

Excellent and concise overview of a neglected topic

Bill Nasson, *South Africa at War, 1939-1945 (A Jacana Pocket History)*

Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2012

160pp

ISBN 978-1-4314-0382-0

R79.96

Written in an engaging and humorous style for a lay audience, *South Africa at War, 1939–1945* by Bill Nasson offers a useful introduction to the involvement of South Africa in the Second World War. Between the extremes of the perspective of Smuts who emphasised the contribution of the South African war effort and the neglect in the international historiography of South African participation in the Second World War, the truth of the country's role in the conflict lies somewhere in the middle. In his opening chapter, "General Perspectives", Nasson highlights the past and current disregard of the Second World War in South African historiography.

The formation of the apartheid state in 1948 and the rise to power of those who opposed South African participation in the war led to a silencing of the war in the historiography. The advent of full democracy in 1994 continued this act of silencing in favour of the history of liberation. Perhaps part of the reason for this lay in the failure of the Second World War to initiate democratic change in South Africa in a similar manner to the impetus it provided for anti-colonial struggles on the African continent and elsewhere.

The ambivalent way in which the conflict is perceived is by no means recent. As Nasson shows, the outbreak of war in September 1939 exacerbated divisions within parliament between Hertzog's faction, who called for neutrality and Smuts' belief that neutrality would mean a lack of Commonwealth support should the Germans decide to regain South West Africa. The narrow margin of victory in parliament for the Smuts coalition led to Hertzog's resignation as prime minister with Smuts taking on the leadership position. These divisions were mirrored by South African society as well.

In his fourth chapter, "Neutrality Averted and Early Shadow-boxing", Nasson highlights the tensions in South African society that were laid bare by the war – an Afrikaner opposition that desired neutrality; hostile Afrikaner nationalists that actively supported Nazi Germany; and black political groupings that saw little value in participating in a war fought ostensibly for democracy when they were a politically oppressed majority. The country was also unprepared for war in terms of defence and industrial capabilities.

Yet, economically, South Africa emerged from the Second World War stronger than ever before. Industry had expanded to meet war demands with job opportunities opening up for black men and white women because white men were released for combat. The chapter, "What, Who, Where and Why" shows the South African war machine in action with the South African

Naval Force coming into its own as did the South African Air Force. White women and black men were recruited into the various auxiliary services and the vehement opposition to arming black men saw men of the Native Military Corps armed with assegais to defend the country's important installations. Patrols were carried out along the country's coasts and borders but because fighting never actually occurred in South Africa, the impact of the war was not nearly as devastating as it was in Europe, for instance.

South African troops fought in East Africa and then in the desert of North Africa where the surrender at Tobruk marked the lowest point of support for the war effort. The less than uniform support for the war meant that security remained an issue. "Not Fighting on the Beaches" highlights the tense situation on the home front with sabotage carried out by the right wing Ossewa-Brandwag (OB) and a plot by the OB in conjunction with the Germans to assassinate Smuts and topple the government.

South African involvement in the Second World War had political ramifications as well. The exigencies of war and the shortage of manpower raised the possibility of arming black soldiers. Simultaneously, political groups such as the ANC and the Communist Party of South Africa argued for equal participation in the war. In Chapter 7, "Gain, Pain and Wane", Nasson discusses how increasing urbanisation brought about by the war led to a relaxation of influx control and pass legislation in the wake of Tobruk. Plans were made to extend social benefits to urban black residents in the form of pension and health schemes as well as education opportunities. The demand for black labour led to a steady decrease in the wage gap between white and black workers. In the Union Defence Force itself, the Army Education Services sought to inculcate "liberal" values in servicemen. However, as the war progressed to its conclusion, these possibilities for social, political and economic change were not realised. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Native Military Corps where servicemen were compensated with bicycles for their war service. The need for Smuts' government to appease so many different interests in South African society led to the enactment of further repressive legislation and the suppression of trade union activism, with a rising conservatism that would eventually culminate in the apartheid state.

The Second World War has often held a nostalgic place in our collective memory with generations raised on the stories that came to define the period. Nasson acknowledges this. Interspersed with the account of the war are the narratives that have captured the popular imagination – stories of the Royal Navy dog, Just Nuisance; the Lady in White who sang soldiers off to war from the quayside in Durban harbour; Major-General Dan Pienaar, war hero of both the First and Second World Wars who was killed in a plane crash in Kenya; and a protest of poor conditions aboard the ship, "City of Canterbury" in Durban. The book concludes with a quirky "Postscript" detailing one of the stranger impacts of South Africans at war when English shoe designer, Nathan Clark, inspired by the adapted footwear of South African troops "up North" created an internationally popular "desert boot".

Book Reviews / Boekresensies

In the spirit of the Jacana Pocket History series, Bill Nasson's *South Africa at War, 1939–1945* gives an excellent overview of a neglected aspect of South African historiography. While by its very nature, it cannot focus in detail on important themes such as identity and political activism, Nasson's work does flag these in a manner that piques the interest of the reader and paves the way for future engagement with these very relevant issues.

Suryakanthie Chetty
University of Johannesburg