 26 November 1993.

⁸¹ Interview with Professor Piet Cillie, Cape Town, 1 September 1994.

⁸² *South Africa*, 7 April 1951.

⁸³ *Die Transvaler*, 24 September 1957.

⁸⁴ *Die Vaderland*, 6 February 1951

⁸⁵ *Die Burger*, 15 March 1952.

policies and righting the wrongs suffered by Afrikaners in uniform in previous years. In lockstep the Nationalist press congratulated Erasmus on the various actions undertaken by him to put a "national" veneer on the UDF. *Die Burger* in 1951 said that "it is only since FC Erasmus became minister of defence that steps have been taken to have the military traditions of the Afrikaner accepted by the defence force".⁸⁶ He was thanked for remaining faithful to the principles of apartheid by removing armed black troops from the UDF. Any criticism of Erasmus by the opposition was characterised as the rantings of misguided and ill-informed British-oriented sycophants - "jingoes" - driven by a prejudicial attitude towards Afrikaner Nationalism. The 1950s were years when the NP were consolidating power and the role of the Afrikaans press was to be an uncritical arm of party and government and hold the volk together under a distinctive ideology.⁸⁷ Erasmus greatly benefited from this.

While aided in his work by a sympathetic Afrikaans press the minister was still keenly aware of Nationalist opinion in the platteland and in the party branches. In a speech in Kuruman in 1951 he candidly disclosed that conscription would not be implemented as there was not a public demand for the measure.⁸⁸ This was despite the still critical situation in Korea and the pledges to build up forces for the Middle East. A few days later he castigated immigration into the Union as it was a means by which the Afrikaner could be "ploughed under".⁸⁹ Again he had pandered to the immediate fears of the volk even though immigration would assist the small white population by increasing the manpower pool for defence. In his speeches in and out of parliament Erasmus refused to accept that there existed any NP manipulation of military appointments and promotions. Addressing the house of assembly in 1952 he said that members of the UDF just "laughed" when the opposition alleged that politics existed in the force. In fact throughout Erasmus's ministerial papers there can be found plentiful correspondence with party structures on military personnel matters and various defence issues. In one ironic case, Marais Viljoen (later state president), at the time an official of the Transvaal party, suggested that the career of Colonel JD Pretorius (then at the RAF staff college) be furthered.⁹⁰ The Cape organisation telegraphed the minister to ask that the

⁸⁶ *Die Burger*, 29 November 1951.

⁸⁷ Potter, *The Press as Opposition*, p. 203.

⁸⁸ *The Friend*, 21 May 1951.

⁸⁹ *Die Transvaler*, 28 May 1951.

⁹⁰ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, Viljoen to Erasmus, 17 April 1952, MV 65/1/214.

union jack not be displayed at the 1953 coronation parade in Cape Town.⁹¹ Almost immediately Erasmus announced that he had discovered in UDF regulations that the flag could only appear at military ceremonies in Natal and therefore would not be flown in Cape Town.⁹² As a consequence veterans organisations and the Royal Navy did not participate in the ceremony. In 1955 a Cape party supporter was assisted in entering the SAAF by the intervention of the minister after a request by the party organisation. Van Heerden was obliged to inform du Toit that "the minister wishes that consideration be given to the request if at all possible, please".⁹³

Leading Nationalists, including ministers, lobbied for supporters to be given leadership roles in the skietcommandoes. Strijdom, while still lands minister in 1954, canvassed for a Mr SP Mulder to be commandant of the Nylstroom commando.⁹⁴ The supposedly politically neutral speaker of the house of assembly, JH Conradie, wanted a Dr Louis Kriel to be head of the unit in Upington. Conradie advised Erasmus that "the allegation that he is not well-disposed towards the government is untrue... We can count on him".⁹⁵ The cosy relationship, promoted by Erasmus, between the skietcommando movement and the National Party came as an unpleasant jolt to his cabinet colleague Paul Sauer. The non-Broeder Sauer had a long record of aversion to secret societies.⁹⁶ In a private note to Erasmus in 1955 he said he was surprised to learn that the Transvaal party organisation was monitoring nominations for commandants. He added, " I seriously condemn this line of action".⁹⁷

Erasmus publicly stuck to his position that the defence force had been decontaminated of party politics. At the 1952 Transvaal party congress he rejected a resolution from the Marico branch which called for skietcommando units to divest themselves of officers

⁹¹ SANDF Documentation Service, Minister of Defence's Papers, van Staden to Erasmus, 22 May 1953, MV 13/3 Vol 1.

⁹² *South Africa*, 6 June 1953.

⁹³ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, van Heerden to du Toit, 24 September 1955, MV 65/3.

⁹⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Strijdom to Erasmus, 23 July 1954, MV 22/11/3.

⁹⁵ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Conradie to Erasmus, 23 September 1954, MV 22/11/3.

⁹⁶ O'Meara, *Forty Lost Years*, p. 46.

⁹⁷ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Sauer to Erasmus, 17 June 1955, MV 22/11/1.

unsympathetic to the Nationalist administration. The minister said that "we do not ask what a man's politics are as long as he is prepared to serve the government of the day".⁹⁸ Speaking to another resolution at the same congress which called for the purging of "subversive" elements in the defence force, Erasmus replied that such elements existed in all armies. However in his opinion there was less undermining in this regard in the UDF than in any other army.⁹⁹ His comments sat uncomfortably with the statement of Malan made earlier in the year that the armed services "needed to be cleansed".¹⁰⁰ The number of defence resolutions at the various party congresses were never great, reflecting the low priority given to the field by both government and party. Those that did appear predominantly dwelt on the need for increasing the Afrikaner and republican attributes of the defence force. Little attention was given to its combat worthiness. Occasionally a resolution would raise an issue evincing unease with certain developments. At the 1955 Transvaal congress a Pretoria branch called for an independent promotions commission to be established as "the large number of resignations from the defence force is alarming and exposes the government to unfair criticism".¹⁰¹

For projects such as ADO, the take-over of Simonstown, the creation of multilateral naval defence around the Cape, Erasmus had predictable support from party activists and the Nationalist media. In their view if there was any degree of failure in any of the schemes this had nothing to do with the minister's approach or the political reputation of the country. *Die Transvaler* in 1957 said that the plan for African collective security had not occurred as the metropolitan powers did not appreciate the vital importance of closer continental defence cooperation.¹⁰² In this and in other aspects of Erasmus's handling of his portfolio and the general defence of the Union critical judgement was not applied by Nationalist commentators. This sense of unreality was seen in the *Die Burger* editorial on the occasion of Erasmus's retirement from government when it asserted that the UP had "a respect for Minister Erasmus which will cause him to be missed".¹⁰³

⁹⁸ *The Friend*, 25 September 1952.

⁹⁹ *The Star*, 23 September 1952

¹⁰⁰ *Cape Times*, 15 March 1952.

¹⁰¹ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Resolutions of the Transvaal National Party Congress, 23-24 September 1955, MV 19/1.

¹⁰² *Die Transvaler*, 24 September 1957.

¹⁰³ *Die Burger*, 24 July 1961.

The United Party and Erasmus

The UP and its supporting press made Erasmus one of their primary political targets from 1948 onwards. For the opposition it was difficult in their view to sympathise with a minister who appeared to know little about national security, took an acute partisan position on his portfolio and operated as a proverbial "bull in a china shop". Though he was a competent debater in parliament he did not receive the esteem of the UP as was the case with individuals such as Malan, Havenga and Louw on the government frontbench.¹⁰⁴ In his years as shadow spokesman Erasmus had never been highly regarded or taken seriously by fusion MPs in his grasp of defence issues.¹⁰⁵ From early on in the Nationalist administration the UP press expressed anxiety over the direction of his department. In July 1948 the *Cape Argus* noted that "many people fear that Mr Erasmus's actions are directed towards the creation of an army in which political orthodoxy rather than any record of military achievement will be the qualification for promotion".¹⁰⁶ There was little deviation from this stance during the following eleven years.

In the initial defence debates of 1948 the UP was in a weak defensive position. Erasmus's assertions that the military intelligence section had undertaken domestic surveillance of Afrikaner Nationalist organisations during and after the war were correct and disconcerting. Smuts had created a special division of military intelligence to investigate anti-war organisations in the Union in early 1940, assisted by the security police and department of censorship.¹⁰⁷ Even more embarrassing was the minister's claim that reports had been sent to UP headquarters - which was also accurate. In the party archives there are records, for instance, of correspondence between Captain GH Ribbinck of the intelligence section of the

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Dr Marais Steyn, Stellenbosch, 31 August 1994. Steyn in the period of Erasmus was a leading UP parliamentarian. Later he was to become a Nationalist minister under Vorster.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Leif Egeland, Johannesburg, 4 May 1993. Egeland was the fusion MP for Zululand in the 1930s and early 1940s, who made his maiden parliamentary speech on the same day as Erasmus in June 1934. Later as South African high commissioner in London he hosted Erasmus's first visit to the British capital in 1949.

¹⁰⁶ *Cape Argus*, quoted in *Forum*, 31 July 1948.

¹⁰⁷ Bloomberg, *Christian Nationalism and the Rise of the Afrikaner Broederbond*, p.183.

first reserve brigade in Johannesburg and the general secretary of the UP, OA Oosthuizen. Ribbinck made his reports on official UDF stationery, as in the case of his despatch of 23 October 1941. He informed Oosthuizen that Erasmus was a member of a "Young Turk" element of the HNP which were holding meetings with the Greyshirt leader in the Afrikaner Koffiehuis in the offices of the Dutch reform church in Cape Town. Ribbinck concluded this report: "interesting developments with a good chance of sabotage may be expected in the near future".¹⁰⁸ The general secretary was not sure of the propriety of the interchanges with an intelligence officer and wrote to Ribbinck later in 1941:

Lately copies of your various reports on political happenings have been received at this office and I have not acknowledged them for the simple reason that I did not know whether it was proper that I should write to you and acknowledge them in your official capacity. It was, however my intention to tell you that your reports are most informative and I have been particularly helped by them in confirming information received through our organisation. They help to put two and two together.¹⁰⁹

The party's head office was also in receipt of telephone transcripts, monitored by the police special branch, of individuals not only associated with extremist groups but also with the HNP. Existing records include notes of Erasmus's conversations with Dr Karl Bremer on 18 July 1944, with Malan the following day, and with Dr PJ van Nierop on 21 July 1944. All the discussions focused on internal party matters.¹¹⁰

In the August 1948 defence debate Smuts was at a disadvantage when Erasmus accused his administration of deploying the security forces to assist the UP. The former premier could only argue that in wartime there needed to be additional domestic scrutiny as the conflict was being fought on two fronts, at home and abroad: "We did not know who was friend or foe, where the opposition ended and where the sabotage started".¹¹¹ Only developments affecting the war effort, he asserted, were communicated to him. The post-war collection of intelligence data could only be explained "by sheer routine, probably an

¹⁰⁸ UNISA, UP Archives, Central Head Office Files, Ribbinck to Oosthuizen, 23 October 1941, Folio 18.1.

¹⁰⁹ UNISA, UP Archives, Central Head Office Files, Oosthuizen to Ribbinck, 13 November 1941, Folio 18.1.

¹¹⁰ UNISA, UP Archives, Central Head Office Files, Security Police Reports-1943/1944, Folio 53.12.

¹¹¹ *Keesings Contemporary Archives*, 1948-1950, p.9772.

oversight".¹¹² Erasmus's predecessor as defence minister had handed him a political gift by demonstrating that there had been a less than correct constitutional relationship between the UP and the UDF. This fact was later employed by him and fellow Nationalists to contend that if politics had entered the defence force it was solely due to the activities of Smuts and his colleagues.

During the following months the UP and the English press were on firmer ground with their critiques of Erasmus's initiatives such as the skietcommandos. The *British Africa Monthly*, within weeks of the announcement of their formation, called the movement as out of date as "the bow and arrow brigade". It also noted that the UDF generally had already become "a sort of whispering gallery, that even in the mess, at the dinner table, or in the bar, officers will not speak lest their private confidences be betrayed".¹¹³ Already it was coming to public notice that Erasmus had started to employ a network of informers in various units. In November 1948 the Union congress of the UP received its first resolution from a branch concerning Erasmus. "Congress views with grave concern the policy pursued by the Minister of Defence".¹¹⁴ The number of resolutions would increase as years passed. The UP-aligned media, unlike their Nationalist counterparts, were prepared occasionally to praise their political opponents. One such occurrence was the reorganisation of the general staff by Erasmus in late 1948. The *Cape Times* described those elevated as "good soldiers with sound records" and said that "their promotion is both deserved and should improve South Africa's military efficiency".¹¹⁵ Even the liberal magazine *Forum* said at this time, "we profoundly mistrust the broad aims of the present government and do not lessen an opposition to it, even when we have to give it praise. An occasion for commendation is clearly the announcement by Mr Erasmus for the new set-up for defence".¹¹⁶ The opposition and their media supporters were pragmatic enough to back ministerial measures which they believed were sensible and benefited national security.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *British Africa Monthly*, September 1948.

¹¹⁴ UNISA, UP Archives, Central Head Office Files, Resolutions of the Sixth Union Congress, 24-28 November 1948, Folio 2.6.

¹¹⁵ *Cape Times*, 12 November 1948.

¹¹⁶ *Forum*, 20 November 1948.

However the UP leadership remained critical of Erasmus. They thought the skietcommandos did little to enhance the defence of the Union, but were also concerned with its political character. Oosthuizen in December 1948 wrote to all his provincial and general council secretaries to urge them to get party members to join the formation "or the whole commando will be left to the mercy of the Nationalist Party". Government supporters, he claimed, were attempting to exclude "the Engelsgesindes".¹¹⁷ On occasion in these early days of the Malan administration the opposition liked to point out how Erasmus did not understand the importance of key world developments, tending to the mundane. The member for Kimberley City, Harry Oppenheimer, commented that while there had been world-wide apprehension in September 1949 over the testing of the first Soviet atomic bomb the minister's first speech after the event was about the removal of the red tab from PF uniforms.¹¹⁸ The opposition were also unhappy that Erasmus had not thanked Smuts for his services to the nation when the minister the following month terminated the former premier's appointment as commander-in-chief of South African forces in the field.¹¹⁹

With the resignation of Beyers early in the 1950 parliamentary session the UP hoped to make major political capital. This was deftly deflected by the minister when the chief of the general staff took retirement leave on 20 January. Erasmus said in parliamentary debate that the matter could not be discussed until the Beyers resignation became effective the following March. By that point the controversy had calmed and the interchanges in the house of assembly did not have the immediacy or intensity of the events earlier in the year. This was doubly unsatisfactory for the opposition for they had the luxury of having a full account of the reasons for Beyers' departure. Colonel R Pilkington Jordan, the member for Rondebosch, had been Beyers' deputy adjutant-general during World War II. He had details from his former military chief on his difficulties with Erasmus but could say nothing of note for two months.

¹¹⁷ UNISA, UP Archives, Central Head Office Files, Oosthuizen to Provincial and General Council Secretaries, 12 December 1948, Folio 7.

¹¹⁸ *Pretoria News*, 28 September 1949.

¹¹⁹ Gibbs, *Twilight on South Africa*, p.194. In June 1940 Smuts, besides being prime minister, minister of defence and of external affairs made himself commander-in-chief of South African forces in the field. He assumed that the appointment fell away at the end of the war. However Erasmus discovered it was still active and in a curt letter dated 7 October 1949 informed Smuts that the post had been suppressed by the governor-general. Opposition reaction was not so much over this action but that Erasmus had not been gracious in expressing gratitude for Smuts's military services in the recent war.

The UP's attack was further stymied when Beyers's criticism of Erasmus did not come until about a month after the general's formal retirement. The acrimonious correspondence between himself and the minister was not produced. It was quite possible that Erasmus warned him that if it were published he would be prosecuted under the defence act for disclosing confidential information without due authority.¹²⁰ Du Toit, Beyers's successor as chief of the general staff, did not inspire opposition confidence. UP parliamentarians pointed out that du Toit had never been on the staffs of the adjutant-general, the quartermaster-general or the director-general of technical services and had had no association with the air force or navy.¹²¹

Later, in the 1950 parliamentary session, the UP decided to mount a major assault on Erasmus. This occurred in the senate where there was an almost even balance between the government and opposition.¹²² The attack was carried out during the second reading of Havenga's appropriation bill on the last day of the session. Heaton Nicholls, UP leader in the upper house, moved an amendment against the bill's passage and said that they would continue their opposition until the government withdrew the defence portfolio from Erasmus. In the debate Nicholls argued that under Erasmus's direction the UDF had moved back to the horse and rifle mentality of forty years earlier. An inordinate amount of defence department energy, for example, had been channelled towards the skietcommandos. After a heated debate "the Erasmus amendment" was only defeated by the government on the casting vote of the president of the senate.¹²³ The addition of four Nationalist senators from South West Africa after its August 1950 elections ensured that the opposition would not be able to use the upper house to initiate a successful attack on Erasmus.

Almost on the same day as the senate vote the Korean war commenced. The delay of six weeks in despatching the SAAF to the Far East provided the UP with an opportunity to question the Nationalists' pro-Western credentials. A *Star* cartoon had the prime minister speaking on the telephone in his office while Erasmus, wearing a Fred Carno army-style uniform including high boots, gloves, much braid and a Tyrolean hat, surveys a map of the

¹²⁰ UK Public Record Office, Rumbold to Gordon-Walker, 5 July 1950, DEFE 7/934.

¹²¹ *Cape Argus*, 2 February 1950.

¹²² *Keesing's Contemporary Archives, 1948-1950*, p.9440.

¹²³ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 30 June 1950, 745A.00/0909.

world. Malan says, "we're on the side of the west, our map shows Korea in the east, so until Korea goes west there's nothing much we can do about it".¹²⁴ The new UP parliamentary leader, JGN Strauss, said that "it was a pity" that the Malan administration was unwilling to back up "its anti-communist crusade by appropriate means". The press release of the party's action committee issued on 2 August called on the government "to accept its responsibilities as a member of the United Nations in a united fight against communism".¹²⁵ Two days later the cabinet committed itself to sending the air force to Korea.

At the November 1950 congress of the UP in Bloemfontein, several branches presented anti-Erasmus resolutions. Amidst this welter of criticism the defence minister organised a skilful counterattack. He instructed the heads of the three services to make a nation-wide SABC radio broadcast on the current state of the defence force. The programme, entitled "How Prepared Are We for War", was recorded on 23 November for broadcast on 28 November just after the formal introduction of the resolutions at the congress. Durrant, still head of the air force, reported that the three directors-general were told what to say, that the whole exercise was political propaganda with absolute falsehoods broadcast.¹²⁶ Political advantage for the opposition was further dented by the claim made at the congress that there was "a gestapo agent" in the Korean squadron who was reporting directly to Erasmus on internal developments in the unit. The American air attaché informed Washington that the contention was untrue. The defence minister responded to the UP assertion by saying that the nation owed the men in the Far East who were fighting with their backs to the wall a most humble apology. This was due to them as they were "being dragged through the mud of political controversy". He denied that he had an informer in Korea as all reports from Asia were relayed to him via defence headquarters.¹²⁷

The UP was as anti-communist in the external sphere as the government. However they often queried whether the Nationalists' allegiance was plausible in the light of low defence

¹²⁴ *The Star*, 28 July 1950.

¹²⁵ UNISA, UP Archives, Central Head Office Files, Minutes of the Action Committee, 1-2 August 1950, Folio 3.1.

¹²⁶ US State Department - Central Files, Erhardt to State Department, 24 November 1950, 745A.00(W)/0021.

¹²⁷ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 8 December 1950, 745A.00(W)/0052.

expenditure. This view was reflected in the English press, particularly in the early 1950s when Cold War tensions were at their height. Their concern over expenditure was possibly hypocritical in light of the activation by Smuts in 1947-48 of the inter-war practice of sparse spending on the UDF. The *Cape Argus* commented in late 1950:

The choice to be made between the alternatives must depend on how the government believes that the threat to South Africa is real and imminent. Ministers have repeatedly suggested by their actions, as well as by their words, that they regard the communist danger as urgent calling for grave measures of internal security. The external security will certainly not be purchased for an expenditure of £12 million a year and Mr. Erasmus knows it as well as anybody.¹²⁸

The newspaper suggested that the minister needed to explain why sacrifices needed to be made. A year later the *Pretoria News* congratulated Erasmus for demonstrating solidarity with the country's allies by pledging forces for the Middle East. Nonetheless in a teasingly ironic editorial the daily suggested the new role was somewhat hollow as resources were not being diverted to fulfilling the commitment:

The fact is that South Africa will not spend money on fully equipping our army unless war breaks out. Second is that she will not mobilise any greater part of that army than the existing permanent force unless war breaks out. Let other nations mobilise armies, divert men from civilian production and strain their economies. We do not intend to such inconveniences. Let other countries equip their armies, let them buy tanks and have them rot in the sun. If war breaks out, we will send our troops in our own time. If it does not, we will have saved a lot of bother.¹²⁹

By mid-1952 the evident lack of an undertaking to increase defence preparedness became even more of an issue to the opposition press as in the case of the the *Natal Daily News*:

While the Western nations sweat and strain to produce guns and tanks, planes and soldiers, South Africa continues to rest on the premise that as and when war breaks out, she will then mobilise, train and equip an expeditionary force. There is no public conscience which protests the national dishonour of South Africa sheltering behind the defence preparedness of her allies...of allowing others to pay for preventive rearmament and leaning on our friends to take the first shocks should war break out while we then get ready in our own good time.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ *Cape Argus*, 4 December 1950.

¹²⁹ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 16 November 1951, 745A.00(W)/0337.

The critique of the policies of the defence department by the UP and the English press centred on the perception that there was a cardinal inconsistency in the approach to national security by Erasmus. Ambitious promises were being made to Western partners which never could be fulfilled with the limited means devoted to them. This view coincided with the assessments made by the Union's principal allies, Britain and the United States. Remembering the recent participation of South Africans alongside the Commonwealth in World War II, there was also a sense in UP circles in the early 1950s that the country was not a fully paid-up member of the Western club. Other old friends were making real sacrifices in the effort against communism while the Nationalists produced much rhetoric with little effect. This was the luxury of opposition and it is questionable whether the UP would have endangered the notable growth in the economy in the 1950s in order to embark on an ambitious rearmament programme.

Strauss became the leader of the UP after the death of Smuts in September 1950. He was not particularly robust or effective and had no strong personal following or great prestige.¹³¹ Unlike many on his front and back benches he was not an ex-serviceman. At the beginning of the 1951 parliamentary session, his first as full leader of the party, he took up the subject of defence preparedness in the no-confidence motion. He took issue with a statement of Erasmus's that the UDF was ready for war. The officer commanding central command in Bloemfontein, he disclosed, had announced that the PF still had 2000 vacancies. Besides decrying the low defence expenditure he suggested that there were sinister links between the skietcommandos and NP structures. He believed that there was a lack of enthusiasm on the part of Western nations to be associated with the Union. One reason for this was the policy enunciated by Erasmus in his Tulbagh speech in which he emphasised that local blacks would not be armed. Strauss asked how this position could be reconciled with a statement of Donges at the recent London Commonwealth conference. The interior minister had said that "no efforts should be spared to enlist every possible unit of manpower and to harness all material resources on the side of the democratic nations".¹³² Under continued UP volleys later

¹³⁰ *Natal Daily News*, 7 August 1952.

¹³¹ Troup, *South Africa: An Historical Introduction*, p.304; Kruger, *The Making of a Nation*, p. 258.

¹³² The Institute for Contemporary History, Bloemfontein, Strauss Papers, "Notes for Parliamentary Debate", (indated) January 1951, PV 444.

in the session, Erasmus put up a spirited defence: "Why am I being pilloried and besmirched today? For the simple reason that I am trying to make the defence force into the thing which others before should have made it. Something with a specific South African character, something traditionally South African".¹³³ Despite their criticism the opposition gave "general support" to Erasmus's Middle East commitment in the 1951 session. However to give more bi-partisan backing to the government they wanted specific details of the pledge which they suggested should be in secret session. But they did not obtain permission from the Speaker.¹³⁴ To a large extent throughout the 1950s a great gulf did not exist between the government and the UP in the area of external military commitments. The opposition was gratified that the Nationalists had discarded their neutralist, anti-British position of the wartime period and were co-operating with London over Commonwealth defence. Erasmus was well aware that in his overseas initiatives he was backed by almost all of white political opinion, unlike Smuts in 1939-45. The main criticism by the UP of Erasmus centred on his "political" interference in the internal workings of the UDF, its low morale, loss of experienced personnel and inability to fulfil pledges to the Union's allies.

The UP, unlike the government, had a wide range of spokesmen who could speak knowledgeably on military subjects as many had seen active service in the two world wars. Their Cape and later national leader, de Villiers Graaff, had been an officer in the North Africa campaign. Notable contributors to debates included PA Moore, member for Kensington, Johannesburg, a veteran of the Great War; R Badenhorst Durrant who had been in Middle East operations; Lewis Gay, MP for South Peninsula (which encompassed Simonstown), who was a British admiralty liaison officer with the SANF in the 1940s; also prominent were Captain Wilfred Butters and Captain Bernard Henwood. One of the most distinguished was Pilkington Jordan a former deputy adjutant-general (organisation) who had resigned his commission in August 1944 due to what he believed was political interference by Smuts in the workings of the UDF.¹³⁵ Members of the UP caucus tended also to be more "worldly" than the Nationalist MPs with only 20% of the 1948 intake involved in agriculture.¹³⁶ Many were

¹³³ *South Africa*, 7 April 1951.

¹³⁴ *Round Table*, September 1951.

¹³⁵ UNISA, UP Archives, Pilkington Jordan Papers, Booklet - "PJ - The Life of R.D. Pilkington Jordan".

¹³⁶ Lipton, *Capitalism and Apartheid*, p.282.

in the professions or business and were well travelled and able to appreciate the international dimension to the range of defence policies inaugurated by the defence minister.

The English press frequently queried details of ministerial statements. The *Star*, in a major article in May 1951, asked how it was conceivable that the Union could mobilise quickly two divisions with a third constituted soon afterwards when the combined PF/ACF formation was only 30,000. Possibly there was an assumption, the newspaper speculated, that the skietcommandos would make up the balance. However this component of national defence had been designated by the government for local, low-level security operations. The disappearance of officers associated with the "ancien regime" and their replacement with Nationalists was also noted by the UP newspapers. The *Rand Daily Mail* believed that the official explanation that the dismissals at the time of "the midnight ride" were part of an economy drive was risible. Its editorial on 2 December 1953 put its position succinctly: "the purge in the SAAF and other branches of the UDF which has been systematically conducted during the past five years of Nationalist rule has almost been completed".¹³⁷ The event occasioned a comparison in a number of newspapers between the composition of the armed forces leadership group at the beginning of 1950 and the situation just four years later, highlighting the dramatic staff changes wrought by Erasmus. It also produced a welter of press cartoons of Erasmus wearing a garish uniform on a motorcycle. The most prominent of the cartoonists was the American-born Bob Connolly of the *Rand Daily Mail* who through the Erasmus period caricatured the minister in various outfits of a ruritanian cut.¹³⁸ Because of the minister's interest in introducing new uniforms he was dubbed "The Tailor" by Strauss and other UP critics.¹³⁹ However the opposition party and press could also be congratulatory. There was much acclaim for Erasmus's successful negotiations over Simonstown. The *Cape Argus* said the minister "deserves all credit" for his diplomatic skills in the matter.¹⁴⁰ The economic growth of the country, the *Cape Times* suggested, would permit the Union to bear the extra cost of a major installation such as Simonstown.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 December 1953.

¹³⁸ Sowden, *The Land of Afternoon*, p.140.

¹³⁹ Interview with Vause Raw, Durban, 9 March 1993. Raw was the UP's defence spokesman in the Senate after the creation of the enlarged upper house in 1956.

¹⁴⁰ *Cape Argus*, 5 July 1955

¹⁴¹ *Cape Times*, 5 July 1955.

For the 1954 session the defence group of the UP caucus decided to make a comprehensive attack on Erasmus. They argued that he was hopeless, inefficient, lacked vision, was motivated by political intent in his actions and made misleading statements over the state of the UDF. The use of senior uniformed personnel in making press and public platform statements to defend ministerial policy was also raised. However the opposition did not want to appear unduly negative. In that year's defence debate they supported the idea of African collective security.¹⁴² Throughout the decade a number of speakers made an issue out of the attenuating nature of the British ethos in the UDF. However, as the UP was anxious to retain Afrikaner support, they could not be as forceful in protecting the British heritage as the government could be in promoting boer/Afrikaner traditions. Despite this effort the party of Smuts had become in most senses one representing English interests, with only between 15% and 25% of Afrikaners voting for it in the elections of the 1950s.¹⁴³

Behind the scenes the opposition and the English press over the years attempted to obtain as much "political dirt" and information about Erasmus's activities from as many sources as possible. Many of the details came from serving or former military personnel. The party's general secretary JL Horak, in 1954 revealed that he had learnt from an impeccable ex-military source that the UDF had built an airstrip near the minister's Nelspruit farm.¹⁴⁴ Four years later an informant told the *Sunday Express* that an airfield was under construction by the air force near Merweville, the birthplace of the minister. The newspaper asked the minister's private office whether this was for his personal use. The private secretary advised that the installation had been created to serve as an emergency landing site and that there was no connection to the minister or his family.¹⁴⁵ In the course of the following year de Villiers Graaff, leader of the UP since Strauss was deposed in November 1956, received wide-ranging details on the SADF from an active SAAF officer. The serviceman disclosed that in 1958 an air force aircraft had been used to convey game shot by Erasmus on a hunting expedition. The Viscount acquired by the SAAF for VIP travel had the then astounding amount of £500 worth

¹⁴² UNISA, UP Archives, Cape Provincial Party Subject Files, Badenhorst Durrant to Pilkington Jordan, 14 April 1954, Folio 127.

¹⁴³ Potter, *The Press as Opposition*, p.22; Patterson, *The Last Trek*, p.118.

¹⁴⁴ The Institute for Contemporary History, Bloemfontein, JGN Strauss Papers, Horak to Steyn, 17 March 1954, PV 448.

¹⁴⁵ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Private Secretary to the *Sunday Express*, MV 13/3 Vol II.

of crockery on board. As no servicing facilities for the plane existed in the Union it had to be flown either to Kenya or Britain for maintenance. In the case of the Canadian-built Sabres purchased in 1956 they had a particularly short range. If they had been acquired to act in the low-level interceptor role there were significant difficulties to overcome as there were only two radar stations in the country. Much fanfare had been made of the eight Shackletons purchased, but these were short of spares, and only two were being flown because of a lack of trained crew. Melville, the commandant-general, had never seen a land battle, and Viljoen, the air chief of staff, had never fired a shot in anger or flown a modern aircraft. While the SAP had only one major-general, the defence force had several at that rank or above.

Despite confidential details on the defence force which would have damaged the prestige of most governments Erasmus and his colleagues were not particularly alarmed or concerned by the stance of the opposition. The Nationalist juggernaut had moved inexorably towards a comprehensive domination of the political scene after each general election with the position of the defence minister appearing ever more secure. There was little that the UP could do to modify policies emanating from defence headquarters. In 1956 the UP publication *A Commentary of Politics Today* could only claim in the defence field that the opposition had forced the Malan government to send the SAAF to Korea. More vaguely it stated, without explanation, that "the policy of General Smuts to defend South Africa wherever the enemy might be and not to wait along the Limpopo was taken over".¹⁴⁶ Erasmus would not have accepted that he had been guided by the example of his predecessor. Despite the active involvement of the UP on the select committee studying the 1957 defence bill the opposition were unable to end the voluntary nature of external service, obtain a statutory defence council to advise the minister, or to lay the foundations for the modernisation of the skietcommandos.¹⁴⁷ On balance the UP had little to show for its years of informed criticism. The sense of powerlessness was demonstrated in the dramatic decrease in the number of defence resolutions at party congresses. From several presented at the national Union congress in 1950 there was none by the time of the 1957 gathering. In a party memorandum during the same year policy formulators could only state that "the recognised United Party policy is to support the government on defence matters essential to the safety of the country".¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ *A Commentary of Politics Today* (UP), February 1956.

¹⁴⁷ Grundy, *Soldiers Without Politics*, p.95.

The UP had a difficult time as a party from 1948 onwards. It appeared to want to be all things to all men. Its race policy of "white leadership with justice over an undivided South Africa"¹⁴⁹ was only a slight divergence from the government's apartheid policy. During the 1953 no-confidence debate Strauss attacked apartheid but was unable to present a credible alternative.¹⁵⁰ Measures taken by the government to clamp down on black agitation, such as the public safety act and the criminal law amendment act, were supported by the UP. They believed that if they did otherwise they would lose white electoral support and not attract the elusive moderate Nationalist voter.¹⁵¹ The party attempted on occasion to show that they could be as resolute on the race issue as the government. In the 1958 election a nemesis of Erasmus's, PA Moore, was quoted as saying, "Give us a chance and we will show the country that we can deal as firmly with the Kaffirs as the Nationalists".¹⁵² After the 1953 defeat a process of party splits from the left and right commenced. By the end of the decade four minority groups had broken off, the most important being the MPs in 1959 who went on to form the Progressive Party.¹⁵³ The UP, despite the more dynamic leadership of de Villiers Graaff from 1956 onwards, continued to spiral downwards. The issue of defence at least offered a differentiation from Nationalist policy positions. The slightly comic figure of Erasmus and his extravagant actions presented the opposition with opportunities to obtain political mileage. Unfortunately defence, either external or domestic, was not a pivotal issue for voters in deciding which party to support in the 1950s.

For the 1958 election the UP produced a list of candidates a number of whom had come into conflict with Erasmus since 1948. Brigadier Bronkhorst was a candidate at Roodepoort, with a fellow victim of the "Midnight Ride", Colonel JA De Vos, at Vanderbylpark. The former head of the British Empire Service League (BESL), DG Ross, who had tangled with the minister over the creation of a defence council stood in Benoni. In Graaff-Reinet Commandant Kingwill, who had resigned over the renaming of Die

¹⁴⁸ UNISA, UP Archives, Division of Information and Research Files, Memorandum on Defence, September 1957.

¹⁴⁹ Harold Brotz, *The Politics of South Africa: Democracy and Racial Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.38.

¹⁵⁰ Kruger, *The Making of a Nation*, p.272.

¹⁵¹ Le May, *The Afrikaners: An Historical Interpretation*, pp. 210-1.

¹⁵² Munger, "Self Confidence and Self-Criticism in South Africa", p. 662.

¹⁵³ Potter, *The Press as Opposition*, p. 22.

Middellandse Regiment, was a candidate. Colonel JD Pretorius, court-martialled in August 1953, ran at Boksburg. Meanwhile Brigadier JT Durrant had become involved in the UP's Transvaal organisation and was to become its head. In the 1960s Gideon Jacobs, whose appointment as dean of the military academy had been vetoed by Erasmus, was elected MP for Hillbrow. One of the unintended by-products of the Erasmus approach to staff management was to turn a significant number of non-political professional servicemen into opposition politicians.

In their campaigns in 1958 Bronkhorst and Pretorius complained that politics had destroyed the efficiency and morale of the UDF.¹⁵⁴ Pretorius specifically contended that a secret police system existed in the defence force. These personnel recorded an officer's political views, those of his wife, whether the wife was Afrikaans or English-speaking, the schools attended by any children and other relevant details which could point to the extent of loyalty to a political party.¹⁵⁵ Monitoring of this nature had occurred with regard to Bronkhorst before he was prematurely retired.¹⁵⁶ Pretorius promised that the UP on returning to power would review the position of officers and NCOs who had been promoted due to their loyalty to the NP.¹⁵⁷ It was suggested by the candidate that "the cream" of the officer corps had gone to the Rhodesias because there politics played no part in service activities. During the campaign the federation government confirmed this trend by announcing that it was accepting at least 50 servicemen from the Union every month.¹⁵⁸

After the Nationalist victory in the polls, at which most of Erasmus's critics did not capture seats, criticism of the minister resumed but with greater resignation that little could be accomplished. The opposition were greatly relieved with the arrival of Fouche in late 1959, an individual known for his competence and lack of partisan spirit as administrator of the Orange Free State. Pilkington Jordan described the new minister as "a real improvement over his predecessor".¹⁵⁹ English newspapers spoke of him as "fair-minded", "level-headed" and in a position to bring a degree of stability to the defence department.¹⁶⁰ Members of the UP

¹⁵⁴ *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 March 1958.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Mrs Linda Griffiths, Cape Town, 31 August 1994.

¹⁵⁷ *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 March 1958.

¹⁵⁸ *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 March 1958.

¹⁵⁹ *Cape Times*, 8 December 1959.

leadership found a refreshing openness from Fouche in discussions on the position of certain English regiments whose future had been under threat from his predecessor.¹⁶¹

Though Erasmus was ensconced in the justice portfolio by 1960 he had to sustain one last major broadside in his handling of defence. This came from Bronkhorst who, though he did not win a seat in 1958, had won the North Rand by-election two years later. In his maiden speech, which was traditionally presumed not to be controversial, Bronkhorst accused Erasmus of deliberately driving English personnel from the defence force and giving favourable treatment to "hangers-on and henchmen". He claimed that on a recent staff course involving 21 SAAF and 17 army officers there was not one English-speaking participant. Taking advantage of his parliamentary immunity he declared that Erasmus had permitted "the falsification of examination promotion results". The SADF had been allowed to become top-heavy with generals, some of whom were nothing more than outspoken politicians. During World War II the UDF had eight officers of general rank commanding 200,000 personnel. By the end of 1959 with a greatly reduced PF and citizen force there were still eight generals.¹⁶² It was obvious that Bronkhorst had long been waiting to make this verbal assault on his former tormentor since his forced departure from the general staff. His comments on the shortcomings of the armed services resonated for less than two weeks after his speech the events surrounding the Sharpeville disturbances commenced.

During the defence debate on 3 May 1960 the UP received warm thanks from Fouche for its cooperation with the government in security matters.¹⁶³ In the wake of the state of emergency the new minister attempted to create the widest support across the white electorate in line with Verwoerd's desire for white unity. The opposition was happy to forget about the years of divisiveness which characterised the period of Erasmus at the defence department.

¹⁶⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 December 1959.

¹⁶¹ Interview with Vause Raw, Durban, 9 March 1993.

¹⁶² *The Star*, 11 March 1960.

¹⁶³ *Cape Argus*, 4 May 1960.

National Defence and the Extra-Parliamentary Groups

One of the distinct features of the Erasmus era was the degree of friction between the minister and extra-parliamentary groups such as veterans organisations and the Torch Commando. Normally veterans were accustomed to follow the practice, as in the case of the armed forces, of non-interference in party politics. Many of the actions of Erasmus appeared so extreme, so against what they saw as the national interest, that they felt obliged to speak out. From the ranks of ex-servicemen dissatisfied with the general political and constitutional drift of the Malan government arose the War Veterans Torch Commando movement of 1951-53. Although its analysis ranged over a number of issues there existed a strong anti-Erasmus subtext throughout the period of activity.

One of the earliest signs of veterans' unease occurred with the appointment of Hiemstra as military adviser to the minister in 1948. *Wings*, the publication of the SAAF association, viewed the action with "grave uneasiness" because of Hiemstra's lack of combat experience.¹⁶⁴ In 1951 the magazine highlighted the exodus of personnel from the air force due to insufficient pay, lack of promotion prospects and the conditions of service. Particular attention was drawn to the shortage of ground staff, many of them former RAF technicians, which was leading to a serious drop in service effectiveness. The publication contended that the organisation of the air force was "being subordinated to outside political influences".¹⁶⁵ Comments such as these from an ostensibly non-partisan journal and subsequent ones sympathising with "victims" such as Durrant had consequences. Erasmus banned *Wings* from UDF installations just before the 1953 general election.

When SAAF association members met for their annual conference in East London in June 1952 they were assured by their president, Colonel PB Thorpe, that the organisation retained a healthy interest in the well-being of the air force and its state of preparedness for an international crisis. He made an indirect attack on Erasmus: "Why should... any bona fide criticism at the highest level of the policy controlling the SAAF be automatically dubbed politics".¹⁶⁶ For the following annual conference of the association Erasmus despatched

¹⁶⁴ *Wings*, August 1948.

¹⁶⁵ *Wings*, June 1951.

Willmott, the chief of the air force, to make a major address to the members. He strongly suggested to the veterans that SAAF policy matters including its future direction were not the basis on which the association was formed or its concern.¹⁶⁷

Another organisation came into dispute with Erasmus in August 1950, again disturbed by the developments in the defence department. The influential South African Legion of the BESL had suggested through its chairman DG Ross in a telegram to the minister that a defence council, as authorised under section 29 of the defence act, be revived. It was envisaged by the league that the council could give advice to the minister and "consist of persons having special knowledge and experience relating to the general defence requirements of the Union".¹⁶⁸ In his reply from the hustings in South West Africa Erasmus shocked the veterans by stating that if such a body were constituted he did not want any Smuts supporters on it. The minister in a follow-up statement said that he wanted to clarify the point that when he referred to Smuts supporters he did not mean the BESL but rather individuals. Unfortunately for Erasmus's image, between his first comments and later explanation Malan had written a cordial letter to the league thanking it for its suggestion of a bi-partisan defence council. He expressed his appreciation of the organisation's "co-operative attitude and willingness to render support in the defence of the country".¹⁶⁹ A good relationship in fact existed between the prime minister and the veterans organisations as Malan upheld promises originally made by Smuts to ex-servicemen in such areas as pensions.¹⁷⁰ The defence council idea was eventually rejected by Erasmus who argued that the general staff committee furnished the detailed advice that he would need to frame policy. In the late 1950s the BESL complained about the refusal of the minister to allow the defence force to participate in veterans ceremonies where the union jack was displayed or "God Save the Queen" played. An editorial in the league's journal *The Springbok* in late 1958 voiced their exasperation at the incremental loosening of Commonwealth ties:

¹⁶⁶ *Wings*, July 1952.

¹⁶⁷ *The Star*, 15 July 1953.

¹⁶⁸ The Institute for Contemporary History, Bloemfontein, JGN Strauss Papers, Edwards to Strauss, 19 February 1952 (relaying 1950 DG Ross telegram), PV 448.

¹⁶⁹ US State Department - Central Files, Connelly to State Department, 25 August 1950, 745A.00/0952.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with Major Lionel Murray, Cape Town, 7 September 1993. Murray was a former national vice-president of the South African Legion and UP member of parliament.

With how much more must we ex-servicemen put up? What further concession must we make to government ideology.... Where is the end of it all?. Our country should be proud of those who fell; our dead lie together with no banner separating one from another. The least we can ask is that government pay honour to those who fought that we may live. The whole episode leaves a bad taste.¹⁷¹

The organisations representing naval veterans, including former Royal Navy personnel living in the Union, were like the BESL in a state of disquiet from mid-1950 with Erasmus's measures. Initially there was a rumour that army-style ranks were going to be initiated for the SANF.¹⁷² This was swiftly followed by disparaging remarks Erasmus made on the "square-rig" naval ratings uniform. With reluctance the navy veterans' organisations accepted the new design when it was unveiled in September 1950. After the uniform controversy there was a lull in the acrimony between the veterans and the minister. Erasmus in fact was invited to the Trafalgar Day dinner hosted by the naval officers' association the following month. The chairman of the association, Commander JMF Phillimore, in his remarks reminded the minister "of the importance which those who here have had or have to do with the sea, attach to tradition".¹⁷³ As it transpired Phillimore would gradually develop into one of the minister's bitterest critics. Erasmus, ever the astute politician, took the occasion of the dinner to announce the establishment of the naval gymnasium in Saldanha.¹⁷⁴

The delicate relationship between the ex-navy personnel and the minister finally deteriorated in March 1952. The spark was the dropping of the appellation "Her Majesty" from the designation of ships, naval shore installations and from the cap tallies of the new ratings uniform. In an ironic note just before the announcement the journal of the navy league and naval officers association, *Sailor*, had complimented the Malan administration for acquiring a second destroyer. It commented that "the government's navy-minded, chiefly to Mr. Erasmus".¹⁷⁵ Admiral BW Barrow, the federal president of the navy league told the minister that the dropping of "HM" alienated "the goodwill and patriotism of the very men upon which South Africa will depend in the event of war" and would affect recruitment.¹⁷⁶ Phillimore went even further. In a letter to Erasmus the former Royal Navy officer withdrew

¹⁷¹ *The Springbok*, December 1958.

¹⁷² *Sailor*, August 1950.

¹⁷³ *Sailor*, November 1950.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Sailor*, March 1952.

¹⁷⁶ *Sailor*, May 1952.

his association's agreement to the 1950 ratings uniform design. He added that "we are reluctantly compelled to realise that the minister had broken faith with us and with all naval men in this country and he had degenerated the navy into a playground of contemptible politics to the detriment of a fine, honourable service".¹⁷⁷ Later in 1952 *Sailor* took the minister to task for "the elimination of the visible ties with the British Commonwealth" and complained that the navy had "been yanked into the arena of party politics". As in the case of *Wings* a banning order in regard to defence installations was placed on *Sailor* by Erasmus in late 1952. The reason given was that certain articles were negatively affecting enlistment.¹⁷⁸

During mid-1952 the naval officers association joined up with the gunners association and the SAAF association for a joint letter to Malan. Besides claiming that there was "a general unpreparedness in the country's defence" they commented that the statement of du Toit on the UDF's readiness was "profoundly suspect". The three bodies called for an impartial commission to examine the national defences.¹⁷⁹ Erasmus described the concept of an investigating body as "blatant propaganda against the government".¹⁸⁰ On the day Malan received the letter the minister described du Toit in parliament as an individual "who commanded the respect of the world with his reputation".¹⁸¹ He reiterated that the general staff was quite adequate for professional advice and a commission was not formed.

After the 1953 election, with the Nationalists including Erasmus in an even more secure position, the criticism by the veterans began to peter out to a condition of sullen resignation. The government was even less likely to be influenced by extra-parliamentary pressure with a larger majority. Despite the urgings of a former adjutant-general, Major-General Wakefield, on behalf of the council of corps, regimental and kindred associations not to name ACF regiments after Nationalist heroes but rather after individuals "who gave no offence to any section of the population",¹⁸² there were no concessions by

¹⁷⁷ *Sailor*, April 1952.

¹⁷⁸ *South Africa*, 7 February 1953.

¹⁷⁹ UNISA, UP Archives, Sir de Villiers Graaff Papers, Chairmen of Naval Officers Association, the Gunners Association and the SAAF Association to Malan, 6 June 1952, Folio 3.7.1.

¹⁸⁰ *South Africa*, 28 June 1952.

¹⁸¹ *Hansard*, House of Assembly Debates, 6 June 1952, Column 7335.

¹⁸² SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Wakefield to Erasmus, 20 November 1953, MV 8/1.

Erasmus. The defence minister was hardly partial to the ex-servicemen's organisations, believing them to be too British flavoured.¹⁸³ Their publications for much of his period as minister were almost exclusively in English with *Sailor* often referring to the Royal Navy as "the navy", interchangeable with the SAN. In the mid-1950s relations between the minister and many naval veterans, however, began to improve. The navy league at this juncture had come under the deft and diplomatic chairmanship of Admiral Sir Herbert Packer. He was a former C-in-C at Simonstown and the husband of the South African novelist Joy Packer and who had decided to retire in the Union. At the league's annual general meeting in July 1954 he said that it was essential that the body "remain not only non-political but also have a reputation for being non-political".¹⁸⁴ Under his guidance the league's previously critical tone became more muted towards Erasmus and was positively complimentary after the Simonstown agreement. On the occasion of its announcement Packer sent the minister a note conveying "heartfelt congratulations on the successful outcome of your recent visit to the United Kingdom".¹⁸⁵ Ex-naval staff such as Packer recognised that Erasmus had triggered a dramatic growth in the Union's maritime strength. In that branch of the UDF there was growing satisfaction as new warships came on stream. By 1958 Packer was able to advise his annual general meeting that the navy would grow from 17 vessels that year to 28 in 1963. Recruiting had strengthened with the personnel intake having doubled over the previous two years, of whom 54% were Afrikaans speaking.¹⁸⁶

Earlier in the decade Erasmus had been a prime target of the Torch Commando movement. The genesis of the organisation had been the introduction early in the 1951 parliamentary session of the separate representation of voters bill. Its purpose was to override one of the two entrenched clauses in the South Africa act giving coloureds, mainly in the Cape, the franchise on the common voters roll. The majority of the coloured 50,000 voters in the Cape were anti-NP and constituted at least 20% of the electorate in six of the constituencies in the province.¹⁸⁷ For Malan, Erasmus and others associated with Keroomstraat there was obvious political advantage in the bill; it was an issue of little

¹⁸³ Interview with Brigadier Frans Erasmus, Pretoria, 9 June 1992.

¹⁸⁴ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Opening Speech of Navy League Annual General Meeting by Admiral Sir Herbert Packer", 7 July 1954, MV 13/4.

¹⁸⁵ *Sailor*, October 1955.

¹⁸⁶ *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 October 1958.

¹⁸⁷ Gibbs, *Twilight in South Africa*, p.217.

immediate concern to the northern Nationalists.¹⁸⁸ The tampering with the constitution had implications for English-speakers. The equality of English and Afrikaans was the other entrenched clause. For many former servicemen the actions of the government had more than a hint of the European fascism they had fought. They were concerned with the importance placed by the NP on the volk, its intense nationalism and the increasingly dictatorial nature of the government.¹⁸⁹ Established in April 1951 the War Veterans Torch Commando consisted predominantly of ex-servicemen and women initially, with other anti-NP whites later joining. A distant relative of the prime minister and dashing Battle of Britain ace, Group Captain AG ("Sailor") Malan, became national president with Louis Kane-Berman as national chairman. "Sailor" Malan on his return to the Union after the war, had become private and political secretary to Harry Oppenheimer in the Kimberley area.¹⁹⁰ By early May 1951 torchlit processions had been organised in urban areas with particularly large rallies in Johannesburg and Cape Town. These for many recaptured something of wartime camaraderie.¹⁹¹ The guiding example for the movement had been the recent Belgian experience where a campaign of demonstrations had forced King Leopold III from the throne.¹⁹²

Though ostensibly deploying peaceful methods there was an intimidatory element to the campaign. This had security implications for the government. An early Torch Commando memorandum suggested:

After one or two months put on a Torch march in Johannesburg that will generally stagger the Union. There must be a minimum of 25,000 men and women marching and all of them to bring a torch. The idea of this is to put a real scare in the Nationalists and give them uneasy thoughts about civil war - it will have a tremendous effect on the populace not taking part.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Professor Piet Cillie, Cape Town, 1 September 1994.

¹⁸⁹ Janet Robertson, *Liberalism in South Africa 1948-1963* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1971), p.52.

¹⁹⁰ Norman Franks, *"Sky Tiger": The Story of Group Captain Sailor Malan* (London: Crecy Books, 1994), p.197.

¹⁹¹ Le May, *The Afrikaners: An Historical Interpretation*, p.206.

¹⁹² Interview with Sir de Villiers Graaff, Cape Town, 9 February 1994. Graaff was the liaison officer for the UP with the Torch Commando while also Cape leader of the UP.

¹⁹³ UNISA, UP Archives, Division of Information and Research Files, Memorandum - "Organisation and Action - War Veterans Torch Commando", June 1951, Folio 154.

The Malan government was actually anxious during the period of the Torch Commando that an anti-government movement could bring on to the streets tens of thousands of white citizens.¹⁹⁴ This was particularly the case in late May 1951 when a large and peaceful torch rally near parliament turned violent after non-members joined the throng and attacked police.

With much of the commando membership formerly servicemen there naturally developed an underlying criticism of Erasmus. One of the Western Cape organisers wrote to the movement's national treasurer, Leo Kowarsky, on this theme:

...demand the resignation of Erasmus as Minister of Defence. We could at any rate get the United Party to demand a Commission of Enquiry into the state of our defences and agitate for it. Edward Joseph is able to get lots of dope and I personally know of present ACF commanders who would talk or at least provide us with information. Anyway liaise with Joseph who apart from the stuff he can give us on the condition of the SAAF, knows Len Beyers well who I understand is licking his chops for revenge.¹⁹⁵

At the Commando's national conference on 30 June 1951 one delegate claimed that Erasmus had appointed a Nationalist "political commissar" in the SAAF's Korea squadron. A former quartermaster-general, Major-General Mitchell-Baker, went on to assert at the same gathering that the UDF "was practically useless as a military weapon".¹⁹⁶ Six weeks later the national executive announced that it was establishing a committee to look into the state of the defence force. Their research was to be on the basis that Erasmus's statements on defence preparedness were "inaccurate" and "misleading". The findings of the inquiry would be placed in front of the public for their perusal.¹⁹⁷ In October 1951 the report was issued. It described the situation in the forces as "chaotic" with the minister drawing on his imagination if he said he could mobilise three divisions and fifteen air force squadrons. The PF was understrength as valuable personnel had left because of political interference and enforced bi-lingualism.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Dan O'Meara, Montreal, 29 January 1997.

¹⁹⁵ UNISA, UP Archives, Willem Kleynhans Papers on the WVTC, Lorraine to Kowarsky, (undated) May 1951.

¹⁹⁶ UNISA, UP Archives, Division of Information and Research Files, "Minutes of the National Conference of the War Veterans Torch Commando", 30 June 1951, Folio 154.

¹⁹⁷ *The Star*, 7 August 1951.

¹⁹⁸ UNISA, UP Archives, Willem Kleynhans Papers on the WVTC, "Memorandum on Defence", October 1951.

In a charged atmosphere of recrimination between the Commando and the government the prime minister alleged in August 1951 that the movement had been taken over by the left-of-centre Springbok legion veterans organisation which he suggested was a communist front.¹⁹⁹ The Commando was described as communist-oriented using Soviet-style political tactics and assuming military or semi-military features. Private armies, he said, could not be tolerated and implied that the Commando constituted a domestic threat as so many of its members had wartime experience.²⁰⁰ Outside observers such as the Canadian envoy, MacDermott, believed that the WVTC had made strenuous efforts to exclude from membership any known communists.²⁰¹ The Nationalist government had a very elastic definition of "communism". To Strijdom however the Commando was "a creature of the capitalists" connected with the gold companies.²⁰² Schoeman described the movement as "an abortion" of the money magnates.²⁰³ Erasmus was also on the anti-capitalist bandwagon. In a Warmbad speech he warned leaders of gold companies and financial directors of "monopolies" that their actions, presumably in support of the Commando, might create a demand for the public control of their firms. Many of these individuals were using their riches against Afrikaner Nationalism. The (white) poor and workers, he said, might eventually take over the gold mines so that they "were under the control of the people" through their elected government.²⁰⁴ His statement smacked of an economic structure more socialist than even the Commando could contemplate.

The unrest in the body politic caused by the growth of the Torch Commando soon resonated in the UDF itself. The movement's action committee in November 1951 advised Commando members to join the armed forces in time of war. "However we will do our best to see that the present government will not manage that fight".²⁰⁵ That same month the committee criticised moves by Erasmus to rename 2 Botha Regiment after Christiaan Beyers.²⁰⁶ Within the defence establishment efforts were made to limit the influence of the

¹⁹⁹ *Cape Argus*, 6 August 1951

²⁰⁰ *Cape Times*, 5 September 1951.

²⁰¹ UK Public Record Office, Copy of Despatch from Canadian High Commissioner MacDermott to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 2 October 1951, DO 35/3145.

²⁰² *South Africa*, 20 October 1951.

²⁰³ *Forum*, May 1952.

²⁰⁴ *Cape Times*, 13 August 1951.

²⁰⁵ UNISA, UP Archives, Willem Kleynhans Papers on the WVTC, "Minutes of Torch Commando Action Committee Meeting", 8 November 1951.

Commando among the uniformed personnel. Reports emanated from ACF units in the Cape in August 1951 that commanding officers had advised their commissioned ranks not to join the organisation. One commander was quoted as saying that "it is far better for my officers to be outside the movement, which has as one of its aims the overthrow of the present government".²⁰⁷ The Commando leadership criticised the government in late 1951 for allegedly allowing surveillance by the police CID at the Lyttleton air base of SAAF members to ascertain whether they were Commando members.²⁰⁸ By December 1951 Erasmus had decided to further isolate the UDF from extra-parliamentary politics by adding a new clause to PF regulations. This forbade any member of the force from taking part in politics beyond voting and attending political meetings in plain clothes. A ban was also placed on attendance at demonstrations or on processions for political purposes.²⁰⁹

Brigadier JT Durrant became a leading spokesman for the Commando within days of leaving the air force in March 1952. He soon berated du Toit for not disciplining air force officers who openly proclaimed sympathies for the NP. There existed a lack of trust, he claimed, by the Western allies in the conduct of defence by Erasmus and the Nationalists.²¹⁰ The former SAAF chief was soon joined in the movement by Major-General George Brink, who would proffer detailed information on the UDF to the Torch leadership during the following months. An Afrikaner and senior field commander during World War II Brink as a child had been an inmate, like Major-General Dan Pienaar, of a British concentration camp. On announcing that he had become a member of the Torch Commando he stated that the armed forces had emerged from the recent war with an enhanced reputation and prestige. This had subsequently been destroyed by a group of extremist politicians who had turned the UDF into "a political toy seething with discontent and frustration". Preferential treatment had been given to men without war service, including the command of ACF regiments. In the air force there had been particular damage through resignations and side-tracking of personnel.

²⁰⁶ UNISA, UP Archives, Willem Kleynhans Papers on the WVTC, "Minutes of Torch Commando Action Committee Meeting", 1 November 1951.

²⁰⁷ *The Star*, 18 August 1951.

²⁰⁸ *Cape Times*, 20 December 1951.

²⁰⁹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 12 December 1951.

²¹⁰ US State Department - Central Files, Birch to State Department, 21 March 1952, 745A.00(W)/0426.

As a result the defence force was "in a state of unpreparedness and hopelessly inadequate to meet any serious emergency that arose".²¹¹

Du Toit soon issued a press release rebutting Brink's comments. Brink, he said, had had no involvement in the creation of the post-war army so his accusations were based on "hearsay". The UDF was "above politics" and political considerations were not taken into account when appointments were submitted. In the view of Pilkington Jordan never before in defence force history had " a chief of the general staff entered into public controversy in the public press". Erasmus also entered the fray by calling Brink "a disappointed man who did not know what he was talking about" and confirming that the du Toit statement which he did not consider as political had been approved by him.²¹² Brink continued to make further comments ranging from describing the military gymnasium hats as "a theatrical type of head-dress" to a more serious point that du Toit had not risen to his challenge on the state of the air force. While agreeing with du Toit that political considerations were not a factor in submitting military appointments it was certainly the case when it came to their approval. Brink later ran as a UP candidate in the 1953 general election and lost narrowly in the Pretoria Central constituency.

By June 1952 the membership of the Commmando had grown to over 200,000 members according to its publicity officer. This was greater than either of the two leading political parties. However in an internal memorandum the Torch executive was advised that the movement had essentially no appeal to the Nationalist Afrikaner of the platteland who regarded the torchmen as the English equivalent of the OB. Relations between the two white communities had worsened through verbal attacks on the NP as a whole rather than its extremists.²¹³ Statements by leaders of the movement were sometimes provocative and worrying to many voters. Kane-Berman in April 1952 advised that if the government circumvented the appeal court's decision on the separate representation of voters act the commando would call a day of protest and "bring the country to a virtual standstill".²¹⁴

²¹¹ *The Star*, 12 March 1952.

²¹² *The Star*, 15 March 1952.

²¹³ UNISA, UP Archives, Division of Information and Research Files, Memorandum-"Torch Policy and Programme", undated, Folio 154.

²¹⁴ Carter, *The Politics of Inequality*, p.317.

Though Kane-Berman had said that UDF personnel would not be approached directly for Torch membership, this in fact occurred in one notable incident. Colonel PC Blair-Hook, the English-speaking commander of No 1 military hospital in Pretoria and later appointed surgeon-general by Erasmus in January 1953, was approached by the Commando's Cape Town office in late 1952. An appeal was made to him either to join or subscribe to the movement. His energetic reply mirrored the robust attitude of the defence department to the Commando:

I assume that you must be aware of the fact that I am a member of the Permanent Force. That being so, at the very least your letter could embarrass me seriously in the eyes of my Department, and at most it appeals to me to act in a disloyal and treasonable manner towards the government and department which I serve.

Kindly refrain from communicating with me in future and please make it clear to your committee that I regard your organisation as a mischievous and disrupting influence and menace to our nation. I sincerely hope there will be found some legal machinery to prevent your attempt to sabotage the Defence Department by appealing to Permanent Force officers to be disloyal.²¹⁵

Blair-Hook sent the Commando letter to the adjutant-general who then passed it on to Major JP Booysen, head of the military police and known as "Gestapo" Booysen in UP circles. It was believed that it was Booysen who had alerted Erasmus in 1948 to the controversial intelligence files at defence headquarters.²¹⁶ The military police chief reported to du Toit that the Commando was absolved from prosecution under section 103 of the defence act by virtue of its claim to be a non-political body. In these circumstances there were no legal means by which the practice of soliciting servicemen could be discontinued. Booysen suggested that Erasmus might want to raise the issue in parliament or that Blair-Hook's reply be passed on to SAPA. He felt that the latter action "may have a detrimental effect on their future success of recruiting members of the forces into their movement".²¹⁷ In the end Erasmus took up the first suggestion and in early March 1953 he attacked the Commando's efforts to enlist service personnel. In this he was supporting the prime minister who had accused the movement of meddling with the PF and ACF as well as the police.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Blair-Hook to the Secretary, War Veterans Torch Commando, Western Cape Region, 2 December 1952, MV/G15.

²¹⁶ Interview with CWC van Heerden, Pretoria, 29 May 1992.

²¹⁷ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, Booysen to du Toit, 14 February 1953, MV/ G15.

²¹⁸ *Cape Times*, 15 March 1952.

A year before the 1953 election the Torch Commando joined up with the UP and the small Labour Party to form "the united democratic front".²¹⁹ The movement was in a determined mood and still ready to comment vigorously on Nationalist actions. In its *Programme for Action* it decried the skietcommandos for providing the government with a force which could be "used to impose its fascist policy" on the country against popular opposition.²²⁰ The government saw the Commando in the same alarming light. With Malan describing the organisation as part of "a white-black communist revolution" the Veereniging MP, Loock, felt that the movement was planning a coup d'état. Its leaders, he said, were going around the country ostensibly to hold public meetings. Their true purpose was to study "routes and lines of communications and they will attempt to strike when the time is ripe". Unfortunately for the Commando the government was aware of their plans and had spies in the innermost circles of its leadership.²²¹ The comments of Loock were not farfetched. "Sailor" Malan made a secret approach to Major Keith Coster who was responsible for the UDF ammunition dump at Ganspan. He asked Coster whether in a national crisis he would allow the Torch Commando access to the base and thereby obtain munitions for a possible armed struggle against the government. Coster responded that this would constitute a treasonable act and was against his oath of loyalty as a commissioned officer. In these circumstances he could not involve himself in such action. The matter was dropped by Malan.²²² The American embassy reported in mid-1952 that the Commando had formed armed defensive squadrons on a regional basis. These units consisted of five cars conveying members who held licenses to carry firearms.²²³ Washington was advised that the opposing sides were building up forces in preparation for a possible conflict, noting that Erasmus had announced after the launching of the Torch Commando that he would raise the establishment of the skietcommandos from 80,000 to 100,000.²²⁴

²¹⁹ Robertson, *Liberalism in South Africa, 1948-1963*, p.60.

²²⁰ UNISA, UP Archives, Willem Kleynhans Papers on the WVTC, "A Programme of Action for the War Veterans Torch Commando", (undated).

²²¹ *South Africa*, 5 July 1952.

²²² Interview with Lieutenant-General Keith Coster, Somerset West, 30 August 1994.

²²³ US State Department - Central Files, Embassy to State Department, 18 July 1952, 745A.00(W)/0543.

²²⁴ US State Department - Central Files, Robertson to State Department, 3 October 1952, 745A 00(W)/ 0650.

When the results of the 1953 poll were published there was great disappointment in Commando ranks. Instead of victory by the united democratic front there was a strengthened Malan administration. With the Nationalists receiving a mandate for another five years the movement lost momentum. There was little hope of sustaining mass support for a further period of such duration.²²⁵ In the wake of the election the Commando lost members and purpose. Its leadership was informed in a post-mortem analysis that the organisation's propaganda had actually assisted the government. Nationalists had been put into "a state of genuine fear" with the resultant heavy voting "a tribute to the Torch Commando more than any other factor".²²⁶ One of the last significant statements of the Commando leadership on political events was made by Kane-Berman in December 1953. He claimed that "the midnight ride" was planned by the Nationalists so that they would have "complete control" over "the militia" and as a means of preventing any rising "of the people" against them.²²⁷

As in the case of the veterans organisations Erasmus felt less pressure from other extra-parliamentary groups after the election. Occasionally the minister came in for mild censure by outside bodies. One such was the association of chambers of commerce. At their 1953 annual meeting they resolved that the ACF ballot system be for one continuous period rather than for short periods over four years. They suggested that the then current arrangements affected adversely the training and employment of young (white) men. It was also noted that the Malan government had failed to discuss with employers the regulations governing the length of training. The businessmen received little satisfaction from Erasmus. The four-year period of the ACF training obligation was maintained with the periods later even lengthened.²²⁸

One peripheral group which took "a stand" against the minister were the students of the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg. In April 1952 "the society for the prevention of Erasmus" was formed on campus. On one occasion there was a light-hearted burning of the

²²⁵ Robertson, *Liberalism in South Africa 1948-1963*, p.107.

²²⁶ UNISA, UP Archives, Division of Information and Research Files, Memorandum -"Torch Commando Prospects", (undated), Folio 154.

²²⁷ *The Star*, 12 December 1953.

²²⁸ SANDF Documentation Centre, Minister of Defence's Papers, "Resolutions of the 51st Congress of the Association of Chambers of Commerce of South Africa", 19-23 October 1953, MV 19/2.

minister's effigy. The society's secretary called it "a petty pestilence designed to ridicule the minister of defence".²²⁹ By the time of the 1958 election Erasmus was a well-established comic figure in the English community. When he arrived for a political rally in Pietermaritzburg he received a good-natured "surprise" reception from about 200 students. They were dressed in an outfit of khaki shirts and shorts and carried placards, palm fronds and broom sticks. Placards displayed such slogans as "dig that crazy uniform", "Ons het E'lief" and "we don't like gnats". One student pumped a fly-spray at Erasmus's car.²³⁰

By the end of the 1950s the political reorientation of the defence force had affected other spheres of national life. In 1959 the secretary of the Botha Day committee complained that Commandant-General Melville had refused to allow the SADF to participate in the commemoration of the Union's first premier. However an Afrikaner cultural organisation within the defence force formed by Hiemstra had the benefit of both the army and air force bands as well as military gymnasium personnel for a concert in aid of the Louis Trichardt memorial fund. The same level of support had been given to the Kruger Day ceremonies and the reburial of General Kemp.²³¹

After Fouche entered the defence department relations with veterans organisations substantially improved. Packer for one reported to the navy league that he had called upon "the approachable and sympathetic Minister of Defence, Mr Fouche". The new minister wrote to Packer - "I am continually endeavouring to get the whole of the South African Defence Force and all sections of our people closer together. What your league is doing in helping to accomplish this as far as the navy is concerned is highly appreciated".²³² It was in this spirit of bi-partisan conciliation that Fouche was to be accepted as a more suitable defence minister across the whole of the white political spectrum.

²²⁹ *The Star*, 25 April 1952.

²³⁰ *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 March 1958.

²³¹ *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 September 1959.

²³² *Sailor*, September 1960. Due to his personal qualities and acceptability to both white English and Afrikaans-speaking communities Fouche was appointed State President in 1968.

CONCLUSION

An evaluation of Erasmus as defence minister would suggest that he was in essence a "professional" politician of limited discernment. By the time he retired from the cabinet he had been a full-time member of the NP apparatus and government for a third of a century. He had only passing experience of other professions and up to the 1950s was not well travelled. The theme of his life was his party which he served. He did this in a loyal and dedicated manner, ensuring power for the NP after years in the wilderness. He did not fully comprehend the area of national security. Associated with an ethnically based political organisation for so long, he appeared overly conscious of the need to somehow transform the UDF, an institution of the whole nation, into an appendage of the NP.

The changes wrought in the ranks of the armed services reflected a spirit of revanchism bound up in the personality of the minister. The personnel and symbols representing the "old order" of the era of Botha, Hertzog and Smuts had to be expunged. Erasmus was fully aware that the creation of a more visible "national" defence force was a plank of Nationalist policy which had popular resonance with the volk. They wanted the military to a large extent to be an authentic image of themselves rather than an imitation of the British model. To Erasmus "South African" meant "Afrikaner". He wanted to invoke the spirit and trappings of the "boer en sy roer" past and did this in promoting the skietcommandos and reviving the ranks of the old republics. The alteration in uniforms, the new decorations, rank insignia, the strengthening of bi-lingualism followed on from this. Erasmus required that the outward and visible panoply and the ethos of the UDF be recognisably different from that of the British forces. These changes paralleled the moves to divorce the Union from the crown and Commonwealth, along the road to the republic of 1961. By the end of the 1950s Erasmus had created a "national" appearance for his defence force. However his overt lack of sympathy for the substantial tradition inherited from the United Kingdom disillusioned many English-speakers. They felt that Erasmus's actions indicated that he believed that the English had dual allegiances and that their contribution to the military culture could be belittled.

As important to Erasmus as the new symbolism evident in the forces was the dramatic upheaval in the military leadership. It was a natural reaction that the minister should want to surround himself with a general staff having an empathy for Afrikaner Nationalism, but not an appropriate one. In Erasmus's case it was a purge not just in the top echelons but through the whole of the commissioned ranks, on political grounds, not on the basis of incompetence. Through his network of informers and by a detailed interest in the minutiae of military administration Erasmus knew those sympathetic to his party. He promoted their careers and blocked the progress of those not aligned to Nationalism. In this process the nation often lost the services of experienced and patriotic officers who were an asset to the UDF. Discord, suspicion and lowered morale were the by-products of his actions in a small officer group in a period when there was little growth in the size of the armed forces. These elements had the effect of discouraging many English and non-Nationalist Afrikaners from becoming officers, appreciating that their advancement would not be solely on grounds of ability. In the case of the English they never regained the position that they held in the pre-1948 period even with the re-imposition of "professionalism" by Fouché and Botha. Erasmus had created such a legacy of disillusionment that English-speakers generally from that era onwards viewed the defence force as yet another sphere of state activity in which they were not fully welcome. He had also instigated a process by which the officer corps began to be associated with the government of one party which came to full flower in the age of the "total onslaught".

The development of the UDF in the 1950s was conditioned by the wide scope given to Erasmus in managing the forces by the cabinet but with a low level of funding. Most of the minister's colleagues did not have a military background and little evident interest in internal security matters, which was understood to be within the purview of the SAP. They were also anxious not to distort the dramatic economic growth of the Union during the decade by transferring valuable resources to military expenditure, as had been the case in Britain. Erasmus could supervise the UDF on the lines which he proposed within financial parameters. The result of this latitude combined with the fact that Erasmus was not a heavyweight figure in cabinet and could not argue successfully for increased expenditure proved almost fateful for the regime. A minister evidently more incisive about the Union's domestic situation would have appreciated the threat to the Nationalist government posed by a disaffected black majority population. Blacks were increasingly becoming embittered by the constraints of the

apartheid system. In response to this an individual of sterner qualities would have from early on tailored the "teeth" of the defence force. This would have been segments of the PF and ACF, well trained and equipped for a quick response "fire brigade" role, ready to move to locations of unrest. Instead Erasmus devoted considerable effort in building up the electorally popular skietcommando system - the NP under arms - which produced ill-trained riflemen cheaply. The formations did not give the Union enhanced defence. On the other hand, the ACF, with its strong British colonial origins, which was the mainstay of the armed services, was permitted to languish for years. Regiments were too often starved of the resources eventually needed to face the security threat to white South Africa which erupted in 1960. When funds were released as in the case of the special equipment account, they were used to purchase heavy armour for the Middle East. The prominent involvement of the CF in the Sharpeville state of emergency contrasted with the near invisibility of the commandos in the support role. This phenomenon demonstrated the lack of understanding by Erasmus of the nature of the growing security problem facing the regime in the previous decade and the appropriate military response.

Internationally Erasmus proved to be somewhat of a Candide figure, an innocent in a harsh political world. He, and other ministers such as Louw, never appeared to realise that in the area, for example, of weapons procurement the Union as a relatively affluent country was required to purchase its own weapons. Instead an unrealistic stance was maintained for years that, because of the strategic importance of South Africa, the facilities for rapid rearmament should be proffered in time of war by Britain and the United States. The Western allies, as the Cold War became more intense, were seeking a full contribution from Pretoria. What they received were extravagant gestures of military assistance particularly in the Middle East masking a shabby defence structure. The minister appeared not to appreciate that the Western powers monitored the Union's military preparedness and became fully cognisant of the fact that his pledges were essentially vacuous. By these actions Erasmus contributed to the disillusionment among important friends of his country already increasingly troubled by the NP's domestic agenda. Britain, in particular, had been anxious in the interest of Commonwealth solidarity to remain sensitive to the concerns of the Union. London had given support to Erasmus's pet projects, such as the Nairobi and Dakar conferences, and the protection of the sea routes, and permitted a degree of South African involvement in the

protection of the high commission territories. These were not defence priorities for the British but were undertaken to keep the South Africans in line with the Western coalition's considered stance against Soviet aggression.

In the realm of external defence Erasmus and his government were to a large degree concerned with following a political doctrine rather than one purely based on security. In simple terms the Union wanted to be accepted as part of the Western alliance. They hoped that this would then produce Western diplomatic as well as military backing for the regime against communism and other perceived threats. However in this Nationalist "dreamworld" the government was not disposed to commit the financial reserves necessary to make South Africa a worthwhile ally. The Near East undertaking was made in the first instance to gain suitability as a Western partner and to smooth the path to the much desired handover of Simonstown. The despatch of the SAAF to Korea was likewise made without enthusiasm, to amass American support for Pretoria in a possible future crisis involving the Union. In his strivings for a defence organisation covering Africa and for a sea routes conference Erasmus was directed by national self-interest: to obtain a defence system that gave the Union prestige and additional protection in a coalition of European powers. However a more realistic minister would have been aware that the sub-Saharan region was not in the front-line of the East-West conflict. There was little advantage therefore in such an alliance for the other colonial powers. Many of them were conscious that from the time of the granting of self-government in the Gold Coast in 1951 the colonies were destined to take the path to full sovereignty. Predictably the unremitting efforts of the Canute-like Erasmus to market his concept of continental land and naval defence were to fall on deaf ears.

The "political" character of the Erasmus approach to defence was highlighted in the issue of Simonstown and the aftermath of the negotiations. Because he was attempting to achieve an important objective he was prepared to be accommodating to Whitehall's particular security requirements. He urgently needed the base to demonstrate that the Union was truly sovereign and that he could be seen to be a successful player in the realm of statecraft. With their stranglehold on the minister the British could to a large extent dictate the development of the SAN from 1955 onwards in their negotiations with the South Africans. The fact that the navy was one of the few success stories of the 1950s was to a large extent by default. There

was in the case of the maritime forces a well-defined development programme with clearly delineated objectives to fulfil. As there appeared to be a clear-cut policy for naval activities the SAN benefited unlike the other branches of the defence force, with encouraging levels of enlistment in the later part of the decade.

However in the aftermath of the Simonstown agreements the minister revealed the shallowness of his supposed devotion to the Middle East role. As he had obtained the main domestic political prize he immediately backtracked on understandings made with London and moved on to his own personal agenda of a defence organisation, protection of the sea routes and a radar system. In this effort there was a certain degree of realism on the part of the minister. Britain itself was becoming weaker around the world particularly in the Middle East from the mid-1950s. Erasmus saw that the South Africans might well have locked themselves into a regional commitment where the strategic circumstances were altering constantly. Defence closer to home was the field with which the minister felt more comfortable. His determined inroads into the security arrangements for the protectorates were indicative of this effort to shore up the laager around the Union.

The personality of Erasmus had ramifications for national defence. Because he was an aggressive individual lacking confidence he felt the necessity of surrounding himself with "yes" men such as du Toit. As they were beholden to him and had seen displays of his easy readiness to terminate the careers of senior officers they were unlikely to remonstrate with him over the conduct of his department or warn him of military deficiencies. A minister like Louw who was self-assured about his position among the Nationalist powerbrokers was loyal to his staff. He did not feel the need to rid his departments of those officials considered to have been linked to the pre-1948 regime. As a result of his personnel policies Erasmus was unhindered in proceeding with his programme as there was also little interest from the premiers or their cabinets in his portfolio. Among ministers he was undoubtedly regarded as a "lightweight" who had been useful to the party organisation but who lacked imagination or great competence in government. He would not have been offered responsibility for one of the important "apartheid" or economic departments. In the absence of a perceived significant menace to white South Africa in the estimation of the leadership, there was little pressure on him to rejuvenate the armed forces or to introduce reforms to the defence secretariat. This

provided Erasmus with the scope to travel extensively and develop ambitious international schemes primarily for the individual benefit of the Union rather than for collective security.

Within the greater Nationalist family Erasmus was always a popular political figure. He appeared to fulfil pledges to party supporters, most of them not "au fait" with defence matters, to make the military more "national". They were probably unaware of the tensions between ministers in cabinet such as that between Erasmus and Louw. In these early years of power the NP felt it necessary to project a united front to the electorate. They were assisted by a sycophantic and uncritical Afrikaans-language press and by an increasingly politically manipulated radio service. Erasmus as a defence minister was a particular target for the opposition parties and extra-parliamentary groups. He had little regard for them or their criticism, not taking them into his confidence, as was to be the case with Fouché later. Erasmus did not feel it necessary to vigorously seek broad support. He was aware that the anti-communist UP already gave him general backing in his external policies because they meshed with its own programme of continued ties with the Commonwealth and the West.

To the question of whether or not Erasmus competently served his state the answer would have to be in the negative. A less obtuse minister, one more aware of the need for white unity, would have attempted to pursue a bi-partisan approach to national security, accommodating the traditions and aspirations of both English and Afrikaners. Instead Erasmus went out of his way to marginalise the English within the UDF and alienated an important community which never again played its full role in defence. On the world stage he disillusioned vital Western allies, particularly Britain and America, with empty pledges and unrealistic projects of overt benefit to the Union. Within the UDF/SADF he eroded morale in the military leadership group and forced the departure of personnel of value to the forces on spurious political grounds. To a large extent Erasmus was a prisoner of the cabinets of his era who were unrealistic over the eventual violent response of blacks estranged from the regime. The NP governments of the 1950s also overestimated South Africa's importance to the West. They were slow in understanding that for most nations there was little political benefit to be gained from a close association with a white minority regime in an era of widespread colonial emancipation.

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4 *Interviews*

Interviews were conducted with the following individuals during the course of research:

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 Vice-Admiral SC Biermann, Cape Town, 13 July 1994
 Commander WM Bisset, Simonstown, 8 February 1994
 Professor Piet Cillie, Cape Town, 1 September 1994
 Mr Mark Coghlan, Pietermaritzburg, 4 December 1993
 Lieutenant-General Keith Coster, Somerset West, 30 August 1994
 Commander Charles Curtis, Johannesburg, 8 March 1994
 Brigadier Pieter de Vos, Stellenbosch, 31 August 1994
 Vice-Admiral RA Edwards, Pretoria, 28 July 1994, 8 August 1994
 Dr Leif Egeland, Johannesburg, 4 May 1993
 Brigadier Frans Erasmus, Pretoria, 9 June 1992
 Dr Brand Fourie, Pretoria, 17 August 1994
 Brigadier Deon Fourie, Pretoria, 24 June 1994, 1 July 1994
 Lieutenant-General Ian Gleeson, Pretoria, 15 October 1992
 Sir de Villiers Graaff, Cape Town, 9 February 1994
 Mrs Linda Griffiths, Cape Town, 8 February 1994, 31 August 1994
 Commandant-General RC Hiemstra, Pretoria, 3 November 1993, 9 September 1994
 Dr Gideon Jacobs, Johannesburg, 3 August 1994
 Commander Gideon Joubert, Somerset West, 29 August 1994
 Commandant WG Kingwill, Graaff-Reinet, 6 February 1994
 Professor Willem Kleynhans, Pretoria, 17 June 1994
 Colonel Denzil Loveland, Cape Town, 7 February 1994, 14 July 1994
 Lieutenant-General HJ Martin, Pretoria, 15 October 1992
 Major Lionel Murray, Cape Town, 7 September 1993

Mr Dan O'Meara, Montreal, 29 January 1997
Mr Hamish Paterson, Johannesburg, 14 September 1993
Major-General Edward Pienaar, Stellenbosch, 14 July 1994
Mr Vause Raw, Durban, 9 March 1993
General Bob Rogers, Knysna, 12 February 1994
Ambassador Donald Sole, Cape Town, 11 July 1994
Dr Willem Steenkamp, 7 February 1994
Dr Marais Steyn, Stellenbosch, 31 August 1994
Ambassador FD Tothill, Pretoria, 18 August 1994
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