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The Ossewabrandwag as a Mass Movement, 1939-1941

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In the first years of its existence the Ossewabrandwag (OB) was an Afrikaner nationalist mass movement comprising nearly all social strata of the Afrikaner population. Its heterogeneous mass basis was made possible only by the lack of a clear-cut political programme or a definite ideology. Instead, the OB drew mainly on Afrikaans popular culture which drew its stimulus from the Symbolic Ox wagon Trek of 1938. The OB, emphasising its republican and nationalist outlook without committing itself to any definite goals, contained in its ranks very divergent interest groups. By emphasising volkseenheid (national unity) and by rejecting South Africa's participation in World War II as Great Britain's ally, it was able to integrate a multitude of different nationalist organisations for the very reason that it lacked a clear ideological profile. Only when its new leadership started to define its ideology and developed its own policy from the middle of 1941 onwards did the OB's membership decline. Abandoning its earlier populism, to a large extent it then developed into a fascist organisation.

The Ossewabrandwag (OB) (Ox wagon Sentinel), the biggest mass movement of Afrikaner nationalism, was originally a local group based at Bloemfontein. Following its foundation in February 1939 it rapidly developed - spreading like a 'brush-fire' (veldbrand) - into the 'most powerful Afrikaner organisation', a 300,000-member mass movement so strong that it attracted to its meetings 20,000 people in a village like Rustenburg, 15,000 in Bellville and 30,000 in Springs.

People joined the movement literally by tens of thousands. This is all the more astonishing when one considers that the movement hardly sprang from organic growth. It was much more like a springtide [stormloop or 'run'].

When viewed as a mass movement - a description, though, that seems appropriate only for the period of 1939 to 1941 - the vagueness of the OB's aims is striking. There is no clear ideological profile, a fact which I will take as a starting point for my analysis of the
Ossewabrandwag phenomenon. In my view – as I will try to make clear in this essay – it was just this vagueness and blur of its aims which made the OB so very attractive to the masses. The OB represented, so to speak, the lowest common denominator. What it stood for could be accepted, in principle, by every Afrikaner nationalist. The OB’s objectives can be condensed into three main and very general-minded epithets – epithets that seem to explain the secret of its initial success: national unity (volkseenheid); rejection of South African participation in World War II; and establishment of a republic.

Starting from these general aims, I will attempt in this essay to support the following view: In the OB case it has to do with a heterogeneous mass movement that succeeded, due to a very efficient organisational structure, in uniting highly diverse interest groups under the roof or ‘umbrella’ of a small number of attractive slogans. But this also explains why the OB turned out to be an unstable mass movement: for as soon as its leaders started to specify its aims, they necessarily destroyed the existing general consensus. And the alliance – informal as it was in nature – disintegrated.

At this time, Afrikaners were on their ‘Second Great Trek’. The term refers to urbanisation, with all its accompanying consequences of wide-spread pauperisation, alienation from the rural world where people came from, and increasing social differentiation. In the wake of these social problems and the growing awareness of them among Afrikaner intellectuals, the 1930s brought a distinct radicalisation of Afrikaner nationalism which opened the door for fascist ideas to work their way in. On the organisational level, the Afrikaner Broederbond (AB) and its network of sub-organisations succeeded, from the late 1920s onwards, in monopolising Afrikaner cultural life for nationalist purposes. According to M. Hroch’s concept of a three-stage development in nationalist organisation, Afrikaner cultural nationalism was entering phase ‘C’, i.e., the mass movement stage. In this context, the symbolic ox wagon trek (which took place in 1938 in celebration of the centenary of the Battle of Blood River) kindled a nationalistic enthusiasm that surpassed the boldest expectations. This was a crucial milestone. The members of the volk, who had generally been alienated from one another and had for the most part been absorbed by urban conglomerates, now rediscovered each other. Cultural nationalism gained, through this meticulously planned event, its mass basis. The Ossewabrandwag would give this new enthusiasm direction and would make it lasting. It would indeed be its very embodiment.

Volkseenheid had long been the primary and popular aim of Afrikaner nationalists. The split-up that took place within the National Party (NP) in 1933-34 undermined people’s trust in parliamentarianism and its procedures – a trust of course that had never been very deep-seated and widespread. The populist structure of South African political parties, their general aim being volkseenheid within the parliamentary-constitutional framework, in fact already contained the seeds of a mass movement like the OB. Many Afrikaners were prepared to give up multipartyism (the concept of a party

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11 OB, H. M. van der Westhuysen Collection (hereafter HMvdW Coll.) 8/57, Manuscript of a speech held on the 9th founding day of the OB, p. 1.
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state) in favour of the idea of volkseenheid. When South Africa entered the war as Great Britain's ally, this also signalled the failure of same-smelting (uniting/merging), that is, of Smuts's model of a white South African nation based on citizenship. Smuts and Hertzog advocated different forms of a constitutional nationalism, albeit racist in character. Only cultural nationalism with its different social background and orientation could provide Afrikaner nationalism with a distinct ideology. Culture-based nationalism usually tends towards political radicalisation rather than constitutional nationalism.

The main reason for the absorption of radical nationalist and fascist ideological tendencies and elements coming from overseas must be seen in the affirmative attitude which Afrikaner nationalism took, from the 1930s onwards, towards urbanisation and modernisation, and also in its foundation on culture. After 1926, the National Party displayed an ever deepening rift between moderate constitutional nationalists and radical, culturally oriented republicanists, which resulted in the 1934 split-up of the NP over the issue of fusion with the South African Party (SAP). After 1934, nationalism took the organisational shape of an informal alliance between a 'purified' NP and the AB. In contrast, radical nationalism obviously had its roots in times prior to the early 1930s, before it was integrated into Hertzog's populist party. But after 1934 it developed its own institutional structures, and ideological tendencies could now develop rather freely. So one should be cautious when one talks about an absorption of fascist ideas by an already radicalised nationalism. The adoption of fascist ideas should be seen as a result rather than a cause. If one narrowly concentrates on ideology there is always a danger of explaining radicalisation in terms of an 'importation' of radical ideas and ideologies. What is overlooked in the process are existent social and institutional conditions. But it is the latter which make possible — and really explain — ideologies.

So this is the background against which the rise of the OB as a champion of volkseenheid must be interpreted. When in 1940 the just 're-united' (Herenigde) National Party (HNP) split up again, the OB stepped in 'to cure all these [split-caused] evils, which indeed it did, and the volk had never before been united so strongly as it was under the roof of the OB, and we sincerely believed this would open for us the road.

15 This is certainly true for the path-breaking studies on ideology and intellectual history by T. D. Moodie, The Rise of Afrikanerdom and P. Furlong, Between Crown and Swastika (Hanover/London, 1991). The main reason for the radicalisation of Afrikaner nationalism seems to me must be looked for first and foremost in economic and social developments within South Africa, including longer-term developments of political parties, the attitude towards democracy, an affinity to the use of violence and in the peculiarities of the South African constitution. Especially the descriptions and analyses of a transfer of radical nationalist ideas from Europe as contained in notions like 'Neo-Fichteanism' (with nearly nobody among the scholars actually having read Fichte's book) seem to be of secondary importance and often lack a basis in evidence: Furlong, Between Crown and Swastika, p. 80 passim. A point in case are H. Simson's remarks on Diederichs: H. Simson, The Social Origins of Afrikaner Fascism and its Apartheid Policy, Uppsala Studies in Economic History 21 (Uppsala, 1980), p. 169 passim. Simson draws on the fact that Diederichs studied with Max Scheler, but he keeps himself satisfied with a few rather superficial remarks on Scheler and he himself conceives a basic difference between Scheler's and Diederichs' concepts of nationalism. A. Hagemann in his important study, Südafrika und das 'Dritte Reich' (Frankfurt/New York, 1989), p. 221, remarks that the mere fact of having studied in Germany can not be taken as evidence of the ideological standpoint of a particular student. There is clearly a lack of studies on individual Afrikaner nationalists, their academic teachers in Europe and the social milieu they lived in during their stay.
to a republic." Hereniging (reunion) thus took place initially within the ranks of the OB, which found itself carried to new heights by the waves of anti-war feelings. Many Afrikaners lost patience with party politics and felt that the ballot box no longer made sense. It was this feeling of frustration which was canalised and organised by the Ossewabrandwag into a much more positive power than it would have been had it remained in a non-organised form.

The OB was able to articulate the disgust which many people felt in view of the delicacies of party politics. It proudly showed itself as a movement of ‘doers’ rather than ‘talkers’: ‘What the OB actually stood for was activism. People streamed, in ever larger numbers, to Ossewabrandwag meetings. For everyone hoped to find his or her “salvation” there, rather than in politics.’ This explains why a great many people were, from the first, interested in the OB not as an organisation for the promotion of Afrikaner ethnic culture purposes, but rather as an organisation that represented the ‘Afrikaner fist’.

The Kommando Structure

The Kommando structure was not a phenomenon that was characteristic of the OB alone. This military form of organisation had in fact been developed during the frontier period and was used by other organisations as well. Now, however, this structure must be regarded as a sort of political militia. But what is more important is the fact that it succeeded in giving its members a feeling of solidarity and making them submit to higher aims. ‘The mere thought that thousands of people all over the country were thinking, feeling and acting alike was in itself a great driving force.’ The OB urged its members to see the nation as a community.

The basic units would be small groups that ‘work with each other in complete harmony, while each individual is helped by ties of mutual trust and comradeship in his/her striving after the true ideals of our movement.’ The kommandos were organised locally, that is, there was one in every small town. As the members knew each other well, the kommandos were in a position to take action in a broad range of fields. They exercised considerable social control; members could

17 Archive of the Institute for Contemporary History, University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein (hereafter INEG), PV 104: R. Meyer Collection, Ontstaan van Ossewabrandwag (May 1962).
19 OB, Int., K. J. H. Behrens, p. 4; OB, Int., J. W. Bell, tape no.214/5, p. 2. J. J. Badenhorst, ‘Die Organisatiestructuur van die Ossewa-Brandwag’ (MA thesis), Potchefstroom 1985, p. 12, mentions as one of the preconditions for the rise of the OB that the political discourse in South Africa took on a ‘war-like character’ (oorlogskarakter) at an early stage; INEG, PV 18/3/1/34, C. R. Swart Collection (hereafter PV 18), J. H. de Jager, Kommandant in Parys, to Swart, 24 May 1940.
20 OB, Int., G. Marais, p. 5
21 Die doel, strewe en organisasie van die Boere-Handhawersbond (Potchefstroom, 1933), p. 33 passim; it was similar in the case of the Trekmaats: OB, HMvdW Coll. 9/63/2, Die Trekmaats. For the historical development of the kommando system, see C. M. Bakkes, ‘Die kommandostelsel met spesiale verwysing na die historiese ontwikkeling van sy rangstukruur’, in P. G. Nel (ed), Die Kultuurontplooiing van die Afrikaner (Pretoria/Cape Town, 1979), pp. 294-313.
22 M. Duverger, Die politischen Parteien (Tübingen 1959), p. 54 passim.
25 INEG, PV 158/12: J. D. Jerling Collection (hereafter PV 158), Circular letter Transvaal, June 1940, p. 1; also OB, Int., C. H. Rautenbach, p. 3.
be mobilised quickly; and often they dominated important sectors of the social and cultural life of a town. Above all, the need for discipline was stressed.\textsuperscript{26}

The \textit{kommando} structure blurred social differences, a factor greatly appreciated generally: “The most wonderful insight and experience to me was that social position [stand] was unimportant – rank played no role at all. Poor, rich, uneducated, educated – all shared this feeling of belonging together, and everyone actually joined in.”\textsuperscript{27} There even were cases “where professors and other academics – people in high positions – were prepared to serve, for the people’s sake [volksaak], under a common man who was by no means their equal in terms of qualification.”\textsuperscript{28} But it was just this point which was criticised by others:

Another inherent weakness of the OB lay in the fact that there was no time to develop a corps of leaders. In consequence it became common practice in any department or enterprise to appoint some junior clerk as a liaison person who had to give orders to people who stood above him in terms of age and social rank.\textsuperscript{29}

The \textit{kommando} structure, with its rank-and-file clarity and simplicity, provided an alternative to the increasingly complex processes of ‘higher politics’. It can be seen as a grass roots protest of people who felt powerless in the face of a political party which was being restructured and modernised at that time, thereby losing much of the popular appeal that was so characteristic of Hertzog’s leadership. However, while the commando structure with its emphasis on equality can be interpreted as the organisational expression of the populist element inherent in the OB, it would be totally wrong to conclude that this was some sort of basic democratic structure: the militaristic principle of command and obedience that characterised the OB is incompatible with any democratic structure. Nonetheless there are a number of cases in which the OB proved more ‘democratic’ than its leaders would have liked it to be, for example, when members refused to obey a certain officer,\textsuperscript{30} when rank-and-file OB members showed solidarity with an officer who had been dismissed,\textsuperscript{31} or when officers were elected by the rank and file rather than being appointed by the upper echelons.\textsuperscript{32} One officer once complained that highly educated members (hooggeleerdes), particularly those from the University of Pretoria, were woefully ‘strong addicts to over-intellectualism’, with the effect that ‘common members declare that they would judge orders on grounds of conscience and would not always be prepared to sacrifice their personal interests for the sake of the Ossewabrandwag cause.’ Many members showed an inclination to criticise orders. ‘Some expect great things to happen but feel that orders tend to be targeted at rather trifling matters to which they don’t want to dedicate their time and energy.’\textsuperscript{33} After all, the OB had no means...
to enforce obedience. There was, of course, the oath of allegiance, and what the OB could do was to appeal to the men's sense of honour. But this was a very poor substitute for real power, as history showed later. Amazingly, even Hans van Rensburg, OB leader from January 1941, gave his generals and the later leaders of the sub-organisations plenty of rope. So one can say that there was a curious mixture of principles – leadership and consensus – in the OB.

The Role of the War

As subsequent developments revealed, the enthusiasm of 1938 could not be kept alive forever. After an initial rapid phase of expansion, the OB was beginning to shrink like a deflated balloon. But then the outbreak of the war came to its rescue and gave it a decisive impetus. Governor-General Sir Duncan's refusal to dissolve parliament and call new elections drove even greater numbers of Afrikaners into the extra-parliamentary camp, even though the OB at that time stressed its non-political attitude.

The significance of the war as a mobilising factor becomes clearer when one takes into consideration that many of the people who were then in their forties had spent part of their childhoods in the concentration camps of the South African War and thus nourished strong anti-British sentiments. ‘One could name thousands of burgers who fought in the Anglo-Boer War and were still alive, people who had taken part in the Rebellion and were still alive ... they felt as if they were stepping back into a reality that was familiar to them.’ Many of the younger people too had grown up with stories from these times. So the Anglo-Boer War became a metaphor for suppression by the British and was closely linked to collective memory. It was the war, then, that gave the OB the ‘wounded identity motif’ – a factor of decisive importance in the emergence of populist movements. It explains why 'nationalism during that phase of its development very often took on such an “anti” bias. Nationalism is “anti”/against the enemy without being clearly “pro”/for anything really.' It was a semi-military movement. It represented a reaction to the declaration of war, and it had no clear cut ideological content right from the beginning. Its primary function was to mobilise Afrikaner resistance.

The war as such had offended the ‘national’ identity of Afrikaners, but the potential for mobilising the masses was certainly strengthened by the fact that sectional identities too were disrupted, degraded and wounded. The frequent street fights between soldiers and enraged young Afrikaners clearly reveal how the consciousness of a loss of

36 OB, Transvaal Beheerraad (hierafter TVB Coll.) 8(i)/1/2/4, Minutes, 26 September 1939. See also: ‘Uit die Geskiedenis van die O.B. in Noordelike Transvaal’, in OB-Jaarboek Noord Transvaal 1947 (Pretoria s.d.), p. 15. OB, J. v. W. de Vries Coll. 1/1, OB-Minutes, Gathering on 26 September 1939, Pretoria.
43 OB, Int., N. Deacon, p. 13; see also OB, Int., Mrs W. J. van der Linde, p. 7.
social status – as a result of the waves of industrialisation, the urbanisation and the uprooting of people who were alienated from their familiar rural environment – crystallised itself around a war that was seen, in nationalistic categories, as ‘forced upon us’. This found vent in violence perceived as ‘defensive’. The confiscation of farmers’ rifles, proclaimed in 1940, must have had a similar effect and probably also offended the feelings of most of those concerned; for a ‘Boer’ lacking his ‘Roer’ was perceived as a rather imperfect person. There were not many governmental war measures which can be said to have caused a similarly steady wave of protests, or were so frequently and consciously counteracted, or were in a similar manner compensated for by the militant-activist Stormjaers organisation, the OB’s storm troopers.

The war can be seen as a focal point. It brought together and merged longer-term developments (such as pauperisation and social discrimination) and shorter-term measures (like, among others, the dismissal of Afrikaner nationalists from the army and the war measures taken by the government). All this contributed significantly to the rise of the OB as a mass movement. The celebration and glorification of cultural patterns, along with a restitution and strengthening of ethnic identity, represented the ‘positive’ element as opposed to the movement’s ‘anti’ bias. As regards the latter, the crystal nucleus was the republic. As a contemporary put it, the OB was a movement ‘which helped to keep course – the course, i.e., of Afrikaner idealism, with its yearning for an identity of its own, its striving for independence, its longing for self-realisation with a chance to live along one’s own lines.’ If the OB wanted to preserve its mass appeal, it had to side-step for a time all political issues that could cause irritations. Instead, its main objective would lie in achieving a unification of Afrikaners on the basis of the best possible common denominator. This meant furthering cultural matters, from Afrikaans language issues to Voortrekker graves that were looked after.

This approach was followed until the OB started to propagate a separation from the British Empire, opting for a republic in the process. The OB saw this as the desirable positive side of its position that balanced the ‘negativism’ contained in its disapproval of the South African war effort. But the National Party saw this differently and accused the OB of meddling with NP matters. It is significant that even within the OB there was no consensus with respect to constitutional issues and the form of a future republic. Hopes of a separation from the Empire were especially prevalent in the Transvaal and were widespread throughout its Afrikaans population because of its republican past. From the historian’s point of view therefore it can be said that the OB’s fundamental

45 The loss of ‘social honour’ (‘soziale Ehre’) as a decisive element in the rise of National Socialism was discovered at an early stage by the historian L. Varga: ‘Die Entstehung des Nationalsozialismus’, in L. Varga, Zeitenwende - Mentalitätshistorische Studien 1936-1939, edited by P. Schöttler (Frankfurt 1991), pp. 115-37, pp. 120-1.
46 Die Transvaler, 1 July 1940, 4 July 1940, 6 July 1940.
47 OB, KG Coll. 2/1/2, R. Meyer to Laas, 29 June 1940. Meyer had told the police in Greytown about his intention to refuse to hand in his rifle. See also OB, Int., J. A. Smith (jnr.), p. 7.
49 Die Ossewabrandwag Konstitusie, IV Doelstelling. See also INEG, PV 158/30: OB oath. This goal is also written into the Cradock agreement with the HNP of October 1940, namely that ‘the chief aim and aspiration of the OB is oriented towards the propagation, protection and realisation of the Voortrekker principles and ideals, including the religious, moral and economic foundation of our people’: INEG, PV 158/13, Onderhoud tussen dr. Malan en die Grootraad van die Ossewa-Brandwag - 29 Oktober 1940. See also Stellenbosch University (SU), D. F. Malan Collection (hereafter DFM Coll.) 1/1/1701.
appeal actually lay in republicanism, the more so as many Afrikaners were dissatisfied with the pretty indecisive attitude the HNP displayed, particularly in the Cape. The OB placed its hopes on a German victory in the course of World War II, since this would also have brought the collapse of the Empire. Nonetheless one can quite safely presume that the number of South Africans who had anything like a moderately good knowledge of what national socialism really stood for must have been rather small.

This view is underpinned by the fact that the German short-wave radio station at Zeessen oriented its propaganda broadcasts at promoting Afrikaner nationalism, not Nazi ideology. So it is not surprising that the German attack on the Netherlands was enough to produce a sobering effect with a great many of the members leaving the OB.

**Popular Culture**

Cultivating popular culture was one of the main goals of the OB in its official programme. Cultural topics played a central role throughout the movement's existence. They certainly helped in many instances to disguise ideological rifts and inconsistencies, and to keep members happy. As H. Pross put it: 'Parties which subject their members to strict ritualisation can afford discursive inconsistencies to an extent that otherwise would mean break-up.' In some places the OB managed to take virtually complete control of cultural life:

We succeeded in activating people who hitherto had not participated in any Afrikaner activities whatsoever. The National Party was dead. Cultural activities were in fact unknown in Pretoria as far as I am concerned. What did exist? Apart from the enthusiasm that had been aroused in 1938, there was virtually nothing else until the Ossewabrandwag stepped in and brought things to life.

The OB organised *braaiwleis* evenings which are still very popular among Afrikaners. Their primary function was to raise funds, but they usually took the form of social gatherings accompanied by speeches. The OB also promoted an Afrikaans sports discipline called *jukkei*. It arranged folk song evenings, lectures and film performances. And it sold OB Christmas cards and song books, and even planted trees. As a Pretoria commando reports, it was the *vriendekringaande* (evenings of friendship) that attracted people more than anything else. The OB was quick in getting the most out of the enthusiasm generated by

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53 OB, Int., G. Cronjé, p. 16.
58 OB, Int., M. S. F. Grobler, tape no. 113/14, p. 11. See also the subdivision of a *kommando* in different units, which were largely active in the cultural sphere - presumably one of the reasons for the long existence of the OB in the Rustenburg area: OB, KJHB Coll. 2/15/1.
59 For an example of the organisation of such a function, see INEG, PV 332/1/2/2/1/1: J. Gutter Collection, minutes of officers' gatherings, 10 January 1942, 24 January 1942 and 21 February 1942. See also P. H. Kapp, *Ons Volksfeeste*, i.e., P. W. Grobbelaar (ed), Die Afrikaner en sy kultuur, Vol. 3 (Cape Town 1975), Chapter 6 'Spontane Volksfeeste', paragraph 'OB-feeste', pp. 160-1.
60 OB, Int., H. M. Robinson, p. 20.
61 INEG, PV 158/13, Dagbestuur van die *Grootraad*, 28 November 1941.
62 OB, Int., Bell, p. 22. OB, TVB Coll. 8(i)/1/3/1, Circular letters, 9 December 1941, Agenda for 1942.
63 OB, MSFG Coll. 1/7, Pretoria Reports, pp. 5-6.
the ox wagon trek, adopting the traditional *Voortrekker* costume as the garment which members were expected to wear at their gatherings. In a similar way it exploited the Great Trek mythology to create suitable emblems and badges.\(^64\) The traditional costume served as a sort of uniform that would help to blur social differences.\(^65\) The more activist members of the OB, though, were afraid that the OB might develop into 'some sort of boy scout movement for adults'.\(^66\) And to some degree the popular culture events indeed served the purpose of keeping the younger-age hotspurs busy.\(^67\)

It was in this popular cultural framework that women members were most active.\(^68\) At first, women members had been organised in the same manner as their male counterparts, and originally they also were to have the same rights.\(^69\) Before long, however, a different type of image of the female began to dominate in the OB, with women's tasks and roles defined as follows: 'The primary purpose of her [the woman's] existence lies in the reproduction of the people to which she belongs. So she must be educated from early on in such a manner that she will see her proper roles of wife and mother as her highest vocation.'\(^70\) Initially, women seemed to resist this subordinate role. But in the final analysis their opposition efforts were of no avail.\(^71\) 'In fact we simply joined the men's groups. We just helped them ... Orders always came from the top and we just executed them.'\(^72\)

OB gatherings and celebrations served the purpose of collecting money for financing not only the OB or its *Noodhulpfonds* (emergency aid funds) for internees, but also the welfare work the OB provided for poor whites on the Witwatersrand.\(^73\) 'Already an initial effort has been made to take care of the poor by way of creating work-clubs. Also, credits have been granted in special cases of need. But hitherto these activities have been of a rather sporadic character.'\(^74\) One 'Cinnie Stoffberg Kommando' organised its own women's *kommando* for the social rehabilitation of impoverished whites.\(^75\) Many young people found adventure and company at the youth camps offered by the OB.\(^76\) Of considerable importance were the functions at Afrikaans commemoration days. They were either organised by the OB, as on the Krugerday occasion in Pretoria (10 October), or the OB sent delegations like the one it sent to the funeral of...
the Boer War general, Maritz. Later on, OB leaders tried to create a clearer profile of OB identity by laying more stress on commemoration days of the OB’s own making, particularly Majuba Day (27 February) and ‘OB Day’ on 8 August. The latter was the day on which, in 1938, the ox wagons had started their journey from Cape Town into the interior of the country. By elevating this day to Foundation Day (instead of the actual day of formal foundation), the OB wanted to underpin the claim that it was ‘a movement of, and originating from, the people’. While relations with the reformed churches were not always unproblematic, the OB constantly sought to woo the churches’ favour. Since belonging to a church and going to church were integral parts of the Afrikaner national identity, the OB surely had more than one good reason to see to it that its members went to church. In Pretoria at least this plan was highly successful.

The Rise of the OB

The Ossewabrandwag was only one among many organisations that mushroomed all over the country in the aftermath of the symbolic ox wagon trek. Most of these groups had their origins on the Witwatersrand and in Pretoria. In contrast, the OB had its stronghold in the Orange Free State, with headquarters in Bloemfontein. So initially the OB represented a rather peripheral phenomenon. But this fact raises all the more the question as to why it was the OB of all organisations that prevailed over all the others. In the first place, the answer seems to lie in the fact that the OB had the vaguest programme of all these organisations. It contained cultural goals of a highly general nature only, combined with broad declarations of intent. This made it easy for every national-minded Afrikaner to see in the programme what he or she wanted to see. Most of the other organisations made the ‘mistake’ of specifying too strongly on their aims. From the start, they were therefore much more restricted in terms of potential addressees (and social ambit).

First and foremost was its name that linked the OB closely to the mass event of 1938: the ox wagon as the symbol of Afrikanerdom was connected in a striking way with the notion of guardian of Afrikaners’ interests: ‘Had this organisation had some other name, it certainly would not have made such a strong impact.’ Of considerable importance in such organisations – with their strong emphasis on hierarchy – is, naturally, the personality of the leader. Colonel Laas was the first Kommandant-Generaal (KG). While this office had not yet gained, during his leadership, the same weight as it was to attain under his successor van Rensburg, Laas was already the chief organiser,

78 INEG, PV 91/1, P. J. G. Fouche Collection, Programme for the festivity on Majuba, New Year’s Day, 1941. See also OB, Int., C. J. Roos, pp. 7-8.
79 OB, HMvdW Coll. 8/57, Die Ossewabrandwag as volksbeweging, p. 1.
81 OB, Int., M. S. F. Grobler, tape no. 113/14, pp. 11-12.
82 OB, Int., A. S. Spies, tape no. 3-5, p. 36, p. 67, and p. 2.
83 This was also the case with the Boerenasie under the leadership of Manie Maritz. After his death the movement rapidly lost influence. The Boerenasie followed the same principles as the OB, but rejected the OB because of its alleged domination by secret societies like the Afrikaner Broederbond: S. G. ‘Manie’ Maritz, Ontwaak Afrikaners! voor dit te laat is, and: ‘Waarom “Die Boerenasie” gestig is’, in Die Dappere Boodskapper (27 January 1941), p. 1.
84 It is significant that he is not addressed with his OB title of Kommandant-Generaal, but still as Kolonel, his army rank.
a tireless worker who regularly toured the country to recruit new members. Obviously, he commanded the kind of rhetoric that appealed to the Afrikaner masses.86

After Laas’s withdrawal from the OB an ‘interregnum’ of several months followed. Then Dr J. F. J. van Rensburg, a dynamic personality and former administrator of the OFS, became leader of the OB. Van Rensburg was by no means a good orator.87 His success lay in his strong personality and the way he showed himself to be a leader. This was obviously enough to draw a host of new members into the OB. In some areas such as the Soutpansberg it was not until van Rensburg became OB leader that the movement really found its basis.88

Dr van Rensburg’s entry into the political arena certainly meant a strong push and caught the imagination of every young Afrikaner. I was a youngster of 20 at that time and I was prepared to do anything Hans van Rensburg told me to do. We literally adored him.89

A question of great importance surely was how the National Party would react to an extraparliamentarian movement like the OB. The HNP tried to get the OB under its control. Under Laas’s leadership, these attempts were repudiated with the argument that the OB had too heterogeneous a mass basis: ‘Otherwise we would not be able to mobilise a really big support for the volk, among the preachers of the churches, for example, or the teachers, officials and factory workers.’90 As a result, the HNP’s attitude towards the OB was rather reserved.91 In the Transvaal in particular the OB became a problem for the National Party, because in this province NP organisation was very weak at that time,92 and a considerable number of Afrikaners in fact were no longer represented in Parliament due to the direct election system. In contrast, Afrikaners in the South tended to be more closely linked to their party.93

In the second half of 1940 things changed. The OB had meanwhile shown that it was a political power in its own right which now caused the NP to begin to support the OB openly.94 This brought the OB another surge of new members streaming into its ranks. But in the NP a certain uneasiness remained with respect to the OB. After all, the movement had not really been brought under control. And not long after van Rensburg had come into power, there were first signs of a power struggle to come.95

The OB also received considerable support from followers of former prime minister Hertzog. These people had been largely pushed out of political life by prominent HNP members. One of Hertzog’s followers was van Rensburg himself. As the historian D. W. Krüger showed, many were disappointed with the disgraceful manner in which Hertzog was treated by the NP. So they joined the OB rather than the HNP.96 Besides there were

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86 INEG, PV 18/3/1/33, J. L. Uys to C. R. Swart, 6 December 1940. See also OB, Int., F.D. Rousseau, p. 2. OB, Int., C. A. Pienaar, tape no. 105/06, p. 9.
88 OB, Int., A. P. van der Walt, p. 2; see also OB, Int., A. T. van Coller, p. 6.
90 SU, DFM Coll., 1/1/1665, P. K. Zondagh to D. F. Malan, 13 May 1940. See also OB, KG Coll. 2/1/2, J. A. Smith to Laas, attached to a letter by N. G. S. van der Walt to J. A. Smith, 18 May 1940.
91 INEG, PV 158/11, HNP Pretoria office to R. P. B. Erasmus, Louis Trichardt, 24 August 1940.
93 OB, Int., A. S. Spies, tape no. 3-5, p. 80.
94 Die Burger, 5 March 1977; Die Volksblad, 31 October 1940. From mid-1940 onwards, the OB is amply and prominently represented in NP press articles.
95 SU, DFM Coll., 1/1/1778, 1782, 1784, 1811: Correspondence of early 1941 about the exclusion from the OB of the organising secretary of the HNP in the OFS, Frans du Toit.
a number of members of the (governing) United Party who had also joined the OB.\footnote{We may therefore conclude that HNP and OB interests by no means naturally coincided. Rather, there was a smouldering rivalry among both organisations for the same nationalist constituency.}

In the Orange Free State, the OB had an initial following that was rather homogeneous in social terms. But inasmuch as the movement expanded, more and more social strata came into play. Initially it was the militia-like skietverenigings (shooting clubs) founded by Colonel Laas which played a dominant role in the OB’s build-up process.\footnote{Nonetheless, the OB quickly overcame its initial character as a sort of private army establishing itself in the shadow of the official armed forces – especially so after members of the armed forces were banned from membership in the OB. Laas (who was himself a farmer) addressed, through the country-based skietverenigings, a larger farming public. The OB therefore acquired a character that was particularly rural. While there are only a few Free State OB membership lists that have survived, these few provide evidence that the overwhelming majority of OB members were either farmers or people with traditional-type occupations rooted in an rural environment. In the country (platteland) there obviously was a widespread longing for such an organisation like the OB, and the rural kommandos particularly courted the ‘not-so-well-off classes’ (namely, the bywoners) – ‘a fact that should not be overlooked’.}

The railways and its workers had been an Afrikaans domain since the job-creating measures of the ‘Pact Government’. Railway employees started to join the OB in great numbers. They were organised in special kommandos, for reasons perhaps which may have to do with intended sabotage activities.\footnote{This represented a deviation from the normal, local community-based organisational structure. The case of the railway employees can be interpreted as an attempt to establish a system of ‘workshop cells’ of the sort that can also be found later on in industrial centres. Outside the Orange Free State, railway employees also seem to have been a worthwhile field for recruitment activities. Obviously the OB planned a union-wide organisation of separate kommandos for those occupational groups that were of particular strategic relevance, such as railway employees or policemen. So railway workers already had developed a relatively strong}

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‘national consciousness’, fostered also by the collective power which they had experienced and practised within the organisational context of the Spoorbond, a nationalist union of railway employees.107

Another group of people that gave the OB cause momentum in more than one respect were ex-soldiers. This group included not only members of the skietverenigings and the ‘Special Service Battalions’,108 but also ex-soldiers from the regular armed forces who, like van Rensburg himself, had been dismissed from the army at the beginning of the war as allegedly untrustworthy elements, or had been ‘relegated’ to the reserves because they had refused to fight outside the Union’s borders.109 All these persons undoubtedly had suffered a loss of status. Now compensation was available through incorporation into a paramilitary group. Things became even better when many of them soon attained leading positions due to their military and administrative training and skills.110

Initially the Orange Free State was the OB’s core area; there it developed, with a membership of 45,000,111 its first strongholds. But very soon the gravitation centre shifted to the Transvaal. This northern province was more densely populated and highly urbanised, so for numerical reasons, it naturally acquired dominance. Compared to the Free State, OB membership was also much more heterogeneous in this province, even in rural areas. The latter included the rich maize-growing areas as well as the thinly populated Bushveld in the West Transvaal or the Transvaal Lowveld. The documents suggest that it was the poorer areas from which the OB drew its mass basis. Farmers suffered heavily during the Depression, the general economic crisis being aggravated still further by periods of drought in the 1930s.

In the country, we had a terrible time struggling for life. And there were the droughts, which worsened matters. So we were faced with two evils at once: a depression and a countrywide drought. Farmers went bankrupt in great numbers – by their thousands – and with them of course the dealers to whom they were indebted and who in the process lost both their money and their markets.112

Right from the beginning, the OB put the economic interests of its members on its agenda. And indeed it was frequently able to strengthen the organisation of farmers on a local scale. In the platteland areas it was not an exception that local OB chiefs were also leaders of interest groups or co-operatives. N. J. R. Roets, originally a member of the Handhawersbond, and his successor as OB general of Rustenburg, K. J. H. Behrens, founded an economic self-help organisation called Boere Hulp en Werkverskaffings Organisasie. Its affiliation to the OB was expressly made part of its articles.113 This is probably one reason why the OB had an exceptionally strong footing in Rustenburg – stronger than anywhere else. Moreover, Roets

109 H. Anderson says (OB, Int., tape no. 57 p. 4), that in his Army unit 1,860 out of 2,100 men refused to take the ‘Red Oath’. H. Anderson, tape no. 16-18; this interview is of particular interest with respect to the role of ex-soldiers in the OB. See also J. J. Badenhorst, ‘Die Organisasiestruktuur’, p. 77.
110 OB, Int., N. Deacon, p. 14, means that especially the ex-soldiers found a new ‘home’ in the OB, since they were not treated as cowards. OB, Int., F. G. T. Radloff, pp.4 passim; OB, Int., J. C. J. van der Westhuysen, tape no. 112, p. 11.
111 J. J. Badenhorst, Die Organisasiestruktuur, p. 74.
113 OB, KJHB Coll. 7/35/1 and 2/15, OB, Int., N. J. R. Roets and L. J. C. Bootha, tape no. 54-5, pp. 15-17 and 27-8.
initiated a campaign to support the Afrikaans Volkskas bank.\textsuperscript{114} In the Transvaal OB Control Council (Beheerraad), support measures and advice for farmers were discussed\textsuperscript{115} and Natal’s OB leader demanded that OB members should give as much support as possible to Afrikaans enterprises.\textsuperscript{116} But there were also cases surely where local and regional OB leaders misused their position and authority to settle old accounts of a private character and to pursue their personal political interests.\textsuperscript{117} Among the Stormjaers in particular were a number of persons who entertained quite high-flown expectations.\textsuperscript{118} 

It was not until the OB had already been firmly established in the central and northern parts of the country that the movement started to expand into the south. The western Cape had a more specialised, export-oriented agricultural economy, but also more firmly established social and political structures than the north. In spite of these differences – with conditions that were somewhat more conservative – the new mass movement grew rapidly and became very strong. Many of the members of the Kaapse Wynbou Vereniging were also OB members. And among the winegrowers OB members were even in the majority.\textsuperscript{119} In June 1940 the secretary of the OB office already felt sure that the Cape was ‘our forte’.\textsuperscript{120}

Of course the OB was especially strong in traditional right-wing bastions such as Paarl (where it succeeded, in a way, the Greyshirts). In contrast to the OB, the Greyshirts were not so much an Afrikaans nationalist as a racist organisation to which ‘Aryanness’ and ‘Aryanism’ were dear. So former Greyshirts brought distinct anti-Semitic tendencies into the OB – tendencies, though, that remained fractional in character.\textsuperscript{121} One of the central figures of the western Cape OB in later years, W. R. Laubscher, had formerly been a chief organiser of the Greyshirts. So we may assume that Laubscher was also responsible for the strong ideological orientation of the western Cape OB, especially with regard to its rejection of the party system and its refusal to take part in (democratic) elections.\textsuperscript{122} ‘The English newspapers point to the coincidence of Nazi organisation and the presence of officers who, up to a year or two ago, were prominent as Greyshirts.’\textsuperscript{123} If one takes van Rensburg’s later itineraries as a pointer, it can be seen that the dry and agriculturally marginal areas of the north-western Cape – places like Kakamas, for example, which was a rehabilitation centre of the Dutch Reformed Church for ‘poor whites’ – were among the best OB strongholds. People there were more ready than elsewhere to turn their backs on traditional politics. ‘They put the blame for much of their misery on politics. I believe those people had rather had enough of politics.’\textsuperscript{124}
The enthusiasm for the OB in some regions like the semi-arid farming areas certainly had economic reasons too. But it would be a mistake to argue only from an economic point of view. For there were longer-term convictions and traditions which also had a strong impact on the OB’s rather diverse following. To take an example, ideology-based motivations played a much stronger role in the western Cape than in the Transvaal. In the latter area the OB was more pragmatic but at the same time more activist in its approach. Here, memories of the republican past were a strong mobilising factor. In the Cape, republicanism was not really rooted in tradition but was formulated from a much more principle-oriented, ‘theoretical’ point of view. In consequence there was a gulf between reality and theory, as can be seen from the hesitation and reserve with which the Cape NP treated republicanism. As far back as 1940, Dr F. D. du Toit van Zyl, a well-known surgeon in Cape Town and one of the OB leaders there, openly and unambiguously spoke up for a fascist state while his political convictions focused on the rejection of parliament and democratic parties.

The eastern Cape and Natal were areas of a sort of Afrikaans ‘diaspora’. In cities that were markedly English in character – such as Port Elizabeth or Durban – opportunities for economic development and cultural self-realisation were very restricted for Afrikaners up to that time. But things changed when the OB began to rise. Now street fights between OB members and soldiers frequently occurred in a number of ‘English’ cities (Cape Town included). It seems that the OB was dominated by a relatively broad anti-British sentiment in these ‘diaspora’ regions – more so than in other areas like Orange Free State or Transvaal, where republicanism mixed with local and regional plus political and economic interests.

The OB in the Cities

As regards urbanised areas, the dividing line runs between industrial zones like the Witwatersrand and centres of intellectual life and administrative bureaucracy like Cape Town, Pretoria and other university cities. In 1940 there was already talk about transferring OB headquarters from Bloemfontein to Johannesburg, for ‘the Rand is seen as the main artery of the Boer nation.’ A. S. Spies, the first chief officer of the Stormjaers, contends that the OB found its centre of gravity on the Rand because of the general mood and strong activism that dominated in that area. On the Rand alone the OB had, at the peak of its expansion, a membership of 60,000 – compared to 130,000 in the whole of Transvaal. It can be taken for certain that the movement expanded from the urban areas into the rural regions rather than the other way around. One of the early organisers on the Rand recalls that he had to manage up to three meetings every night.

The Witwatersrand OB’s composition was just as heterogeneous socially as was the Afrikaans population there in general. The fact that the OB developed so very rapidly on the Rand was attributable first and foremost to social reasons. The rural exodus of Afrikaners was well underway. The majority of them had been newly urbanised. So

125 OB, F. D. du Toit van Zyl Collection, manuscript of speech in Mooreesburg, May 1940.
126 OB, F. D. du Toit van Zyl Collection, Die Evolusie van die O.B., manuscript, Stellenbosch, 29 November 1941.
128 KG 2/1/2, J. D. Sander, 11 April 1940. OB, Int., A. S. Spies, tape no. 3-5, p. 5.
129 OB, Int., A. S. Spies, tape no. 3-5, p. 65.
130 OB, Tvb Coll., 8 (i)/13, Circular letter of 30 April 1943.
131 OB, Int., A. S. Spies, tape no. 3-5, p. 6.
they had had, so far, no opportunity really to make a living and establish themselves economically. On the contrary, many lived on the verge of starvation, exposed to a range of discriminatory practices: ‘And all the time people made you feel – and especially so if you were a Rand Afrikaner – that you were only a second-class citizen and that there was no place there for an Afrikaner.’ But the situation became even worse when the war broke out, as can be seen from the testimony of a mine worker who subsequently became an active Stormjaer:

I had to put up with a lot while I worked in that mine. Of those employed there I was the only one who refused to join the volunteer corps or the ‘red badges’ or the like. There was such an atmosphere of arrogance as only those hanskakies can produce. It was quite a struggle if you wanted to be a true Afrikaner but keep your feelings under control.

The OB’s objective was a limited cooperation with Albert Hertzog’s ‘reform’ movement that was under way in the mining unions. Like the railway employees, construction workers were also organised as a separate OB group in the manner of ‘workshop cells’. A point in case is the existence of OB cells among the Rand’s railway employees and teachers.

As J. Lewis showed, the older craft unions represented those skilled workers who saw themselves as craftsmen and resisted the mechanisation of the work process with its division of labour and the resulting degradation of the craftsman in labour market terms. The craft unions were closed organisations with a monopolistic apprenticeship system in the manner of medieval guilds. Since they were afraid of losing both their monopoly and their wage standards, they continued to shut out all unskilled, mostly Afrikaans workers. It is easy to understand that Afrikaners, however, primarily saw an ethnic discrimination in these practices – a view nationalist propaganda naturally tried to hammer home to Afrikaans workers. To them, the non-accessible craft unions were nothing but a big obstacle in their way to economic rise and social advancement. Beyond this, they deeply resented the animosity and contempt with which the craft unions regularly treated them.

Afrikaners found themselves restricted mainly to those occupations where education and training were less important than the colour of the skin. But this had another consequence: they were dependent on the government as a guarantor of their social status. As a rule, whites had the supervising and non-productive jobs while Africans carried the main burden in doing the heavy manual work. These white workers generally felt that the Smuts government – a coalition that actually included the English-type Labour Party – did not represent their interests. This opened the door for the NP to step in and present itself as the poor whites’ ally. Especially in the thirties the NP followed this strategy and intensified its attempts to find acceptance as champion of the poor and their interests.

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133 OB, Int., A. S. Spies, tape no. 3-5, p. 6.
134 OB, Int., J. H. Coetzee, p. 10, this form of discrimination was restricted to the Rand. G. Cronjé remembers how he had been insulted as a child for speaking Dutch: OB, Int., G. Cronjé, p. 3.
135 OB, Int., J. D. Visser, p. 2
136 INEG, PV 158/14, Dagbestuur-Vergadering, 7 October 1941.
137 Rand Daily Mail, 3 March 1941. See also UCT, BC 640, E3.203, Report on the 688 strong Gideon-Scheepers-Kommando in Johannesburg, whose members were all - without exception - railway employees.
138 J. Lewis, Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation, pp. 107-8. See also S. Pauw, Die beroepsarbeid van die Afrikaner in die stad (Stellenbosch 1946), pp. 110 and esp. p. 114.
139 J. Lewis, Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation, p. 107, mentions that these people were nicknamed ‘cowboys’, presumably because of their rural background.
workers – was skilfully used by the Afrikaans nationalist movement for its racist propaganda.

But it should be kept in mind that Afrikaans workers had had no opportunity so far to develop self-awareness to the point of seeing themselves as a labour movement. They came into the cities with a mentality that originated in rural life. This meant that they were much easier to mobilise for nationalist objectives than for the cause of the political Left. A point in case is the dramatic extent to which the ‘rediscovery’ of national feelings and affiliations took place in 1938 through the ox wagon symbol, particularly on the Rand.141 This is not to say that the nationalist movement merely set its own lines of reasoning against the discursive patterns of the Left. Rather, it re-interpreted and re-formulated the concept of class conflict in nationalist terms – a clever and highly successful move since it undermined and eroded the Left’s discursive bastion ‘from within’, so to speak.142 The existing indignation about capitalist exploitation was utilised and canalised in such a way that it saw a capitalist-imperialist conspiracy, run by ‘ethnically alien elements’, as its new enemy.143 This helped the OB very much at that stage because the NP – at the end of the 1930s – was still very weak in parliamentary terms. Trust in the parliamentary system was still underdeveloped among Afrikaans nationalist workers on the Rand, and the National Party had not many seats in parliament in the years prior to 1948. Rather, the tendency among workers was to organise themselves, in the early years, into small organisations of a highly local character. Later, they streamed into the OB in great numbers. As a rule, joining the OB took a collective rather than individual form because many of the right-wing organisations were absorbed by the OB in corpore. If one takes these absorbed organisations’ programmes as a measure, we also get a pretty clear view of the interests that were ‘tied up’ and canalised by the OB.144 As the leaders of these organisations rose to higher ranks in the OB, this naturally meant that there was a good chance to bring to the fore the ideology and interests of these groups. In the wake of the ox wagon trek, small local and regional groups – composed mainly of young people – mushroomed all over the Rand:

We had been told so many kommando stories by our dads and uncles, and we had heard from our mothers about the concentration camps, so all these things were practically in our blood, and we all wanted freedom, wanted to throw off the British yoke. The result can be seen in all those organisations that took shape everywhere as soon as we were grown up.145

Louis Bootha, subsequently a chief OB general (hoofgeneraal) and, in later years, a Nationalist MP, had founded on the western Rand (mainly in the Krugersdorp area) an organisation named Brandwag, which was distinctly anti-Indian in its attitude.146 Randfontein was organised by Bootha as well, and its 400-strong OB kommando led to a cultural revival.147 The

141 J. Lewis, Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation, p. 74, mentions attempts by the trade unionist E. S. Sachs to counteract right-wing populist temptations by trying to connect cultural identity patterns with class consciousness.
142 Only after its decline had already set in did the OB canvas workers by its concept of a national socialism emphasizing the hidden elements of class conflict within Afrikaner nationalism; see E. Roux, “The O.B. “Labour Front””, in Trek, 8 (20 October 1944), p. 13.
144 OB, Int., J. C. J. van der Westhuysen, tape no. 51, p. 11.
146 OB, Int., L. J. C. Bootha, pp. 2-3.
famous wrestling champion Johannes van der Walt, who was working as a tramway driver in Johannesburg, also drew many of his supporters into the OB.\textsuperscript{148}

The Bondswag had its stronghold on the Witwatersrand, but branches existed in Stellenbosch and Potchefstroom also.\textsuperscript{149} Its main target was the ‘violent, revolutionary, insidious and harassing activities of all un- and anti-national elements in South Africa.’\textsuperscript{150} The group was organised along military lines and engaged in street-fighting with trade unionists and political groups of the Left. Many of the Bondswag members found their way into the ranks of the OB’s Stormjaers.\textsuperscript{151} There are grounds to assume that these people formed, to some degree, the core of the storm trooper. In the wake of the Voortrekker centenary celebrations militant groups\textsuperscript{152} mushroomed. Among them were Die Driemanskap\textsuperscript{153} and Die Eeuwefeesbond,\textsuperscript{154} both of which were organisations for the young, just as were secret organisations like Die OJB\textsuperscript{155} and others. Like the Bondswag, the Trekmaats were driven by anti-communist impulses. Their president was N. Diederichs, then also chairman of the Afrikaner Broederbond. The secretary was P. J. Meyer, who was to become one of the most notable representatives of the ‘socialist’ wing of the OB. The Trekmaats’ objective was to organise the workers and to win them over to Afrikaner nationalism.\textsuperscript{156} That the Trekmaats eventually withstood the pull that was exercised by the OB is attributable mainly to the fact that they switched function and became, subsequently, the youth organisation of the Afrikaner Broederbond.

The Christelik Nasionale-Demokratiese Beweging, better known as the Blackshirts, was an anti-Semitic group of dubious fame, due to the violence with which it appeared on the scene.\textsuperscript{157} It was especially strong among tramway employees in Johannesburg,\textsuperscript{158} but also in Natal, although it was very soon absorbed there by the OB.\textsuperscript{159} The Blackshirts sought to win support mainly among ‘Christian-minded national Aryans’\textsuperscript{160} which meant that they were not Afrikaner nationalists in the strict sense of the term. The Brownshirts, anti-Semitic as well,\textsuperscript{161} called themselves Bond van Nasionale Werkers. Their aim was to establish a corporate state with occupation-oriented representational structures.\textsuperscript{162}

On the Rand it was particularly difficult to keep the younger activist OB members


\textsuperscript{149} OB, Int., J. C. J. van der Westhuysen, tape no. 69 u.78, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{150} OB, HMvdW Coll. 8/60/6 Die Bondswag, Grondbeginsels. For the military structure, see Ibid., Magsorder no. 1, 16 January 1939; for the ideology, Ibid., the memorandum by the Kommandant-Generaal of the Bondswag, D. B. H. Grobbelaar of February 1939.

\textsuperscript{151} OB, Int., J. C. J. van der Westhuysen, tape no. 51, pp. 10 \textit{passim} and tape no. 69 and no. 78, pp. 2-3.


\textsuperscript{153} OB, HMvdW Coll. 8/61/3, Circular letter of December 1938.

\textsuperscript{154} OB, HMvdW Coll. 8/61/4.

\textsuperscript{155} OB, HMvdW Coll. 8/61/12.

\textsuperscript{156} OB, HMvdW Coll. 9/63/2, Circular letter of 7 February 1940.

\textsuperscript{157} Kroonstad Times, 10 November 1939.

\textsuperscript{158} OB, Int., J. C. J. van der Westhuysen, tapes no. 69 and 78, p. 10. See also OB, Int., J. C. Neethling tape no. 84, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{159} OB, Grootraad Collection 1/2/11, Minutes of 1939 and 1940, 17 July 1939. There were earlier attempts to change the Blackshirts into a \textit{egte Boere-beweging} (true Boer movement), which was especially directed against its anti-Semitism: NGSvdW Coll. 5/25, Diary of 13 November 1938.

\textsuperscript{160} Christelik Nasionale-Demokratiese Beweging, \textit{Program van Beginsels} (1938).

\textsuperscript{161} OB, Int., J. C. J. van der Westhuysen, tape no. 51, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{162} J. C. Neethling (Pretoria) was one of the leading OB functionaries. Initially he had been a member of the Greyshirts, later on of the Blackshirts. He also was a prominent member of the AB: OB, Int., J. C. Neethling, tape no. 19-20, p. 3.
under control and to persuade them to remain moderate.\textsuperscript{163} Activism was strongest among younger workers, clerks, and more senior skilled workers and craftsmen. They were organised mostly in the storm troopers.

The \textit{Handhawersbond} (HHB) – a military-type organisation – was somewhat older than the OB. It was mainly concerned with promoting the Afrikaans language and with supporting Afrikaners’ economic interests. The HHB had been founded in 1930 by members of the Transvaal Teachers Association.\textsuperscript{164} Having a membership of several thousand people, the HHB had its strongholds in Pietersburg, Waterberg, Rustenburg, Pretoria and its vicinity, and especially in the bushveld.\textsuperscript{165} This organisation had been revived in the early days of 1940\textsuperscript{166} and entertained close links afterwards to Oswald Pirow’s Transvaal-based fascist \textit{Nuwe Orde} (New Order).\textsuperscript{167} In consequence of this relationship, the OB initially kept the HHB at arm’s length.\textsuperscript{168} Eventually, however, the \textit{Handhawersbond} was dissolved after van Rensburg had become OB leader. Most of the former’s members now joined the OB,\textsuperscript{169} and a number of its leaders quickly advanced into high-ranking positions in the OB.\textsuperscript{170}

The key figure of the young Pretoria OB – founded in 1939 – was a missionary whose name was M. S. F. Grobler (who later became a nationalist MP). At the beginning of 1939 Gobler had initiated an \textit{Ossewa-groep}. This group was subsequently absorbed by the OB, and Grobler became the OB’s chief general in Pretoria.\textsuperscript{171} Important influences also came from smaller organisations like the \textit{Boererepubliek}, and particularly from the \textit{Republikeinse Bond}, an organisation that had its stronghold in Pretoria and recruited its members chiefly from among state officials.\textsuperscript{172} In Pretoria – as elsewhere – the OB was primarily committed to social activities:

\textit{Burgers} [members below the officers’ ranks, the rank and file] are divided in \textit{korporaalskappe} in order to help each other in times of economic distress; for example, when a \textit{burger} loses his job simply on account of his convictions, the others shall be obliged to help him, in the context of the OB.

For this reason, the eastern Pretoria \textit{Hoofkommandantskap} tried to gain a foothold in already existing cooperatives, an undertaking that was unsuccessful at that time. But it nonetheless shows that OB leaders clearly were aware of the fact that economic motivations did play a role among members:

Another goal is to establish a direct link between producers and consumers. So what we need is a central storehouse for the OB producer to deliver his products. From there, the goods can

\begin{footnotes}
\item[163] OB, Int., A. S. Spies, tape no. 216-19, p. 111.
\item[164] J. J. Badenhorst (see fn. 19), p. 19.
\item[165] Uit die Geskiedenis van die O.B. in Noordelike Transvaal”, in \textit{OB Jaarboek 1948}, p. 9; See also OB, Int., J. C. Neethling, tape no. 84, pp. 6-7.
\item[166] \textit{Die Vaderland} 1 April 1940. OB, Int., P. C. Coetzee, p. 2 passim.
\item[167] \textit{Sunday Times}, 14 April 1940.
\item[168] SU, DFM Coll., 1/1/1655, P. K. Zondagh (Sccr. of the OB Beheerraad Cape) to D. F. Malan, 13 May 1940.
\item[169] OB, Grootraad Collection 1/2/11, Minutes of 3 October 1940. OB, Int., P. C. Coetzee, p. 10. \textit{Die Volksblad}, 3 December 1940. One of the unclarified questions about the conflict between the OB and the HNP is in how far former \textit{Handhawersbond} activists were involved, for the clash with the NP sprang from the Party’s attacks on Pirow.
\item[170] OB, Int., N. J. R. Roets and L. J. C. Bootha, tape no. 54-5, pp. 3 \textit{passim} OB, Int., J. C. J. van der Westhuysen, tape no. 51, p. 9. Van der Westhuysen is of the opinion that Albert Hertzog was involved in the \textit{Handhawersbond}.
\item[171] Ibid., tapes no. 69 and 78, p. 8.
\item[172] OB, Int., M. S. F. Grobler, tape no. 103, pp. 4 \textit{passim}; OB, MSFG Coll. 5/37/8 about a journal \textit{Ossewa}.
\end{footnotes}
go directly to the consumer. If any of this can be achieved, it will mean a powerful weapon and will greatly help to build trust – because OB members will feel that really all their wants are being given attention.

The feeling of unity among *burgers* was said to be very strong, in part because of good leadership, but in part also because the organisation as such saw this as its main objective. "*Burgers* like to be kept busy all the time, and they are always ready to carry out orders." Grobler used the OB organisation to wrestle the Pretoria taxpayers' association away from British influence – an important first step in the process that resulted in the dominance of Afrikaner nationalists under the leadership of Albert Hertzog on the Pretoria city council. The feeling of unity certainly was further enhanced by the military drill exercises which Grobler introduced. While, in 1940, many OB leaders – among them Grobler himself – were arrested on account of such training exercises, this also helped to speed up the expansion of the OB on a country-wide scale.

The Pretoria OB shot up like a mushroom, and many members of the city's intelligentsia who until shortly before could not be won over are now willing to join. Professors and doctors become corporals and sergeants whereas the higher ranking officers are railway workers and students.

Pretoria soon represented the biggest generalship in the whole Union, due presumably to its heterogeneous social structure. In February 1941 it had 5,586 members. Of these, the smaller part, 1,066, came from the industrial areas in West Pretoria, and most of them were ISCOR workers. Pretoria East – including the city centre and the university – contributed 1,297 members. The biggest *Hoofkommandantskap*, however, existed in the north (Moot). It had its base in the poorer living areas such as Silverton, Innesdal and North Pretoria. Documents from later years confirm that the regionally organised *kommandos* also focused on special occupational groups. This was a policy in fact that was promoted systematically from very early on:

Up to the beginning of this year, students were part of their local Ossewabrandwag units. Due to an agreement between the Ossewabrandwag and the Afrikaanse Nasionale Studentbond [ANS], every member of the ANS automatically became a member of the Ossewabrandwag now, and vice versa. It was regarded as desirable to organise the students into a separate unit.

An observation often made is that students tend to be in the forefront of riots and rebellions. This is confirmed in the case of the OB. In all Afrikaans university cities students were strongly represented in OB units, and often they were frequently organised in separate *kommandos*. Stellenbosch might be cited as a point in case. Many *Stormjaers* could be recruited from the University of Pretoria. And an SJ elite unit called *terreurgroep* – based and operating in the capital – to a considerable degree also consisted of students. The ANS had

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173 OB, MSFG Coll. 1/7, Pretoria Reports, p. 6.
174 OB, Int., M. S. F. Grobler, tape no. 113/14 p. 12.
176 Ibid., pp. 17-18.
177 OB, MSFG Coll. 2/8, Report from the *Kommando* 6a2, January 1943. The comparatively low figure has probably to do with the existence of a right wing trade union, namely ISTA. It is possibly due to the fact that Afrikaners in this case did not have to struggle against a well-established English-speaking skilled labour force: J. Lewis, *Industrialisation and Trade Union Organisation*, pp. 82-3.
178 OB, MSFG Coll. 1/7, Report of 15 February 1941.
elected van Rensburg as its honorary president, which can be taken as an indicator of the strength of the OB among students. To understand this, one should keep in mind that Afrikaans students usually came from families with a non-intellectual background. This fact may account for their tendency to be less interested in intellectual topics, than in trying to change social conditions through militant activities.

What is more surprising is the strong OB involvement of university teachers and intellectuals. Intellectuals clearly were driven by motivations different from those of people living in the platteland or in industrial cities. The Afrikaans intelligentsia was alarmed by the increasing pauperisation among Afrikaners, by the decline of Afrikaans culture, and by the progressive Anglicisation that meant a challenge to their own social status.\footnote{180} These intellectuals can be described as ‘reactionary Narodnikis’ – people who wanted to overcome their social alienation by way of glorifying the volk and a radically people-centred approach. As a rule, those joining the OB were – in contrast to those remaining in the HN party – inexperienced in political matters. They tended to be naive, starry-eyed theoreticians trying to provide the existing populist movement with a theoretical superstructure by stressing the egalitarian aspect of nationalism and constructing on this basis a nationalist version of ‘socialism’, weaving into this texture the volksseie philosophy of Potchefstroom-type Calvinism.\footnote{181} Since they sought to derive their identity from ideologies and Weltanschauungen in the first place, it is no wonder that the need to formulate the Afrikaners’ situation in ideological terms was particularly strong among them. Nonetheless, these people did not play a dominating role in the early, populist phase of the OB.

The inflow of intellectuals into the OB was especially strong in Potchefstroom,\footnote{182} which had always been a stronghold of republicanism.\footnote{183} The Christelik-Republikeinse Beweging under its leader Professor C. H. J. de Wet also had its base in the local university. While it is true that de Wet soon distanced himself from the OB,\footnote{184} his general objective of an authoritarian republicanism found its way into the movement through two other personalities: Professor L. J. du Plessis,\footnote{185} the most eminent later-time OB...
theorist, and N. G. S. van der Walt, the OB newspaper editor.\(^{186}\) Years before the emergence of the OB, van der Walt was already known for his aversion to political parties (the NP included) and parliamentary democracy.\(^{187}\)

While the intellectuals greatly cherished the notion of equality with respect to the *kommandos*, this obviously did not hinder them from rising exceedingly quickly to leading positions. Thus they were markedly involved in formulating the guiding principles and ideas of the OB, and at least from 1942 on they did this to an extent that was out of proportion to their actual numerical strength. In these leading OB circles many could be found who had previously been active in other organisations, including parties. The heterogeneity of the OB membership was also reflected in the make-up of the various ‘control councils’ and the *Grootraad* (Great Council), due to the different backgrounds of these people.

### The Beginnings of Structural Changes within the OB in 1941

At the beginning of 1941 (and for reasons that had to do with the OB’s involvement in acts of sabotage), the government took a war measure that – in the form of an emergency decree – forbade state officials to be OB members. This put the new *Kommandant-Generaal* van Rensburg into a difficult situation right at the beginning of his leadership. He reacted with a clever move, however, by granting the respective members an ‘honourable discharge’. By this he made sure that these people were not socially stigmatised as a consequence of their leaving the OB for fear of losing their jobs.\(^{188}\) Nonetheless, losing a whole group or segment of its membership was a severe blow to the OB; one of the *kommandos* in Pretoria, for example, lost 75 per cent of its members, most of them state officials.\(^{189}\) The social groups affected included, for example, the railway employees (who could play a crucial role in a potential coup d’état) and the teachers. In many places, the non-availability of such people was painfully felt. The teachers in particular, with their higher education, were needed both as organisers and as ‘multipliers’ and propagandists. As membership lists of rural *kommandos* clearly reveal, teachers were very often the only persons with a higher education.\(^{190}\) As a result of the government’s decree, many *kommandos* became more uniform and homogeneous socially.

It is not my intention in this paper to discuss the causes that underlie the conflict between the OB and the HNP, nor will I focus on the course that conflict took. So a few remarks must suffice. Many OB members were not prepared to accept (and identify themselves with) the blunt and undifferentiating rejection of parliament and party politics that characterises the OB from 1941 onwards.\(^{191}\) Certainly there existed a strong populist bias among OB members, with manifold aversions: against the increasing dominance of a caucus-based power structure; against the growing power of the party leaders; against internal discipline. But van Rensburg made a grave mistake in taking these

\(^{186}\) OB, NGSvdW Coll. 5/25, Diary, 18 June 1936 and 10 July 1937; on 27 May 1938 he was elected leader of the movement in the Free State. Even after the foundation of the OB, van der Walt was still active in the *Handhawersbond*; see Diary, 28 May 1939 and OB, NGSvdW Coll. 1/7, letter from the *Handhawersvereniging* in Bloemfontein, 25 April 1938, containing information that van der Walt was accepted as a member.

\(^{187}\) OB, NGSvdW Coll. 5/25, Diary, 4 August 1936, esp. 10 July 1937 and 1 June 1938, about the ‘gruwelige verkiesing’ (horrible election): ‘I hope this was about the last election I had to deal with!’

\(^{188}\) On the withdrawal from the OB of officials who nevertheless pledged their continuing allegiance to that organisation’s aims, see OB, HMvdW Coll. 1/1.


\(^{190}\) J. F. J. van Rensburg, *Leier van die gedissiplineerde Afrikanerdom: lewensbekrywing en drie toespreke* (Johannesburg 1942); Speeches from early 1941.
sentiments for a fundamental rejection of the system as such. The authoritarian and hierarchical structure of the kommando system contributed a lot to the self-destruction of the Ossewabrandwag inasmuch as it made the articulation of grass roots opinion impossible. The effect was that when the leaders came out with a distinct policy, many members felt they had no choice but to leave the OB since there was no way of effecting any change in policy – neither a dismissal of the leaders nor an election of new leaders being possible. The government’s OB membership ban relating to state officials marks the beginning of a process that massively eroded the OB’s membership base. This was intensified after 1941 by the confrontation with the National Party. And things still worsened for the OB after the turning point of the war, and still more so when the war eventually came to an end.

Losing its populist mass basis subsequently changed the OB’s profile, inasmuch as it grew more ideological in nature. Regional centres now moved into the foreground. Rural kommandos became more ‘rural’ in the sense that they were characterised and dominated by certain occupational groups, most notably by the farmers. In university cities meanwhile, the intellectuals began to play a more prominent role. In industrial areas, the OB suffered from a particularly dramatic decline that began in 1942 and can be traced back to the fact that very many of its younger active members were drawn away from the OB as such, joining the Stormjaers.

But there was also the increasing influence which Albert Hertzog’s ‘reform’ movement exerted within the Mine Workers Union and which made the OB a somewhat redundant social and political force. The OB thus developed into a conglomerate of different ‘segments’, each of which had its own and very diverse social outlook. Reorganising the OB into a volksbeweging (people’s movement) had as its aim a more efficient coverage of these diverse social groups by creating sub-organisations of a distinct social and occupational character. But it is exactly this direction in development which can be interpreted as a clear indicator of the OB’s decline. After all, this reveals that the OB had already lost its character as a populist mass movement.

No clear-cut ideological distinction between the NP and the OB existed before 1941. During the 1930s, Afrikaner nationalism became considerably more radical, due mainly to the poor-white problem and the new orientation towards an urbanised constituency which the AB brought about. In this process, fascist ideologies coming from abroad were widely absorbed. It is therefore not possible to speak of two different sections of Afrikaner nationalism – say, a democratic one on the one hand, and an authoritarian or fascist one on the other; rather, we have an ideological continuum. The principle that caused the conflict between the HNP and the OB was parliamentary democracy – not as an end in itself, though, but as a principle – or means – in the sense of gaining power. It is certainly true that ideological differences also emerged and played a role in the clashes...
after August 1941, but as a phenomenon of secondary importance only. In the course of
a 'galvanic process', the HNP discovered the merits of 'democracy' and emphasised
the usefulness of parliamentary structures while the OB drifted towards fascism. It was
- as one scholar put it - a power struggle in the first place, centred around political
principles, with ideological issues emerging only later.195

Subsequent events proved that the NP did the right thing in choosing to gain power
via parliamentary majorities. In fact, there was actually no convincing alternative to
this strategy at the time. There are a number of reasons to support this view: the lack of
political experience among OB leaders; the higher organisational skills and the stronger
government.198

Conclusion

The OB bridged the widening 'gulf' between the rural and urbanised areas - an issue which
most nationalists saw as very important.199 The primary aim behind the struggle against
liberalism and communism was to keep urbanised Afrikaners clean from 'alien' ideas and to
persuade them instead for the notion of the volk. Integrating diverse parts of the population

author tries to set his findings against the principle-centred approach pursued by M. Roberts and A. E. G.
Trollip, The South African Opposition, 1939-1945: An essay in contemporary history (Cape Town, 1947); see
pp. 160 and 179. To me, however, these two opinions and approaches do not seem to be mutually exclusive.
196 INEG, PV 158/30, 'Die O.B. as Volksbeweging' and OB, MSFG Coll., 1/3, Die Volkstryd, declaration of the
Grootraad of October 1941.
197 As I have tried to show, the OB rallied, under the umbrella of very vague and global aims, a great number of
very diverse interests. The support for an Afrikaans popular culture must be seen as one of the uniting elements
in this process. Therefore I cannot agree with P. J. J. Prinsloo, 'Die Kultuurbeeld van die Ossewa-Brandwag
actually means 'contradiction' or 'incompatibility') of cultural and political interests.
52-76, esp. pp. 60-1.
199 F. A. van Jaarsveld, 'Die Afrikaners se Groot Trek na die Stede 1886-1976', in Die Afrikaners se Groot Trek na
die Stede, en ander opstelle (Johannesburg/Cape Town, 1972), pp. 135-225, esp. p. 194. The programme of the
Afrikanerbond (OB, Grobler Collection 5/37/1) which had been active in Pretoria and was absorbed later by
the OB is typical of this attitude: 'Regaining the cities and towns for the Afrikaner; closely weaving together
the rural and urban parts of the Afrikaner volk to make it a strong whole; putting an end to the servitude of our
volk, especially in the economic and industrial fields, raising it to its legitimate place in all spheres of life.'
The Ossewabrandwag as a Mass Movement, 1939-1941

into one big mass movement was possible only inasmuch as ideological clarity and full-fledged political concepts were dropped. This lack in ideological profile was compensated for by a strong emphasis on popular culture. In the aftermath of the symbolic ox wagon trek, cultural activities and social events attracted many people. The OB resorted to nationalist symbols and ritualisation. Its emphasis on equality and use of Voortrekker symbolism helped to draw into its ranks the poorer Afrikaners especially. Ritualised egalitarianism, with its appeal to a volkseenheid that would transcend all class divisions, lies at the root of both its success and its decline. It blurred social differences, which came to the foreground when the OB became involved in a conflict with the HNP. The lack of a clear policy now became visible and volkseenheid proved to have been no more than a poor substitute for a proper political programme.

In its mass movement phase, however, the OB made a very important contribution to the nationalist movement as a whole because it tried to hammer home to Afrikaners that nationalism would be the panacea – or universal solution – to all their problems. To a large degree, this attempt was indeed successful. It widely helped to immunise Afrikaners against other concepts and alternative approaches. But as soon as its leaders tried to bring to bear a distinct ideology, membership numbers declined and the movement lost momentum. As the NP proved, there actually was no alternative to a parliamentary path to power. The OB had embarked on seizing power by force. As things were, however, an overthrow was impossible. So the OB’s course proved impractical and eventually futile.