

HOOLIGANS IN UNIFORM: THE PIETERMARITZBURG CITY HALL RIOT OF NOVEMBER 1943

by Christopher Merrett

‘THIS is the way we do things in Pietermaritzburg’: those were the reputed words of mayor Eleanor Russell on the evening of Saturday 20 November 1943 as she confronted, with ‘coolness and courage’, a mob of white soldiers and their girlfriends, ‘completely out of control’, who were shouting for a city hall dance to be shut down.¹ The immediate cause of the aggression resulted from the fact that the event was organised by the Natal Coloured Welfare League. This, argued the soldiers, would not be allowed in Johannesburg. Their behaviour that night was particularly reprehensible as it took place in the middle of a world war fought to defend the free world against fascism. Some fascists, in and out of uniform, were active on the streets of Pietermaritzburg that night.

Events and investigation

The occasion was an annual ballroom dancing competition to raise funds for the Mayoress and Rover Scouts Christmas Cheer Fund. As Russell explained, the city hall was granted ‘for the night to a permanent part of Maritzburg’s population’.² But the hundreds of troops confronting her were incensed that the hall had been ‘given to the Cape coloureds’, thus depriving them of their regular Saturday night venue. One soldier provided the contorted (and racist) opinion that by helping to stop the dance he was fighting for freedom. Russell, drowned out by booing and foul language in what she termed an ‘ugly situation’ inflamed by rumours that there were white women with coloured men in the hall, suspended the dance at 9.00

pm; then helped clear the building via the back entrance and drove some of the dancers home. Military police reinforcements from Hay Paddock transit camp just 5 kilometres away had inexplicably taken an hour to arrive at 10.00 pm and needed another hour to fully restore order.

The military inquiry started at Oribi camp on Tuesday 23 November and lasted five days.³ It provides considerable detail about the events of Saturday night and took evidence from military and civilian witnesses. It had to account for a serious two-hour riot that involved hundreds of soldiers who spread out from the city hall in small groups into Church Street where shop windows were smashed. Coloured men and women were assaulted at random by what the *Natal Witness* described in an editorial as ‘hooligans in uniform’. For example, Private Arthur Frost of the Cape Corps was attacked twice: first outside the city hall and then knocked unconscious making his way to the military police sub-station. Confronting the rioters was Captain G.B. Hart, picket commander, who had one officer, Second Lieutenant Matthys Bosman, and 46 men who had been deployed at 6.00 pm; but they were unable to secure the city hall against a ‘military mob’ of 300 soldiers with a racial agenda (the remaining soldiers were spectators). There are several accounts of male and female civilians egging on the rioters and screaming for the city hall to be cleared.

Twice the hall was invaded and people were assaulted, even in the women’s toilets. H. Harvey Williams

described women being knocked down; ticket seller Arthur Wood recalled soldiers shouting abuse about a 'Hottentot dance';⁴ while Suzie Ontong courageously told a soldier busy assaulting her and calling her a 'kaffir' that he was a disgrace to Smuts's uniform. The two masters of ceremony, A.C. Fernando and Andrew Appolos, were both attacked together with the latter's wife. The city hall caretaker, Harold Warr, pointed out that the military picket had already failed to disperse a group of drunken soldiers at 7.15 pm, while Bosman gave evidence that soldiers were fighting one another. His picket had no powers of arrest. Clearly alcohol fuelled the riot, something the military authorities flatly, and implausibly, continually denied.

Significantly the inquiry recorded the role of a particularly aggressive civilian, a South African Railways worker named Coetzee. Hart pointed out to the inquiry that he could not arrest the man and the police were absent. Sergeant H.A. Roos heard another civilian threaten to dynamite the hall, while Private B.J. Vermaak testified that someone was shouting 'tonight is the night for the OB [Ossewa Brandwag or Oxwagon Sentinels]'. There appeared to be three ringleaders. The OB was an Afrikaner cultural organisation founded in 1938 that had become openly pro-Nazi and anti-democratic, ran a particularly vicious militia (Stormjaers), and maintained links with the Abwehr (German military intelligence) in Lourenço Marques. Its leader, the shrewd J.F.J. van Rensburg, was an open admirer of Hitler, but although individual members were prosecuted in 1941 in a case involving preparations for a coup, and many more were interned at Koffiefontein, the OB

strangely survived the war unbanned. It is believed Prime Minister Jan Smuts was wary of creating martyrs.⁵

Incitement inflamed the situation and the South African Police were notably inactive that night, claiming they had too few men available. The OB had sympathisers and members in the SAP, but whether this is true of Pietermaritzburg is unknown.⁶ Civilian Protection Services personnel were present, but also took no action, although they had police powers.⁷ There is an echo of this OB involvement in an incident from three years earlier: extreme right-wingers protested in the supposed cause of protection of white women about use of the city's pavements by black pedestrians. Somehow, this had been linked to the murder of a white woman in mid-March 1940. Rud Meyer of Sevenoaks wrote: 'we country people will take things in hand and start a veritable "clean-up" in Pietermaritzburg'; going on to threaten Africans and Indians.⁸

The military tried to deflect attention from their own unpreparedness. Even so, 50 rounds of tear gas were discharged (some sources say just 30) and dispersed the mob to other parts of town where it became mixed with crowds coming out of cinemas. A laundry in Temple Street was attacked in this wider riot. And there was one instance of Cape Corps retaliation, a group of 20 to 30 soldiers attacking white troops near the Voortrekker Museum and hospitalising two of them. Troops under the military police command of Lieutenant Lance Bailey were assaulted for firing tear gas and Staff Sergeant Francis Chevill, a battle instructor who was set upon twice, pointed out that rioters were looking for trouble and targeted officers and NCOs. There was more than a whiff of mutinous intent about the riot and the

presence of a coloured dance at the city hall was not its only cause.

On the Monday, Colonel A.G. McKenzie, officer commanding Pietermaritzburg, provided a weak apology at the Mayor's Parlour for a 'very bad show'; and took exception to coverage in the *Natal Witness* that had suggested the military had trivialised the incident by treating it as an 'amusing frolic'. McKenzie used the lame excuse that troops who had fought in North Africa resented the presence of coloured soldiers in Pietermaritzburg, particularly at the city's main Saturday-night venue. He noted that soldiers angered by press reports and comment had threatened retaliation. More plausibly he explained that transit troops were under-officered and admitted that there had been previous examples of indiscipline. Russell put McKenzie firmly in his place by pointing out that Pietermaritzburg fell under civil law and that she was unimpressed by McKenzie's opinions and what the military thought about bookings for its city hall. She was the first female mayor of a Natal municipality and when awarded the freedom of the city in 1960 was described as person of 'moral courage'. Events in 1943 suggested that this was indeed correct.

Both this incident and the response of the military authorities raised questions about amenities at Hay Paddock base on the south-east boundary of the city. Up to this point, 440 000 troops had passed through Hay Paddock and the city's other military camp at Oribi. There was a chronic lack of officers in proportion to the number of troops and 'Qakhamba' in a pseudonymous letter to the press berated the military authorities for slovenliness.⁹ The paper despatched what it grandly termed a

special correspondent to Hay Paddock to investigate. It was revealed that tents were pitched on poorly drained yellow clay (thus the bitter soubriquet of Clay Paddock) that could turn into a quagmire. This was confirmed by Deneys Schreiner, a gunner who passed briefly through Hay Paddock and described it as a 'foul, muddy transit camp'. In the same letter he criticised Pietermaritzburg's 'somewhat soggy climate and mental outlook.'¹⁰ But the general verdict in the local press was that mental and physical well-being were now adequately catered for with swimming, cricket and boxing, films, 'and concerts, lectures and quizzes, and a daily news sheet.' The camp's population was divided into six rotating groups and the site had two YMCA venues. Significantly, Saturday was the only night of the week with no scheduled activity at the camp, but beer was available.¹¹

In his somewhat muddled memoirs, written in old age, E.G. Malherbe (then head of Military Intelligence (MI) and later principal of the University of Natal) admitted that transit camps with their shifting populations of troops in limbo were a recipe for trouble and often poorly administered by 'base wallahs' embroiled in tangled red tape. Malherbe is irritatingly vague about dates, but at some stage sent three of his officers, including Gerald Gordon the lawyer and novelist, to address the situation. Their boost to entertainment included a concert given by Noel Coward. As head of MI, Malherbe reported on Hay Paddock to Smuts and to Chief of General Staff, Sir Pierre van Ryneveld. The latter showed startling indifference and shelved Malherbe's report, was reprimanded by Smuts, and then unwisely fired Malherbe in

retaliation. When Malherbe eventually confronted Van Ryneveld before a gathering of generals and gave him a pointed lecture about the perils and injustice of shooting messengers, Van Ryneveld quickly backed down.¹²

Context

The South African Army, a largely volunteer force, was uniquely divided between those who elected to serve beyond the border and those who declined; and the former wore red flashes, a stimulus to internal conflict. The same applied to the SAP, which had a military brigade. A previous riot involving the armed forces had occurred in central Johannesburg on Friday 31 January 1941 when the audience leaving an OB gathering clashed with soldiers, and the police were forced into a baton charge. On the Saturday night the situation worsened and the OB headquarters at Voortrekkergebou, protected by non-tab police, was attacked by soldiers and civilians. Another baton charge ensued but not before the offices of *Die Vaderland*, which had no connection with the OB, were badly damaged. The Voortrekkergebou was saved by the arrival of the Police Brigade (red tabs) from Sonderwater and the streets were cleared only in the early hours by troops with fixed bayonets.

The aftermath provides an interesting contrast with the Pietermaritzburg riot. Smuts issued a special order to troops that reminded them of the importance of ‘discipline ... in the face of the enemy.’ The Elliot Commission of Inquiry (April 1941) found no evidence of deliberate organisation of the riots, but blamed a lack of military control over troops on leave and undisciplined behaviour by police, singling out non-tabbed individuals. The Elliott

Commission recommended the abolition of police tabs, but this was not followed up. It also had harsh words to say about the anti-democratic nature of the OB.¹³

Subsequently there was a riot at another transit camp, Helwan, 90 kilometres from Cairo. Bracketed with Hay Paddock as ‘notorious’, Helwan had been built for the British army in 1916 and was clearly even worse than Pietermaritzburg’s camp. On 17 August 1945, with the war in Europe over, a riot started at the Helwan bioscope, spread to looting of beer and torching of Egyptian shops, and precipitated a rape scare at the nearby women’s camp. When the New Zealand army fire brigade arrived, their hoses were slashed. The causes were broken promises and anxiety about the post-war world, but the trigger was the slow pace of repatriation. Again the messenger, in this instance the Springbok Legion, was blamed; again Smuts made an attempt to rescue the situation. Neil Roos suggests that Helwan was a trigger for post-war disillusionment for poor whites in particular who turned away from Smuts’s United Party towards sentiments that would have been shared with Pietermaritzburg’s military rioters of November 1943.¹⁴

Overview

Under wartime conditions the city hall riot was an incident quickly swept under the carpet. Clearly it was one of the less glorious episodes in the history of the South African Army and a reflection of tensions within the armed forces generally, which were largely created by conditions and treatment experienced by other ranks.

Saul Dubow points out that this was a ‘turbulent period in the history of South Africa’ after a ‘narrow and bitterly con-

tested decision to enter the war'.¹⁵ He goes as far as to say that it was a decade that bisected the South African century in political terms, but during which a number of ideological futures could still be imagined. At least three were on display that night in Pietermaritzburg: neo-fascism; strict segregation; and progressive liberalism.¹⁶ Elements of the last were significantly to be found in the work of the Army Educational Service.¹⁷

The Eufeefes of 1938 was an Afrikaner nationalist high point, after which there had been fractiousness and even some violence. Radical populist nationalism took on various forms ranging from low-key anti-British sentiment to outright Nazism and where the balance lay in the railway workshops of Pietermaritzburg is not recorded. Many members of the South African Police belonged to or had sympathy for the far right.¹⁸

The city hall riot also provides a measure of the state of race relations in Pietermaritzburg in the mid-twentieth century. Throughout the war there was tension about use of public facilities by the Indian community. In February 1941 a businessman named Cassim Suleiman was ejected from a bench in town gardens by a policeman. Benches became a site of contestation – in 1944 'Europeans only' signs were stolen. At the war's end there were complaints about black use of city and park facilities and consequent 'undesirable' behaviour. In October 1944 permission was refused for two African football league teams to play a match in Alexandra Park in aid of the Navy Week Fund.¹⁹

The authorities continued to allow the city hall to be used by all communities on a segregated basis. Liberal and moderate opinion embraced varying

degrees of social separateness, but there is evidence that some absent service personnel harboured considerable fears and grievances about the situation they had left behind. For instance, Captain B.H. Henwood raised the issue of his daughters walking home from St John's School and meeting 'native loafers' if a recreation ground were established in Scottsville. Brother Paul of St Charles objected for sanitation reasons, bizarrely voicing concerns about 'defiled dust from such a ground with its millions of disease germs' spread by the wind into his school grounds.²⁰ Soon after the war the city began to experience intimations of apartheid and the consequences of a neo-fascist ideology against which the war had been fought.

The struggle against Nazism and related ideologies was linked in some minds to a search for greater social justice in a new international order. The Army Education Service (AES) under Malherbe made a major effort to promote ideas of liberal and social democracy, broader citizenship and deracialisation to put the war into context; and Alan Paton believed that many blinkers had been removed. Clearly they had not been taken from those rioting at the Pietermaritzburg city hall. Guy Butler, later a significant figure in the South African literary establishment, was an AES instructor and became so disillusioned at his attempts to promote social democracy that he temporarily lost faith in a progressive vision of humankind.²¹

During World War II there was a general decline in racial intolerance and an increase in left-wing activity, especially after Germany attacked the Soviet Union. The multiracial OK Bazaars strike is held up as an example. In March 1942 Smuts announced that

in the event of a Japanese invasion of South Africa he would arm coloured and African soldiers, but this was purely expedient and once the immediate danger had receded he was able again to reject any notion of an inclusive society.²²

It was not, however, until the early 1960s that grand apartheid was forced upon Pietermaritzburg by the Group Areas and Reservation of Separate Amenities acts and other legislation. And in a sense it was little more than ten years before the city council began to nibble away at its fringes by being among the first municipalities to challenge ‘petty’ apartheid. In August 1973 it set up a city council subcommittee to look at integration possibilities such as park and bus shelter benches and in October that year it placed no obstacle in the way of use of municipal grounds by the multiracial Aurora Cricket Club. In mid-1975 it was to support the opening up of the Natal Society Library in an entirely desegregated building to all the people of Pietermaritzburg. Eleanor Russell’s courageous stand on the city hall steps in 1943 was one gesture in a long and interrupted thread of liberal thought and action in Pietermaritzburg.

NOTES

- 1 *Natal Witness* (NW), 22 November 1943, pp. 1, 2. For background information on Eleanor Russell see: Pamela Reid, ‘Mrs E.E.M. Russell’ *Natalia* 11 (1981), pp. 57–58; Pat Merrett, ‘Mrs E.E. Russell and the role of women in the city’s public life’ in *Pietermaritzburg, 1838–1988: A New Portrait of an African City* edited by John Laband and Robert Haswell (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press and Shuter and Shooter, 1988), pp. 213–216.
- 2 NW, 22 November 1943, p. 1. The Coloured Soldiers Club was in nearby Otto Street and it had probably opened towards the end of 1942 (Pietermaritzburg Archives (PMA), 3/PMB,

- Recreational facilities for non-European troops (TC 4/4/2/305, file 149/31)).
- 3 The events of that Saturday night and the subsequent inquiry were recorded in NW, 22 November 1943, pp. 1–2; 23 November 1943, p. 1; 24 November 1943, pp. 1, 4; 25 November 1943, pp. 1, 3; 26 November 1943, pp. 1, 4; 30 November 1943, p.1. The inquiry was headed by Colonel Sydney Ash assisted by Major W.B. Harrison and Lieutenant R.J. Smithers. The local MP, Colonel O. Shearer attended the hearings, which lasted from Tuesday 23 November until Monday 29 November. The last day involved interviewing hospitalised witnesses. The inquiry focused on the military response and parts of it were reported somewhat incoherently in the NW.
- 4 Wood was treasurer of the Pietermaritzburg branch of the Natal Coloured Welfare League.
- 5 George Cloete Visser, *OB: Traitors or Patriots?* (Johannesburg, Macmillan, 1976), pp. 11, 16, 29, 98, 142, 174.
- 6 *ibid.*, 95.
- 7 This was a wartime outfit, a local version of Britain’s Home Guard, which trained on Wednesday afternoons when businesses were closed.
- 8 PMA, 3/PMB, Complaint re natives and Indians on certain pavements (TC 4/4/2/257, file 79/4). Meyer’s letter (translated from Afrikaans) to the Town Clerk is dated 26 March 1940.
- 9 NW, 24 November 1943.
- 10 Graham Dominy, *The Man Behind the Beard: Deneys Schreiner, a South African Liberal Life* (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2020), p. 36. Schreiner would return to Pietermaritzburg in 1959 as professor of inorganic chemistry and eventually become a long-serving campus principal.
- 11 NW, 27 November 1943, p. 4; Natal Witness Representative, ‘Life in a transit camp: what is done for troops at Hay Paddock’ NW, 27 November 1943, p. 8.
- 12 Ernst G. Malherbe, *Never a Dull Moment* (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1982), pp. 245–247. Malherbe’s description of Hay Paddock is based on his involvement after the March 1944 unrest (‘boiling discontent’) when troops were instructed to sign a new general service oath. He appears to confuse this incident with events in November 1943, although they probably had similar causes.
- 13 Cloete, *OB*, pp. 36–45.
- 14 Neil Roos, *Ordinary Springboks: White Servicemen and Social Justice in South Africa, 1939–1961* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005), pp.

- 96–98, 101. I am indebted to Neil Roos and Chantelle Wyley for supplying me with an electronic copy of this essential source during the Covid-19 lockdown.
- 15 Canada also had its internal divisions and Eire, technically a dominion, remained neutral.
- 16 Saul Dubow, 'Introduction' in *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities* edited by Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2005), pp. 1–2. Other ideologies – African nationalism and communism – were not evident in this incident.
- 17 Michael Cardo, 'Fighting a worse imperialism: white South African loyalism and the Army Educational Services (AES) during the Second World War' *South African Historical Journal* 46 (2002), pp. 141–174.
- 18 Dubow, 'Introduction', p. 5.
- 19 PMA, 3/PMB, Seats in town gardens and Alexandra Park (C batch 364, file 215/9); Control of nurse girls in public parks and gardens (C batch 364, file 215/20); Applications to hold non-European events in Alexandra Park (C batch 364, file 215/24).
- 20 PMA, 3/PMB, Proposed recreation ground for natives at Scottsville (C batch 374, file 242/8). This correspondence from Henwood and J. Leslie Smith attorneys on behalf of his wife, and from Brother Paul, principal of St Charles, is dated September 1941.
- 21 Dubow, 'Introduction', pp. 8–9, 13, 14; Jonathan Hyslop 'An Anglo-South African intellectual, the Second World War, and the coming of apartheid: Guy Butler in the 1940s' in *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities* edited by Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves (Cape Town, Double Storey, 2005), pp. 215, 216–217.
- 22 Shula Marks, 'Afterword: worlds of impossibilities' in *South Africa's 1940s: Worlds of Possibilities* edited by Saul Dubow and Alan Jeeves (Cape Town, Double Storey, 2005), pp. 271, 275.