

Book Feature

Boekbeskouing

Christoph Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel: Radical Afrikaner Nationalism and the History of the Ossewabrandwag*
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A definitive study of the Ossewabrandwag

The Ossewabrandwag was born out of the euphoria aroused by the 1938 commemoration of the trek, a moment of utopian promise that offered many Afrikaners spiritual and national renewal. South Africa's entry into the war decisively broke Hertzog's 'fusion' government and left the Afrikaner nationalist movement more divided than it had ever been. Far from uniting in the face of Smuts's alleged capitulation to imperialism, radical nationalists found themselves torn between allegiance to the parliamentary National Party, the paramilitary Ossewabrandwag and a host of smaller political bodies ranging from the Nuwe Orde and the Afrikaner Party to the militant fascist shirt movements. The Afrikaner Broederbond, which tried to hold the ring in order to unify the *volksbeweging* under its own authority, was composed of members whose sympathies reflected – and sometimes amplified – the rivalry between the National Party and the Ossewabrandwag. In the context of this fevered internecine conflict the wartime Smuts government was mostly content to play a watchful role, other than when it felt impelled to arrest and intern OB extremists as a preventative measure.

Of all the splinter movements that arose in the aftermath of collapse of fusion, the rise of the OB was the most spectacular. The initial stronghold of this mass movement was in the Orange Free State but it soon spread to the Transvaal and the Cape. Its presence in Natal was confined to Afrikaner enclaves. Somewhat against expectations, the OB was not very well represented in South West Africa where pro-German fifth columnists were active. The OB managed to establish itself firmly within rural as well as urban constituencies, building effectively on the command traditions of the countryside and the patriarchal structures of farming communities, as well as the frustrations and fears of marginalised city dwellers and workers. It claimed significant support from the rising legions of Afrikaner intellectuals in university centres like Potchefstroom, Bloemfontein, Pretoria and Stellenbosch. Estimates suggest a total membership of around 2 to 300,000 at its height.

Colonel J.C.C. Laas, the founding *commandant-generaal* of the Ossewabrandwag, was a capricious and impulsive soldier given to bursts of frenetic activity. He ceaselessly toured the country, appointing OB leaders in a chaotic manner with little concern for administrative or organisational process. Laas managed to resist moves to draw up a constitution for the fledgling movement. In 1940 he was replaced by J.F.J. 'Hans' van Rensburg, a dynamic figure who combined military experience

with a high-flying career as a civil servant in the law department and also as administrator of the OFS. In presenting itself as non-hierarchical and inclusive, the OB provided a route to rapid advancement: ordinary members might find themselves in notional authority over men who, in other spheres of life, possessed superior status; yet the inner circles of the OB wherein decision-making was concentrated was dominated by academics and professionals who soon gravitated to positions of influence. Key to the success of Van Rensburg, an ardent germanophile, was his ability to project himself as a Prussian-style officer who, albeit elitist, was able to command the respect of ordinary recruits. Although strongly influenced by national socialism, Van Rensburg was not a rabble-rouser or a demagogue in the Hitlerian image.

The OB's fortunes rose and fell with hopes of German victory in the war. Authoritarian, anti-democratic, profoundly anti-semitic, resolutely anti-communist, and infused with an extremist nationalism that venerated trekker heroes and Krugerite republicanism in particular, its membership was strongly disposed towards violence. Uniforms, marching rituals, and energetic displays of *volkskultuur* proved attractive to its populist membership. The split between the OB and Malan's National Party centred on issues like the role of parliament and the terms of the constitution of the future Afrikaner republic, a matter that came to a head in 1942 when it was still unclear which organisation would emerge dominant amongst radical nationalists.

The Ossewabrandwag achieved very little in the first three or four years of its ascendancy; decline thereafter was rapid. Although OB members were implicated in various threats to overthrow the state and were routinely involved in vicious street brawls with soldiers as well as rival Afrikaner nationalists, it never posed a serious risk to the security of the state. The OB's paramilitary *stormjaers* operated as an elite militia with the clear intent of fomenting violence, yet in practice it did more posturing than perpetrating. Though undeniably frightening, the *stormjaers* never gained control of the streets and proved unable, perhaps unwilling, to unleash a ruthless regime of terror comparable to the Nazi SS. The *stormjaers* were critical of the many *braaivleisgeneraals* amongst the OB's broader oupa-army. Several leading Afrikaner nationalist intellectuals, including Piet Meyer, Geoff Cronjé, N.G.S. van der Walt, H.G. Stoker and L.J. du Plessis were adherents of the OB who rose to positions of influence within the organisation. Yet their ideas cannot be said to have emanated from the OB itself.

Ideologically, the OB evinced a *mélange* of anti-communism, anti-semitism and racism – yet it never developed a clear manifesto or programme. It did not, for instance, play a leading role in the formulation of apartheid, partly because it was so wrapped up in intra-nationalist disputes, but also because it never gave serious thought to policy implementation and the exercise of power. The OB's yearning for an exclusive Afrikaner *volks* nationalist state emphasised generic rightist values such as religion, discipline, the family, and corporatism, but it did little to formalise these in practice. The OB proved unable to compete with the organisational structures of the National Party which became ever more professional and sophisticated under Malan, Verwoerd, and Strijdom. Notwithstanding its clear authoritarian tendencies, the OB was unable to exert effective discipline over its own membership: wayward followers were expelled, but for the most part they simply drifted away.

This brief summary cannot do full justice to Christoph Marx's detailed analysis and meticulous research which has resulted in what must be the definitive study of the OB movement. Readers familiar with the work of Furlong, O'Meara, Giliomee, and others should not expect startling new revelations but they will be intrigued by the new evidence that Marx has brought to this study, as well as his judicious evaluation of differing interpretations. The text abounds with interesting sidelights on well-known personalities and familiar events. Unfortunately, the reader has to work hard to find these.

There are two significant strengths to this book. In the first place, Marx has done a prodigious amount of archival research and his grasp of the secondary material is sound. Although many specific claims (for example, Hertzog's authoritarianism) do not fully convince, the author backs up his views with substantial material. Secondly, Marx uses his command of the German as well as South African historiography to excellent comparative effect. When he argues, for instance, that what been often termed as 'neo-Fichteanism' in South Africa, is better described as 'Spenglerism', one is inclined to take the claim seriously.

Marx mounts a strong argument in the first section of the book to the effect that parliamentarianism in twentieth-century South Africa was not very well established, reminding us of the extent to which post-Union white politics was marked by a tendency to violence. He also has interesting things to say about the relationship between the authoritarian aversion to conflict and its search for harmony and honour, drawing on the theoretical insights of scholars like Elias and Dahendorf. Marx may exaggerate his case but he does entice the reader to think anew about the nature of the post-Union South African parliamentary state, so often assumed to approximate to the 'Westminster model'. He offers important insights, too, on the nature of the National Party's internal organisational structures. Moreover, Marx has interesting things to say about ideology, in particular, variants of cultural nationalism. He makes a strong case (paralleling the argument of Milton Shain) to the effect that anti-semitism, far from being a marginal influence in the 1930s and 40s, is in fact key to understanding to the emergent racism of apartheid.

Originally submitted as Marx's habilitation thesis in 1996, the book is 650 pages in length. Marx only begins his analysis of the OB half-way through the text. In keeping with the conventions of the habilitation – effectively a second doctoral thesis – the author seems bound to chase down every possible lead and to demonstrate his mastery over the entire field of radical nationalism. This means that the narrative structure sometimes seems to have a life of its own, with the author chasing around like a sheep-dog to impose order on its wayward subjects. In pursuing and corralling his burgeoning subject matter, Marx is often deft and insightful. But no sooner is one sheep safely secured than another has to be brought into line. The voluminous size of this book, and the apparent absence of editorial control on the part of the publishers, may deter many readers from reading it. This would be a pity because Marx's book is a major study which deserves a prominent place alongside other titans in the field.

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Afrikaner nationalism revisited: Perspectives on radicalisation and its manifestations in the Ossewabrandwag

Christoph Marx, professor of History at the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany, is not an unfamiliar name in journals on African history, especially the history of South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s. Nor is this the first time he has written on the Ossewabrandwag. In 1994, while still at the University of Freiburg, he published an excellent article in the *Journal of Southern African Studies* on the Ossewabrandwag as a mass-movement. This has become one of the most important studies on the topic, effectively capturing and summarising the core nature of the movement. In his recent book under review here, Marx focuses specifically on radical Afrikaner nationalism with special reference to the Ossewabrandwag.

The post-doctoral study which led to this new publication originally secured Marx's tenure at Duisburg-Essen and was published in German under the title *Im Zeichen des Ochsenwagens. Der radikale Afrikaner-Nationalismus in Südafrika und die Geschichte der Ossewabrandwag* (1998). This is one of very few useful studies on Afrikaner nationalism published in German; indeed there is not much published material on the Ossewabrandwag (OB) in any language. Merely through its focus and topic alone, therefore, this new work makes a significant contribution.

The greatest merit of the book undoubtedly lies in the author's meticulous research. *Die Ossewa-Brandwag. Vuurtjie in Droë Gras* (1991) under the editorship of P.F. van der Schyff is the only other study on the Ossewabrandwag with a comprehensive empirical base. True to the German scholarly tradition, Marx's study is thorough in the extreme; it testifies to a standard of scholarship that must have been excruciating to maintain consistently. Nor should it be forgotten that he also had to master Afrikaans to understand the bulk of the relevant source material. He has consulted a wide range of sources encompassing theoretical works on nationalism; landmark studies of Afrikaner nationalism written in the twentieth century; and an immense volume and variety of secondary sources written on twentieth-century South Africa, especially on the 1930s and 1940s. Primary sources, particularly newspapers and the work of contemporaries are used in the first two parts of his book while his research on the Ossewabrandwag per se is mainly based on archival sources. Marx claims that his book has the broadest empirical base of all works published on the OB thus far – a mere glance at his bibliography and footnotes confirms that he is certainly not given to exaggeration.

The author's explanation of the nature of Afrikaner nationalism and the place of the Ossewabrandwag in this theoretical context makes it first and foremost a social history. It is a careful analysis of the specific historical structures that favoured the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, but unlike many other studies on the topic, which argue that Afrikaner nationalism followed an unavoidable path towards apartheid, Marx emphasises the danger of blindly using teleological interpretations of history. This equips him to give a more sober account of Afrikaner nationalism. Throughout the book he discusses what he calls the "self-evident"; and then proceeds to show that nothing in history is unavoidable. In the words of Marx himself: "... other developments would have been possible". This in itself is a fresh look at Afrikaner nationalism considering that an influential trend in the historiography is to see it

merely as a precursor to apartheid, ignoring the immense complexity of Afrikaner nationalism in its own right.

By writing a social history Marx evades the reductionism that might have resulted in placing exclusive emphasis on the history of ideas and ideologies. And yet it is not the genre of social history per se which comes through so clearly, but how he makes the writing of social history his own. The book deals mainly with the radicalisation of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s. This was a time of social, economic and political turmoil in South Africa, with the Great Depression ravaging the country's economy and new and existing social and political problems dominating the scene. While discussing the transformation of nationalism during this time, he integrates its social historical imperatives with the ideas and ideologies that shaped this process. And in doing so he does not deviate from social history; he enriches his account of this extremist form of nationalism by providing an integrated look at how conditions combined to make way for its articulation and organisation. Capitalism, political revisionism, constitutional nationalism, socio-economic tribulations and all the other developments and influences are woven into the fabric of his discussion. While other historians have explained the emergence of political extremism in the 1930s and 1940s as being under the sway of European ideological influences, Marx shows through his meticulous research that radical Afrikaner nationalism required little prodding from Europe. The conditions portrayed in the second part of the book *cannot* be separated or even remotely understood without knowledge of the underlying long-term developments leading towards extremist nationalism. Marx acknowledges this through the structure of his book.

The work is divided into three parts; this enriches the problem-centred approach which the author chooses to follow. Although he uses a topical exposition, the first two parts of the book supplement each other logically and chronologically – the reader always retains a sense of the time the author writes about.

The first part of the book deals with the foundations of Afrikaner nationalism and its long-term structural pre-conditions. Marx relates how ethnic consciousness (rather than other forms of identity) took hold of South Africa's political elites. This is one of the most important foundations of Afrikaner nationalism and Marx plots its course by reaching back into the nineteenth century. Then, by pointing out the economic and social changes which characterised the first half of the twentieth century, he clarifies and explains the shifts that took place in the political, social and cultural self-perceptions of the Afrikaner people. Many Afrikaners, for example, took exception to the Union constitution of 1910 and its enforced conciliation between Anglo-Boer War adversaries (the Afrikaners and the English-speakers). Afrikaner leaders framed their political ideas around personal loyalties and an almost romantic harking back to the "idyllic" times of the old Boer republics. And most importantly they ethicised social issues by playing the "poor white" Afrikaners off against urbanised blacks in the labour force. All of this contributed to their distrust of the parliamentary political system of Westminster and the urgent need to reform or even replace it. Thus, the search for "alternative" systems flourished and simultaneously fuelled the growth of radical Afrikaner nationalism.

In the second part, Marx illustrates the radicalisation of Afrikaner nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s; together with the first section this provides an effective

context for the explanation of the Ossewabrandwag as the prime example of radicalised Afrikaner nationalism. The true value of the book begins with the second part as is clear in the way Marx explains *how* Afrikaner nationalism was radicalised into *volk* and cultural nationalism against his well-set background. He devotes four chapters to unravelling this issue and this is arguably the most telling, in-depth part of his analysis. It provides an efficient, believable answer to one of the fundamental questions of his book: how Afrikaner nationalism transformed itself from a populist to a cultural nationalism while becoming politically radicalised at the same time.

In addition, the second part also traces the medium and shorter term developments that led to the radicalisation of Afrikaner nationalism. Marx follows the main trajectory of events behind these changes, notably political developments like the “grand coalition” of 1933; socio-economic problems of the 1930s, particularly the Great Depression; and of course the seminal Voortrekker centenary commemoration (*Eeufees*). The symbolic oxwagon trek of 1938 was both the embodiment of cultural Afrikaner nationalism and the spark that ignited the “bush fire” of extremist nationalism which found expression in the founding of the Ossewabrandwag.

Marx’s account reaches its climax in the third and longest part of the book. It examines the radicalisation of Afrikaner nationalism by looking at how it manifested itself in the Ossewabrandwag in the late 1930s and during the Second World War. Of all the extra-parliamentary movements which emerged in the 1930s, it was the most prominent. Initially it tried to hide its fascist sentiments under the guise of cultural nationalism but clashes with the National Party and the immense growth of the OB under the leadership of J.F.J. van Rensburg transformed it into a fascist organisation, propagating a corporative and authoritarian state modelled on German-styled National Socialism. With the allied victory over Germany and the subsequent election victory of the National Party in 1948, the Ossewabrandwag eventually declined and most of its members became absorbed into the NP. The facts and sources are interpreted by Marx against the backdrop of radicalised Afrikaner nationalism and he analyses the shifting social basis of the movement in admirable fashion.

One of Marx’s own points of critique against previous studies of the Ossewabrandwag is that they do not take the regional and social differences of the movement into account, creating the illusion of homogeneity. Although he neglects to give a comparison of the organisational aspects of the OB in the different regions, he devotes a chapter to how the movement developed in the various provinces as well as in the rural and urban areas. This alone greatly broadens the reader’s understanding of the OB’s complexity.

Although his account of the history of the movement is a comprehensive one, it cannot claim to be complete. For example, he devotes only a page to the youth movement and a mere page to the role of women in the Ossewabrandwag, while a whole book could be written on each of these topics alone. However, one can understand the necessity to keep the portrayal of the movement focused on the first two parts of the book in order not to trail off from the problem-centred approach of his study. Marx’s writing on the OB is revisionist in the sense that the topics he covers have already been extensively explored by the historian based in Potchefstroom. However, it is also original because of the integrated perspective he uses to explain the Ossewabrandwag and the vast amount of new information his

research has added to the corpus of work on the organisation. A telling contribution of this book is that it contextualises the OB in a way not accomplished before and thus opens pathways for further studies on various aspects of the movement based on Marx's presuppositions.

This publication makes a welcome and significant contribution to the debate on Afrikaner nationalism and the nature of the Ossewabrandwag. However, for all its merits, this is a taxing read – it is clearly not meant for popular consumption. Nonetheless, any serious scholar who is interested in South African history of the 1930s and 1940s will find this book immensely insightful. It is certainly a worthwhile read.

As one of the contemporaries, quoted by Marx, wrote of the Ossewabrandwag, "History as a science will one day give a fair assessment of the position of the Ossewabrandwag in the development process of the Afrikaners and their future independent, Christian and national republic". Christoph Marx's exposition is without a doubt a "fair assessment" and will surely become one of the major secondary works to consult for any study on the Ossewabrandwag and radical Afrikaner nationalism.

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