

## A RUSSIAN PROTECTORATE OVER SOUTH AFRICA?

E Williams-Foxcroft

### Introduction

Few historians in the West and in this country in particular, know that a South African general\* approached the Russian government with a request for help to start a native rising in South and Central Africa. He was prepared to organise it and hoped that it would lead to a general revolt, joined in by the whites, which would result in the defeat of the English, the end of British rule and the eventual establishment of a Russian Protectorate over South Africa — “A jewel worthy of the crown of Russia.”

At first glance even the suggestion of such a move being made seems either an unwarrantable allegation or the action of a madman. However, the event is a historical fact, which took place in February 1905. The reason why there was no mention of it in any official records was because the negotiations were secret, carefully concealed at the time and the files containing them were only discovered some time after the Russian Revolution. The originals of the documents quoted are now kept among the records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow.<sup>1</sup>

The text was prepared for publication in the Soviet Union by A A Sergeev and appeared in article form under the title of “Nikolai II Emperor Kafrov” in the Soviet journal “Krasnii Arkhiv.”<sup>2</sup> It has now been, as far as it is known, translated for the first time. As the article appeared in Russian<sup>3</sup> thirty years ago and was concerned with a subject of secondary importance at the time, it attracted little attention.<sup>4</sup>

The reason why these particular documents were selected for publication is probably because they reveal the negative aspect of the unofficial foreign policy of the last tsar of Russia and his Minister of Foreign Affairs. The text was preceded by an introduction, written by the Soviet historian, D Zaslavski, who sharply criticises this policy of “promoting the organising of plots against states with whom one has outwardly friendly relations.”

Soviet historians, under Stalin’s dictatorship especially, were encouraged to bring to light any documents discrediting the Imperial regime. They form another link in the history of Russo-South African relations.<sup>5</sup>

They also throw an additional light on the Russian emperor’s attitude to England. It was a well-known fact that the ruler of Russia was not well disposed

Frans Pienaar was in fact never a general but a commandant. Recent research has shown that he was not the great Boer patriot he is here portrayed to have been, but an adventurer motivated by a great degree of self-interest — Editor, *Historia*.

Arkhiv Ministerstva Inostrannikh Del. Politicheskii Arkhiv No 2125. Kantseliariya Ministra. Delo No 86 A-87. (The Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Political Archive No 2125. Chancellery of the Minister, File No 86 A-87).

2. Nos 69/70, 248, 1935.

3. Long before the study of the Russian language became widespread in Europe and the USA.

4. Professor Yakobson refers to it in his article “Russia and Africa,” pp 465-466 in the book *Russian Foreign Policy. Essays in Historical perspective*, edited by J Ivo Lederer. (Yale University Press, 1962).

Which have been outlined in my study *Russia and the South African War, 1899-1902*.

towards England — these documents reveal the length to which he was prepared to go. England had been the stumbling block in the way of Russian expansion and, although officially at peace with Russia, showed her hostility in several ways. Therefore the tsar felt justified in adopting any measures, which might weaken his formidable adversary.

As for the Boer general — to be a “rebel” against the English in those days — far from being a crime, was one of the highest virtues a true Afrikaner could possess, both among his own people and those of other countries, who sympathised with the Boer cause.

At that time Russia was looked on as a friendly ally by most of the Boers and the Russian emperor appeared to them as the embodiment of everything that was noble and just. General Joubert-Pienaar, for such was the name of the general who made the proposal, was no exception. But, whereas he knew or thought he knew something about the Russian tsar and his government's policy — the latter knew nothing about him apart from what he told them himself.

The Russian diplomat to whom he made the proposal refers to him as “the former Boer general” and the Soviet historian also in the dark, alludes to him as the “unknown adventurer of the former Boer Republic.”

Research, carried out lately in this country, has revealed the following facts about him:<sup>6</sup> Francois Jacobus Pienaar was born in 1860<sup>7</sup> in the Free State and came of an old Hugenot family. His father had been one of the Voortrekkers, became a commandant and later a member of the Orange Free State Volksraad. The son left the OFS in 1885 and settled in the Transvaal, where he held government offices and later became captain of the Johannesburg Volunteers. He left Johannesburg for the theatre of war operations with 500 burghers at the beginning of the South African War (1899-1902), captured the first English train in Natal and took part in the battle of Elandsplaagte. He had a distinguished military record and was appointed Vecht-General of the Eastern Border in September 1900.<sup>8</sup> He was taken prisoner, to be more precise, he gave himself up to the Portuguese authorities — to facilitate President Kruger's departure to Europe through Portuguese possessions. He was sent to Portugal and remained a prisoner-of-war until the end of hostilities in the town of Tomar. After the war he was repatriated. He went overseas again, travelled a great deal and changed his name by deed-poll to Joubert-Pienaar in 1903. (His mother's maiden name was Joubert).

Early in 1905 he was again in Portugal, officially on the pretext of negotiations with the local government concerning the prospecting of gold-bearing soil in the Portuguese colony of Angola. But the real reason for his presence there was to establish a contact with the Russian government. His object was naturally not the establishment of a Russian protectorate over South and Central Africa. He was simply holding that tempting prospect as an incentive and eventual prize to Russia or whoever would help him to realise his real aim — that of freeing his country from the domination of his arch enemies — the British. The general believed that “in view of the numerical weakness of the Boers and their lack of a navy, the state of complete independence can only be an unrealizable dream for them.”

---

6. It was supplied mainly by General J J Pienaar.

7. The family Bible, three hundred years old, bears the entry of his name and was later in the possession of Genral J Pienaar, his nephew and the former Administrator of the Transvaal, since deceased.

8. During the second phase of the Anglo-Boer War, when the English already occupied the capitals of the OFS and of the Transvaal. His appointment was made on Sept 15th, 1900.

He left no evidence as to how he visualised the application of a Russian or any other protectorate over his country — that is after his plan would have been, as he hoped, successfully carried out. So much had to be done before the need would arise that the question of ultimate suzerainty remained a matter of speculation at that preliminary stage.

General Joubert-Pienaar made his proposal to Russia through the medium of the Russian Minister Plenipotentiary in Lisbon, A Koyander, on February 10/23rd 1905.<sup>9</sup> It was his intention to organise a native rebellion in South Africa. He was convinced that the Blacks, some 500 000 of them, were ready to revolt and already had “the assurance of some of their leaders to this effect.” According to him such a rebellion could be of a sufficiently serious nature to occupy England’s whole attention for two or three years. He compared Africa to an immense stretch of veld, covered with dry grass which only needed a match to set it on fire.

The position was not actually as serious as it was made out but to make sure of the supply of help he had to create the impression that there was a widespread demand for action. The general was certain that the white section of the population, composed of Canadians and Australians, discontented with the measures the new government was introducing, would join in the rebellion and would in their turn be joined, after a time, by the Boers who would “with God’s help chase the English out of our country.” That would only happen after Russia had entered into an open conflict with Britain. In the end the victorious Boers, unable to stand up alone against possible aggression from overseas, would need the protection of one of the great powers — out of whose number Russia appeared to be the most suitable to the general. Having made up his mind to act and being convinced that he was an instrument in God’s hand fulfilling a sacred mission, he conceived a bold plan and set about executing it.

He was prepared to travel to St Petersburg to discuss the plan of action but asked for financial assistance to undertake the journey as well as for a passport to go to Russia under an assumed name.

The proposal must have struck the Russian Minister in Lisbon as very bizarre, like a bombshell dropping out of the blue in the quiet backwater of non-existent Russian activities in Portugal. However, he did not express any opinion on the matter, but considered it of sufficient importance to send a cable on the same day to his chief — the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Count Lamsdorff<sup>10</sup> outlining the gist of the proposal. The latter submitted the telegram without comment to his imperial master, the Tsar Nicholas II. This was done on February 11th/24th. The tsar read the cable and, instead of ignoring it or finding the project too rash, liked the sound of the proposal and wrote in his own hand on the cable that he was in agreement with the idea.<sup>11</sup> This was equivalent to an order to proceed further. At that time Nicholas II was still the autocrat of all the Russias,<sup>12</sup> but the Russian emperor never liked to state his opinion in too downright a way and added, still in his own hand, presumably for the benefit of his Minister of Foreign Affairs “What do you think of this proposition?”

- 
9. There is a difference of 13 days between the European and the Russian Calendar (the Russian being 13 days behind). Both are given in the text.
  10. Lamsdorff Vladimir Nikolaevich 1841-1904, Count, Minister of Foreign Affairs in Russia from 1900-1906.
  11. He wrote the letter “S” (C in Russian) short for the word “soglasen” which means “I am in agreement.”
  12. Later that year 1905, under pressure from below, Russia became a constitutional monarchy.

Seeing that the emperor had already expressed his favourable opinion concerning the proposal, his subordinate, the minister, did what was expected of him. He agreed with the Tsar, and conveyed the emperor's favourable reply to Koyander only couching it in a circumspect form. He asked for more precise information about the Boer general and the means at his command to organise a rebellion, and being a cautious man and unwilling to face any possible diplomatic complications with England, he categorically declined General Joubert-Pienaar's offer to come to St Petersburg for negotiations. His telegram was sent on Feb 12th/25th 1905.

The Russian minister in Lisbon informed General Joubert-Pienaar verbally (he took the precaution of not writing anything to him) of the contents of the cable he had received from Russia, and asked the general to outline his proposal in writing and give it to him as a document of an anonymous nature — without his signature. The general agreed to this and handed the Russian minister a memorandum, written in his own handwriting. He left it for the night with the minister, who had it copied on the typewriter, and returned the original to the general the next day. (Although the original has not been preserved, there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the memorandum sent to Russia, as not being the exact copy of the handwritten original).

During the meeting which took place, described in Koyander's report, as well as in his memorandum, the general gave the reasons for his attitude, outlined his intentions, the means he proposed to use and stated what he expected from Russia.

So on February 20th/March 5th, the Russian minister in Lisbon sent a long despatch to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in St Petersburg, marked "VERY CONFIDENTIAL." It included an account of his meeting with the general as well as the latter's memorandum.

This memorandum contained two alternate plans of action — both intended to achieve the same result — that of the ultimate expulsion of the British.<sup>13</sup>

In the first plan General Joubert-Pienaar proposed to float a company ostensibly for the promotion of geological research and survey, placing at his disposal a medium sized vessel with the holds, below coal storage, filled with a large store of arms and ammunition and flying the British flag. The general stressed the fact that he worked for and with the English, who mistakenly believed him to be their friend and a loyal British subject. He would go along the coast of Africa making contact with the right persons, distributing presents of fire-arms and spreading sedition throughout the land. He knew some of the paramount native chiefs already, spoke their languages and believed that the only consideration which stopped the Blacks from open revolt was their fear that the Boers "whom they fear" might join the English in the crushing of such an uprising. At that time there was not very much consideration given to the Boers. The general also looked on them mainly as ready manpower to be used for the purpose of successfully achieving his plan.

Nevertheless, he was quite aware that he had to have some ready reward to secure the co-operation of the paramount chiefs. This he intended to buy with "symbolic gifts" purchased with Russian money.

The second plan, which reads rather like a thriller, involved making use of the services of a "middel-aged lady of agreeable exterior and ample means" a person of standing, a hostess travelling around, who would act as a decoy, and whose residences, in which she would lavishly entertain many guests, would be used as headquarters of

---

13. Whose full text is given in the documents.

information-spying centres, while the leader of the whole enterprise, the general himself, would be touring the countryside districts including Black territories officially "trading in livestock and grain."

Such in brief were the two plans outlined in the memorandum and amplified during the several meetings, which took place between General Joubert-Pienaar and the Russian Minister Koyander — all of which, with the exception of the very first one, took place outside the Russian mission, at the private address of the mission's secretary, so as not to compromise anyone or to excite anyone's suspicion in view of the absence of any "substantial Russian interests" in Portugal.

What the General Joubert-Pienaar wanted the Russian government to do was to secretly finance the whole scheme. He estimated the initial cost at about £60 000-£80 000 and his immediate requirements were: 3 000 rifles with 30 000 rounds of ammunition to seal the goodwill of the Black chiefs of Basutoland, Zululand and Swaziland, and a ship at his disposal for the next two or three years. He ended with the promise that the Boers would take an active part in the struggle against England — as soon as Russia entered into an open conflict with her. As a proof of his sincerity in approaching the Russian authorities, the general staked his life by placing it in the hands of Koyander, who, by abusing his confidence, might have betrayed him to the English.

To give a further proof of his good faith, General Joubert-Pienaar offered his services to Russia, either at the front in Manchuria<sup>14</sup> or in Japan, as a British observer officially, but in reality acting as a spy for the Russian high command. General Joubert-Pienaar made it very clear that he would be prepared to undertake any dangerous mission for Russia — provided it would ultimately benefit the cause to which he had dedicated himself — the liberation of his own country from British rule.

Although the proposal might appear odd and the plans submitted somewhat vague — the immediate object for the general was to secure the co-operation of the Russian tsar and his government in principle. If successful, the details could be worked out later in conjunction with Russian advisers. The emperor's reaction to his proposal was a resounding victory. The general had won the first round.

The Soviet historian referring to General Joubert-Pienaar as simply the "unknown adventurer of the former Boer Republic" does not do him full justice. The general must have been a truly remarkable man. It required a great breadth of vision to conceive a scheme on such a grand scale. A mere adventurer would never have been capable of that, still less of the rather grand manner in which the general made his offer. He was at the height of his physical and mental powers at the time, a leader of men, straightforward, venturesome, intent on his purpose, welcoming any dangers, and ready to challenge the world.

The impression he made on Koyander was very favourable. The latter describes the general in his report as a man of about forty-five,<sup>15</sup> a "tall, good looking, well-mannered" person. Although affable with his interlocutor the general behaved with "great dignity" and "looked him straight into the eye when speaking." The Russian Minister formed the impression that he was a "ruthless fanatic," who would stop at nothing and would use every means at hand in his desire to harm the English,

---

The Russo-Japanese War was then in progress and he had considerable military experience as a Commander and guerilla fighter.

15. He was exactly that age, having been born in 1860.

although in conversation he successfully concealed his feelings and spoke in a “sensible, reasonable, clear convincing, but calm and completely self-possessed manner.”

The style of the memorandum is simple and direct. The sentences flow easily but one is aware that the writer is much more concerned with the meaning than with the form. One senses that this writer is a man of action, who is ultimately guided more by his heart than by the voice of reason, to judge by his writing. The two primary moving forces in his life appear to have been his faith in God and his patriotism. In putting forth a proposal, which might have ended badly for him, he was not only staking his own life, but also endangering the well-being of his family.<sup>16</sup> But General Joubert-Pienaar was not put off by the risks he was taking. He felt that he was acting the right way, for he owed no loyalty to the British crown, having found himself, after the end of the war a British subject in spite of himself. He looked on the political set-up around him as upon an unfortunate temporary predicament, which he intended to rectify as soon as possible. His real allegiance was to his own people, the Afrikaners, and for them and their future well-being, he was prepared to perform heroic deeds and even to give his own life.

The plans he had conceived were in his opinion the best possible compromise between what could happen and what he would have liked to happen. For him the aim justified the means. These means would be utterly unacceptable now, but neither General Joubert-Pienaar's beliefs nor his actions should be judged by the accepted standards of more than half a century later. They must be gauged only against the correct perspective of his own time.

What is most interesting and significant about the proposal of a relatively unknown Boer general is not so much its having been made but the fact that it was seriously considered by the Russian emperor and the Russian imperial government, thus becoming a historical event.

To shed any light on the motives animating the characters involved — that is the Boer general, the Russian tsar and his subordinates — one must know something of the background responsible for their respective attitudes in this matter. There are, therefore, two distinct aspects of this question: the Boer and the Russian points of view, which will be examined in turn.

The South African War of 1899-1902 had ended in an English victory. Both sides were very war weary. The actual peace terms might have been worse for the Afrikaners but most of them bitterly resented the loss of independence for which they had fought and for which many of them had sacrificed everything. There were few Afrikaans families left which had not been bereaved; for the battlefield and the concentration camps had taken a heavy toll of life. The countryside was laid waste, much of the cat-

---

16. He was married and had four children then, among them two sons, Philip and Ernest, aged 17 and 15, respectively, at the time of the outbreak of the South African War, who were with him at the battle of Elandslaagte and were taken prisoner, but escaped from the camp at Simonstown, after 8 months in captivity. The youngest was recaptured and banished to St Helena. The elder, after trudging two months and four days, rejoined his father's command at Bronkhorstspuit, east of Pretoria, having travelled fourteen hundred miles from his prison through country overrun and partially occupied by the enemy. His wife, at the capture of Pretoria, was detained by the English for a month; when she managed to escape — alone with her two younger children, she drove a cart to the east in search of her husband, passing through territory wherein Black chiefs were at war and constantly viewing the evidence of this in the corpses of the slain at the roadside. After eight days of this she eventually succeeded in finding her husband and her son who had been a prisoner. (*The Mobile Boer* by A R Hiley and J A Hassell, p 194).

tle slaughtered, many of the homesteads in ruins. True — a special Government fund of £3 million was made available for reconstruction of damaged properties after the war, but it was quite insufficient and there was a shortage of cash, especially in the case of former Boer commanders like General Joubert-Pienaar.

He returned to his homeland after an absence of fourteen months as a prisoner of war and must have found conditions vastly different to those when he had left. He did not remain idle during his period of captivity but spent his time reading all he could get hold of about the English, “the arbitrary way in which they shot my comrades in arms and also about the way they treated our wives and children in concentration camps.” Such descriptions, coming probably from letters of relatives at home, or Republican newspapers (reaching the war prisoners in devious ways), could only have fanned the feeling of frustration and hatred which many of them felt towards the English. General Joubert-Pienaar came to the conclusion that the English were responsible and to blame for all the misfortunes which had befallen his people and his country. It was then that he swore an oath to revenge the victims at any cost and from that moment onwards the fulfilment of that oath became his inspiration and “the most sacred and exclusive” aim of his life.

Upon his return home he found his compatriots in want and the English prospering, or so anyway it seemed to him. They occupied all the best administrative jobs, controlled the rest, imposed English as the official language in schools, cut down wages of white and black, and finally authorised the importation of cheap Chinese labour to work in the mines.<sup>17</sup> This caused “a wave of discontent” not only among the African but among white workers too, the Canadians and the Australians, who the general thought, would not hesitate to turn against their government, if it in any way threatened their vital interests.

The general observed and sized up the situation around him. He travelled extensively in town and country meeting Europeans and non-Europeans and listening to criticism on all sides. His contacts strengthened his conviction that the time had come to organise a revolt on a national scale. He was practical enough to realise that his grand scheme would come to naught if he openly declared himself to be the enemy of the new regime and began to incite others against it. So he decided to pursue his object in secret by pretending to be a friend of the British, to allay any possible suspicions they might have. He succeeded in this “beyond his own expectations.” So, while he was to all appearances working with them and for them between 1902-1905, in reality, he was only looking for ways and means to undermine their power and to put an end to their supremacy in South Africa.

There were two very large obstacles in his way. One was the lack of money, of which he knew he would need vast quantities, the other the absence of an allied State powerful enough to protect his country against England, and at the same time magnanimous enough to grant his people the freedom, which the English, he felt, were denying them. This consideration was of especial importance — to prevent the possibility of an Afrikaner victory being turned into a new subjugation.

The choice was not great. There were only four possibilities before him: France, USA, Germany and Russia.

---

As South Africa and British tropical Africa failed to supply the labour necessary for the Rand Mines upon the report of the Native Affairs Commission of 1903-1905, the importation of Chinese labour was authorised into South Africa.

France was not interested in South Africa. She had come to an agreement over spheres of influence in other parts of the African continent with England, and an open conflict with her for the sake of a very problematic gain, would have had no appeal for her government.

The USA had emerged by the beginning of the Twentieth century as one of the foremost world powers. American public opinion favoured the Boers during the South African War and many people drew a parallel between the two wars of independence. Not so the USA government, which, in spite of a sense of rivalry and some differences of opinion, with the British government, saw its own country's interests too closely bound with the Anglo-Saxon world, represented by the British Empire, to even consider such a proposal.

The German people were very well disposed towards the Boers, but the German government, in the person of William II, had played a double game, professing friendship first to the Boers,<sup>18</sup> then to England with whom a secret agreement was signed, abandoning the SA Republics to their fate. General Joubert-Pienaar did not know this last fact, but he must have known that should Germany decide to give her help and to fight England and win the war, a mere protectorate over South Africa would not satisfy the ambitious German emperor. So he looked on Germany as a last resort — only should everything else fail. His remark about turning to another power “when the time comes, for instance, Germany” might have been made only to spur on the Russians, whose relations with Germany were deteriorating, in spite of official assurances of goodwill on both sides.

Thus there was really only Russia, whose government might consider such a scheme, left. Little was known about Russia and Russian politics in South Africa at the time. But the memory of Russian sympathy and help during the war was still fresh. Public opinion in Russia had been wholeheartedly on the side of the Boers. Ambulance units were sent to South Africa, Russian volunteers came and fought for the Boer cause. Twice the Russian government tried to intervene on behalf of the SA Republics, but on both occasions the German government thwarted the attempt.

After the Hague Conference<sup>19</sup> the Tsar Nicholas II was looked up to as the great champion of peace and justice. In view of this and the distance involved, a Russian protectorate was therefore seen through rose-coloured spectacles. But the fact known to everyone and on which the general really counted, was the hostility existing between English and Russia, whose interests clashed in Near, Middle and the Far East. At the time of the event described, Russia was at war with Japan and it was common knowledge that a large section of public opinion in England not only openly sympathised with Japan but favoured England's actual entry into the war on her side, in order to put an end to further Russian “expansionist ambitions.” It was therefore quite logical to deduce that Russia might be glad of a chance to defeat England, especially if this could be achieved at a relatively small cost to herself.

So, thinking that a war between England and Russia might flare up at any moment, he decided to make it much harder for the English by setting up a second front in Africa. Such a move, he thought, could only profit Russia in the long run. The general's main concern was to make the Russian government see it in the same light, i.e. that he was almost doing Russia a favour by presenting her with such an opportunity.

---

18. William II's telegram to Pres Kruger after the Jameson Raid.

19. Convened at the instigation of the Russian emperor in 1899.



These must have been some of the considerations which passed through the general's mind. But what really drove him on was the radiant vision of a paradise lost — the re-establishment, by any means at hand, of the South African republics. That was why, having decided on the main lines of his two alternate plans in principle, General Joubert-Pienaar approached the Russian minister in Lisbon and made his proposal on February 10th/23rd. It speaks well for the speedy efficiency of the Russian imperial diplomatic service that twenty-four hours later the Russian emperor, then in St Petersburg, was already acquainted with this proposal and acted on the spur of the moment by deciding to give his imperial support to the plan.

It is noteworthy that neither the minister, Koyander, nor Count Lamsdorff expressed their opinion on the proposal by submitting some explanatory document with it. The whole responsibility rested with the Tsar. It was only after he had expressed himself favourably on the subject that Lamsdorff took the liberty of stating that "although the acceptance of the proposal of the Boer General Joubert would not be in harmony with the general spirit of Russian policy, nevertheless, during the present political situation<sup>20</sup> and especially in view of England's unfriendliness as regards Russia, it would be of considerable interest to us."

Countless projects must have been sent to different ministries in Russia and went no further than being put in files. What made General Joubert-Pienaar's proposal into an event of historical interest and importance was the Tsar's approval and the secret negotiation which followed.

The remaining two problems to solve are: (1) why did the emperor favour the project, and (2) if he did so, why did nothing come of it in the end? A partial answer to the first question lies in the kindred spirit inspiring both of these, such otherwise dissimilar men. Different from each other in appearance,<sup>21</sup> outlook, environment and while treading utterly different paths of destiny, the Russian emperor and the Boer general yet had certain characteristics in common. Both were earnest believers and ardent patriots. Each was convinced that his people was God's people and that he was an instrument chosen by the Almighty for the service of his fatherland. Nicholas II was very modest in his personal needs and desires, but his ambition for Russia knew no bounds. He would willingly have given his life<sup>22</sup> to see her the greatest country in the world. It was an aspiration, whose fulfilment did not seem altogether impossible to the tsar — but for the constant vigilance and interference of Great Britain — intent to frustrate all Russian plans in that direction. Nicholas II did not care for the English at all. This was noticed by some of his ministers. One of them wrote: "His Majesty had no liking whatsoever for the English."<sup>23</sup>

During the South African War the tsar's sympathy lay entirely with the Boers. His respective attitudes to the English and to the Boers are clearly expressed in a letter written to his sister the Grand Duchess Xenia Alexandrovna on October 21st 1899 from Darmstadt.<sup>24</sup> "I am wholly absorbed by the war of England with the Transvaal; daily I read all the details published in the English press from the first to the last line

20. Russia's war with Japan and internal difficulties at home.

21. General Pienaar was: "tall, broad, erect." (*The Mobile Boer*, A R Hiley and J A Hassell, p 194), whereas the tsar was of medium height, slender, willowy.

22. He abdicated for what he was told was the good of his people, was imprisoned and finally died a martyr's death with his wife and five children in 1918.

23. Witte: *Reminiscences*, Vol 2, p 406.

24. Krassnii Arkhiv, Vol LXIII.

and afterwards share my impressions with others . . . I cannot prevent myself from expressing my joy about the news received yesterday and just now confirmed, that during the sortie of General White two whole English batallions and a besieging battery were taken prisoner by the Boers. This was what you might call making fools of themselves and leaping without looking . . .” Later in the same letter speaking of the Cape Afrikaners he said: “and what if the rest of the Boers living in the English South African possessions were to rise? . . . What will the English . . . do then?” and he goes on to express his innermost thought: “You know I am not proud but I am very gratified at the thought that I alone am in possession of the means which would alter the course of the war in Africa. This means is quite simple — to issue an order by telephone for all the Turkishtan troops to mobilize and to approach the frontier. That is all! Even the most powerful navy in the world could not prevent us from settling our account with England in this most vulnerable for her spot . . . But the time is not ripe yet; we are not sufficiently well prepared for serious action . . .” He went on to say: “I have been carried away somewhat, but you will understand that occasionally the most cherished dreams come to the fore and it is impossible not to share them.”

To have Constantinople and the strait leading into the Black Sea in Russian lands was also one of the very special desires of the emperor, which he shared with several of his forefathers.

The threat of a war with England at a time when Russia could not embark on it made them give up the realisation of this wish. The emperor also favoured Russia's expansion in the Far East, which had gone on for centuries past, without realising that the circumstances had changed and that Japan had become a world power under England's guidance and tuition<sup>25</sup> and that the price of conquest might be beyond Russia's means. It is odd how the concept of universal peace and at the same time that of the aggrandisement of Russia had their being in the same man, in no way excluding each other.

As no records exist, as far as is known, it is a matter of pure conjecture whether the thought of adding South Africa — “a jewel worthy of the Russian crown” — was a deterrent or brought a new lustre to the proposal in the opinion of the emperor.

It is certain that the chief reason for accepting in principle the proposal of organising a revolt, as far as the tsar was concerned, was to create difficulties for England and to make use of them. The opportunity to help the Boers, by liberating them from a British yoke must have been an additional factor. As for Russian designs on South Africa it is very doubtful if there were any, although Russia's interest in the African continent was not altogether new.<sup>26</sup>

Whatever might have been the other considerations, which prompted the Emperor Nicholas II to accept the proposal, he did so in the firm belief that it would ultimately benefit Russia.

---

25. Several of the Japanese commanders had received their education and military training in England.  
 26. By the end of the 19th century Russia had established, first cultural and later diplomatic relations with Ethiopia, whose inhabitants belonged to the Coptic (a branch of the Eastern Orthodox) Church and whose Negus looked up for protection to Russia. In 1891 a Russian, Cossack Ashinov, who had for a time established a Russian settlement on the shores of the Red Sea, approached the Tsar Alexander III offering him to annex a vast territory in Africa “rich in forests and in precious stones.” The tsar's handwritten comment in the margin of Ashinov's letter was: “notes of a madman.” (Lamsdorff's Diary 1891-1892, p 169).

In accordance with his wish money was given to General Joubert-Pienaar, who was asked to travel to Paris instead of St Petersburg.<sup>27</sup>

On March 8th/18th 1905 Count Lamsdorff wrote to Koyander: "Joubert's proposals are undoubtedly attractive and we are prepared to accept them in principle . . . We could not take upon ourselves the responsibility of making any arrangements such as: the purchase of rifles and ammunition, the hire of a boat, etc. The taking of all measures essential for the success of the enterprise must be left entirely to his own initiative."

Such a message must have been truly welcome news to the general, anxiously awaiting the final verdict from Russia. It now looked as if he had everything he had asked for.

So he departed for Paris full of hope — only to find himself at a dead end and to witness the burial of his precious plan. The Russian ambassador in Paris at the time was A I Nelidov (1903-1910) who was empowered to carry on with the secret negotiations. The matter now rested in his hands as well as those of the Minister of Finance, Kokovtsev.<sup>28</sup> Both these men saw the whole thing from a very different angle than the emperor and his Minister of Foreign Affairs. They were not dreamers but hard realists and, knowing the state Russia was in, weighed up the probable consequences of such a step. The problem as they saw it was reduced to the following, if the secret help given to the Boer general, led to a rift and later to an open conflict with England, could Russia afford to wage a full scale war against not only Great Britain but possibly the whole of the British Empire. Their own answer to that was a very positive no.

By the time of the event described, Russia had been at war with Japan for over a year<sup>29</sup> and the Russian forces were mainly retreating or suffering defeats.<sup>30</sup> The Russian high command had grossly underestimated the resources and the fighting ability of the Japanese. The unexpected reverses were a shock and a great blow to Russia's national pride and prestige. The war was very costly in money and in human lives. The initial wave of optimism gave way to increasing pessimism.

The internal position was unfortunately no better. The reverses on the distant front and the many grievances at home, had created general discontent against the government. They put new life into the opposition groups, particularly those of the extreme left. Several acts of terrorism were committed to force the authorities to introduce reforms. Quite a few highly placed persons were assassinated (among them the Minister of Internal Affairs, Plehve, in July 1904). There were strikes and political demonstrations throughout the country.

27. Because there was a considerable number of Russian residents and visitors in France. The Russian embassy in Paris was one of the busiest and any additional activity would not attract anyone's attention, as it would have done in Lisbon.

28. V N Kokovtsev, Minister of Finance, March 1904-October 1905, again from 1906-1914, and President of the Council of Ministers from 1911-1914.

29. The Russo-Japanese War started on January 27th/February 9th, 1904.

30. Japan had attacked Port Arthur unawares, without formally declaring war on Russia. The Trans-Siberian Railway was not completed at the time and the existing line had only one track except at stations. This made it very difficult to send large numbers of reinforcements quickly.

The worst of these was the incident known as “Bloody Sunday.”<sup>31</sup> The shooting of the workers caused tremendous indignation all over Russia and was the signal for the start of the first revolution.<sup>32</sup> During the Spring of 1905 many country estates were burnt down or destroyed. Strikes now gave place to armed encounters between the workers and the police. Many of the men in the army and the navy sympathised with the revolutionaries.<sup>33</sup> Most of the Russian intelligentsia was in favour of abolishing the absolutist regime in Russia and wanted a constitutional monarchy. Some wished for a republic and the extreme left sector, led by Lenin, demanded the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The tsar was not fully informed of the seriousness of the external and internal position. At the beginning of the hostilities it was imagined by some persons that a victorious war might be the answer to the difficulties at home but the fortune of war was against Russia. There was the added fear of the possibility of England joining Japan and attacking Russia in her moment of weakness.

The very idea of provoking Britain further and thus becoming responsible for the calamities which might follow and strike Russia, if England should win the war, frightened some of the ministers and considerably sobered down those who were, to begin with, not averse or even in favour of the “attractive plan.”

There remained only one thing to do — to convince the tsar of the untimeliness if not of the uselessness of the project. This they succeeded in doing by warning the tsar of what might happen, should the plan be executed and Russia lose the war with England.

So the Emperor Nicholas II regretfully gave up the idea of backing the organising of a revolt against the British, and that of adding the title of “Suzerain of South Africa” to the Russian crown.

This meant sacrificing a dream — but what was even the most “cherished dream” when set on the scale against the actual and the potential dangers threatening the tsar, his throne and above all, Russia.

---

31. On Sunday Jan 9th/22nd 1905 a priest by the name of G Gapon organised a worker's march to the Winter Palace (the emperor's residence). His intentions were peaceful. He wanted to present a petition to the tsar asking him to improve the wages and living conditions of the factory workers, as well as to obtain a promise of political changes. People surged from all directions to join the huge crowd, which ignored the police order to disperse and was fired at. According to the official figures there were 130 killed and several hundred wounded; unofficial sources gave the casualties as much higher.

32. The second took place in 1917.

33. This led to the famous mutiny on the Battleship Potemkin.