

The 'Young Afrikaners': Jan Smuts and Piet Grobler during the months of storm and stress (January-October 1899)

by

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Introduction

In 1893 the First Volksraad of the Transvaal Republic (ZAR) decided that wherever possible, "zonen des lands" (sons of the soil) should receive preferential treatment as far as appointments in the civil service were concerned.* At that time most government positions were in the hands of Dutch officials and the Afrikaner population felt marginalised. A standpoint was taken to the effect that young Afrikaners were to be appointed, even if it meant that more capable Dutch officials were overlooked.¹ Unfortunately, in the 1890s most of these 'zonen' were ill-equipped to hold responsible positions.

In May and June 1898 the civil service was reorganised and a number of new senior officials were named. In May the former State Secretary, Dr. W.J. Leyds, was appointed to the post of Minister Extraordinary in Europe, with Brussels as his headquarters. In June, J.C. (Jan) Smuts and P.G.W. (Piet) Grobler took over as State Attorney and Under Secretary for Foreign Affairs respectively and Leyds was succeeded as State Secretary by the former President of the Orange Free State, F.W. Reitz.² In addition to this team of new officials, President Kruger had the active support and co-operation of the Free Staters, M.T. Steyn and Abraham Fischer (MEC) and the well-meaning Cape sympathisers. All these men were to play an

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I am indebted to my colleague, Bridget Theron for her advice and assistance on this article and for proof reading the draft.

1. Minutes of the First Volksraad, Article 474, 27/6/1893, p. 644.
2. J.C.H. GROBLER, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942* (Melville, 1988), pp. 11-12.

important role in determining the destiny of the Transvaal and indirectly, also of the Free State, in that fateful year of 1899.

In this study, attention will focus on the actions of the two young Afrikaners, Smuts and Grobler. The 28 year-old Smuts, a colonial by birth, needs no introduction. He was a brilliant young jurist and philosopher who would later gain world recognition as a militarist and politician. The 25 year-old Piet Grobler, however, was less of a celebrity and his role in the period before the outbreak of the South African War has received little attention. He was a great-grand nephew of Kruger's and received his education at the State Gymnasium in Pretoria. At the age of 18 he entered the civil service and at the time of his appointment as Under Secretary he held the position of responsible clerk in the Mining Department in Pretoria.³ It was Grobler who introduced Smuts to Kruger and later recommended that Smuts be appointed State Attorney.⁴ This was to be the beginning of a life-long friendship.

Smuts's appointment was hailed in all quarters. Observers only questioned his youth and lack of practical experience for such an important post.⁵ Although Grobler was related to Kruger and allegations of nepotism were raised,⁶ his appointment was generally well received. There were, however, those who felt that he was too young for the post, and the majority of the officials in the Foreign Office were initially unhappy with his appointment.⁷ Although it is true that Kruger dominated the Executive Council in 1898, and that after his successful suppression of the Jameson Raid in 1895-96 his influence and prestige had rocketed, it was not merely a question of appointing Grobler at all costs. Indeed, public reaction to Grobler's nomination seemed to indicate that it was well earned. In *De Volksstem* of 29 June 1898 it was claimed that various members of the Volksraad ('verskillende Volksraadsleden') had actually suggested that Grobler be given the position. The acting British Agent in Pretoria, Edmund Fraser, also informed the British High Commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner that Grobler's appointment

has been hailed with approval, excepting his extreme youth, by all sections of the press.⁸

At first glance the two young Transvalers were reasonably well equipped for their new posts. Smuts, with a thorough legal knowledge, was fluent in English and

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-11.

4. Transvaal Archives (TA), A 787 GS Preller Collection, vol. 221: Smuts, JC, p. 69; W.K. HANCOCK, *Smuts I: The sanguine years 1870-1919* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 68; J.C. Smuts, *Jan Christian Smuts* (London, 1952), p. 38.

5. *The Star*, 2/6/1898.

6. See N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I* (Cape Town, 1921), p. 158.

7. TA, E 32 Leyds Archive, Mf, film A 556, Box 78: TJ Krogh - WJ Leyds, 3/9/1898.

8. Imperial White Book, no 543: Fraser - Milner, 28/6/1898, p. 533; See also *The Weekly Press*, 2/7/1898, 23/7/1898.

Dutch, and had a good reading knowledge of German. As for Grobler, by 1898 he was proficient in Dutch and English and had a sound reading knowledge of both French and German. Smuts had furthered his studies with outstanding success in Britain and Germany. Grobler had undertaken an extensive tour of Britain and the continent in 1896, and had met a number of influential British statesmen, including the Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, with whom he had held a long interview.⁹ Grobler was certainly intelligent and well-read, although obviously not as highly educated as the brilliant young Smuts.

Although not a member of the Executive Council, as State Attorney, Smuts was the Council's legal representative. He was soon embroiled in all contentious issues and points of dispute which came up between Britain and the republic. Grobler's task as Under Secretary involved two main functions. He had to maintain close contact with the republic's legation in Brussels and monitor all developments which might influence the republic's position abroad. These had to be brought to the immediate attention of Leyds. Secondly, Grobler's office had to handle all requests, complaints etc. from foreign powers in Pretoria. To do this he had access to all foreign correspondence.¹⁰ The working relationship which gradually developed between the two young officials was thus of necessity a close one.

Although Grobler subsequently played the less prominent role in the 'Smuts-Grobler partnership' he enjoyed one great advantage: the complete trust and confidence of President Kruger. When, for instance, E.A. Lippert (concessionaire of the dynamite monopoly) asked in January 1899 that his friend Johann Rissik, the Transvaal Surveyor General, recommend someone to accompany him to an important interview with Kruger

in order to avoid misunderstandings, and whose support might influence him [Kruger] ... he strongly recommended young Piet Grobler ... as a man who would be best, and who would speak up to the old man with most influence. I found this opinion endorsed in Pretoria.¹¹

Edmund Fraser also wrote that Grobler

enjoys the Pres.t's confidence, having been present as a listener, each time I have interviewed the President.¹²

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9. *The Standard and Diggers' News* (London edition), 11/6/1896; J.C.H. GROBLER, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942*, pp. 6-10; J.A. BUTTERY, *Why Kruger made war* (London, 1900), pp. 230-232.
 10. J.C.H. GROBLER, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942*, p. 16; W.K. HANCOCK, *Smuts I: The sanguine years 1870-1919*, pp. 78-79.
 11. P. LEWSEN (Ed.), *Selections from the correspondence of John X Merriman 1899-1905*, VRS no 47 (Cape Town, 1966): Lippert - Merriman, 10/1/1899, p. 5.
 12. TA, FK 1097 Milner Papers (Oxford no 3): Fraser - Milner, 26/8/1898, p. 430.

Although it was not in the nature of the rather aloof Smuts to encourage close friendships, his relations with Kruger were also excellent: "...like those of father and son" he later recalled.¹³

It is therefore clear that the two young Transvalers could claim to enjoy the confidence of Kruger. They quite possibly had more influence with him than did many other of the more experienced Transvaal leaders. In 1899 it was probably only Leyds who had more clout with the President - but Leyds was in Brussels. In November 1898 J.S. Smit, the Commissioner of Railways, who often attended meetings of the Executive Council in an *ex officio* capacity when railway issues were discussed, declared that Kruger had become an autocrat in the full sense of the word ("een outocraat in letter en geest"). It was only Schalk Burger who occasionally opposed Kruger in the Council. Piet Joubert was a beaten man and even State Secretary Reitz appeared to have little influence over the President.¹⁴ Reitz's ill-health at this time could possibly have been a factor here too. Be that as it may, during 1899 Kruger came to rely increasingly on the support of Smuts and Grobler.

War clouds gather: the suzerainty issue

In January 1899 Milner returned to South Africa after a three month visit to Britain. He was now determined to bring the 'Transvaal question' to a 'final solution'. He was also assured of Chamberlain's active support.¹⁵ However, the two young Transvalers still firmly believed that war could be averted. So too did the influential Cape friends. In January 1899 John X. Merriman came forward with a peace initiative. He proposed a conference of all the South African states. They would meet in order to find solutions for political problems and other issues of mutual concern. Although Grobler was actively involved in the initial negotiations and preparations for this conference, it did not take place because the Cape Prime Minister, W.P. Schreiner (at the instigation of Milner), refused to cooperate unless Britain could also be represented.¹⁶

According to article IV of the London Convention of 1884, the Transvaal could not enter into treaties with any other state or nation except the Orange Free State without Britain's permission. On these grounds Britain refused to recognise the ZAR as a sovereign independent state because her relationship to Britain was that of a suzerain state, i.e. Transvaal was only permitted to exercise self government under Britain's ultimate authority. Thus, according to the British viewpoint, there could be

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13. W.K. HANCOCK, *Smuts I: The sanguine years 1870-1919*, pp. 69, 189.
 14. TA, E 32 Leyds Archive, Mf, film A 556, Box 78: Smit - Leyds, 6/11/1898. See also J.C. Moll, *FW Reitz - 'n outobiografie* (Kaapstad, 1978), voorwoord: "... hy [Reitz] was soos klei in Kruger se hande."
 15. R.H. WILDE, *Joseph Chamberlain and the South African Republic 1895-1899* (Archives Year Book for South African History, 1956, vol I), pp. 89-91.
 16. J.C.H. GROBLER, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942*, pp. 21-22.

no question of arbitration between them: they simply did not enjoy the same status. On 15 December 1898 Chamberlain once again emphasised that Britain as the 'Paramount Power' would not tolerate any foreign interference in South African affairs.¹⁷

This dispatch was seen in a very grave light by the Transvaal government. Initially Leyds, who was in the republic from January to March 1899, was instructed to formulate a reply to Chamberlain's letter. However, during his stay in Pretoria, Leyds did not find time to put pen to paper and it was only during his brief stay in Cape Town that he compiled a draft reply which he then sent to Grobler, with whom he had previously discussed the matter in some detail.¹⁸ Although Grobler must have received the draft in early April, he informed Leyds on 30 April that Chamberlain's "Suzerain dépêche" had still not been answered.¹⁹ The reason behind this four-week delay is unclear, but in the light of later developments it is obvious that Smuts and Grobler made a comprehensive revision of Leyds's draft. Leyds himself had little doubt about the identity of the authors of the suzerainty dispatch in its final form. Although Reitz had signed it, it was "in bewoordingen die uit de pen van Smuts en Grobler waren gevloeid" (judged by its text, the work of Smuts and Grobler).²⁰ This opinion was also shared by Conyngham Greene, the British Agent, in a letter to Milner.²¹ It is clearly a valid one because as we shall see, by 1899 the two young Transvalers had largely taken over the correspondence with the British government whereas Reitz's input had correspondingly declined.

Although Smuts and Grobler were no doubt sincere in their course of action, they nevertheless erred by hammering at the international status of the ZAR as a sovereign state. In his draft Leyds had concentrated on one point only: whether or not the Transvaal was subject to the suzerainty of Britain. He tacitly ignored the question of the republic's international status. Smuts and Grobler, however, notified Chamberlain that the Transvaal's right to "absolute self government" was based not on the conventions but purely and simply on the republic's inherent right as a sovereign state in terms of international law.²² This was not in fact a true reflection of the republic's status. Smuts and his colleague were demanding more than the Transvaal could rightfully claim. Chamberlain's reply of 13 July 1899 was terse: he

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17. C 9507 -' 99 Correspondence relating to the status of the South African Republic, no 6: Chamberlain - W Butler, 15/12/1898, pp. 28-30.
 18. W.J. LEYDS, *Eenige correspondentie uit 1899* ('s-Gravenhage, 1919): Leyds - Grobler, 26/3/1899, pp. 2-3, Bijlage C, p. 200; TA, SS a 1050, Telegram no T 219/99: Grobler - Leyds, 27/3/1899, p. 227.
 19. TA, LA 252 (iii): Grobler - Leyds, 30/4/1899 (unnumbered, copy).
 20. W.J. LEYDS, *Vierde Verzameling (Corr 1900-1902)*, Deel II, Bijlagen ('s-Gravenhage, 1934), Bijlage A VII, p. 21.
 21. TA, FK 1117 Milner Papers (Oxford no 12): Greene - Milner, 12/5/1898, p. 1041.
 22. W.J. LEYDS, *Eenige correspondentie*, Bijlage C, pp. 201-202, 209.

was not prepared to react to false representations; British suzerainty over the Transvaal was an historical fact.²³ By this time, with war between Britain and the Transvaal only months away, the suzerainty debate was soon swallowed up in the mounting tension.

The Uitlanders and the franchise question

While the suzerainty issue was still in full swing, the political struggle took a serious turn when Chamberlain and Milner started to interfere in the internal affairs of the Transvaal by using the quite legitimate grievances of the foreigners (Uitlanders) in a more aggressive and manipulative manner. The Uitlanders paid the bulk of the republic's taxes and were also considerable property owners. And yet, in order to vote for the First Volksraad (where the real power lay) they had to have been resident in the Transvaal for fourteen years.²⁴ When an Uitlander named Edgar resisted arrest and was shot dead by a policeman in December 1898, the Uitlanders seized the opportunity. A mass petition, in which the franchise issue featured prominently, was sent to the Queen. Much to Milner's displeasure, however, the acting High Commissioner, Sir William Butler, refused to accept it.²⁵ In March 1899 Kruger announced that he intended reducing the period of residence for the franchise by five years, ie to nine years.²⁶ But Milner, who had returned to South Africa in January, decided to use the Uitlander issue to drum up even more pressure. Fired by Milner, the Uitlanders drew up a second petition which was sent to Chamberlain on 29 March. In order to prevent direct British involvement in the republic's internal affairs (which was implicit in the petition), an attempt was then made by the Transvaal government to reach some form of agreement with the pro-Uitlander Rand capitalists, but this ended in failure.²⁷ On 9 May Chamberlain persuaded the British cabinet to accept the Uitlander petition,²⁸ and by so doing, Britain accepted responsibility for reform: the only alternative to this was war.

The Bloemfontein Conference

To make another effort to solve this serious crisis, it was decided that Kruger and Milner should meet in Bloemfontein to begin discussions on 31 May. Like other

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23. C 9507-'99 no 8: Chamberlain - Milner, 13/7/1899, pp. 33-34.
 24. G.D. SCHOLTZ, *Die oorsake van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902 I* (Johannesburg, 1947), pp. 265-267, 272.
 25. W.K. HANCOCK, *Smuts I: The sanguine years 1870-1919*, pp. 81-83.
 26. J.S. MARAIS, *The fall of Kruger's republic* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 253-254.
 27. P. LEWSEN (Ed.), *Selections from the correspondence of John X Merriman 1899-1905*, pp. 12, 42 nt 98; Leyds, *Eenige correspondentie*, Bijlage B, pp. 198-200.
 28. R.H. Wilde, *Joseph Chamberlain and the South African Republic 1895-1899...*, pp. 99-103.

well-informed Transvalers, Smuts and Grobler did not expect much from the conference because by now they had little faith in Milner and the British government.²⁹

Smuts did a great deal of preliminary work on the Transvaal proposals and also took a leading role at the conference. Grobler was unable to participate because he had to attend the opening of the Pretoria-Pietersburg railway line, but he was back in Pretoria in time to meet the Kruger party at the station. Here Smuts filled Grobler in on the outcome of the deliberations: in a word, Milner was set on war.³⁰

The Bloemfontein Conference ended in failure mainly because the two parties could not agree on the franchise issue. Milner demanded the Uitlander vote after five years' residence, but Kruger was only prepared to lower it to seven years.³¹ Milner had not really approached the conference with an open mind. Three weeks earlier he had confided to a friend:

Perhaps it would be best if Kruger hardened his heart and the smash came.³²

As far as Smuts and Grobler were concerned the conference was a turning point. They now had no illusions at all about the sincerity of the British government as represented by Milner. Thereafter they became staunch advocates of a strong, determined stand against British interference.

In May, Conyngham Greene informed Milner:

You have the young Afrikaner War Party consisting of Smuts, Piet Grobler, [Ewald] Esselen ... They are the dangerous combustible element in the situation.³³

According to Grobler the only advantage the republic gained from the conference was that the Free Staters and the Cape friends "absoluut bij ons staat" and shared the opinion that the Transvaal had conceded enough.³⁴ In the event, it was not long before the "friends of the Transvaal" would demand even more concessions from Kruger because war had to be avoided at all cost.

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29. See for example, W.K. HANCOCK and J. VAN DER POEL (Eds.), *Selections from the Smuts papers I* (Cambridge, 1966): Smuts - Leyds, 30/4/1899, pp. 226-229; J.C.H. GROBLER, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942*, p. 25; J.S. MARAIS, *The fall of Kruger's republic*, pp. 272-274.
 30. J.S. MARAIS, *The fall of Kruger's republic*, p. 282; J.C. Smuts, *Jan Christian Smuts*, p. 45; F.S. Crafford, *Jan Smuts: A biography* (Cape Town, 1946), p. 32.
 31. W.K. HANCOCK, *Smuts I: The sanguine years 1870-1919*, pp. 92-93.
 32. C. HEADLAM (Ed.), *The Milner Papers I* (London, 1931): Milner - Hely Hutchinson, 8/5/1899, p. 359.
 33. TA, FK 1117 Milner papers (Oxford no 12): Greene - Milner, 12/5/1899, p. 1041. Esselen was a prominent Pretoria advocate.
 34. TA, LA 252 (iii): Grobler - Leyds 16/6/1899, (unnumbered, copy).

Despite the unsatisfactory outcome of the conference, the First Volksraad approved all the Bloemfontein resolutions. On 15 June it published a draft law to that effect.³⁵ But the franchise issue had now become the main bone of contention and Milner refused to let it go.

The Hofmeyr mission

To combat Milner's fierce propaganda campaign the influential Cape politician, J.H. (Onze Jan) Hofmeyr, thought that the Transvaal should make further concessions. In this he received the somewhat reluctant support of President Steyn and Abraham Fischer.³⁶ Accordingly, Fischer was sent to Cape Town to consult with all interest groups, including Milner and Schreiner.³⁷ On 19 June Fischer arrived back in Bloemfontein with a list of proposals which would satisfy the Cape friends and the British government. The most important of these was to grant the franchise immediately to all Uitlanders who had arrived in the Transvaal prior to 1890.³⁸ With Steyn's blessing Fischer then went to Pretoria to discuss these proposals with the Transvalers.³⁹ Initially they were unwilling to cooperate but after lengthy discussions with Kruger and the Executive Council, a commission comprising Smuts, Grobler, Schalk Burger and Fischer was appointed on 26 June. They were to compile a draft for further discussion.⁴⁰ Although not unanimously accepted, the Council agreed to the draft with a few minor alternations. On the same day, to add fuel to the fire, Chamberlain announced in a speech at Birmingham that the British public should prepare for the possibility of war.⁴¹

Despite the fact that almost all Hofmeyr and Milner's proposals were accepted by the Executive Council, Chamberlain's speech caused the Cape friends to request even more concessions from Pretoria. Hofmeyr took the initiative and wired Fischer that he intended, come what may, to negotiate personally with the Transvalers. He would first go to Bloemfontein to discuss the Cape's new proposals with Steyn. He also requested that Smuts and any other friends he might choose to bring with him,

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35. *Staatscourant der ZAR*, 15/6/1899 (Proclamation no 291: Conceptwet), pp. 1097-1098.
 36. N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, pp. 198-199, 205; DS Jacobs, *Abraham Fischer in sy tydperk* (Argiefjaarboek vir Suid - Afrikaanse Geskiedenis, 1965, I), p. 277.
 37. N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, pp. 207-210.
 38. For a complete list of the proposals see J.H. HOFMEYR and F.W. REITZ, *Het leven van Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr* (Cape Town, 1913), p. 592.
 39. N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, p. 211.
 40. Free State Archives (FA), P 26 Staatspresident OVS: Fischer - Steyn, 27/6/1899.
 41. N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, pp. 217-218; R.H. Wilde, *Joseph Chamberlain and the South African Republic 1895-1899...*, p. 116.

should join him in Bloemfontein.⁴² On 31 June Smuts and Grobler departed in great secrecy for the Free State where Hofmeyr and A.J. Heroldt, the Cape Minister of Agriculture, arrived on Sunday 2 July.⁴³ That same day they had a long interview with Steyn, Fischer, Smuts and Grobler. During the discussions the two Cape Afrikaners pointed out numerous ('vele') shortcomings in the draft franchise bill and they handed Smuts and Grobler a memorandum on Hofmeyr's new proposals.⁴⁴ The two Transvalers promised that they would recommend the proposals to Kruger and the Council, but could not guarantee that all points would be acceptable. They also had to organise that Hofmeyr be sent an invitation to visit Pretoria. This promised to be difficult because relations between Kruger and Hofmeyr had been strained for a number of years.⁴⁵

On 3 July Fischer, Smuts and Grobler arrived in Pretoria. At first the Executive Council opposed the Hofmeyr - Herholdt visit. When it appeared that no invitation was forthcoming, Hofmeyr wired Grobler with the request that he make a personal appeal and do all in his power to get the required permission.⁴⁶ The following day Grobler replied, without compromising himself, that although it was impossible to say whether Hofmeyr's visit would have the desired results, discussion between friends could perhaps be beneficial.⁴⁷ That same afternoon Hofmeyr and Herholdt left for Pretoria.⁴⁸

In the event, the Executive Council approved the Hofmeyr proposals practically *in toto*, so that the final revised draft bill differed very little from Milner's Bloemfontein proposals on the franchise. The result was that Kruger submitted his seven-year franchise bill to the Volksraad. It differed from his Bloemfontein

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42. J.H. HOFMEYR and F.W. REITZ, *Het leven van Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr*, p. 593; SA Library, Cape Town, JH Hofmeyr Papers, Box 8 c (i): Hofmeyr - Fischer, 30/6/1899, (unnumbered, copy); N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, p. 219.
 43. FA, P 26 Staatspresident OVS: Grobler and Smuts - Gouvernements Secretaris, 31/6/1899; *De Volksstem*, 5/7/1899; N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, p. 220.
 44. TA, A1 JC Smuts Collection, Public Papers (SA), vol 96, file 42: Memo Conceptwet, 2/7/1899; J.H. HOFMEYR AND F.W. REITZ, *Het leven van Jan Hendrik Hofmeyr*, pp. 593-594.
 45. J.C.H. GROBLER, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942*, p. 28.
 46. SA Library, Cape Town, JH Hofmeyr Papers, Box 8 c (i): Hofmeyr - Grobler, 3/7/1899, (unnumbered, copy); J.C.H. GROBLER, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942*, p. 28.
 47. TA, SS a 840, T 383/99 with file R a 3601/99: Grobler - Hofmeyr and Herholdt, 4/7/1899, p. 167.
 48. J.C.H. GROBLER, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942*, p. 28.

proposal in that it was *retrospective*, so that Uitlanders who had already been in the republic for seven years would be granted the vote immediately. When Chamberlain heard the news of this bill, he declared that if the report was correct, the crisis was over. No one, he said, would dream of going to war over a difference of two years.⁴⁹ On 19 July the new franchise law was approved by the Volksraad.⁵⁰

The Joint Commission proposal

Milner, however, was unmoved. Exerting pressure on Chamberlain, he decided to tighten the screws.⁵¹ On 27 July Chamberlain proposed that a joint British - Transvaal commission should investigate the seven-year franchise law.⁵² Such action would have made Britain the arbiter of Transvaal legislation: an extremely grave precedent. In order to bypass this British proposal Smuts initiated negotiations with Conyngham Greene.⁵³ Grobler was also kept in the picture and he assisted Smuts in the final composition of a new set of proposals.⁵⁴ New concessions were made in a letter dated 19 August. The republican offer implied the acceptance of Milner's 1 June 1899 Bloemfontein franchise demands, ie retrospective franchise after five years' residence. The number of Uitlander seats in the Volksraad would be increased to 10. But there were three conditions attached to this offer. The British government had to guarantee that (i) this interference in the Transvaal's internal affairs should not constitute a precedent; (ii) that the claim to suzerainty over the republic be dropped and (iii) that the remaining disputes between Britain and the Transvaal be submitted to arbitration which excluded any foreign element.⁵⁵

Britain was prepared to accept the franchise proposals but not the three conditions. On 30 August Chamberlain rejected the republican offer out of hand.⁵⁶ As a new crisis loomed, Pretoria immediately contacted Steyn and he wired back his

49. J.S. MARAIS, *The fall of Kruger's republic*, pp. 298-299.

50. TA, ZAR Localen Wetten, Act no 3, 1899 (Naturalisatie en Vol Stemrecht), pp. 11-16.

51. C. HEADLAM (Ed.), *The Milner Papers I: Milner - Chamberlain*, 26/7/1899, pp. 471-472.

52. M.J. HUGO, *Die stemreg-vraagstuk in die ZAR* (Argief Jaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis, 1947), p. 143.

53. J.S. MARAIS, *The fall of Kruger's republic*, pp. 308 - 309.

54. See TA, SS a 845, file R a 3811/99, D1 III, pp. 108-114; N. LEVI, *Jan Smuts* (London, 1917), p. 44.

55. W.K. HANCOCK and J. VAN DER POEL (Eds.), *Selections from the Smuts papers I*, Report 14/9/1899, pp. 283-284; Green Book ZAR, no 9, 1899: State Secretary - British Agent, 19/8/1899, pp. 5-7.

56. Green Book ZAR, no 9, 1899: Greene - State Secretary, 30/8/1899, pp. 17-19.

recommendations.⁵⁷ It fell to Smuts and Grobler to complete a draft reply expressing the republic's disappointment at the British rejection. The Transvaal had no guarantee that Britain would not in future interfere in the internal affairs of the republic and it reiterated its unequivocal refusal to acknowledge British suzerainty.⁵⁸

This draft reply was telegraphed to Steyn for his comments on the afternoon of 30 August. Steyn felt that it gave "nodeloozen aanstoot" (needless offence) to the British government, and should be worded more diplomatically. He added that negotiations on the suzerainty issue should not be severed by the Transvaal. Britain, if it so wished, should be the one to take this step. The republic should merely reiterate its now well-known standpoint.⁵⁹

In the light of these comments, Smuts and Grobler reluctantly admitted that they might have been too rash in the wording of the draft, but added that over elaboration would confuse rather than promote the republic's cause. The time had come to let the British government know in no uncertain terms that such threats would not blackmail the republic into making further concessions.⁶⁰ This telegram was not well received in Bloemfontein. On 31 August, Fischer replied on Steyn's behalf. Steyn was obviously piqued: he felt that his proposals should not be seen as 'elaboration' but as diplomatically correct. In Steyn's view, Chamberlain was trying to push for an immediate reply in the hope that his flawed assessment of the situation would go unchallenged.⁶¹

Grobler immediately wired that he and Smuts did not mean to be disrespectful or to create the impression that they did not appreciate Steyn's assistance. Indeed, the president's suggestions would most certainly be followed up.⁶² However, when it became clear that Steyn and his government had serious reservations about the Smuts-Grobler draft reply, Kruger requested that Fischer come to Pretoria immediately. He could then assist with the compilation of a reply that would satisfy Steyn.⁶³ On that same evening of 31 August, Fischer departed for Pretoria and the following morning he and the Transvalers finalised the dispatch. In essence this letter was more conciliatory than the Smuts-Grobler draft. Dated 2 September, it

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57. TA, LA 738, Telephone discussion between Kruger and Steyn, 30/8/1899 (typed copy), pp. 17-19.
58. G.D. SCHOLTZ, *Die oorsake van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902, II*, p. 269. The complete draft reply appears in N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, pp. 235-236.
59. TA, LA 738, 30/8/1899, pp. 17-19 and 31/8/1899, pp. 19, 42-44.
60. TA, LA 637, file GR 1083/99: Telegram, Grobler and Smuts - Fischer, undated, pp. 79-80; N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, p. 244.
61. TA, LA 637, file GR 1083/99: Fischer - Grobler, 31/8/1899, p. 85; N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, p. 245.
62. TA, LA 637, file GR 1083/99: Smuts and Grobler - Fischer, 31/8/1899, pp. 86-87.
63. TA, LA 738, 31/8/1899, p. 19.

responded to Chamberlain's dispatches of 27 July and 30 August. The focus of the letter was that the Transvaal acceded to Chamberlain's demand for a joint British - Transvaal commission to investigate the seven-year law, but that the republic's five-year franchise proposal had now been revoked.⁶⁴

On 12 September Chamberlain replied that a return to the seven-year franchise proposal was out of the question, which made the notion of a joint commission irrelevant.⁶⁵ When Greene gave Reitz the note he intimated that a reply was expected within 24 hours.

Last minute attempts to avert war

By chance Grobler happened to be in Bloemfontein on 12 September to consult with Steyn about a number of matters including the dynamite concession.⁶⁶ He used the opportunity to discuss Chamberlain's reply with Steyn. When he became aware that Kruger was thinking in terms of an ultimatum, Steyn reiterated his warning about reacting too hastily. He would consult with Grobler and, if possible, would let Kruger have his view that same day. However, the following day, 13 September, while Steyn and Grobler were still in consultation, the draft reply to Chamberlain's note arrived from Pretoria. Steyn strongly disapproved of it because it was "te ultimaties" (too much like an ultimatum). He promised to give his view, which he had discussed closely with Grobler, in the form of a draft reply. He urged Kruger not to take any steps until Grobler had returned to Pretoria with this draft.⁶⁷

Grobler arrived back in the capital on 14 September. The next day a reply was formulated, which was handed to Greene on 16 September. The republic once again declared its willingness to accept the 'Joint Committee' proposal - a point which was included at the specific insistence of Steyn and Grobler. It also expressed the hope that the British government would stop making unacceptable demands on the republic.⁶⁸ By this stage, however, the die was cast, and on 22 September the British cabinet decided that no further proposals would be made to the Transvaal government.⁶⁹

The last few days of peace were busy ones for the two young Transvalers. They were constantly at Kruger's side to assist him wherever necessary. On 26 September

64. Green Book ZAR, no 9, 1899: State Secretary - British Agent, 2/9/1899, pp. 20-21.

65. Green Book ZAR, no 10, 1899: Greene - State Secretary, 12/9/1899, pp. 1-2; Hugo, p. 157.

66. *De Volksstem*, 16/9/1899.

67. TA, LA 738, 12/9/1899, pp. 93-94, 13/9/1899, pp. 103, 119, 128; N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, pp. 246-247.

68. J.C.H. GROBLER, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942*, p. 32.

69. C 9530 - '99, no 12: Chamberlain - High Commissioner, 22/9/1899, pp. 16-17.

the Transvaal formally requested the Free State Volksraad for military assistance in accordance with the terms of the Political Alliance of 1897. Together, the two Boer states decided to issue an ultimatum⁷⁰ which was finally handed over to Greene on 9 October 1899. It was stipulated that Britain should reply on or before 11 October 1899, no later than 17h00. The ultimatum demanded *inter alia* the withdrawal of all British troops from the borders of the republic.⁷¹

On the afternoon of 11 October 1899 Kruger and his councillors, Reitz, A.D.W. Wolmarans, and appropriately, the two young stalwarts Smuts and Grobler, were discussing developments in the president's office. Greene arrived and without much ado, handed over the British reply - the ultimatum had been summarily rejected.⁷² The political and diplomatic struggle of more than a decade now became a military one

Conclusion

The appointments of Smuts and Grobler, two promising young Afrikaners, were hailed in the *Uitlander* press and in British government circles as a step in the right direction. Grobler, in particular, was considered somewhat 'progressive',⁷³ and there were high expectations for both men. But these hopes were soon dashed. Initially, both tried to normalise relations with the British government and went out of their way to avoid confrontation. In August 1898 Edmund Fraser informed Milner that Grobler

is most obliging [and] anxious to show every attention to our wants⁷⁴

and in December, during an interview with Smuts, Fraser told the young State Attorney that

since the appointment of Reitz, Grobler [PGW] and myself some improvements had appeared.⁷⁵

However, as we have seen, from about May 1899 onwards, the attitude of the two young Transvalers towards the British government changed. Feelings were running high in government circles in Pretoria during 1899, and Smuts and Grobler were in daily contact with the diplomatic recriminations which were being traded between

70. TA, LA 738, 26/9/1899, p. 179; N.J. VAN DER MERWE, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn I*, pp. 249-262.

71. TA, SS a 1025, no B3570/99: State Secretary - British Agent, 9/10/1899, pp. 208-216.

72. D.W. KRÜGER, *Paul Kruger II, 1883-1904* (Johannesburg, 1963), p. 239.

73. *Weekly Press*, 23/7/1898.

74. TA, FK 1097 Milner Papers (Oxford no 3): Fraser - Milner, 26/8/1898, p. 430.

75. W.K. HANCOCK and J. VAN DER POEL (Eds.), *Selections from the Smuts papers I*, (conversation with Fraser), 22/12/1898, p. 213.

London and Pretoria. This was certainly not conducive to any feelings of goodwill on their part towards the British government.

The accusation made by Charles Uys that the 'young Afrikaners' (he specifically mentions Smuts and Grobler) precipitated the struggle, is questionable.⁷⁶ It is now generally accepted that the sacrifice of the Transvaal's independence on the altar of 'cooperation' was all that might have averted the war in 1899. The conflicting interests of British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism, were irreconcilable. After the Bloemfontein Conference, even the sober and diplomatic Leyds expressed his disappointment that the republic had yet again bowed to British demands.⁷⁷

The suggestion that the appointment of Reitz, Smuts and Grobler weakened the ZAR's political position *vis a vis* Britain, is also debatable.⁷⁸ Leyds might possibly have formulated the crucial dispatches with greater care and insight, but this writer feels that the end result would probably have been much the same. One should also remember that Steyn and Fischer, especially during the final months before the war, had a significant input into the final formulation of the various dispatches which were sent to London. From August 1899 the Free Staters were in almost daily contact with Smuts and Grobler and put their stamp of approval on all correspondence.

In the course of 1899 the two young Transvalers gradually took over the reins from Reitz. In August Fischer even went as far as to send Smuts "a 'code' (Fischer's patent) for use with you and Grobler".⁷⁹ By that time Reitz had become marginalised and his health was a source of grave concern. During the critical weeks of July he was away with his family at the coast. Smuts, Grobler and others were left to cope with the August crisis.⁸⁰

The final question is whether the two 'young Afrikaners' were equal to the task which was entrusted to them. In the light of the foregoing discussion it cannot be denied that at times they were too hasty and that their judgement was not always sound (the suzerainty dispatch, for instance), but this is largely attributed to their youth and lack of practical political experience. Then too, in 1899 the 29 year-old Smuts and the 26 year-old Grobler had to contend with an astute and polished diplomat in the person of Greene and an arrogant and belligerent 'empire builder' in Milner. Again, would the capable, experienced Leyds have fared any better or acted differently? On 8 September 1899 Leyds wrote two letters, one to Smuts and the other to Grobler. In both letters he condoned the actions they had taken and

76. C.J. UYS, *Paul Kruger, van die wieg tot die graf* (Kaapstad, 1955), p. 51.

77. W.J. LEYDS, *Eenige correspondentie: Leyds - Grobler*, 9/6/1899, pp. 43-44.

78. C.J. UYS, *Paul Kruger, van die wieg tot die graf*, pp. 51-54.

79. W.K. HANCOCK and J. VAN DER POEL (Eds.), *Selections from the Smuts papers I: Fischer - Smuts*, 24/8/1899, p. 304.

80. W.K. HANCOCK, *Smuts I: The sanguine years 1870-1919*, p. 103.

expressed his support for their approach to the crisis situation.⁸¹ It would thus seem that if criticism is to be levelled at them it should be directed at their approach rather than at what they aimed to achieve.

An important reason why Smuts and Grobler were prepared to negotiate almost to the last moment was that they, like many others, realised that the republic could not afford to lose the support of the Free Staters and the Cape friends. Grobler, unlike the strong-willed and intellectually superior Smuts, had a deep rooted aversion to violence and would do almost anything to avoid conflict. He was the more emotional and impulsive partner and his actions were at times inconsistent.⁸² Being so closely involved in its final formulation,⁸³ Grobler was well aware that the republics had decided to issue an ultimatum. Yet as late as October 1899, a few days before the hostilities started, he was still prepared to negotiate. On 3 October Arthur Enoch, a Quaker who sincerely believed he could avert war, consulted with Grobler and Reitz at the presidency about a peace plan he had in mind. They listened with great interest and even encouraged him until Smuts arrived

and upset the whole position by appealing to the worst feelings of the other two men ... He influenced the others so much that they veered round a great deal

and consequently Enoch's peace initiative suffered an untimely demise.⁸⁴ Some time later Enoch remarked that

Smuts and Grobler had been strong for war, but that FW Reitz ... was the most culpable, for in his relations with his belligerent colleagues, he was as a weather vane is to the strong wind.⁸⁵

It is not surprising that the domineering Smuts influenced and browbeat Grobler, because Smuts was undoubtedly the senior partner in the relationship. And yet, Grobler had one great asset: he enjoyed Kruger's complete trust. John Buttery, who was chief sub-editor of the semi-official government newspaper *Standard and Diggers' News* at the time, but no friend of the republic, gave the following assessment of Grobler in 1900:

For reasons that are not familiar to Europe, Piet Grobler comes easily first of what may be called the Lesser Lights of Fallen Krugerism. Indeed, during the last twelve months of storm and stress he came very

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81. W.J. LEYDS, *Eenige correspondentie*: Leyds - Grobler, 8/9/1899, p. 161 and Leyds - Smuts, 8/9/1899, p. 162.
 82. J.C.H. GROBLER, *Politieke leier of meeloper? Die lewe van Piet Grobler 1873-1942*, pp. 34 - 35.
 83. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
 84. W.K. HANCOCK, *Smuts I: The sanguine years 1870-1919*, pp. 105-106.
 85. Quoted by A.M. DAVEY, *The British pro-Boers, 1877-1902* (Cape Town, 1978), pp. 154-155.

much to the front at Pretoria ... One of the young hopes of the Afrikaner Party ... he was a great power at the Presidency and the affection in which he was held by Oom Paul made him a person of no little importance, even apart from his official standing [and] as he possessed intimate access to the President, and was implicitly trusted by him, I have no doubt that he communicated many of his mistaken notions to the head of State, who would absorb them without question.⁸⁶

Smuts's biographer, Levi, declares that

(T)he responsibility of pitting two young and inexperienced officials against a polished diplomat such as Mr Greene cannot lie at the door of Messrs Smuts and Grobler, but belongs to the Executive Councillors who had sent them.⁸⁷

This writer is of the opinion that the two 'young Afrikaners', under the most trying circumstances, acquitted themselves of their task very creditably. By 1899 complete capitulation might have saved the republic: good diplomacy would assuredly have not.⁸⁸

Opsomming

Die 'Jong Afrikaners': Jan Smuts en Piet Grobler gedurende die maande van storm en drang (Januarie-Oktober 1899)

deur

J. C. H. GROBLER

In Junie and Julie 1898 is twee jeugdige Afrikaners, Jan Smuts and Piet Grobler, onderskeidelik in die ampte van Staatsprokureur en adjunk-sekretaris van Buitelandse Sake aangestel. Smuts het nie 'n bekendstelling nodig nie, maar Grobler, 'n familielid van president Kruger, is tot op die hede nog 'n betreklike onbekende figuur. In die studie word gepoog om aan te dui hoe twee onervare dog

86. J.A. BUTTERY, *Why Kruger made war*, pp. 2-4, 230-232.

87. N. LEVI, *Jan Smuts*, p. 44.

88. After suffering ill-health for a number of years Piet Grobler was admitted to a Pretoria hospital in May 1942, where he passed away on 22 August. A few days before Grobler's death, in the midst of world conflict, and with things not looking good for the allies, Prime Minister Smuts still found time for a brief visit to see his old friend. Later, in a special message he paid tribute to Grobler: "To many of us his passing is a sincere personal loss. To me in particular he was a valued associate from the last days of the old Transvaal Republic, when we were closely associated, and in the stormy period between the Jameson Raid and the South African War ... for me personally [he] was and remained throughout half a century, a much-valued bond with an unforgettable past." *The Cape Argus*, 24/8/1942.

dog begaafde amptenare die krisisse hanteer het wat hulle voorgedoen het in die nege maande wat die oorlog voorafgegaan het. Hulle het geleidelik die beheer van die Staatsekretaris, F.W. Reitz, oorgeneem. Dit is moontlik gemaak deur die vertroude wat Kruger in hulle gehad het, asook die feit dat Reitz se gesondheid begin ingee het. Vanaf Augustus 1899 was Smuts and Grobler bykans daaglik in onderhandelinge met die Britse regering gewikkel. 'n Bestekopname word gemaak van hulle optredes en die vraag word gestel of hulle tot die opbou van spanning voor die oorlog bygedra het - soos daar trouens by geleentheid beweer is. Uiteindelik word gevra: was hulle opgewasse vir die taak waarmee hulle gekonfronteer was? 'n Gevolgtrekking word oor hierdie saak gemaak.