

**From “Native Village” to “Dark City”:  
Population Growth, Class, Politics and Local Administration  
in  
Alexandra Township, South Africa, 1933-1943**

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**Introduction**

Alexandra Township is located approximately thirteen kilometers from central Johannesburg to the northeast of the city. It has achieved almost mythical status in the minds of many black South Africans as it has a long history. It was first settled in 1912 and was one of the few places in urban South Africa where Africans could own their own property. Alexandra was a major site for urban struggles, of political organisation and of resistance throughout its storied history. In addition, Alexandra survived the apartheid regime’s onslaught against a permanent African presence in urban areas. Finally, Alexandra was a central locus of protest against the vagaries of the apartheid system during the 1980s and early 1990s, as Belinda Bozzoli has recently outlined in some detail.<sup>1</sup> This article is concerned with a particular phase in Alexandra’s and South Africa’s history, namely that of the 1930s, when the urban landscape changed dramatically as thousands of new migrants settled in the urban areas surrounding Johannesburg. It charts a course between the early years of settlement where property owners controlled the political and economic landscape to the beginnings of mass protest movements that emerged during the 1940s. In this process a class struggle took place within Alexandra as property owners and tenants struggled to shape the world in which they lived, while at the same time both groups were marginalized within the wider South African context. As such, the situation in Alexandra was similar to that of Sophiatown which has been discussed in some detail by Alan Cobley and more recently by David Goodhew, both of whom outline the emergence of an ideology of respectability.<sup>2</sup> As Goodhew claims, “respectability was central to the resistance that these working class areas offered to the state.”<sup>3</sup>

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1. B. Bozzoli, *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid* (Ohio University Press, Athens - Ohio, 2004).
2. A.G. Cobley, *Class and Class Consciousness: The Black Petty Bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924-1950* (Greenwood Press, Westport, 1990); D. Goodhew, *Respectability and Resistance: A History of Sophiatown* (Praeger, Westport, 2004).
3. Goodhew, *Respectability and Resistance*, p xxii.

While the demographic changes in Sophiatown were similar to those in Alexandra, two differences remained. In the first place, Alexandra was outside of municipal control and therefore earned the title of “nobody’s baby” as it developed relatively uncontrolled by white authority, though it was by no means exempt from the reach of the segregation and apartheid states. Secondly, unlike the western areas of Johannesburg where many of the plots were owned by Indian or white absentee landlords, the Alexandra Township Company sold its stands exclusively to Africans and “coloureds”. As Goodhew outlines, in Sophiatown many stands were owned by whites, while in Newclare, coloured and Indian owners greatly outnumbered Africans.<sup>4</sup> This latter difference was less significant than the former, particularly as property owners in Alexandra formed the majority of members on the local governing body during the period from 1916 to 1932, and thus faced a direct threat to their interests from above, as well as from below. It is against these dynamics of local political economy that the period of transition from the early 1930s to that of the mid-1940s in Alexandra must be understood. Additionally, white money-lenders exploited standowners’ need for financing. It is clear that while standholders dominated the local political scene into the early 1940s, their focus on local representation in order to have a political voice sounded increasingly shrill to tenants faced with rising rent and bus fares, as well as an increasingly repressive state. However, there was a brief moment of unity surrounding the issue of representation on the local governing body, the Alexandra Health Committee (AHC) in which the strategy of mass meetings was used to heighten protest, though these meetings were clearly controlled by standowners. Between an initial bus boycott in 1940 and the squatters movement of 1946, the focus of protest began to shift dramatically in Alexandra though as old property owning local leaders such as R.G. Baloyi (himself a one-time bus owner) and E.P. Mart Zulu were replaced by new leaders in organisations such as the African Democratic Party, formed at the time of the 1943 bus boycott. Indeed a mass meeting held in October 1942 repudiated Zulu who had agreed to support a rise in bus fares.<sup>5</sup>

In South Africa new urban patterns developed during the first three decades of the twentieth century as the economy industrialized and as Africans streamed into locations in and near the major cities. Whereas in

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4. Goodhew, *Respectability and Resistance*, p 11.

5. For a discussion of the politics surrounding the 1942-1943 bus fare issue and its impact on local politics, see B. Hirson, *Yours for the Union: Class and Community Struggles in South Africa* (Zed Books, London, 1989), pp 138-146.

the latter part of the nineteenth century, Africans within the confines of present-day South Africa were present in urban areas either as migrant labourers or as “black Victorians” – those who primarily filled clerical positions and who had been educated at mission schools, by 1930 those who attempted to form an urban and Westernized elite were thrown together with tens of thousands of new migrants. While some slum areas developed early in the century, areas where Africans and “coloureds” could own their own land also appeared within city boundaries such as Sophiatown in Johannesburg, or near municipal boundaries such as Alexandra, located just outside of the Johannesburg municipality. Whites initially referred to Alexandra and places like it as “native villages”, places where “thrifty” Africans could be settled, however, by the mid-1930s a surge in migration led to townships being referred to as more menacing with connotations such as “dark city” that was applied to Alexandra. These terms represent both a shift in the demographics of urban South Africa as well as emerging shifts in white attitudes that saw large black settlements near white urban areas as potential threats to white “civilization”. Alexandra in particular faced much scrutiny as it was located near wealthy white suburbs to the northeast of Johannesburg. While whites struggled to make sense of African urbanization, Africans faced different types of “struggles” as they sought to carve out spaces and lives for themselves in the urban areas of South Africa.

Early residents hailed Alexandra as a place where “respectable” or better class Africans (and coloureds) could live and eventually own property. In petitioning the Transvaal administration in 1913, Alexandra plotters stated:

The necessity for such a township near Johannesburg where respectable and thrifty Natives could purchase land has long existed, and the sellers have supplied a decided want. This fact is evidenced by the number of better class Natives who have purchased lots on the property and who have erected buildings thereon.<sup>6</sup>

Many white liberals and missionaries concurred with this assessment and believed that property ownership gave blacks a stake in society which would promote social stability and eventually elevate them towards the standards of white civilization.

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6. Central Archives Depot (hereafter CAD), Pretoria: Native Affairs Department (hereafter NTS) 4234 80/313, volume 1, Alexandra Health Committee 1912-1928. Petition from plotters and residents of Alexandra Township to the Minister for Native Affairs, May 1913, pp 1-2.

Christianised migrants from better-off peasant and sharecropping areas of the Transvaal and Orange Free State often moved to the freehold townships of Sophiatown and Alexandra between 1912 and the early 1930s. Many of these people migrated to the city as a means to accumulate resources for marriage, or to buy property and houses in the rural areas. Furthermore, social capital was gained through having held a job in Johannesburg and those who had not spent time in the city were looked down on by those who had.<sup>7</sup> Once such migrants married, they often settled in Alexandra or Sophiatown, even if they could not afford property ownership, rather than the less prestigious slum areas of Johannesburg.

The face of Alexandra Township however changed dramatically during the 1930s when its population increased from about 5 000 to an estimated 45 000 to 50 000. Originally viewed by blacks and some whites as a “native village” for “thrifty” Africans to settle and own property, the influx of thousands of new residents led to Alexandra being viewed as a “dark city” on the edge of affluent white settlement. This rise in population was caused by drought and famine in the rural areas during the early 1930s, the initiation of major slum clearances by the Johannesburg City Council (JCC) from 1935 onwards and the increase in job opportunities as manufacturing expanded after South Africa abandoned the gold standard in 1933. Alexandra’s administration also changed dramatically during this period as residents lost their elected majority on the Alexandra Health Committee (AHC) at the beginning of 1933.<sup>8</sup> From 1933 through to 1941, the AHC was run by H.G. Falwasser, a recently retired Native Affairs Department (NAD) official, who served as both chairman and secretary of the committee. An elected element returned in 1937, but residents remained in the minority. From 1941 to 1943, liberal leader R.F. Alfred Hoernlé served as AHC chairman on a reconstituted committee, but residents did not regain their pre-1933 majority.

These changes had a profound effect on property owners in Alexandra, as their dominant position in local affairs was eroded. The rapid influx of people into Alexandra was a mixed blessing for standholders. On the one hand, income from rent rose significantly when standholders were being squeezed financially by the effects of the

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7. B. Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng* (Heinemann, Portsmouth, 1991), pp 89-92.

8. For a discussion of the Alexandra Health Committee under a locally elected majority between 1916 and 1933, see J. Nauright, “‘An Experiment in Native Self-Government’: The Alexandra Health Committee, the State and Local Politics, 1916-1933”, *South African Historical Journal*, 43, 2000, pp 223-243.

depression and rapidly rising mortgage costs. On the other hand, many new arrivals threatened their local political hegemony. In response to the loss of elected representation on the AHC and to the potential political threat from tenants, standholders formed several organisations during the 1930s. These groups were at the vanguard of the last standholder attempts to cooperate with white authorities in efforts to regain a measure of local self-government and to maintain a semblance of distinction from the majority of residents who did not own property and thus had less of a material stake in the township.

However, these attempts by standholders to work within a liberal incorporationist paradigm ran counter to the material realities of their position in the South African political economy of the 1930s. Standholders were slowly squeezed out of economic opportunities in a system that discriminated against black businesspeople in favour of whites. Several standholders were forced out of the local transportation market in the late 1930s, while others suffered losses in food and clothing trades. Increasingly, most standholders relied on rent for the majority of their income. An example of this was R.G. Baloyi, prominent businessman in Alexandra, treasurer of the ANC in the early 1940s, patron of many social organisations such as the Alexandra and Transvaal African Football Associations and member of the Native Representative Council (NRC) from 1937 to 1942. Baloyi built the only two-storey house in Alexandra from his profits as a landlord and bus owner running along the Alexandra-Johannesburg route. He was the last local bus owner forced out in 1940 and, after that, relied primarily on the income from the series of stands he owned in Second and Third Avenues, an area which author, former Alexandra tenant and squatters' leader, Modikwe Dikobe, labelled "R.G. Proprietary Ltd".<sup>9</sup>

Standholders encountered ambiguities between their reliance on ideals of improvement and an emerging awareness of the unwillingness of state authorities to extend rights to urban Africans, even "civilized" ones. Furthermore, pressures from tenants gradually forced standholders to decide between supporting liberal incorporationist ideals or uniting with tenants in struggles which threatened all residents after 1935. By the end of the 1930s, male standholders still controlled public protest and predominated in discussions with white authorities, yet they realized the necessity of reporting to the community at mass meetings. Standowner Emmanuel Peter Mart Zulu initiated this strategy in the early 1920s. He became notorious for holding public meetings. Dikobe, who became a

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9. M. Dikobe, "RG", in *Dispossessed* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983), pp 34-35.

leader of the Alexandra squatters' movement during 1946 to 1947, credits Mart Zulu with the creation of mass meetings, which by 1946 had become a tool of tenant and squatter organisation.<sup>10</sup> In the 1930s, leading male standholders strictly controlled public meetings, deciding speakers and agendas. By the end of the decade, most residents of Alexandra opposed the Falwasser-dominated AHC, proposals to remove the township, and were against any attempt to raise transportation costs.

During the 1930s, conflicting class interests and the ambiguity of the standholders' position prevented the appearance of mass resistance in the township. National organisations were weak in the early 1930s, which resulted in an absence of activity in Alexandra. The lack of support for national organisations in Alexandra can be explained by the organisational focus on protests against passes in Johannesburg townships. This was not a significant issue in Alexandra as the necessary permits were more easily obtainable. African national political activity was galvanized during the late 1930s in response to Prime Minister J.B.M. Hertzog's restrictive legislation.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the apparent class division between standholders and tenants, there was not unified action within each group. Tenants united at times, but could not challenge standholders who controlled access to housing and water-resources consistently. Standholders were divided between various factions that emerged out of competition for AHC seats during the 1920s and early 1930s. Coloured residents, most of whom were standholders, increasingly formed ethnically-based organisations in the 1930s, initially because a NAD official dominated the new non-elected AHC. Coloureds complained that they should not be subjected to

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10. M. Dikobe, "Mart Zulu", in *Dispossessed* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983), p 36. Dikobe states in the poem:

"If it were yesterday  
I would venture out after sunset ...  
And remind you  
That tomorrow  
There's a meeting.

You would have had no reason  
To complain  
Of being disturbed at that hour  
Because you, alone,  
Raised me ..."

11. National organisations and leadership became actively involved in Alexandra during the bus boycotts of 1942-1944.

any NAD authority and resented being treated the same as Africans in a time of greater compartmentalizing of people according to race in South Africa. They also blamed AHC inadequacies on the lack of sufficient coloured representation.

The AHC under Falwasser made improvements in sanitation, roads, and water-supply, but the provincial administration would not grant powers the AHC needed to cope with a population larger than all but a handful of white municipalities. As a result, Falwasser became more dictatorial in his approach to administration, acting more like a municipal location manager than the chairman of a health committee. Falwasser's attitude created widespread opposition by the late 1930s.

### **Material Pressures of the 1930s**

Underlying the increasing political divisions in Alexandra, were the economic hardships of the early 1930s. Many residents suffered during the depression, which created greater unemployment and a relative decline in real wages locally. Some Alexandra workers were victims of policies that replaced African labour with poor white labour in the State's attempt to prevent the emergence of a non-racial lumpenproletariat. The situation became so bad that by April 1933, the AHC approved the expenditure of £25 a month for poverty relief. The scheme involved the employment of thirteen Africans at the rate of 1s 6d per day without food. However, the committee stated that there were at least 500 unemployed in Alexandra. At least 100 of these could be employed on road-works, but the AHC did not have the resources to pay their wages. The committee asked for a matching contribution from the NAD to subsidize a further thirteen workers.<sup>12</sup> The NAD stated that it had no funds for poverty relief and that the AHC should take steps to "get rid of unemployed Natives who have no fixed interest in the township."<sup>13</sup> Falwasser pressed the NAD and the latter agreed in September 1933 to contribute 6d a day for three months only to workers employed on public works in the township if the AHC also paid 6d.<sup>14</sup> It was not until the end of October 1933 that

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12. CAD: NTS 7860 101/336, Alexandra Township Native Distress. Letter from Falwasser for the AHC to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 26 April 1933. The unemployment figure of 500 was out of an estimated population of 8 000, at least half of whom would have been children, as most residents lived in family units. In addition, the figure of 500 referred to men, so perhaps one-quarter to one-third of working age men were without formal employment by 1933.

13. CAD: NTS 7860 101/336, NAD Internal memo to the Director of Native Labour, 10 May 1933.

14. CAD: 7860 101/336, Secretary for Native Affairs to the Director of Native Labour, 28 September 1933.

the AHC finally started the scheme that employed eleven men to level Number Two Square to create a sports ground for residents.<sup>15</sup> In early November 1933 the NAD asserted that “repatriation to their homes of unemployed Natives if such Natives originate from rural locations or reserves” should be standard policy.<sup>16</sup>

This correspondence shows that the AHC could not help destitute residents in a significant way. In addition, the NAD thought that simple repatriation would solve the problem of unemployed urbanites. This assumed that all Africans had a “home” in the rural areas that could support them, however, many did not, which was why they were in town. The Native Economic Commission (NEC) of 1930-1932 found that, even in the comparatively well off Transkei, the average family did not generate enough surplus to pay taxes and buy needed staples, which forced many men into migrant labour, and others into towns on a more permanent basis.<sup>17</sup> However, it is important to remember that not all people who came to town from rural areas were forced out and not all those who migrated to urban townships and locations planned to stay permanently.<sup>18</sup>

Many residents had just arrived from rural areas. Archdeacon Francis Hill of the Anglican Church reported to the NEC that significant numbers of tenants left white farms in the late 1920s and 1930s because farmers would no longer allow them to keep cattle and demanded more labour. Some left farms and came to town, but had to sell their cattle because they could not find inexpensive grazing close to black settlements. He presented five cases of standholders who recently settled in Alexandra because of conditions imposed by white farmers. Hill stated that many more people he interviewed related

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15. CAD: NTS 7860 101/336, Letter from Falwasser for the AHC to the Chief Native Commissioner, Witwatersrand, 23 October 1933; List of natives engaged on 30 October 1933 at 1/- per diem for whom a government grant at the rate of 6d per diem is applied for three months, 30 October 1933.
  16. CAD: NTS 7860 101/336, Secretary for Native Affairs to the Director of Native Labour, 4 November 1933.
  17. Union Government (hereafter UG): 1922-1932, Report of the Native Economic Commission 1930-1932 (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1932), pp 277-278.
  18. Bozzoli, *Women of Phokeng*. Also see J. Nauright, “‘I am With You as Never Before’: Women in Urban Protest Movements, Alexandra Township, South Africa 1912-1945”, in K. Sheldon (ed), *Courtyards, Markets, City Streets: Women in Urban Africa* (Westview Press, Boulder, 1996), pp 259-283, for more discussion on the strategies of women migrants from Phokeng who settled in Alexandra in the late 1920s and 1930s.



similar stories and that he believed the cause of influx to town “is the lack of grazing and plough land”.<sup>19</sup>

Tourakis, in his BA Honours thesis on Alexandra’s political economy, argues that a system of racketeering developed in Alexandra in the 1930s and 1940s. At the top of the system were white money-lenders who exploited a standowning “petty bourgeoisie” through high interest rates. Standowners then exploited “working-class” tenants by charging high rent. Tourakis continues that both standowners and tenants exploited a “lumpenproletariat” of sub-tenants.<sup>20</sup> This characterization of classes in Alexandra’s political economy provides a useful model for a basic analysis of socio-economic differentiation within Alexandra. However, the evidence shows that this is nothing more than a model. Political divisions within groups, particularly among standholders, were quite pronounced and cannot be reduced to a functionalist analysis of economic divisions purely based on narrowly defined class interests. This is particularly true when read against the accounts provided by Coplan, Koch, Callinicos, Bonner, Bozzoli, Goodhew and others on urban black culture, social divisions and struggles for survival in urban townships and locations.<sup>21</sup> Standholders were victims of high interest rates charged for refinancing or for building loans. Those who bought stands in the early 1930s, paid anywhere from £65 to £200, payable with a deposit of £2 and monthly installments of £1. By 1930, a total of 882 stands had been transferred to owners, and by 1936, 1 211 of the 2 525 stands had been paid in full.<sup>22</sup> The strain on standholding families can be measured by comparing stand payments to the average earnings of residents in 1930, which the AHC put at £2 per month.<sup>23</sup> After

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19. William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Church of the Province of South Africa (hereafter CPSA): AD 1438, Native Economic Commission. Evidence of Archdeacon Walter Francis Hill, Father Stephen Carter and Miss Dorothy Reynolds Maud on behalf of the Church of the Province of South Africa, 11 May 1931, pp 7574-7576. Also see M. Lacey, *Working for Boroko: The Origins of a Coercive Labour System in South Africa* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1981), pp 135-141.
  20. P.N. Tourakis, “The ‘Political Economy’ of Alexandra Township, 1905-1958.” BA Honours, University of the Witwatersrand, 1981, pp 20-21.
  21. See discussion of literature on urban black culture in the Introduction.
  22. CPSA: AD 1438 Evidence Presented to the Native Economic Commission. Statement Submitted by the Health Committee of the Alexandra Township to the Native Economic Commission 1930, submitted 18 May 1931, p 1; CAD: TP6 - 1937, Feetham Commission Report III, Annexure E, Statement by the Alexandra Health Committee, p 98.
  23. CPSA: AD 1438, Statement by the AHC to the Native Economic Commission, p 2.

completing purchase payments on their stands, standowners often went to money-lenders who charged interest at rates of ten per cent or higher for building loans. Dr. A.B. Xuma, in his capacity as part-time Medical Officer of Health in Alexandra, stated in 1939 that terms of repayment were frequently too difficult for many owners. The result often was the loss of property to money-lenders or their agents.<sup>24</sup> Johannesburg Native Commissioner, J.M. Brink, reported in 1940 that Jewish attorneys and finance companies provided financing, with the interest rate of ten per cent payable yearly in advance.<sup>25</sup> The Native Affairs Commission (NAC), which investigated affairs in Alexandra in 1940, stated that lenders normally deducted forty per cent of the loan amount before paying out loans, but charged interest on the full amount.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of financial pressures, standholders increased the numbers of rooms for rent on their properties. Under AHC regulations in operation in the early 1930s, standholders could build thirty or more rooms of twelve by twelve feet on the majority of stands and also provide the necessary latrines. In 1934, Falwasser forced through new AHC regulations that stipulated that forty per cent of each stand must remain unbuilt and that owners would have to pay costs of removing any excess buildings.<sup>27</sup> These new regulations still allowed for almost thirty rooms per stand. It was reported in 1940 that monthly rent charged by standholders varied from 10s to 30s per room.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, standholders who built the maximum allowable rooms could earn between £15 and £45 a month from rent. However, much of this revenue went to the white money-lenders. While Brink believed that standholders were deliberately exploiting their fellow Africans, Hoernlé argued:

The crux of the whole business, however, is the European money-lender ... The net result is that the Township as a whole is heavily in debt to Europeans in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Most standholders are little more than agents for their creditors, collecting rents from their tenants and paying the bulk of the

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24. CPSA: AD 843/RJ/B3.2.1, File 3, Alexandra Health Committee, Medical Officer of Health's Report for the year ended 30 June 1939, Report B, pp 17-18.
  25. CAD: KJB 479 N9/8/3, J.M. Brink, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to the Director of Native Labour, 27 May 1940, p 4.
  26. UG: 1942-1941, Report of the Native Affairs Commission 1939-1940 (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1941), pp 29-30.
  27. CPSA: AD 843/RJ/Na1.1, File 2, Powers of Health Committee in regard to limiting buildings on stands, et cetera (1934).
  28. CAD: KJB 479 9/8/3, J.M. Brink, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to the Director of Native Labour, 27 May 1940, p 4.

receipts to their creditors as interest and amortisation for bonds. [However] Those who succeed in paying off the bonds live, like corresponding European "capitalists" on the backs of their tenants.<sup>29</sup>

Despite assertions that standholders lived “on the backs of their tenants”, available evidence suggests that property owners in Alexandra were in no better position than those in the Western Areas freehold townships of Johannesburg. Only four per cent of the Sophiatown population owned stands in the 1930s, and only a quarter of those could afford to keep an entire house for themselves. Twenty-nine per cent of African owners in the Western Areas relied on their property as the main source of income, but most were in debt and struggled to pay off mortgages. Similar to Alexandra’s case, Steve Lebelo argues that Sophiatown property owners faced a dilemma: they needed the tenants to maintain their income, property and way-of-life; but the presence of the tenants in large numbers came to threaten their position and status.<sup>30</sup> A survey of 1950 revealed that only 102 families out of a population of 66 000 in Sophiatown and Martindale could afford to buy homes if they were removed. Cobley argues that, although property owners were not much better off than tenants, aspirations surrounding freehold rights had a psychological significance which often led to special pleading for protection. He argues further that poor living conditions faced by all classes of urban Africans helped develop common cultural references in urban African communities, which ensured the potential for cross-class joint action.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of Alexandra, property ownership had significant psychological and ideological value as evidenced by standholders’ defence of their property rights. Standholders asserted that property ownership marked a permanent stake in society in general and in Alexandra in particular. Alexandra’s unique legal position meant that it was much more difficult to eliminate property rights there which made standholders’ defence of rights even more tenacious than elsewhere. However, Bonner argues there was more to the black “petty bourgeoisie” and “aspirant petty bourgeoisie’s” interests than mere ideological forms. Those who invested in property were indicating their permanent tie to the urban area where they had to raise all their costs of reproduction. Bonner

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29. CPSA: SAIRR "B" Box Collection, AD 843 B15.4, Hoernlé to Rheinallt Jones reporting on Alexandra Township, 9 February 1943, p 3.

30. M.J. Lebelo, “Apartheid’s Chosen Few: Urban African Middle Classes from the Slums of Sophiatown to the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg, 1935-1985”. Unpublished paper presented to History Workshop, February 1990, University of the Witwatersrand, p 9.

31. Cobley, *Class and Consciousness*, pp 33-34.

asserts that low wages and pressures on women to work all pushed the petty and aspirant petty bourgeoisie together and drove them towards the rank and file of the working class.<sup>32</sup> However, in Alexandra standholders continually fought to obtain and preserve their difference from tenants throughout the 1920s, 1930s and into the 1940s. Rather than driving residents together, property ownership, with its attendant material differentiation and ideological significance, prevented mass struggle in Alexandra for several decades as standholders sought to protect their privileged position, precarious as it was. Baruch Hirson asserts that a petty bourgeoisie developed in towns which was barely distinguishable from workers in living standards. However, this group aspired to respectability through education at the best schools for Africans, attending church at the “more respectable denominations” – the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and AME, through “proper” behaviour and cultivation by some “Western” values. This behaviour earned them the appellation “scuse-me-please” from other township-dwellers. The members of this “petty bourgeoisie” were caught between liberal-Christian values of self-improvement and advancement, and their emerging anger at being confined to an inferior position along with blacks who did not share their cultural and ideological values.<sup>33</sup>

### **Pressures Created By Rising Population**

The large numbers of people coming to Alexandra from the countryside and other urban areas created many contradictions for standholders. At the beginning of the 1930s, the population of Alexandra was estimated at anywhere from 8 000 to 14 000, but the lower figure was the more accepted one. Of this 8 000, a significant proportion consisted of families of the approximately 1 200 standholders who lived in the township. By 1940, however, the population was somewhere in the neighbourhood of 50 000, although no one knows for sure. Most of the stands were occupied by this time, although there were still a few absentee landowners. Even if as many as 2 000 standholders lived in Alexandra with their families, they would only account for 10 000 to 14 000, which meant that the other 30 000 to 40 000 residents were tenants and their families. This transformation raised a series of new questions, both for state officials and standholders.

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32. P. Bonner, “The Transvaal Native Congress 1917-1921: the Radicalisation of the Black Petty Bourgeoisie on the Rand”, in S. Marks & R.B. Rathbone (eds), *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa 1870-1930* (Longmans, London, 1982), pp 277-278.

33. See Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, pp 5-6.

The whole philosophy that developed around Alexandra's early settlement centred on it being a place where "thrifty Africans and Coloureds" could purchase their own land and develop "along their own lines" in their own community. However, by the mid-1930s, most residents were not property owners, but tenants who went to Alexandra to avoid municipal controls and because it was easier to get a work seeker's permit there. The influx of thousands of new tenants in the 1930s created a series of contradictions for standholders. Increased income could be made from rent, which prevented total financial ruin for many property owners, but as slum conditions emerged, standholders found it more difficult to convince state officials that the township was a model for African urban development that should be controlled by residents free from direct state control. Many of the newer migrants were single men and women, rather than family units. This threatened conceptions of "respectability", linked to stable family settlement. The AHC Chairman of 1942-1943, Alfred Hoernlé, stated that the real development of slum conditions dated from about 1935 when slum properties in Johannesburg were closed and many victims went to Alexandra.<sup>34</sup> In the same year the first significant agitation for the removal of the township developed because of its unsanitary and slum conditions.<sup>35</sup>

A rise in illicit liquor offences resulted from increased influx to Alexandra. In 1928 there were 220 cases of liquor possession while in 1941-1942, there were 6 896 cases reported to the police, of which 4 961 were under the liquor laws.<sup>36</sup> Sergeant Scheepers, stationed at the Wynberg police station responsible for Alexandra from 1922 to 1935, stated in 1936 that several hundred "undesirable" tenants were women who rent rooms "for the sole purpose of brewing liquor". Some of these women had "husbands" living with them, many supported by money made from the sale of liquor.<sup>37</sup> Many of these men would not have been actual husbands. Some were temporary partners, while others may have

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34. CAD: TPB 1140 TALG 23/8933, volume 1, Alexandra Township. Minutes (Abridged) of conference held in conference room, Union Buildings, Pretoria, 23 October 1942, p 4.

35. See J. Nauright, "'The Mecca of Native Scum' and 'A Running Sore of Evil': White Johannesburg and the Alexandra Township Removal Debate, 1935-1945", *Kleio*, 30, 1998, pp 64-88.

36. CAD: GNLB 418 85/2, Young Committee Minutes of Evidence, Evidence of F.C. Scheepers, L/Sgt., South African Police, 11 April 1929, p 112; CPSA: SAIRR "B" Box Collection, AD 843 B74.4, File 2, Pretoria Conference on Alexandra Township, 1942, pp 2-3. See Chapter 1 for more on liquor in Alexandra.

37. CAD: C56, Johannesburg and Germiston Boundaries (Feetham) Commission Minutes of Evidence, Evidence of Sergeant Conrad Scheepers, 28 February 1936, p 399.

been *diepamokoti*, literally “trench-diggers”, unemployed and often evicted tenants who cleaned shebeens and dug trenches for hiding illicit liquor, particularly by the 1940s, in exchange for free accommodation and food.<sup>38</sup>

According to Scheepers, there was never any serious trouble in Alexandra, although fights frequently occurred on weekends. He never had trouble breaking up a disturbance and indicated that standholders often assisted him and regarded him as a friend. He also stated that: “If it were not for the assistance of the stand owners the few [seventeen] policemen stationed at Wynberg could never have looked after the place.”<sup>39</sup> It is possible that the increasing cooperation between standholders and the police regarding illicit liquor and weekend disturbances, was due to decreasing reliance on the liquor trade by leading standholders who were now able to accumulate through renting rooms and through the operation of shops in the township. In addition, cooperation on this issue was a key way to distinguish themselves morally and ideologically from the mass of new arrivals, many of whom imported *marabi* culture, which surrounded the liquor trade in Johannesburg slumyards, to Alexandra and Sophiatown in the 1930s.<sup>40</sup> As Coplan demonstrates, *marabi* was much more than the musical form for which it was named. It came to mean “a category of people with low social status and a reputation for immorality, identified by their regular attendance at *marabi* parties.”<sup>41</sup> In Alexandra a variant of *marabi* developed from slumyard culture and the already present all-night “tea-meetings”.<sup>42</sup> Due to slum clearances and subsequent immigration to Alexandra, the township became a much larger centre for weekend

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38. Lebelo, “Apartheid’s Chosen Few”, p 15.

39. CAD: C56, Feetham Commission Minutes of Evidence, Evidence of Sergeant Scheepers, 28 February 1936, pp 402-403.

40. Marabi culture was named for the musical form popular in slumyards, developed by working class musicians in the shebeens. Marabi expanded to encompass the whole range of practices accompanying drinking and music in shebeens. Marabi is discussed in detail in M. Dikobe, *The Marabi Dance* (Heinemann, London, 1973); D. Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa’s Black City Music and Theatre* (Longman, London, 1985), pp 90-112; E. Koch, “Doornfontein and its African Working Class, 1914–1935: A Study of Popular Culture in Johannesburg.” MA dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1983, pp 102-220.

41. Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*, p 94.

42. By 1950 Alexandra was a main centre of a new musical form known as kwela. Many of the best penny whistle players of kwela music were from Alexandra where the style developed on the streets and in shebeens. See Coplan, *In Township Tonight!*, pp 158-160.

drinkers than it had been in the 1920s. Lebelo argues that Sophiatown was largely free of *marabi* culture which surrounded illicit liquor brewing and selling in the slumyards, and that before the 1930s, poor whites supplied most of the illicit liquor there.<sup>43</sup> Alexandra seems to have followed a similar cultural pattern, although standholders did not seem to enforce prohibitions on brewing and selling of liquor with the same zeal as many Sophiatown property owners. This was because the comparatively fewer tenants coming to Alexandra in the late 1910s and 1920s, did not allow landlords the luxury of imposing many restrictions.

Added to the influx of Africans from the Union, the British Protectorates and Johannesburg slumyards, was a movement of Rhodesian Africans to Alexandra. Johannesburg was the largest city on the sub-continent and offered greater opportunities and higher wages than other urban centres. Alexandra attracted Rhodesian Africans, as well as other foreign blacks, who came to the Rand because they could escape detection much easier there. From the mid-1930s, official reports continually allude to the presence of Africans from Rhodesia at Alexandra. Some linked their arrival with the rise in crime.<sup>44</sup> Officials and whites opposed to the township used the presence of “foreign natives” to press their argument that Alexandra was “uncontrolled”, and therefore dangerous to the white community.

A general wave of crime appears to have arrived along with the rapid rise in population. This was partly due to greater numbers of weekend visitors and partly to a police crackdown inside the Johannesburg municipal boundaries that drove several gangs and gang-members to Alexandra. In 1941-1942, there were 38 murders, whereas there had been only a couple per year before the 1930s.<sup>45</sup> In 1940, J.M. Brink, Chief Native Commissioner of Johannesburg reported on conditions in Alexandra:

That the Township is the refuge and harbourage of Native criminals and loafers of every type and degree, that liquor is brewed freely and that vice is rampant, admit, in my opinion, of no argument whatever. Furthermore, it must definitely be accepted as a fact that the position is steadily growing worse and has been aggravated by the City Council's slum clearance schemes, the abnormal influx of Natives into the Johannesburg

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43. Lebelo, “Apartheid’s Chosen Few”, p 11.

44. CAD: TPB 1140 TALG 23/8933, volume 1, Abridged minutes of a conference on Alexandra, 23 October 1942, p 3.

45. CPSA: SAIRR "B" Box Collection, AD 843 B74.4, File 2, Pretoria Conference on Alexandra Township, 1942, pp 2-3.

area and the lack of adequate accommodation elsewhere in the city.<sup>46</sup>

Juvenile delinquency also increased with the rising population. In 1943, Hoernlé stated that Alexandra needed at least 100 more classrooms to accommodate the 5 000 or more children not in school.<sup>47</sup> In the whole of Johannesburg in 1939, schools were available for only 15 214, or 37,6 per cent of the estimated 40 000 African children of school-going age.<sup>48</sup> Delinquency was attributed to lack of sufficient schools, unstable “marital” unions, lack of adequate “suitable” leisure activities and facilities, as well as the absence of many mothers from home for much of the day.<sup>49</sup>

These problems emerged out of the transformation of Alexandra from a “Native Village” to the “Dark City” where thousands of “unsupervised” blacks lived near white areas. The changing conception of Alexandra among white South Africans led to debate on the administration and whole future of the township in the 1930s and 1940s.

### **Political Organisations and Local Administration**

The decision by the Provincial Administration to disestablish the AHC at the end of June 1932 and subsequently to replace it with a reconstructed AHC with seven nominated members – four whites, two Africans and one coloured person, led to a series of complaints by groups within Alexandra. Between late 1932 and 1935, it appears that standholders organised into three distinct groups. The first was centred around the local branch of the African Peoples’ Organisation (APO) and consisted of coloured standholders only. The second was known as the Alexandra Township Standholders Committee (ASC) which opposed AHC elected members, whom they argued were out of touch with township residents. The ASC consisted of both coloured and African members and was led by well-known local political figures, particularly C.A. Ramushu and John McPherson. The last group was organised in 1935 as the Alexandra

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46. CAD: KJB 479 N9/8/3, J.M. Brink, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to the Director of Native Labour, 27 May 1940, pp 2-3.

47. CPSA: SAIRR "B" Box Collection, AD 843 B15.4, African Townships Committee, Extract from a letter addressed by Professor R.F. Alfred Hoernlé to J.D. Rheinallt-Jones, Chairman of the African Townships Committee, being a report on Alexandra Township, 9 February 1943, p 2.

48. CPSA: A1117/3 Conference on Native Juvenile Delinquency (1939), Ray Phillips, “A survey of the situation on the Witwatersrand”, p 5.

49. See CPSA: A1117, papers presented to the Conference on Juvenile Delinquency, 1939.



Standholders Protection and Vigilance Association (ASP&VA), initially led by E.P. Mart Zulu. It is clear that the ASP&VA was relatively conservative and more closely linked with Lilius Campbell, Director of the Township Company that sold property in Alexandra during the 1930s, than the other organisations. This fact has led one author to label the ASP&VA a “bogus” or front organisation and nothing more than a mouthpiece for Campbell and the Township Company, yet it became the longest continuous standholder organisation in the township and was still operating as late as 1969, headed then by long-time member Dan W.B. Gumede, who bought his property in 1932.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the ASP&VA was highly vocal in the campaign to remove Falwasser and in defence of Alexandra against threats of removal.

Representing the 985 adult coloured residents of Alexandra in 1932, the APO was in favour of extending coloured representation on the AHC to four members to end the domination by Africans who had more members based on their greater numbers and not “by reason of their intelligence or suitability to safeguard the interests of the Township.”<sup>51</sup> The APO initiated complaints against the AHC in 1930 when, for the first time, no coloured man was elected to the committee. Ironically this was after the defeat of A.P. Dickinson, who did not get along with the local APO leadership.<sup>52</sup> As a result of the election, the organisation asked for official protection of coloured AHC representation.<sup>53</sup> In an additional statement, the APO asserted that African members of the AHC could not protect their interests and that they did not want Africans to represent them.<sup>54</sup> Upon the establishment of the new AHC at the beginning of 1933, the Administrator appointed APO member J.W.B. McPherson to represent coloured people in

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50. D. Duncan, “Liberals and Local Administration in South Africa: Alfred Hoernlé and the Alexandra Health Committee, 1933-1943”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 23, 3, 1990, p 480; *Rand Daily Mail*, 2 April 1969. Duncan’s article is full of inaccuracies regarding the history of the AHC prior to 1933 and on the roles of organisations and personalities within Alexandra. The political careers of Mart Zulu, Gumede, Ramohanoe, Mrupe and other ASP&VA leaders could not be controlled, manipulated or bribed by Campbell as Duncan suggests.
  51. CAD: TPB 1139 15/8933, 2, Benson & Sadie, Solicitors for the African People’s Organisation of Alexandra Township to the Administrator of the Transvaal, 21 June 1932.
  52. See Nauright, “An Experiment in Native Self-Government” for a discussion of Dickinson and the APO in local politics during the 1920s.
  53. CAD: TPB 1139 15/8933, 2, Alex S. Benson, Solicitor, representing the APO to the Administrator of the Transvaal, 17 October 1930.
  54. CAD: TPB 1139 15/8933, 2, Benson & Sadie, Solicitors for the APO to the Administrator of the Transvaal, 3 February 1933.

the township, but McPherson refused office in protest at the loss of the resident AHC majority.

The Alexandra Township Standholders' Association aimed at direct control of all township affairs and hoped to remove "the stranglehold which the Alexandra Township Limited exercises over all aspects of the lives of the standholders." The association believed in the value of white advice, but objected to non-elected whites on the AHC. They thought whites should be on the AHC in an advisory capacity only. Finally they complained that Alexandra would be saddled with "undesirables" cast off by Johannesburg for as long as the AHC's powers were not increased.<sup>55</sup>

Mart Zulu and other local leaders formed the ASP&VA in February 1935 and by 1936, the association claimed a membership of 960. Its object was "to safeguard the interests of the plotholders".<sup>56</sup> Mart Zulu outlined his philosophy in a New Year's message to Alexandra residents in 1940. He stated:

I hope we can continue to live in peace and harmony in Alexandra, while also keeping the crime rate low. This too will serve the purpose of demonstrating to the white government that black people *can* and will be able to hold positions of power and run the nation [African affairs].<sup>57</sup>

It is clear from *Bantu World* reports of the late 1930s and early 1940s that the ASP&VA tried to work closely with white officials in hopes of earning respect and a return to local control of the AHC. The majority of local leaders and a number of former and future AHC members belonged to the association, including C.S. Ramahanoe; president of the Transvaal ANC in the early 1940s; J.A. Ntsala, AHC secretary in the late 1920s and early 1930s and ASP&VA secretary; Dan W.B. Gumede, secretary of the Alexandra Branch of ANC in the early 1940s, secretary of the Alexandra Workers' Union (AWU) founded by Mart Zulu in 1939 and later ASP&VA president and president of the Alexandra Ratepayers' Association; J.K. Mrupe, AHC member in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s

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55. CAD: TP6 - 1937, Feetham Commission Report III, Annexure J: Extracts from a memorandum from the Alexandra Township Standholders' Association, p 111.

56. CAD: TP6 - 1937, Feetham Commission Report III, Annexure G: Statement submitted by the Alexandra Township Standholders Protection and Vigilance Association, p 104.

57. *Bantu World*, 13 January 1940 (original in Zulu – translation by Miranda Miles).

and a builder and shop owner; Reverend Samuel Maeger, archbishop of the Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion, AHC member in the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s and ASP&VA vice-president; and J.E.H. Vilakazi who was the figurehead ASP&VA president.<sup>58</sup> R.G. Baloyi and Doctor Xuma also attended several meetings organised by the ASP&VA. By mid-1942, the association claimed to have 8 000 members, which if accurate, meant that a significant number of tenants were members as well.<sup>59</sup> This figure is probably an over-estimate used to impress officials, as it is not likely that large numbers of tenants joined, since the ASP&VA always professed to represent the interests of standholders. Nonetheless, the involvement of so many of the prominent local political figures, along with recognition from Xuma and Baloyi, belies the suggestion that the association was “bogus”.

It is clear from representations by all of these groups to the NAD and Provincial Administration that residents assumed that Falwasser and the nominated AHC was only a temporary measure. They protested that the committee did not consult residents when making new rules and regulations and that the AHC should be elected by standholders and not by “irresponsible individuals as is often the case”.<sup>60</sup> Residents received a small concession in October 1937, when elections for the three black AHC members were restored. However, this did not give residents the amount of power they had before 1932, as elected members would still be in a minority.<sup>61</sup>

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58. Evidence on Reverend Maegar is from *Bantu World*, 2 December 1939; on Mrupe from *Bantu World*, 1 April 1939; on Gumede from *Bantu World*, 12 August 1939.

59. CPSA: SAIRR “B” Box Collection, AD 843 B74.4, File 2, Alexandra Township Vigilance and Protection Standholders Committee to the Controller of Building and Utility Services, 4 August 1942.

60. CAD: TPB 1138 TA13/8933, Standholders Committee, Alexandra Township to the Administrator of the Transvaal, 28 July 1934. Also see CAD: TAB 1138 TA13/8933, African People’s Organisation to the Administrator of the Transvaal, 17 February 1935; CAD: TAB 1138 TA13/8933, Resolutions passed at a meeting under the auspices of the Alexandra Township Standholders Protection and Vigilance Association attended by 1 500 Standholders on 20 March 1938.

61. CPSA: SAIRR “B” Box Collection, AD 843 B74.4, File 2, Alexandra Health Committee Correspondence, Secretary for Public Health to R.F.A. Hoernlé, 20 October 1942, re enclosed document as basis of discussion at Conference on Alexandra, p 2.

## “We Demand That Falwasser Must Go”: Residents and the AHC<sup>62</sup>

Falwasser initiated some improvements in basic services in Alexandra, but, as this quotation suggests, by 1938 he became increasingly antagonistic towards black members of the AHC and the committee's black employees. Doctor Xuma, who had been part-time Medical Officer of Health for the AHC since 1929, stated that Falwasser was less even-tempered and impartial than the Native Commissioners who headed the committee before him. In addition, Xuma felt that Falwasser did not spend enough time studying Alexandra's affairs. Xuma cited the AHC's progress in recent years as proof that resident AHC members were not preventing Falwasser from making improvements, contrary to the Chairman's assertions.<sup>63</sup> The *Bantu World* reported in 1940 that Falwasser's ability as an administrator was not in question, but he had difficulty dealing with Africans on a personal level.<sup>64</sup>

In Falwasser's opinion, African and coloured AHC members adopted a hostile attitude, not only against him, but against any measure of white control over township affairs. He accused them of deliberate obstruction of AHC business at “my Committee meetings” and opposition to many of his suggestions for improvements.<sup>65</sup> In particular, resident members supported by one white member, rejected Falwasser's plans to appoint a white man as a junior clerk.<sup>66</sup> They then decided that a coloured man be appointed which Falwasser opposed. As a result, one of the resident members proposed the elimination of Falwasser's voting rights for failing to carry out the wishes of the majority. Falwasser thought this was “entirely out of order and cannot be accepted but it clearly shows the attitude of the Native and Coloured members.”<sup>67</sup> Despite his hostility towards black AHC members, Falwasser admitted that he had acted unconstitutionally in failing to implement an earlier AHC resolution on this appointment. Under the circumstances, Falwasser

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62. CPSA: AD 843/RJ/B3.2.1, File 4, Flyer from Alexandra United Committee for a Mass Meeting at Number Two Square, Alexandra Township, 18 May 1941.

63. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 4, A.B. Xuma to D.L. Smit, Secretary for Native Affairs, 12 August 1940, pp 1-2.

64. *Bantu World*, 19 October 1940.

65. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 4, H.G. Falwasser to H.F. Pentz, Transvaal Provincial Secretary, 3 April 1940.

66. NTS 4236 80/313, 4, H.G. Falwasser to the Provincial Secretary, 23 May 1940.

67. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 4, H.G. Falwasser to H.F. Pentz, Transvaal Provincial Secretary, 3 April 1940.

determined he had no course of action but to resign as chairman of the AHC effective at the end of June 1940.<sup>68</sup>

As a result of problems on the AHC, D.L. Smit, Secretary for Native Affairs, interviewed Falwasser, Herbert Sutton Cooke, then Acting Director of Native Labour, and Brink in early June. Cooke sympathized with Falwasser's position recalling his tenure as chairman of the AHC in the 1920s. Falwasser supported the Provincial Administration's idea of an all-white AHC with township residents limited to an advisory board and agreed to continue as chairman under such a new system.<sup>69</sup>

Just after Falwasser's resignation, the Alexandra Coloured Associated Association (ACAA), an umbrella group for the several coloured groups in the township, complained that Falwasser always argued issues on racial lines, even though all residents were black.<sup>70</sup> Xuma agreed with this assessment in stating that "the present Chairman has often introduced an unpleasant racial flavour to certain discussions thus irritating and pricking the pride of non-European members ..."<sup>71</sup> Elected resident AHC members also confirmed that Falwasser was hostile to them. They stated that he "finds it difficult to accept criticisms, more especially when they come from Non-European members."<sup>72</sup> Senator Rheinallt Jones supported these views of Falwasser's attitude in his interview with the NAC in October 1940. While praising the improvements initiated by Falwasser, Rheinallt Jones said that Falwasser "had a temperament that was not particularly suited for dealing with non-Europeans and ... there was growing steadily a personal resentment against him." Rheinallt Jones had tried to get Falwasser to hold public meetings to inform township residents of AHC matters, but the latter had refused.<sup>73</sup>

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68. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 4, Falwasser to Pentz, 23 May 1940.

69. NTS 4236 80/313, 4, Note of Interview with Major Cooke, Acting Director of Native Labour, H.G. Falwasser, Chairman of the Health Committee of the Alexandra Township and Brink, Native Commissioner of Johannesburg, by D.L. Smit, Secretary of Native Affairs, 8 June 1940.

70. CAD: TAB 1138 TAA 13/8933, Alexandra Coloured Associated Association to the Administrator of the Transvaal, 5 July 1940.

71. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 4, Xuma to Smit, 12 August 1940, p 2.

72. CAD: TAB 1138 TA 13/8933, Elected members of the Alexandra Health Committee to the Administrator of the Transvaal, 2 July 1940.

73. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 4, Notes on an interview between the Native Affairs Commission and Senator J.D. Rheinallt Jones held at Pretoria on 11 October 1940, p 1.

The immediate issue that aroused protest against Falwasser's conduct, was his continuing failure to accept the appointment of a Mister Frederick as junior clerk for the AHC, despite the fact that the AHC had approved his appointment at two meetings respectively in March and May 1940.<sup>74</sup> Resident anger was exacerbated by the Transvaal Administration's proposal to reconstitute the AHC, which would consist of three nominated white members appointed by the Administrator, thus ending the role of residents on the AHC. In August 1940, Xuma argued that the scheme would be a retrogressive step which would alienate residents and strain African support for the government during the time of crisis caused by the Second World War. Xuma asked that the Administrator receive a deputation of black AHC members before deciding how to reform the committee. Finally, he politely warned the government that the "people are very much agitated over this matter."<sup>75</sup>

A mass meeting was held at Number Two Square in Alexandra on 25 August 1940 under the auspices of the Alexandra United (Front) Committee (AUFC). A significant number of township organisations formed the AUFC in order to protest against Falwasser, the proposed all-white AHC, the proposed NAC investigation and in favour of increased black representation on the AHC. Leading members included Dan Gumede and C.A. Ramahano of the ANC (and the ASP&VA); Mart Zulu of the ASP&VA and the AWU; Dickinson of the APO; H. Lodewyk of the ACAA; Baloyi; AHC members T.D. Nel, J.K. Mrupe and B.M. Sechaba; T.D. Peters of the Alexandra branch of the Youth League of South Africa; Molifie of the Standholders Association; A. Ombela of the AWU; and L.P.R. Jonas of the Alexandra Better Bus Service Committee, who issued the flyers for AUFC mass meetings.<sup>76</sup>

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74. CAD: TPB 1138 TA 13/8933, Alexandra Coloured Associated Association to the Administrator of the Transvaal, 5 July 1940. The appointment of Frederick as a junior clerk was passed at the AHC meeting of 26 March 1940 when Falwasser was on leave. Upon his return the next month, Falwasser refused to accept the appointment. A second resolution was passed by the committee in May which Falwasser again refused to follow; NTS 4236 80/313, 4, D.L. Smit, Secretary for Native Affairs, Notes of interview with Major Cooke, Acting Director of Native Labour, H.G. Falwasser, Chairman of the Alexandra Health Committee and Brink, Native Commissioner of Johannesburg, 8 June 1940. In this interview Falwasser claimed that Frederick was not qualified to do the work as he would have to make contact with whites in the course of his duties.

75. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 4, Xuma to Smit, 12 August 1940, p 3.

76. SAIRR "B" Box Microfilm Collection, Reel 21, AD 843 B64.5, SAIRR Miscellany, Alexandra Township – Constitution of Health Committee,

An estimated 8 000 residents attended the mass meeting which unanimously demanded Falwasser's immediate resignation.<sup>77</sup> Residents were also angry that the Provincial Administration planned to ban them from serving on the AHC and limit resident input to an advisory board. The flyer advertising the meeting stated local grievances clearly:

Residents of Alexandra! Our rights in the Township are being further threatened. Everyone knows that the Health Committee lawfully elected a Non-European clerk about 5 months ago. He has not as yet been allowed to take up his job.

Furthermore, there is a move to set up a totally European Health Committee and Non-European Advisory Board. Now you all know that the Advisory Boards have NO say whatever. Are we then to be left at the mercy of a handful of Europeans who have not our interests at heart? NO!<sup>78</sup>

This meeting occurred less than three weeks after the short bus boycott of 1940, which had successfully prevented the raising of bus fares and must have been fuelled by confidence generated from the boycott.

The formation of the AUFC demonstrates that most local political organisations were united in their opposition to increased white controls and interference in their local affairs. Although most of the protest leaders were standholders, the large number of people who attended the protest rally demonstrates the solidarity this issue created among many residents of Alexandra.

Tourakis and Duncan suggest that economic self-interests motivated standholder protests against Falwasser. Duncan also argues that standholders "profoundly mistrusted the white AHC members." This assertion certainly can be applied to their views of Falwasser, but most leading standholders defended limited white representation on the AHC as necessary to guide and assist residents, though not to control them.

As a result of the AHC crisis, the government sent the Native Affairs Commission (NAC) to investigate the situation for two days in October 1940. Hundreds of residents carrying placards demanding

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Alexandra United Front Committee to the Secretary of the SAIRR, 10 September 1940.

77. CAD: TAB 1138 TA 13/8933, Alexandra United Front Committee to the Transvaal Administrator, 25 August 1940.

78. CAD: TAB 1138 TA 13/8933, Alexandra United Front Committee flyer for a mass meeting at Number Two Square, Alexandra Township, 25 August 1940.

representation on the AHC demonstrated outside the hall before the first NAC hearings. The demonstration concluded with the singing of *Nkosi 'Sikelele Afrika* and then 600 residents packed the hall to listen to the evidence presented.<sup>79</sup> Xuma testified that AHC minutes revealed that Falwasser overruled recommendations of other members and he also refused to include any black members in deputations or interviews with government officials, which was clear evidence of his hostile attitude. A. Lynn Saffrey, a South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) leader who replaced Rheinallt Jones on the AHC at the beginning of 1938, stated that he had not found resident members unhelpful. He thought there was no case for abolition of resident representation.<sup>80</sup>

The NAC concluded that there was no proof that black AHC members had been a failure. However, there was evidence that an all-white AHC would not receive any support from residents. In the NAC's opinion, an all-white Committee "would be a distinctly retrograde step and would not achieve the results aimed at."<sup>81</sup> The commission recommended that the AHC be reconstituted with four nominated white members, one of whom would be an independent chairman with veto powers, and eight elected black members to represent four two-member wards. Standholders and male residents of five years or more would be eligible to vote.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the urgings of the NAC, the Provincial Administration proceeded with plans for an all-white committee and Falwasser returned to head the AHC. In addition, the findings of the NAC investigation of October 1940 were not published for several months. Organisations pressed resident AHC members to investigate and in February 1941, J.K. Mrupe asked Senator Rheinallt Jones to intervene on their behalf.<sup>83</sup> However, nothing happened by May 1941, which prompted public calls by the AUFC and the Transvaal African Congress for its publication. They organised another mass meeting that unanimously protested the

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79. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 5, Notes on the meeting of the Native Affairs Commission held at Alexandra Township, 9-10 October 1940, p 1; *The Star*, 10 October 1940; *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1940.

80. *Rand Daily Mail*, 10 October 1940.

81. Union of South Africa, Report of the Native Affairs Commission, 1939-1940 (UG: No. 42, '41, 1941), 28, paragraph 6.

82. Union of South Africa, Report of the Native Affairs Commission, 1939-1940 (UG: No. 42, '41, 1941), 30, paragraph 15.

83. SAIRR, 'B' Box Collection, Reel 21, AD 843 B64.5, J.K. Mrupe to Rheinallt Jones, 9 February 1941.



delay in publication.<sup>84</sup> People in Alexandra became convinced that non-publication meant the Provincial Administration was ignoring the NAC's recommendations.<sup>85</sup>

After repeated calls, General J.J. Pienaar, Transvaal Provincial Administrator, agreed to meet representatives of Alexandra residents in June 1941 to hear their views on the AHC. The deputation was not allowed to have white counsel, but was headed by Doctor Xuma, now president-general of the ANC. He stated residents' uniform opposition to the all-white committee and to an advisory board with no real power. Xuma relayed the strength of sentiments by referring to feelings expressed at an AHC meeting with ratepayers where "some of the women members [ratepayers] are said to have stated that they would rather be shot than be compelled to be legislated by a Committee in which they had no confidence. I am not inclined to take this statement as an irresponsible, vain threat."<sup>86</sup>

In contrast and reply to Xuma's assessment of the depth of feeling against Falwasser, the Chairman asserted that he attached little importance to threats of passive resistance. He also thought it was "absurd" to suggest that the AUFC had "restrained the masses" from attacking him. Rather, he suggested that they had encouraged protest. He also argued that no more than "a dozen or so natives in the township ... care in the least degree" what kind of committee controls Alexandra. Falwasser finally stated that a number of residents told him that there could be no progress if "native and coloured agitators" have any say on the AHC and that they feared a return to the old days of corruption. Nevertheless, Falwasser felt sufficiently compromised to suggest that an entirely new committee should be appointed as soon as possible.<sup>87</sup>

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84. CPSA: AD 843/RJ/B3.2.1, File 4, Transvaal African Congress and Alexandra United [Front] Committee flyer for a mass meeting and summary of resolution passed at the meeting, 18 May 1941.

85. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 5, Transvaal African Congress, Resolutions passed at the meeting of the Transvaal African Congress, held at Alexandra Township, 4 May 1941; Alexandra United [Front] Committee, Resolutions of mass meeting, Alexandra Township, 18 May 1941.

86. CPSA: Xuma Papers, ABX 410614, Substance of the representation made by Doctor A.B. Xuma as leader of, and on behalf of a deputation of Alexandra Township Standholders and Residents which was received at the Old Government Buildings, Pretoria, by the Administrator, General J.J. Pienaar accompanied by H.F. Pentz, Provincial Secretary, 14 June 1941, p 4.

87. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 5, H.G. Falwasser to H.F. Pentz, Transvaal Provincial Secretary, 15 June 1941.

Another protest was held by women in Alexandra in August 1941. Some seventy women occupied the AHC offices, demanding that they be closed. The women issued three demands, the order of which is interesting. The first pressed for Falwasser's removal from office, while the other two complaints related to the cost and distribution of the new water-system. Rates charged for the new system were based on the number of rooms per stand even though the water mains did not run along each street. These complaints over water-supply and cost added to the animosity felt towards Falwasser, who was responsible for instituting the new water-system.<sup>88</sup>

From the moment of the Provincial Administration's decision to appoint an all-white AHC, the NAD defended residents' right to representation on the committee. The NAC investigation concurred with the reports of the Young Committee (1929), the Feetham Commission (1937) and the Thornton Committee on Peri-Urban Areas (1939), all of which agreed that the resident representation on the AHC should continue. NAD officials approached the Administrator on several occasions in late 1940 and during 1941 in an attempt to reach a compromise.

Official discussions resulted in the decision to reconstitute the AHC in August 1941, soon after the women's protest. The new committee consisted of three white members and one African and one coloured resident elected by standowners. However, the franchise was restricted to men and women who had finished buying their property. As a result, the ASP&VA held a mass meeting to protest against the new dispensation and condemned the Provincial Administration who had "raped their rights they had been enjoying since the establishment of the Alexandra Health Committee."<sup>89</sup> Mrupe split with ASP&VA leadership on this issue as he protested to Brink before the mass meeting that there was a rumour that "a section of supposed leaders who pretend to represent Voters' planned to assault anyone who accepted nomination for

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88. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 5, Director of Native Labour to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 19 August 1941, re mass protest by women of Alexandra Township.

89. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 5, E.P. Mart Zulu and Dan W.B. Gumede for the Alexandra Land Owners Protection and Vigilance Association (ASP&VA) and Z.M. Mokhele and Dan W.B. Gumede for the Transvaal African Congress (Alexandra Branch) to the Native Commissioner, Johannesburg, 9 December 1941, re re-election on 14 December 1941.

the new AHC elections.”<sup>90</sup> It appears that Mrupe, a long-time AHC member, preferred to keep his AHC seat rather than join protests against the further franchise restrictions.

Alfred Hoernlé took over as chairman of the AHC in an attempt to restore the credibility of the AHC both among residents and state officials. Hoernlé was one of the leading figures in South African liberal circles. He was a leader in the Joint Councils movement and a founding member and leader of the SAIRR. Phyllis Lewson suggests that the experiences of the 1930s left him “deeply pessimistic” and that many liberal projects were “mere ambulance work” which could not change the pattern of South African society.<sup>91</sup>

It is clear, however, that Hoernlé was out of touch with events in Alexandra and the wishes of many groups of residents. He did very little regarding the disputes over bus fares and made contradictory statements concerning his position on the possible removal of Alexandra.<sup>92</sup> While standholders argued over representation and the franchise, wider issues such as the water-system, bus fares, and rent began to focus the attention of the majority of residents, particularly after the departure of Falwasser. Most residents rejected the new AHC and most of those with franchise boycotted elections. The highest number of voters in the 1940s participated in the election of 1945, when residents elected one white member in addition to black members. Vincent Swart, a supporter of the bus boycotters and local socialist leader ran for the white seat, but lost by 121 votes to 88. His colleague, Daniel Koza, was to run for the African seat but did not get his nomination in on time. As a result, only 111 votes were cast for that seat which was won by Dan Gumede – small numbers indeed in a township with tens of thousands of residents.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusion

On the surface the protest against Falwasser and the fight to retain resident, albeit standholder, representation on the AHC appear to have been insignificant to most residents. However, the ability of the

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90. CAD: NTS 4236 80/313, 5, J.K. Mrupe to J.M. Brink, Native Commissioner, Johannesburg, 4 December 1941.

91. P. Lewson, *Voices of Protest: From Segregation to Apartheid, 1938-1948* (A.D. Donker, Craighall, 1988), p 23.

92. For more on Hoernlé’s position in the removal debate, see J. Nauright, “The Mecca of Native Scum”, pp 64-88.

93. CAD: KJB 479 N9/8/3, Acting Native Commissioner, Johannesburg to the Provincial Secretary, 10 December 1945, re Alexandra Township Health Committee Elections.

ASP&VA and the local branch of the Transvaal African Congress to attract thousands to mass meetings and the lack of significant demands by tenants for equal representation reflects both the general hatred of Falwasser as the most immediate symbol of white domination of blacks in South Africa and the relative weakness of tenant political organisation before the bus boycott of 1942. The relative unity generated by the Falwasser issue was in reality the last protest movement that standholders controlled in any significant way.

Alexandra Township was greatly transformed in the late 1930s and early 1940s. By the early 1940s, the township had become one of the largest black urban areas in South Africa with a population somewhere between 45 000 and 60 000, yet it still was administered by the most primitive form of local administration allowed under the Local Government Ordinance. By comparison, Sophiatown's official population measured 16 668 in 1937 and 39 186 in 1950.<sup>94</sup> In addition, residents lost their elected majority on the AHC in 1932 and the committee subsequently was dominated by Falwasser, who became virtual dictator of local administration. Falwasser's heavy-handed approach to running the township caused considerable resentment among black AHC members, standholder organisations, and ultimately all residents who identified Falwasser with white control.

Standholders remained dominant in local political affairs throughout the 1930s, but by the end of the decade, they were well outnumbered by tenants, many of whom were single and arrived as refugees from collapsing rural economies or because of greater restrictions on tenants on white farms. In addition, several thousand victims of slum clearances in Johannesburg moved to Alexandra to avoid further municipal controls. In the early 1940s, rent and the overall cost of living continued to rise, attempts were made to raise bus fares, while wages lagged behind. The average increase of the cost of basic staples rose by 91 per cent in Johannesburg townships between 1940 and 1944 and Alexandra's increase would have been similar.<sup>95</sup> These factors, along with standholder reluctance to press tenant interests, led to tenant organisation in 1942 and later helped precipitate the squatters' movement in 1946.

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94. Figures recorded in Cobley, *Class and Class Consciousness*, p 33.

95. Figures for price increases between 1940 and 1944 listed in Cobley, *Class and Class Consciousness*, p 37.

## **Abstract**

This article argues that greater tensions developed between standholders and tenants in Alexandra Township, South Africa, during the 1930s, as well as between both groups of residents and white authorities. However, during this decade, conflicting class interests and the ambiguity of standholders' position prevented the appearance of any recognizable form of mass resistance in the township. National organisations were weak in the early 1930s, which resulted in an absence of activity in Alexandra. African national political activity was galvanized during the late 1930s in response to Prime Minister Hertzog's restrictive legislation.

Though there were class divisions between standholders and tenants within Alexandra, there was not unified action within each group. Tenants united at times, but could not challenge standholders who controlled access to housing and water-resources consistently. Standholders were divided between various factions that emerged out of competition for seats in the Alexandra Health Committee (AHC) during the 1920s and early 1930s. During much of the decade, protest was levelled at the AHC and its increasingly autocratic white leader, Herbert Falwasser.

The AHC under Falwasser made improvements in sanitation, roads, and water-supply, but the Provincial Administration would not grant the powers which the AHC needed to cope with a population larger than all but a handful of white municipalities. As a result, Falwasser became more dictatorial in his approach to administration, acting more like a municipal location manager than the chairman of a health committee. Falwasser's attitude created widespread opposition by the late 1930s. The form of protests, which increasingly relied on public action, set the groundwork for larger protests that emerged in the 1940s.

## **Opsomming**

### **Van "Native Village" tot "Dark City": Bevolkingsgroeï, Klas, Politieke en Plaaslike Administrasie in Alexandra Township, Suid-Afrika, 1933-1943**

Hierdie artikel voer aan dat spanning gedurende die 1930's toenemend tussen perseleienaars en huurders in Alexandra Township, Suid-Afrika, asook tussen beide groepe inwoners aan die een kant en die wit owerhede aan die ander ontwikkel het. Gedurende dié dekade het die botsende belange van die aanwesige klasse en die dubbelsinnigheid van

perseeleienaars se posisie egter verhoed dat enige herkenbare vorm van massaweerstand in die gebied ontstaan het. In die vroeë 1930's was nasionale organisasies nog swak, wat veroorsaak het dat daar 'n gebrek aan sodanige aktiwiteite in Alexandra was. Afrika-nasionalistiese politieke aktiwiteit het eers in beweging gekom teen die einde van die 1930's as reaksie op Eerste Minister J.B.M. Hertzog se beperkende wetgewing.

Hoewel daar klasseverskille tussen perseeleienaars en huurders in Alexandra was, was daar geen verenigde aksie binne die afsonderlike twee groepe nie. Huurders het soms verenig, maar was nie in staat om voortdurend te protesteer teen die perseeleienaars wat hulle toegang tot behuising en waterhulpbronne beheer het nie. Die eienaars, aan die ander kant, was weer verdeeld tussen verskillende faksies wat te voorskyn gekom het uit die kompetisie vir setels in die Alexandra Gesondheidskomitee (AGK) gedurende die 1920's en vroeë 1930's. Tydens die grootste gedeelte van hierdie dekade was protes gerig teen die AGK en dié komitee se toenemend outokratiese wit leier, Herbert Falwasser.

Onder leiding van Falwasser het die AGK verbeterings aangebring aan sanitasie, paaie en watervoorsiening, maar die provinsiale owerheid was nie bereid om die magte aan die AGK te gee wat nodig was om 'n bevolking groter as die meeste wit munisipaliteite na behore te kan hanteer nie. Gevolglik het Falwasser se benadering tot administrasie al meer diktatoriaal geword, sodat hy eerder soos 'n munisipale lokasiebestuurder as die voorsitter van 'n gesondheidskomitee begin optree het. Sy houding het teen die einde van die 1930's wydverspreide opposisie tot gevolg gehad. Die vorme protes daarteen, wat al hoe meer op openbare aksie staatgemaak het, het die grondslag gelê vir groter protesaksies wat in die 1940's gevolg het.

### **Key words**

Alexandra Health Committee; Alexandra Township; class struggle; ethnicity; local government; public protest; respectability; standholders; tenants; 1930s.

### **Sleutelwoorde**

Aansien; Alexandra Gesondheidskomitee; Alexandra Township; etnisiteit; huurders; klassestryd; openbare protes; perseeleienaars; plaaslike owerheid; 1930's.