

The colony of Natal and the management of its Afrikaner subjects in the build-up to the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902)

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Samevatting

In die historiografie van die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899–1902) het die vooroorlogse bestuur van Britse onderdane wat historiese, kulturele en bloed bande met die republieke gehad het tot dusver min aandag geniet. In die lig hiervan, word in die artikel die bestuur deur die Kolonie van Natal van hul Afrikaner onderdane, in die opbou tot die oorlog, onder die loep geneem. Deur gebruik te maak van 'n teoretiese raamwerk met lojaliteit as 'n fokus word die bestuur van Natal Afrikaners deur die Natalse owerhede in terme van vuurwapen besit; betrokkenheid in die militêre magte en algemene optrede, ondersoek. Hoewel Natal Afrikaners, in die algemeen slegs dislojaal in woord en denke en nie in daad was nie, het die Natalse owerhede dit anders beskou. Vir laasgenoemde was 'n simpatieke lojaliteit teenoor die republieke niks anders as 'n dislojaliteit teenoor die Natalse en imperiale owerhede nie. As gevolg daarvan, ondanks die feit dat min bewyse daarvoor bestaan het, is Natal Afrikaners in die aanloop tot die oorlog deur hul regering gewantrou en met die uitbreek van die oorlog versaak.

Keywords: Anglo-Boer War; South African War; Civilians; Loyalty; Natal Colony; British Empire; Natal Afrikaners; Dutch districts; Spies; Firearms; Cadets; Rifle associations.

Introduction

In 1899, on the eve of the Anglo-Boer War, the colony of Natal, when compared to the Cape Colony and the Boer Republics of the Orange Free State (OFS) and the South African Republic (Transvaal), was the only region in which Afrikaners formed the minority amongst the white inhabitants. In 1896, it was estimated that they totalled no more than 5 000 of whom 862

were men eligible to vote.¹ The vast majority of this ethnic minority resided in the so-called “Dutch” districts of Kranskop, Umvoti, Weenen, Estcourt, Upper Tugela, Proviso B, Umsinga, Klip River, Dundee and Newcastle. In terms of making a living, Natal Afrikaners were almost exclusively involved in agriculture and especially in the rearing of livestock which necessitated a summertime migration to the republics and a return in the winter months to Natal. This transnational relationship exposed Natal Afrikaners to the culture, politics and history of their relatives who lived in the republics. So much so, that the governor of Natal, Walter Hely-Hutchinson, accused Natal Afrikaners of viewing the Transvaal rather than Natal and the British Empire, as their political home.²

It was once said of the Anglo-Boer War that it resulted in the spilling of more ink than blood.³ However, historiographically speaking, little of this ink has been spilt on the pre-war management of groups like the Natal Afrikaners who had blood ties with people in the republics and associated culturally and historically with them, but were legally and geopolitically under the hegemony of Natal and the British Empire.⁴ The focus of this article is therefore on how Natal, under Prime Minister AH (Albert) Hime, managed its Afrikaner subjects during the tense period of diplomatic standoff between Britain and the Transvaal/OFS alliance (roughly 31 May 1899 to 11 October 1899) which eventually culminated in the outbreak of war on 11 October 1899. In the process, it is envisaged that a different understanding of this period, which is generally dominated by the bigger political events of the time, will emerge.

Theoretically, this article is framed by the notion of loyalty as hypothesised by Kleinig.⁵ Accordingly, the earliest and psychologically most powerful loyalties are associations in which people become deeply involved in or identify with relations, countries and culture. In the words of Kleinig,

1 Pietermaritzburg Archival Repository (PAR), Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO) Vol. 2575: Request, W Pearce (Agent-General for Natal) on behalf of the War Office (WO) for the approximate number of Natal Afrikaners, 1897. The term Natal Afrikaner is preferred to Boer since the former is the term that most commonly appears in the archival material consulted.

2 Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, London, Colonial Office (CO), Vol. 179/206: Letter, W Hely-Hutchinson (Governor) / J Chamberlain (Secretary of State for the Colonies), 15 September 1899.

3 MS Stone, “Medical care and the Victorian army: health, hospitals and social conditions encountered by the British troops during the South African War, 1899–1902” (PhD, University of London, 1993), p. 7.

4 See for example: CJS Strydom, *Kaapland en die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1937); JH Snyman, “Die Afrikaner in Kaapland, 1899–1902”, *Archives Year Book for South African History* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1979).

5 J Kleinig, “Loyalty”, in EN Zalta (ed.) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/loyalty/>, as accessed on 10 May 2011), pp. 1–19.

[such] loyalties are not just to any group that may exist, or even to any group with which we have some association, but only to those to which we are sufficiently closely bound to call ours ... in such identifications, the fate or well-being of the objects of loyalty become bound up with one's own.

The test of loyalty, according to Kleinig, is conduct. Loyal persons act in support of or remain committed to the object/s of their loyalty, even when it is likely to be detrimental to do so.

Managing the arms and ammunition available to Natal Afrikaners

Curbing the purchase of arms and ammunition

With the possibility of war increasing, the Natal government deemed it necessary to manage its Afrikaner subjects in a concurrent manner on various levels. One of the first steps taken was to exercise tighter control over their acquisition and ownership of rifles and ammunition. The initial move was made by the commandant of volunteers, Colonel W Royston, who forwarded a circular on 10 July 1899 to all magistrates claiming that due to a delay in the receipt of the usual supply of ammunition, “until further instructions not more than 200 rounds of ammunition of any description is to be issued to any person within 12 months”.⁶

This ruling did not apply to registered members of rifle associations and in fact had nothing to do with a shortage of ammunition; it was a concerned reaction to the upswing in the amount of ammunition purchased by Afrikaners who were not members of rifle associations. Evidence of this increase is provided by sales for the comparative periods of 1 April to 21 June 1898 and 1 April to 21 June 1899, during which time, purchases from government depots by non-members rose from 8 230 to 13 090 rounds, while those by members declined from 48 660 to 32 650.⁷

Although this measure restricted Natal Afrikaners from purchasing ammunition from government depots, they were still free to buy ammunition and rifles from traders such as JF King, a merchant in Durban. Applications for the purchase of rifles were nevertheless subjected to the discretion of the resident magistrate, who in an attempt to avoid confrontation, seldom

6 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Circular, W Royston (Commandant of Volunteers) / Magistrate, 10 July 1899.

7 PAR, Minister of Justice and Public Works (MJPW), Vol. 68: Summary of ammunition issued from gunpowder depots, 1 April 1898–21 June 1898 and 1 April 1899–21 June 1899.

declined requests for permits. Consequently, for example, from 1 June to 1 July 1899 at Dundee, Magistrate P Hugo, issued permits for 29 rifles of which 25 were purchased by Afrikaners. Indeed, of the 3 240 rounds sold, only 500 were not bought by Afrikaners.⁸ In addition, Hugo also received applications from Afrikaners for certificates to purchase arms in other districts and to buy and sell weapons amongst themselves. None of these requests could be refused since they complied with the law, but Hugo was convinced that the purchases were not (as was claimed) for shooting vultures and stray dogs, or because of fears of an African uprising. The situation was little different in other districts. The magistrate of Umsinga reported in September 1899 that Afrikaners had bought 2 200 rounds and the English-speakers only 1 800, while the former had also purchased bandoliers.⁹ In Estcourt, Magistrate Addison issued 1 300 rounds, mostly for Martini Henry's, to Afrikaners in the first 25 days of September 1899, taking care not to exceed the prescribed limit of 200. However, he was unable to prevent the Van der Merwe family from collectively purchasing, in late September 1899, a worrisome 1 000 rounds, and other Afrikaners from freely buying rifles and bandoliers.¹⁰

In another attempt to curb the sale of arms and ammunition, Prime Minister AH Hime, who also held the portfolio of minister of justice and public works, called in August 1899 for an investigation into the records of all rifles sold in Natal since 1 January 1896. This opened up a can of worms. Over 500 rifles had been sold, of which JF King in Durban had sold 312. Of these, only two were licensed by the Durban magistrate, despite him having registered 206 rifles. The explanation by the controller of firearms was that rifles were registered immediately after passing customs and consequently the return of sales by dealers, who had rifles in stock for long periods, did not correlate with the magisterial lists. To Hime this was incomprehensible and the extensive list of rifles bought by Natalians, many of whom were Afrikaners, did not aid him in his quest to control arms and ammunition in the face of the impending war.¹¹

8 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 69: Returns of ball ammunition sold at Dundee (Controller of Firearms), 1 June 1899–1 July 1899, 12 July 1899.

9 PAR, Attorney-General's Office (AGO), Vol. I/7/39: Report, GE Adamson (Magistrate, Umsinga), 20 September 1899.

10 PAR, CSO. Vol. 2580: Report, RH Addison (Magistrate, Estcourt), 25 September 1899.

11 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 116: Report, (Controller of Firearms), 22 August 1899.

Investigating rumours related to Afrikaner ownership of arms and ammunition

By August 1899, rumours had also begun to circulate that Natal Afrikaners were receiving arms and ammunition from the OFS and the Transvaal. The first of these suggested that in July 1899, a person presenting himself as a roving photographer, travelled in the Normandien area near Newcastle with a wagon and eight horses. Apparently he only called on Natal Afrikaners, and rumour had it that he was distributing Mauser ammunition. Investigations into the matter yielded nothing and were eventually dismissed out of hand.¹² The reason the issue was dropped was because Natal Afrikaner trekboers were permitted, in terms of Section 17 of Law 11 of 1862, to take arms and ammunition for personal use across the border. The authorities thus argued that there was simply no need to distribute ammunition secretly and risk punishment.¹³ Furthermore, the nature of the law made it possible for arms and ammunition to be brought into Natal and to be left behind on departure. Concerns about this practice had been raised between 1896 and 1899 by the Natal Police, but the Natal government did not deem it prudent to repeal the law.¹⁴ However, with the rising tension between the republics and Britain, Royston pointed out, with little effect, that the law in question conflicted with newly imposed regulations calling for the registration of all firearms brought into Natal.¹⁵

A second rumour elicited more urgent action. A coal prospector reported that it was believed that every Natal Afrikaner between Dundee and the Buffalo River border with the Transvaal had a Mauser, some of which were unregistered and had apparently been secretly issued from across the border. Furthermore, the rumour had it that as part of their mobilisation plans, Natal Afrikaners were practising with their Mausers and had explicit orders to rendezvous at Talana Hill should war break out. In reaction, Hime on 25 August 1899 instructed the chief commissioner of police, Colonel JG Dartnell, to look into the matter. Dartnell was not too optimistic about this because he was of the opinion that if the Natal Afrikaners did indeed have unregistered Mausers, they would conceal them, and issuing search warrants

12 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Letter, C Bird (Principal under-Secretary) / TR Bennett (Magistrate, Klip River), 23 August 1899; Letter, TR Bennett, (Magistrate, Klip River) / C Bird (Principal under-Secretary), 26 August 1899.

13 PRO, CO, Vol. 179/206: Minute paper, distribution of firearms in Natal by Boers, 19 September 1899.

14 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 69: Report, Natal Police OFS Boers brought arms and ammunition into Natal, 1898–1899.

15 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 69: Report, W Royston (Commandant of Volunteers), firearms brought into Natal by trekboers from the Republics, 5 June 1899; 28 August 1899.

would be a risky move under the current circumstances.¹⁶

The rumour, however, had a much wider ripple effect; news of it reached the heart of the Empire in London. The secretary of state for the colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, wasted no time in contacting the governor of Natal, Walter Hely-Hutchinson, asking that an immediate enquiry be launched and instructing that should the rumour be verified, the serious implications of such a situation had to be “brought home to the SAR government”. It became the duty of Sub-Inspector WE Lyttle of the Natal Police to investigate the matter. In fulfilling his brief Lyttle inspected all the arms in the area in question and found only four Mausers, all registered to Natal Afrikaners. Nevertheless, Lyttle was of the opinion that there was a great deal of truth in the rumour and firmly believed that every single Natal Afrikaner in the district had a Mauser hidden away. He claimed to have been informed by his spies that the customs post at De Jagersdrift had received a consignment of Mausers apparently destined for Natal Afrikaners. The spies could not however, say where the consignment was being kept or whether it had already been distributed.¹⁷ As a result, the Natal authorities proceeded to keep a close watch on the Landmansdrift and De Jagersdrift crossings into the Transvaal, an exercise that yielded no proof whatsoever.¹⁸ The reality was actually very different. As early as May 1899 Commandant-General PJ (Piet) Joubert of the Transvaal had instructed that Mausers should not be sold to Natal Afrikaners who called on the landrost at Vryheid hoping to acquire a weapon.¹⁹

Rumours, however, persisted that Natal Afrikaners, specifically those residing at Noodsberg in the New Hanover district, had unlicensed Mausers. Again, this proved to be unfounded.²⁰ The next rumour that circulated was that RJ van Rooyen of Rustenburg, Umvoti, had used an unlicensed Mauser at the Upper Umvoti Rifle Association practice session and Sergeant Barbezat was duly despatched to investigate the matter. For once the rumour proved correct, because Van Rooyen admitted to possessing an unlicensed Mauser

16 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Letter, W Royston (Commandant of Volunteers) / AH Hime (Prime Minister), 24 August 1899; Letter, AH Hime (Prime Minister) / JG Dartnell (Chief Commissioner of Police), 25 August 1899; Letter, JG Dartnell (Chief Commissioner of Police) / AH Hime (Prime Minister), 25 August 1899.

17 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Letter, J Chamberlain (Secretary of State for the Colonies) / W Hely-Hutchinson (Governor), 16 September 1899; Letter, JG Dartnell (Chief Commissioner of Police) / WE Lyttle (Sub-Inspector), 18 September 1899; Letter, WE Lyttle (Sub-Inspector) / JG Dartnell (Chief Commissioner of Police), 20 September 1899.

18 PRO, CO, Vol. 179/206: Minute paper, distribution of firearms in Natal by Boers, 19 September 1899.

19 National Archives (NA), Pretoria, Kommandant-Generaal (KG) Vol. 818: Telegram, Landrost Vryheid / PJ Joubert (Commandant-General of the Transvaal), 5 May 1899.

20 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Report, CLA Ritter (Magistrate, New Hanover), 23 September 1899.

and 120 of the original 600 rounds he had purchased. He offered to take the rifle to the local magistrate to register it but instead, Barbezat confiscated the Mauser.²¹ A day or two later, Van Rooyen went to the magistrate's office and submitted a sworn declaration on his acquisition of the rifle. He claimed that on his return from the Transvaal he had taken the two Mausers he had purchased to Magistrate Fannin for registration. Tax and duties were paid on one rifle. Fannin refused to register both rifles since Van Rooyen only had a permit for one of them. The second rifle was subsequently registered on 12 March 1898 in the name of TC van Rooyen of Pampoennek, but was however retained at the magistrate's office. To resolve the problem, Fannin undertook to write to the controller of firearms. When Van Rooyen called a week later Fannin had still not received a reply and handed the Mauser to Van Rooyen instructing him to produce it when called upon to do so. According to Van Rooyen if he had contravened the law he had done so unwittingly, for he had not attempted to conceal the rifle and had relied on Fannin and the controller of firearms to execute the necessary administrative procedures.²²

This incident incensed Prime Minister Hime who felt that both the magistrate and the controller of firearms had acted in a highly irregular and illegal manner. He pointed out, in late August 1899, that Section 17 of Law 11 of 1862 was not applicable in this particular instance. Furthermore, an application was submitted for a Martini Henry while a Mauser had been registered. In the light of this, the rifle in question should never have been registered to TC van Rooyen because his application was flawed. The second rifle should have been confiscated immediately and the government informed. Owing to the confusion and crass irregularities of the situation, the law could not be enforced and after paying the custom duties, Van Rooyen's Mauser was handed back to him.²³ But his good fortune ended here. His subsequent application to import 600 rounds from Germany for self defence, shooting of vultures, and target practice, was denied by Hime because Van Rooyen had apparently declared that he would under no circumstances fight for the British.²⁴

21 PAR, AGO, Vol. I/7/39: Report, unlicensed Mauser, RJ van Rooyen, 27 August 1899.

22 PAR, AGO, Vol. I/7/39: Deposition, RJ van Rooyen, 29 August 1899.

23 PAR, AGO, Vol. I/7/39: Report, unlicensed Mauser, RJ van Rooyen, 29 August 1899.

24 PAR, AGO, Vo. I/7/39: Letter, RJ van Rooyen / Controller of Firearms, 9 October 1899.

Searching for unregistered firearms

Based on the persistent rumours the Natal authorities decided to have the police conduct a house-to-house inspection for unregistered rifles in the “Dutch” districts of Weenen, Umvoti, Estcourt, Klip River, and Proviso B. Districts dominated by English-speaking Natalians who also suffered this inconvenience were Pietermaritzburg, Alfred and Durban.²⁵

In the Estcourt district the inspection unearthed several unregistered items which the owners then took to the magistrate for registration. One such person was GL Oosthuysen who applied to register his two rifles, a carbine and a revolver. He had brought these into Natal on his return from a hunting trip in Rhodesia. J van der Merwe, of the farm Moor, who believed that as a trekboer Section 17 of Law 11 of 1862 applied to him, likewise applied to register a Mauser which he had purchased in the OFS, while JJ Meyer and JC Jordaan,²⁶ as well as the member of the legislative council for Weenen, Casper (C) Labuschagne, also submitted firearms for registration.²⁷

While these Natal Afrikaners were happy to comply with the inspection procedure, problems arose over the Mausers belonging to JA Oosthuysen and his son. The Oosthuysen’s were wealthy landowners with 12 000 acres in Natal and 13 000 in the OFS. In 1898, father and son bought Mausers from the OFS government but did not have them registered in Natal. In an attempt to circumvent the process, Oosthuysen (snr) asked FR Moor, the secretary of native affairs and a local politician, to intervene on their behalf. When this did not materialise, Oosthuysen (snr), in a sworn affidavit before Magistrate Addison, acknowledged that as a British subject, he had brought in unlicensed Mausers from the OFS, but claimed that he had been ignorant of the law. The same day Oosthuysen visited his lawyers, Chadwick & Miller, who on behalf of father and son, applied to the controller of firearms to grant licences on the grounds that the Mausers were not brought into Natal in wilful contravention of the regulations or with the intention of using them against the British. When an immediate response was not forthcoming Chadwick & Miller were instructed to write to Pietermaritzburg that the normal formalities be set aside, since the Oosthuysens wanted their rifles registered without delay. The

25 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 68: Question investigations into unregistered rifles, TJ Nel / AH Hime (Prime Minister), 9 May 1900.

26 PAR, AGO, Vol. 1/7/39: Application, GL Oosthuysen, firearm registration, 18 September 1899; Application, J van der Merwe, firearm registration, 18 September 1899.

27 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Report, RH Addison (Magistrate, Estcourt), 12 September 1899.

reply received was simple – the matter was receiving attention.²⁸

This was not what Oosthuysen wanted to hear, and on 5 October 1899 he, accompanied by his son, left for the OFS without handing in his Mauser despite requests from the magistrate that he do so. The fact that the police did not prevent him from leaving, did not confiscate his rifle nor prevent him from intimidating Chief Ncwadi, angered Prime Minister Hime, especially since the police could not provide a satisfactory answer for their lack of action.²⁹

At this stage, with the firearm inspections yielding little, the Natal Police acting in a half-hearted manner and the existing legislation proving inadequate to control firearms and ammunition, the only solution open to the Natal authorities was to instigate stricter regulations when issuing licenses to Natal Afrikaners. Accordingly, the son of Adrian Jansen, a justice of the peace, was refused a permit without a reason being supplied, for the Mauser he had imported from the Transvaal. Incidents like this added to the growing sentiment amongst Natal Afrikaners that they were being distrusted by their own government. They grumbled that if rifles were intended for disloyal purposes, there were certainly other, easier means of obtaining them.³⁰

Generally, attempts by the Natal authorities to monitor and control firearms and ammunition in the possession of Natal Afrikaners caused great dissatisfaction. In the Weenen district Afrikaner gun owners took it for granted that the inspections were aimed at them. As a result, a Mr Grobbelaar, who possessed an “old piece” without a permit, told Magistrate Matthews that the government should not take arms from people but that they should rather provide them with weapons for defensive purposes. A certain Heine went even further and defiantly told the police that Natal Afrikaners could get many more rifles from the Transvaal if they so wished.³¹ Similarly, in the Dundee district much offence was incurred. The question posed by many was: Why are the authorities reacting this way when friction between the Transvaal and Britain is on a precarious high? Although most Afrikaners found the inspection process insulting and an attack on their loyalty as British subjects, the half-hearted and perfunctory manner in which the inspection was done

28 PAR, AGO, Vol. 1/7/39: Application, JA Oosthuysen (snr) firearm registration, 18 September 1899–28 September 1899.

29 PAR, Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA) Vol. 1/4/6: Correspondence, WG Wheelwright (Magistrate, Upper Tugela) / AH Hime (Prime Minister), 25 September 1899–5 October 1899.

30 *Times of Natal*, 27 September 1899.

31 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, MRN Matthews (Magistrate, Weenen), 4 August 1899.

often raised a smile.³² On the whole, the inspections by the police yielded only 16 unlicensed rifles, of which only two were Mausers. Of the 16, only 11 were confiscated.³³

This lack of evidence contributed to the anger and invasion of privacy felt by Natal Afrikaners, for whom firearms not only formed an important part of their defence and hunting prowess but also served as significant cultural symbols of masculinity. These emotions and the ill-feeling harboured against the Natal authorities are best summarised by CJ Triegaardt in a letter he wrote to the *Times of Natal*:

... I could not get one [rifle] for love or money. Before this disturbance, I bought one in town, took it to the Resident Magistrate's office, and had it registered. That shows plainly that we Natal Dutchmen are not trusted with a gun; frightened it might go off when we have it. Don't blame them; guns are dangerous. The Home Guard in Pietermaritzburg can get firearms and ammunition served to them, to protect them against the supposed coming war. That is arming one party and disarming the other by not wanting to sell them firearms; but, thank God, Ladysmith is not the only place to get firearms. I suppose after this I'll be branded as a disloyal subject, which I certainly must be as regards (sic) the way I was treated.³⁴

Natal Afrikaners and the armed forces of the Natal Colony³⁵

Concurrently with efforts to monitor the firearms and ammunition possessed by Natal Afrikaners, the Natal government also turned its attention to another possible threat the Afrikaners could pose to the colony – membership of the armed forces.

The first line of defence in Natal was the various rifle associations. Being a member of a rifle association held several advantages, including the right to purchase rifles at cost price, and to be given free ammunition. Despite these benefits, Natal Afrikaners did not join rifle associations in large numbers. For those who were members, the situation changed radically during early 1899. New rules were published requiring all members to take an oath of

³² *Times of Natal*, 27 September 1899.

³³ PAR, MJPW, Vol. 68: Question investigations into unregistered rifles, TJ Nel / AH Hime (Prime Minister), 9 May 1900.

³⁴ *Times of Natal*, 13 September 1899.

³⁵ For a comprehensive overview of the Natal armed forces at the time of the Anglo-Boer War, see MS Coghlan, "The Natal volunteers in the Anglo-Boer War, September 1899 to July 1902: reality and perception" (Ph.D, UNP, 2000).

allegiance to the crown. Members unwilling to do so were to be excluded from acquiring a rifle and ammunition from the association, and had to continue membership at their own expense. An outcry followed. Associations with substantial numbers of Afrikaners, such as for example the one at Kranskop, refused to adopt the new rules. To the *Natal Mercury*, adopting this attitude was incomprehensible, because as British subjects who enjoyed all the accompanying privileges, they should also be expected to defend the Empire. The only conclusion the reporter could reach was that Natal Afrikaners wanted to be free to join the Transvaal in the event of war and were therefore disloyal.³⁶

The reaction of Colonel Royston was to call for the abolition of all rifle associations whose members had refused to take the oath of allegiance. However, Attorney-General Henry Bale was more cautious. He pointed out that the new rules were not applicable to members who had joined under the rules of 6 June 1896, which did not demand a loyalty check by means of an oath of allegiance except when purchasing a rifle for cash. Although the governor had the power to disband the rifle associations, Bale maintained that such a step would cause much anger amongst Natal Afrikaners and that this course of action would be unwise.³⁷

The issue of the new rules and oath of allegiance came to a head when the legislative assembly member for Melmoth, Yonge, asked the assembly to identify the rifle associations which had refused to adopt the new rules. Thirteen associations were subsequently named of which only two, Upper Umvoti (headed by TJ Nel), and Venterspruit (headed by AWJ Pretorius), had Afrikaners as presidents. None of these associations provided reasons for their rejection of the new rules but the assumption was that Afrikaners were responsible for the recalcitrance because they were not British loyalists and did not wish to sign the oath of allegiance.³⁸ Yonge was certainly not universally loved for his proposal. A letter he later received from Umvoti had a newspaper article enclosed in which the offending rifle associations were listed. The article, covered in red ink, presumably to symbolise blood, was meant as a thinly disguised threat.³⁹

³⁶ *Natal Mercury*, 23 March 1899.

³⁷ PAR, MJPW, Vol. 65: Extract, *Natal Mercury*, with comments by W Royston (Commandant of Volunteers), 23 March 1899.

³⁸ PAR, MJPW, Vol. 67: Question on rifle associations that have failed to adopt new regulations, Yonge, 30 May 1899.

³⁹ *Natal Witness*, 31 August 1899.

The associations that complied with the new rules quickly lost most of their Afrikaner members. Others, dominated by Afrikaners, held out and by 12 October 1899, the day after the war began, had still not adopted the new rules. Prime Minister Hime eventually decided that the associations which had failed to comply with the by now not-so-new rules, and whose membership had fallen below 50, would henceforth cease to exist. On one level this was a shrewd move since all such rifle associations were located in the “Dutch” districts, namely at Helpmekaar, Ingogo, Little Tugela, Upper Tugela, Upper Bushmans River and Venterspruit.⁴⁰ Although this step successfully eliminated the associations dominated by Afrikaners, who were seen as disloyal because they had refused to take the oath, on another level it was counterproductive since it also eliminated those Afrikaners with some loyalty to the Empire from the rifle associations and thus from the broader Natal society.

As a result of this “cleansing” process, the remaining rifle associations retained very few Afrikaners as members. Proof of this is found in the muster roll for those rifle associations that had adopted the new rules. By the end of 1899, the numbers were as follows: Camperdown, 20 members, two Afrikaners; Clyderdale, 15 members, four Afrikaners; Dundee, 90 members, two Afrikaners; Elandslaagte, 18 members, two Afrikaners; Highlands, 32 members, two Afrikaners; Klip River, 18 members, one Afrikaner; Kranskop, 20 members, three Afrikaners; Rietvlei, 18 members, two Afrikaners; Seven Oaks, 19 members, three Afrikaners; Tshekana (Muden), 21 members, six Afrikaners; Umvoti, 29 members, four Afrikaners; and Weenen, 52 members, 18 Afrikaners. Thus, at the end of 1899 only 14 percent of the members of rifle associations were Afrikaners.⁴¹

However, the unwillingness of Natal Afrikaners to maintain their membership of the rifle associations was not only because of their opposition to signing an oath of allegiance to the crown. Equally important was the fear that as members of the Natal colonial armed forces they could be called up to fight against the Boer commandos – a possibility most wanted to avoid.⁴² This fear also took root amongst some Natal Afrikaners in the Newcastle and Klip River districts who had dropped their membership of the rifle associations.⁴³

40 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 71: List of rifle associations which have not adopted the new regulations, 12 October 1899.

41 PAR, Natal Defence Records (NDR), Vol. 2/3: Muster roll, rifle associations, 31 December 1899.

42 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2582: Report, MRN Matthews (Magistrate, Weenen), 6 October 1899; CSO, Vol. 2580: Telegram, CJR Saunders (Chief Magistrate and Civil Commissioner) / AH Hime (Prime Minister), 20 September 1899; Telegram, AH Hime (Prime Minister) / CJR Saunders (Chief Magistrate and Civil Commissioner), 22 September 1899.

43 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Report, JO Jackson (Magistrate, Newcastle), 9 September 1899.

It took a letter from the Natal government to allay these fears.⁴⁴

The second tier of the Natal colonial defence was the Natal Police and the various volunteer units. Apart from the police, which had three Afrikaner members,⁴⁵ the only volunteer unit which had a substantial number of Afrikaners was the Greytown-based Umvoti Mounted Rifles (UMR). As 1899 progressed and the prospect of war increased, more and more German and Afrikaner members resigned from the UMR, mainly to avoid fighting against their “own flesh and blood”.⁴⁶ Between 1 July 1899 and 30 September 1899, 19 members resigned of whom 16 were Afrikaners, including Troop Sergeant-Majors CJ van Rooyen and S van Niekerk, Sergeant PR Botha and Corporal JHF Nel.⁴⁷ Apart from being unwilling to fight against their kin, the commanding officer, Colonel George Leuchars, was determined to root out the “disloyal Dutch contingent” from the UMR. In this he was successful and was confident that the Afrikaners remaining in the unit were aware that they had to be loyal, on Leuchars’ terms, because they were under close surveillance.⁴⁸

The lowest tier of the Natal colonial military hierarchy consisted of cadets. Every government school and most private schools had scholar cadets. Statistics from the available archival material on the cadet corps provide an overview of their strength and composition by 31 December 1899: Dundee (three Afrikaners); Durban High School (two Afrikaners out of 50 cadets) with EG (Ernst) Jansen being a sergeant until he left the school on 30 November 1899; Estcourt (four Afrikaners out of 35 cadets) all of whom had left by September 1899; Greytown (49 Afrikaners out of 80 cadets); Ladysmith (eight Afrikaners out of 57 cadets) all of whom had left by August 1899; Maritzburg College (seven Afrikaners out of 79 cadets) all of whom had left by November 1899; Newcastle (seven Afrikaners out of 76 cadets) all except for J van Blerk had left by August 1899; Stanger (six Afrikaners out of 30 cadets) all of whom

44 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Letter, C Bird (Principal under-Secretary) / TR Bennett (Magistrate, Klip River), 12 September 1899.

45 PAR, NDR, Vol. 215/216: List, Natal Police parading at headquarters, 31 March 1899.

46 *Times of Natal*, 2 September 1899.

47 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 69: List, men who have resigned from UMR, 1899.

48 *Times of Natal*, 24 August 1899.

had left on an unknown date; and Weston (one Afrikaner) who left in August 1899.⁴⁹

Being an Afrikaner member of the cadet corps with the war clouds gathering was not easy. Evidence for this is information on the events held at a cadet camp in Durban, where six Afrikaner boys refused to applaud the queen. When asked for an explanation one replied: “she is not our Queen.” Hinting at the measures adopted at the UMR and referring to the new rifle association rules the *Natal Mercury* recommended that the boys be expelled from the corps.⁵⁰ The behaviour of the Afrikaner cadets was also raised in the legislative assembly to which the prime minister replied that an official enquiry had been called for.⁵¹ It seems nothing much happened to the cadets in question for on 14 October 1899, a reader identifying him or herself as “Fear God – Honour the King”, wrote to the *Times of Natal* complaining that the boys had not been adequately punished.⁵²

In the period just before the war broke out, Afrikaners did not feature prominently in any of the defensive layers of colonial Natal as represented by the rifle associations, volunteer units, and the cadet corps. This was partially because of the politics of the day which demanded undivided loyalty to the crown. Very few Natal Afrikaners were prepared to place themselves in a position where they would possibly have to fight against their kith and kin. The aggressive rooting-out of Natal Afrikaners, who were judged as having questionable loyalty to the colonial armed forces, thus solved very few problems. Instead, as had happened with the measures to curb the availability of firearms and ammunition, such tactics merely alienated Natal Afrikaners from pre-war Natal society.

49 PAR, NDR, Vol. 2/2: Muster roll, cadet corps, 31 December 1899. At least two private Natal Afrikaner rifle associations with no allegiance to the Natal government existed at the time. The small Normandien Rifle Association (*De Natal Afrikaner*, 24 January 1899) and the large, active Biggarsberg Boer Rifle Association which did drilling, conducted sham fights and held a “*wapenskou*”. The Natal colonial government frowned on these alternative rifle associations and regarded them as illegal, but out of fear of repercussions did not act against them. *Natal Witness*, 4 September 1899; PAR, CSO, Vol. 1501: Letter, C Bird (Principal under-Secretary) / Magistrate (Umsinga), 8 December 1896.

50 *Natal Mercury*, 14 August 1899.

51 *Times of Natal*, 4 August 1899.

52 *Times of Natal*, 14 August 1899.

Spying on Natal Afrikaners in the immediate pre-war period

Information gathering by the magistrates

Apart from the strategies outlined above, the Natal government also wanted to keep a close watch on the Afrikaners in Natal. On 29 August 1899, the government instructed all magistrates to forward a weekly confidential report to the authorities in Pietermaritzburg. These reports were to focus on the attitudes of the white and black populations in the district concerned and were to include any information that could assist the government in maintaining law and order, such as the investigation of rumours and newspaper articles.⁵³ On 30 September 1899, the monitoring of Natal Afrikaners was intensified when the commissioner of police, Colonel JG Dartnell, with the support of Governor Hely-Hutchinson, forwarded a memo to the police inspectors at Newcastle, Dundee, Ladysmith, Estcourt, Greytown, Nkandla and Melmoth, instructing them to “... make out lists of the Dutch residents in your district, and carefully note the names of any who leave the colony to join the Transvaal ...”⁵⁴ Although the OFS was omitted, it can be assumed that any Natal Afrikaner who intended venturing in that direction was also to be reported.

The outcome of these instructions was that Afrikaners in Natal were henceforth closely monitored and then reported on in some detail. A case in point was the reports from Proviso B and Umvoti. Two members of the Zuid-Afrikaanshe Republiek Politie, RP Dafel and Potgieter, were rumoured to have stayed overnight with some fellow Afrikaners in Proviso B under the pretence that they wished to purchase cattle. At the same time, Proviso B Afrikaners were rumoured to have started stocking up on sugar and flour.⁵⁵ Furthermore, several young Afrikaners from Umvoti were reported to be in the Vryheid district, hoping to gain land in Zululand in the event of war.⁵⁶ Furthermore, according to the hotelkeeper at Helpmekaar, a group of young Afrikaners had left Umvoti to join the Transvaal forces when the news came through of the failed Bloemfontein Conference (31 May–5 June 1899) between President Paul Kruger of the Transvaal and the British high commissioner for South Africa, Sir Alfred Milner.⁵⁷ The Natal Police, who followed up this last lead,

53 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Confidential circular No. 51 of 1899 / Magistrates, 29 August 1899.

54 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 116: Afrikaners who have left, or may leave, to join the Boers, 30 September 1899–3 October 1899.

55 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2581: Report, TR Maxwell (Magistrate, Melmoth), 24 September 1899.

56 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, Chief Magistrate CJR Saunders, 16 August 1899.

57 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Letter, JL Knight (Magistrate, Nkandla) / CJR Saunders (Chief Magistrate and Civil Commissioner), 13 September 1899.

were unable to confirm it.⁵⁸ From within the ranks of Natal Afrikaners these reports were generally rejected as idle gossip⁵⁹ or sheer fiction.⁶⁰

What was neither gossip nor fiction was the sympathy for the republics that arose in the “Dutch” districts – both north and south of the Tugela River. From the Kranskop district, Magistrate HW Boast confirmed that the prospect of war was being freely discussed. According to him, there was a great deal of ignorance about the military might of the British Empire. Furthermore, Boast felt that although family ties made them sympathetic towards the plight of the republics, most Afrikaners were in favour of a peaceful settlement and planned to remain neutral.⁶¹ The same was true in the neighbouring Umvoti district where the sole transgression of the local Afrikaners was open sympathy for the predicament of the Transvaal.⁶² In Weenen, as in Umvoti and Kranskop, the possibility of war was also freely discussed amongst Afrikaners in a manner referred to by the local magistrate as “... boastful ... characteristically vague, but disloyal in tendency”. These discussions were finally tempered by the advance of the British Army, although only two Afrikaners bothered to make a point of watching the passing troops. As in other “Dutch” districts the attitude of most Afrikaners was one of sympathy towards the republics,⁶³ but this emotional attachment was not accompanied by any promises of tangible support.⁶⁴ The only support forthcoming was in the form of contributions to a fund that had been set up in the likelihood of there being wounded Transvaal burghers who needed medical attention. Ds AM Murray initially indicated that he would contribute to the Transvaal Relief Fund and accepted complimentary tickets to the “Relief Fund Concert” but when a counter-fund for Boer casualties was created, he and several other Afrikaners – to the annoyance of the magistrate – changed their minds and withheld their contributions.⁶⁵

Matters were virtually the same in the neighbouring Estcourt district where Magistrate Addison and the local English residents⁶⁶ doubted the allegiance of the local Afrikaners but could find little evidence of active disloyalty.⁶⁷

58 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, CJR Saunders (Chief Magistrate and Civil Commissioner), 16 August 1899.

59 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2582: Report, RA Addison (Magistrate, Estcourt), 25 September 1899.

60 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, Magistrate MRN Matthews, Weenen, 4 August 1899.

61 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, HW Boast (Magistrate, Kranskop), 1 September 1899.

62 VS Harris, “The reluctant rebels: The impact of the Second Anglo-Boer War upon the Klip River Dutch Community, with special reference to the Dutch community of Dundee” (BA Honours, UNP, 1982), p. 4.

63 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, MRN Matthews (Magistrate, Weenen), 4 August 1899.

64 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Report, MRN Matthews (Magistrate, Weenen), 20 September 1899.

65 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2581: Report, MRN Matthews (Magistrate, Weenen), 1 October 1899.

66 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, RH Addison (Magistrate, Estcourt), 9 October 1899.

67 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, RH Addison (Magistrate, Estcourt), 4 September 1899.

However, unlike In Kranskop, Umvoti and Weenen, the magistrate could provide names of Afrikaners who by dint of their movements were regarded as possibly being disloyal. According to Addison, two young brothers of Thaba Hlope wanted to proceed to the Transvaal but were thwarted by their father.⁶⁸ A certain Buys from Weenen, as well as J van der Merwe and JA Oosthuysen and his son – the same Oosthuysens who had run into trouble because of being in possession of unlicensed firearms – had left for the OFS.⁶⁹

In the neighbouring Upper Tugela district, the only district south of the Tugela River that bordered on a Boer republic, the OFS, the local Afrikaners avoided the resident magistrate and the local police. The result of this was that intelligence was hard to come by and it was only with a great deal of effort that the magistrate established that a certain De Villiers was commandeered by his father, a commandant in Harrismith, and that a memo was circulated stating that in case of war the Natal government would close the border with the OFS and seize all trekboer livestock. This caused panic amongst many local Afrikaners who decided to trek, in the middle of the lambing season, to their summer pastures in the OFS.⁷⁰

North of the Tugela River the districts of Klip River, Dundee and Newcastle all bordered on either the Transvaal or the OFS. This meant that they generally had closer contact with the republics than those to the south of the Tugela. In the light of this, TR Bennett, the magistrate for Klip River, felt that it was likely that the local Natal Afrikaners would join the invading commandos in large numbers. In Bennett's opinion, although the Afrikaners in the area were outwardly calm and loyal, he sensed a dogged underlying disapproval of the attitude of the British government towards the Transvaal. Bennett estimated that if hostilities broke out, between 15 and 20 percent of the non-land holders would immediately leave the district and join the commandos and in the case of a Boer invasion, the remaining property owners would probably unite with the invaders, if not as combatants at least to assist in an auxiliary manner. The exceptions would be a few affluent Afrikaners who would remain neutral.⁷¹

The magistrate of the Umsinga district initially took the same line as Bennett – that if the British suffered reverses, the Umsinga Afrikaners would regard rebellion as worth their while. Local Afrikaners were also seen building up

68 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Report, RH Addison (Magistrate, Estcourt), 12 September 1899.

69 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 116: Report, RH Addison (Magistrate, Estcourt), 5 October 1899.

70 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, WG Wheelwright (Magistrate, Upper Tugela), 4 September 1899.

71 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, TR Bennett (Magistrate, Klip River), 5 September 1899.

supplies, and according to Magistrate Adamson, the driving force behind all this was the commander of the local Biggarsberg Boer Rifle Association, CJ de Villiers, who was trying to sell his two farms in Umsinga and had also removed his cattle to the OFS.⁷² But as war approached although he was experiencing difficulty in ascertaining reliable information on the extent of pro-republican sympathy, Adamson changed his mind and reported that an armed rebellion of local Afrikaners was unlikely. He argued that most of the locals were large land owners who feared that their property might be confiscated.⁷³

To the north of Umsinga, in the Dundee district, Magistrate Hugo, himself a Natal Afrikaner who enjoyed the support of most of the prominent Afrikaners in the area, found it easier to glean information on what was transpiring in his magistracy.⁷⁴ In a guarded conversation with AL Jansen, a local justice of the peace, Hugo was informed that the Dundee Afrikaners had strong sympathies with the republics but did not want to take up arms.⁷⁵ A conversation with another prominent local Afrikaner, JJ Gregory, confirmed Jansen's statement. As far as Gregory was concerned, Natal Afrikaners would not cross into the Transvaal to assist the commandos in the event of war. However, he felt that if the republican forces were to cross into Natal and meet with success, some Dundee Afrikaners would in all likelihood join forces with the commandos.⁷⁶ But as Hugo pointed out, this was the voice of the landed gentry who had much to lose because of their lucrative economic activities on both sides of the Natal/Transvaal⁷⁷ and Natal/OFS⁷⁸ borders. Exceptions did occur among young and relatively poor Afrikaners, as reported to Hugo by a certain Maritz. Subsequent investigation by Hugo identified the potential rebels as Jordaan, Meyer and Nel.⁷⁹ As far as the Dundee magistrate was concerned, they had one thing in common: "They all belong to the lower class of Dutch, and have no standing at all in the district."⁸⁰

The only Natal Dutch district which bordered on both the Transvaal and the OFS was Newcastle. In early September 1899, Magistrate Jackson reported that all was peaceful in his region. The affluent Afrikaners were strongly

72 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, GW Adamson (Magistrate, Umsinga), 3 September 1899.

73 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, GW Adamson (Magistrate, Umsinga), 28 September 1899.

74 PAR, AGO, Vol. 1/8/65: Letter, FDJ Havemann (Secretary, Congress of Dutch Farmers Association) / H Bale (Attorney-General), 1 October 1899.

75 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Report, P Hugo (Magistrate, Dundee), 2 September 1899.

76 PAR, AGO, Vol. 1/7/39: Report, P Hugo (Magistrate, Dundee), 20 September 1899.

77 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2581: Report, P Hugo (Magistrate, Dundee), 4 September 1899.

78 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2582: Report, P Hugo (Magistrate, Dundee), 7 October 1899.

79 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2581: Report, P Hugo (Magistrate, Dundee), 5 October 1899.

80 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2582: Report, P Hugo (Magistrate, Dundee), 7 October 1899.

opposed to war, but feared that irresponsible young men might assist the republics if hostilities were to break out.⁸¹ A few Afrikaners, who in the view of the magistrate had the intention of joining the commandos, had taken their livestock to the republics despite the fact that the grazing there was relatively sparse and that the lambing season was about to begin.⁸²

The exception to the rule amongst the various districts in Natal was Proviso B, in Zululand. This area was formerly part of the New Republic which had been ceded to Natal in exchange for recognition in 1886.⁸³ Its white population, predominantly Afrikaans-speaking and geographically isolated from the rest of Natal, maintained strong political, cultural and economic ties with the Transvaal. Unsurprising therefore, rumours circulated that they were expressing pro-republican feelings and were communicating with the Transvaal, under cover of night, using African runners. This information soon proved to be far more than a rumour and before hostilities began, some of the wealthiest Afrikaners in the area, notably JJ van Rooyen,⁸⁴ T Strydom,⁸⁵ and PJ Koekemoer, moved over the border with all their livestock. They were soon followed by a further nine local Afrikaners.⁸⁶ In total, 22 percent of the male Afrikaner population of Proviso B left for the Vryheid district before war broke out,⁸⁷ by far the largest number from any Natal district.

The reports from the magistrates, the eyes and ears of the Natal government, collectively revealed that the vast majority of the Afrikaner inhabitants of the “Dutch” districts felt a great deal of sympathy for the plight of the republics. However, despite the underlying suspicion the magistrates generally harboured towards their Afrikaner subjects, they had to admit that from the available evidence, with the exception of those in Proviso B, most signs of disloyalty were discussed and deeply felt in heart and mind but were hardly likely to be expressed in subversive action.

81 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, JO Jackson (Magistrate, Newcastle), 5 September 1899.

82 PAR, Principal Veterinary Surgeon (PVS) Vol. 3: Letter, DC Uys / Principal Veterinary Surgeon, 19 August 1899.

83 EH Brookes and C de B Webb, *A History of Natal* (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1987), pp. 185–186.

84 PAR, Prime Minister (PM), Vol. 91: Telegram, CJR Saunders (Chief Magistrate and Civil Commissioner) / AH Hime (Prime Minister), 4 September 1899.

85 PAR, AGO, Vol. I/7/39: Telegram, CJR Saunders (Chief Magistrate and Civil Commissioner) / C Bird (Principal under-Secretary), 7 September 1899.

86 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2581: Report, TR Maxwell (Magistrate, Melmoth), 4 October 1899.

87 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2581: Report, TR Maxwell (Magistrate, Melmoth), 4 October 1899.

Information gathering by the Natal populace

In addition to the reports submitted by the various magistrates the Natal authorities had another formal level of intelligence gathering available to them. Over the years the Natal African population, in an elaborate system of “native intelligence officers”, was used to glean information about dissent in their ranks. These African spies reported directly to the secretary of native affairs, FR Moor, who in turn shared such information with the Natal authorities. This system was now used to gather information on Natal Afrikaners. “Native intelligence officer no 2”, for example, accused all Afrikaner inhabitants of the Greytown and Kranskop districts of politically influencing local Africans. He recommended: “They should be made to declare on what side they will be in the event of hostilities. If they say they will take the part of the others in the Transvaal, they should be sent across the border to their own people ...” His point of view was based on two incidents. Near Seven Oaks a local Afrikaner had informed him that the commandos would invade Natal and that they would “go right into Maritzburg and drink their tea there”; and near Kranskop, two Afrikaners had warned Chief Mbanyana that his cattle would be raided if he supported the British, to which he retorted that he would instigate revenge raids.⁸⁸

The official systems of spying on fellow British subjects were augmented by unofficial intelligence provided by loyal Africans and English Natalians alike. A case in point was Nondubela, who declared that on his way to Pietermaritzburg he had met four Afrikaners who asked him whose side he would take in the impending war. In another instance, Chief Kula stated that a certain Maritz, who traded with him and who had outspanned at his homestead, had tried to convince him to side with the republicans. From the Kranskop area, Jacob Zuma reported that AJJ Nel had said that the Natal Afrikaners would wait until the Transvalers came for them after first attacking Durban. He went on to say that *en route* to Durban the commandos would cross at Ngubeva Drift and attack Greytown. Nel also boasted about the Transvaal victory at Majuba in 1881 and the way the Jameson Raid in 1895 had been put down with ease; he had already, he said, set some cattle aside which he would slaughter when the Boers came into Natal.⁸⁹

88 PAR, SNA, Vol. 1/4/6: Statement, Unknown African, 13 September 1899.

89 PAR, AGO, Vol. 1/7/39: Deposition, J Zuma / Magistrate, Umvoti, 12 October 1899.

Writing to the *Times of Natal*, a reader who signed himself “Alert”, warned his Afrikaner neighbours: “You are known, you are watched and any overt act of rebellion on your part will be inevitably rewarded on its merits.”⁹⁰ GL Coventry did more than just issue a warning and informed the Natal authorities that since 1896, and specifically after the visit by ex-Transvaal president, MW Pretorius to the Estcourt district, treason was viewed in a less serious light by the local Afrikaners. Coventry complained that when he brought this change in attitude to the attention of the authorities, he was accused of being alarmist.⁹¹ In reaction, and a clear indication of how seriously information about Natal Afrikaners was being viewed, Prime Minister Hime responded in person, expressing regret that Coventry’s warning had been received with indifference. He explained that the government had failed to act because they wanted to prevent undue alarm. Furthermore, action could not be taken because there were still ongoing diplomatic efforts to avoid hostilities.⁹² Not all unofficial intelligence was based on rumour and PB Simmons, the president of the Weston Rifle Association, reported a week before war broke out, that one JT Potgieter, who resided near Kamberg, had gone to join the commandos leaving behind crops, a horse and other property; furthermore, he had sold off his livestock at a very low price.⁹³

The official and unofficial intelligence gathering on Natal Afrikaners was augmented by some of the Natal newspapers who as public watchdogs took it upon themselves to do some policing.⁹⁴ The most prominent role in this regard was adopted by the *Times of Natal* which hinted that during the Anglo-Transvaal War of 1880–1881, Natal Afrikaners had sided with the Transvaal and now rebels were again gearing to follow the same route. The newspaper encouraged its readers to act as informers and to compile names and addresses of potential rebels and witnesses which “could then be forwarded to the newspaper or the Principal under-Secretary”.⁹⁵

This call was based on a report on 24 August 1899 in which the *Times of Natal*, in an article entitled “Rebels in Natal”, urged the Natal government “... to take steps to disarm disloyal British subjects within this Colony and Zululand and to inform all such at once by Proclamation that their properties

90 *Times of Natal*, 29 August 1899.

91 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 116: Statement, GL Coventry, 15 May 1899.

92 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 116: Letter, AH Hime (Prime Minister) / GL Coventry, c 1900.

93 PAR, CSO, Vol. 1628: Letter, PD Simmons / C Bird (Principal under-Secretary), 6 October 1899; PAR, MJPW, Vol. 116: Report RH Addison (Magistrate, Estcourt), 5 October 1899.

94 See for example, the *Natal Witness*, 5 October 1899.

95 *Times of Natal*, 9 October 1899.

would be forfeited without hesitation, in the event of these people joining or affording assistance to the enemy.”

The “facts” on which the newspaper based its recommendation were that Afrikaners in Umvoti had formed a quasi-military organisation that would support an advance by Transvaal forces into southern Natal. In addition, these Afrikaners were accused of trying to influence local Africans to side with them and were levelling expressions laced with racial hatred against the English. Such behaviour, according to the newspaper, smacked of disloyalty and open rebellion; the government should disarm those who had acquired firearms illegally and take action against those who had broken the law.⁹⁶

The first Afrikaner to react to these accusations was D Havemann, who regarded the article as laughable. In lampooning mode, he volunteered further information: “... we are busy manufacturing cannons out of gumwood blocks, to be loaded with onion bulbs, to meet our terrified Greytown English friends as soon as hostilities commence.” In view of the accusations levelled against the Umvoti Afrikaners, Havemann wondered how great the falsehoods would be when journalists reported on the situation in the Transvaal.⁹⁷ J Nel responded in more serious vein and stated openly: “Our sympathy is with the Transvaal for our relatives are there – and we have not sunk so low in the scale of civilization as to forget blood is thicker than water – I am dear sir, one of the so-called rebels.”⁹⁸

By now the election of William Nel as commandant and Henry Dafel as his assistant, had become something of a standing joke in the Greytown area, especially when Gert van Rooyen, in a letter to the newspaper, expressed the thought that these two men would “be a match for the mighty British Empire”. The *Times of Natal* did not share his humour and labelled it as “an example of Boer logic and policy”, and hoped that all Van Rooyen’s friends would be so foolish as to underestimate the “mighty British Empire” to the same extent that he had.⁹⁹

Under the outwardly joking veneer, the Afrikaners of Greytown were fuming about the article which branded them as rebels, conspirators and meddlers. They decided to circulate a petition calling on the three elected

96 *Times of Natal*, 24 August 1899.

97 *Times of Natal*, 2 September 1899.

98 *Natal Witness*, 1 September 1899.

99 *Times of Natal*, 11 September 1899.

political representatives for the area, TJ (Theunis) Nel, TJ (Tol) Nel and G Leuchars – who was also the commanding officer of the UMR – to present it to the governor. The petition alleged that falsehoods and lies were being spread under cover of freedom of the press. The three parliamentarians were requested to demand “... an immediate and thorough investigation into the matter, with a view to having these charges either substantiated and publically proved or publically withdrawn or revoked”. Although the *Times of Natal* welcomed the expression of loyalty in the petition, it stood firm and reported that there was more to the truth than any enquiry would reveal.¹⁰⁰ In response, the newspaper upped the ante by reporting that the general feeling was that the majority of Afrikaners in Natal would join the Transvaal forces if they could do so without losing their farms and livestock.¹⁰¹

When nothing came of their petition, the politically well-organised Umvoti Afrikaners held a public meeting to remonstrate with the Natal government for allowing the *Times of Natal* to insult them in this unseemly manner. They also complained that they were distrusted by the “Natal Jingo Ministry” and if the government did not act, there would be no support for their cause.¹⁰² These statements must have touched a raw nerve and the Umvoti Afrikaners were given what they wanted – a public enquiry into their loyalty. Under Circular No. 51 of 1899, Attorney-General Bale instructed the Umvoti magistrate, HC Koch, to enquire into the matter. Attempts by Koch, himself an Afrikaner, to gain such information were met by evasive answers. Nevertheless, he concluded that the Umvoti Afrikaners were not disloyal; they felt with some justification, that they had been subjected to grave injustice.¹⁰³ The report by Koch thus confirmed the earlier findings as expressed in the official report¹⁰⁴ and must have satisfied the Umvoti Afrikaners on some level that the *Times of Natal* was indeed overzealous in its reportage. On the other hand, for the Natal authorities, it was a win-win situation. Had the report by Koch revealed high levels of disloyalty they could have acted against the culprits; since it did not, they were seen as caring enough about their Afrikaner subjects as to allow a public enquiry.

100 *Times of Natal*, 1 September 1899; *Natal Witness*, 1 September 1899.

101 *Times of Natal*, 11 September 1899.

102 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Report, HC Koch (Magistrate, Umvoti), 19 September 1899.

103 PAR, MJPW, Vol. 69: Minute paper, H Bale (Attorney-General) / to HC Koch (Magistrate, Umvoti), 26 September 1899; PAR, AGO, Vol. I/7/39: Letter, HC Koch (Magistrate, Umvoti) / H Bale (Attorney-General), 28 September 1899.

104 VS Harris, “The reluctant rebels...” p. 4.

Intercepting Natal Afrikaner mail

Despite their official intelligence gathering efforts, the intelligence volunteered by African and English civilians and the vigilance of the newspapers, the Natal authorities must have felt that they did not yet have the full picture on the loyalty (or otherwise) of the Natal Afrikaners. Early in October 1899, the final act of espionage against Natal Afrikaners commenced. Although Martial Law had not yet been proclaimed, all letters to and from Natal Afrikaners were illegally intercepted and opened so that in the words of the governor, the government was in a position to "... thwart and counteract the work of spies in Natal." To Chamberlain he wrote "... these documents go to bear out the theory of the existence of a widespread and deep rooted Dutch conspiracy throughout South Africa for the subversion of British rule."¹⁰⁵ If the contents of the letters he forwarded to Chamberlain were any indication of the mood of his Afrikaner subjects, the governor had clearly over-reacted. Phrases such as "if we faithfully trust in the Lord ... who will defeat us?"; "the plan of the Boers here [Mooi River] is to join the Transvaal if they win"; "may God grant that you come off best, but I do not believe that it can be that the Afrikaner must lose"; and "have a Transvaal flag in readiness to be hoisted when the Boers arrive", can hardly be described as evidence of a "conspiracy" and were surely an indication of emotive and heartfelt sympathy and support for the republican cause. What the letters did give away was names of possible rebels such as Solomon M. who had joined the Harrismith Commando.¹⁰⁶ Probably more accurate was the view of WCH George of the Natal Police, who headed the postal investigation and who noted: "Practically the whole of the Dutch correspondence which we have gone through and numbering many thousands of letters is couched in the most sympathetic terms, calling on the almighty to lead the Afrikaner armies to victory."¹⁰⁷

In collating the mass of evidence that emerged from all its sources of intelligence the Natal authorities could but come to a single conclusion – active disloyalty was not rampant amongst Natal Afrikaners in the months building up to the outbreak of war. Only 26 out of an estimated population of 5 000 were identified by the Natal Police as having left Natal for the

105 PRO, CO, Vol. 179/208: Letter, W Hely-Hutchinson (Governor) / J Chamberlain (Secretary of State for the Colonies), 6 November 1899.

106 PRO, CO, Vol. 179/208: Letters, JA van der Westhuyzen / CJ van der Westhuyzen, 3 October 1899; EJ Boshoff / AA Boshoff, 6 October 1899; JS Maritz / CF de Jager, 8 October 1899; SHF de Jager / C de Jager, 11 October 1899; TA Perold / JF Keytell, 11 October 1899.

107 PRO, CO, Vol. 179/208: Letter, WCH George / AH Hime (Prime Minister), 6 November 1899.

republics. Of these, seventeen were from Proviso B – an isolated area which had only become part of Natal in 1886.¹⁰⁸ Not all of these necessarily left with military intentions, because the threat of war had merely convinced some Natal Afrikaners to depart on their annual seasonal migration to the summer pastures in the republics earlier than usual. Realistically, the Natal Police could not be expected to keep track of all the Natal Afrikaners who had left for the republics. A case in point was Aveling of Newcastle, who departed for the OFS on 13 September 1899 to join the reserve artillerists.¹⁰⁹ In all likelihood such individuals were not numerous enough to seriously inflate the numbers provided by the police or to alter the fact that Natal Afrikaner disloyalty was an emotional reaction, unlikely to be expressed in active support.

Managing the Natal Afrikaners as war clouds gathered

With the information on Natal Afrikaners pointing to the fact that the vast majority wanted to remain neutral while reserving the right to sympathise strongly with the republics, the Natal authorities (who tended towards viewing this as tantamount to disloyalty) had to decide on how to use this to manage its Afrikaner subjects.

At no stage did the Natal government, despite evidence to this effect, charge Natal Afrikaners for using treasonable language. Such charges were possible in terms of Act 22 of 1896, section 34.¹¹⁰ According to the act, “Mere expression of hatred or contempt of the sovereign authority may usually be allowed to pass without notice, though there may be circumstances in which language becomes dangerous to the public safety, and should be punished.” The problem, as encapsulated in the addendum to the act was: “Guilt will depend on the precise words used and the time when, and circumstances under which they were used.”¹¹¹ This stipulation was so vague and indeterminate that to achieve a conviction was very difficult.

Thus, when AAJ Nel greeted HV Killoch jovially with the words “Good day, rooinek”, to which Killoch replied “Good day greybelly”,¹¹² the incident

108 PRO, CO, Vol. 179/205: Letter W Hely-Hutchinson (Governor) / J Chamberlain (Secretary of State for the Colonies), 6 October 1899.

109 OE Prozesky, private collection, Diary of JJA Prozesky: Diary entry, 16 September 1899, p. 17.

110 PAR, AGO, Vol. I/7/39: Minute paper, treasonable language used by AAJ Nel at Kranskop, 29 October 1899.

111 PAR, AGO, Vol. I/7/39: Letter, AH Hime (Prime Minister) / H Bale (Attorney-General), 30 August 1899.

112 Greybelly – Vaalpens in Afrikaans - was a common nickname for Transvalers at the time.

snowballed until the prime minister became involved. Reacting to Kinloch's greeting, Nel retorted that the Transvalers would shoot the "rooineks until their entrails fly". Killoch took this as a private joke.¹¹³ The local magistrate likewise paid little attention to the incident because he knew that Nel, who was locally known as "Mal Theuns" (mad Theuns), was a rabid hater of the British.¹¹⁴ Others disagreed and felt that Nel was perfectly sane although somewhat eccentric, and should take responsibility for his repeated verbal attacks. As a result, Prime Minister Hime seriously considered charging him for using treasonable language.¹¹⁵ The problem was that neither the Kranskop magistrate nor the clerk of the court was prepared to testify to the slanderous nature of Nel's statements, because their Dutch was too poor.¹¹⁶

What bothered Natal Afrikaners was that their English counterparts were allowed to voice their opinions and to call the Natal Afrikaners and indeed the republics unflattering names, but they were not given the same leeway.¹¹⁷ The advice the sole Dutch newspaper in Natal, *De Natal Afrikaner*, offered to its readers in this regard was both sound and simple – do not, under the prevailing circumstances, discuss any issues related to the tension between Britain and the republics. Accept the fact that the Hime government will readily believe anything negative about the Afrikaner.¹¹⁸ Accordingly, when Casper Labuschagne, a Natal Afrikaner politician, voiced his opinion that the Natal government viewed all Natal Afrikaners with suspicion,¹¹⁹ Hime's reaction certainly gave credence to the *Natal Afrikaner's* advice. While the prime minister hastened to add that the Natal government made no distinction between Afrikaners and English, and that they had always been treated alike, he concluded with a veiled threat – that this would remain the status quo "... as long as Dutch Colonists remain loyal to the British Crown."¹²⁰ Governor Hely-Hutchinson then made his contribution to the issue by saying that Natal Afrikaner loyalty would last only as long as the British army did not suffer serious reverses.¹²¹

113 PAR, AGO, Vol. 1/7/39: Report, HW Boast (Kranskop, Magistrate), 5 October 1899.

114 PAR, AGO, Vol. 1/7/39: Deposition, J Zuma / Magistrate, Umvoti, 12 October 1899.

115 PAR, AGO, Vol. 1/7/39: Minute paper, treasonable language used by AAJ Nel at Kranskop, 29 October 1899.

116 PAR, AGO, Vol. 1/7/39: Minute paper, treasonable language used by AAJ Nel at Kranskop, 29 September 1899.

117 *De Natal Afrikaner*, 8 September 1899; *Natal Witness*, 7 September 1899; *Natal Witness*, 3 October 1899.

118 *De Natal Afrikaner*, 19 September 1899.

119 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Report, RH Addison (Magistrate, Estcourt) 25 August 1899.

120 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2582: Letter, AH Hime (Prime Minister) / CJ Labuschagne, 2 October 1899.

121 PRO, CO, Vol. 179/206: Letter, W Hely-Hutchinson (Governor) / J Chamberlain (Secretary of State for the Colonies), 15 September 1899.

Another Natal Afrikaner grievance did receive equally short shrift. Throughout the “Dutch” districts, fears were expressed that in the event of war Afrikaners’ livestock would be raided and their property looted and destroyed by Africans who would use the conflict as a smokescreen to settle tribal differences.¹²² These fears were first brought to the attention of the Natal authorities by Major-General William Penn-Symons, the officer commanding of the British forces in Natal,¹²³ and were even being echoed by the *Times of Natal*¹²⁴ and the *Natal Witness*.¹²⁵ Natal Afrikaners felt that they needed the support and protection of their government in this regard.

In his response, Prime Minister Hime instructed Natal Africans to “remain within their own borders, as the war will be a white man’s war ...”¹²⁶ This instruction did not by any means satisfy all Natal Afrikaners. In Weenen,¹²⁷ Dundee¹²⁸ and Upper Tugela,¹²⁹ the local Afrikaners applied to their respective magistrates for permission to congregate in laagers for protection against a possible African uprising. None of these magistrates took the Natal Afrikaners’ fears seriously and concluded that the secondary motive behind the requests was to separate themselves from English-speaking Natalians so that they could avoid government structures if there was a republican invasion. In other words, the local authorities saw the request as yet another ploy on the Natal Afrikaners’ agenda of disloyalty – and dealt with it accordingly. At least one Natal Afrikaner saw this reaction as part of a bigger Natal government plan – Natal Afrikaners were not allowed to purchase rifles readily, which in turn left them unarmed and under dire threat of an African revolt.¹³⁰

With such suspicions and mistrust dominating the thinking of the Natal authorities, the question needs to be asked: What direct advice or guidance on how to act in the build-up to war did Natal Afrikaners received from their government? The answer is that no clear instructions were initially issued by the Natal government. This meant that individual magistrates, or individual Natal Afrikaners, had to decide for themselves on what actions would be appropriate. The Dundee magistrate, for example, advised the local trekboers

122 PAR, SNA, Vol. I/4/6: Report, P Hugo (Magistrate, Dundee) / FR Moor (Secretary of Native Affairs), 27

September 1899; PAR, CSO, Vol. 2581: Report, TR Maxwell (Magistrate, Melmoth), 24 September 1899.

123 PRO, CO, Vol. 179/206: Memo, W Penn-Symons (Major-General) / Chief of Staff, Cape Town, 31 July 1899.

124 *Times of Natal*, 28 August 1899.

125 *Natal Witness*, 18 September 1899.

126 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2580: Letter, AH Hime (Prime Minister) / Magistrate, 9 September 1899.

127 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2582: Report, MRN Matthews (Magistrate, Weenen), 6 October 1899.

128 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2581: Report, GW Adamson (Magistrate, Umsinga), 3 October 1899.

129 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, WG Wheelwright (Magistrate, Upper Tugela), 4 September 1899.

130 *De Natal Afrikaner*, 8 September 1899.

not to begin their seasonal migration.¹³¹ In contrast, when asked directly, the Natal government was vague on how Afrikaners should behave. A case in point is the question posed by HW Boers, the postal contractor for Upper Tugela, who wanted to know what steps were being taken to protect the mail in the event of war. The response was simple yet lacked clarity – if attacked Natal would be defended with the full force of the British Empire; compensation would be exacted for any injury or loss to the Natal Colony or to its loyal subjects.¹³² In the process nothing was revealed in terms of how Natalians in general, and Afrikaners specifically, were expected to behave or what support their government would provide.

The first official guidance from the Natal government to its people, Proclamation No. 98 of 1899, was only issued on 29 September 1899 – less than two weeks before the war began. It warned Natal inhabitants, without providing any detail, against disloyalty and treason. Its gist was punitive rather than protective and pointed out that the Natal government could confiscate the property of rebels.¹³³ In their reaction, a member of the public¹³⁴ and sectors of the press,¹³⁵ echoed the idea that the property of those guilty of treasonable offences be confiscated. In both cases the “enemy within” who should suffer this fate was identified in advance – the Natal Afrikaners were the culprits. Doubt was however cast on the validity of the proclamation by the principal under-Secretary, C Bird, who declared: “Under the present circumstances the government has no power to confiscate property belonging to anyone whether in Natal or otherwise.”¹³⁶ The contents of the proclamation issued were thus not only legally questionable but were extremely late in coming and offered very little to Natal Afrikaners specifically.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the day before war broke out a letter to the *Times of Natal*, penned by “An Exile”, complained, “... we hear nothing from the British Government as to the action they intend taking with the disloyal Dutch ... more plain statement of facts by our government would be appreciated by British subjects, and I feel sure you will agree with me that the

131 PAR, CSO, Vol. 2581: Report, P Hugo (Magistrate, Dundee), 4 October 1899; PAR, Principal Veterinary Surgeon (PVS) Vol. 3: Letter, DC Uys / Principal Veterinary Surgeon, 19 August 1899; PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, GW Adamson (Magistrate, Umsinga), 3 September 1899; PAR, CSO, Vol. 2579: Report, WG Wheelwright (Magistrate, Upper Tugela), 4 September 1899.

132 PAR, Postmaster General's Office (PMG), Vol. 80: Enquiry, HW Boers, c. 1899.

133 *De Natal Afrikaner*, 3 October 1899; PAR, Natal Colonial Publications (NCP), Vol. 6/1/1/52: *Natal Government Gazette*, 29 September 1899; *Natal Witness*, 30 September 1899.

134 PAR, CSO, Vol. 1628: Letter, PD Simmons / C Bird (Principal under-Secretary), 6 October 1899.

135 *Times of Natal*, 12 October 1899.

136 PAR, CSO, Vol. 1628: Letter, C Bird (Principal under-Secretary) / PD Simmons, 6 October 1899.

time has come for plain speaking on this and other matters of like nature.”¹³⁷

When war did indeed break out on 11 October 1899, the Natal authorities seemed singularly unprepared in terms of managing their Afrikaner subjects. While viewing them collectively as being disloyal in thought and speech, it appears that no large-scale rebellious or mutinous activities were actually expected. The next proclamation was only issued on 15 October 1899, by which stage the republics had already advanced deep into Natal and specifically into the so-called “Dutch” districts of the Natal Colony to the north of the Tugela River.¹³⁸

In the light of the above, it is fair to argue that the large volumes of information so meticulously gathered on Natal Afrikaners in the build-up to the war were not effectively used by the Natal authorities to manage their Afrikaans-speaking subjects. The dilemma for the Natal authorities was that the information was insufficient to lay charges against the Afrikaners but enough to cast suspicion on them as the “disloyal enemy” within. Consequently, all their concerns, including fear of an African uprising or unhappiness on how they were being categorised by the Natal government, were dealt with from this premise. The result of such reactionary administrative decisions was that in the pre-war period, it did little for Natalians in general and Natal Afrikaners in particular.

Conclusion

The overarching loyalty of Natal Afrikaners in the build-up to the Anglo-Boer War was to fellow Afrikaners and the republics rather than the Natal Colony and the British Empire. In the process, the fate and well-being of the republics became of close concern to Natal Afrikaners who despite the detrimental implications of their overt sympathies, maintained their loyalty to what they felt was “ours”.¹³⁹ However, Natal Afrikaners by and large did not exhibit their emotional ties in direct action on behalf of the republics. Indeed, Afrikaans-speaking residents also displayed loyalty to the colony of Natal – the geopolitical region to which they were legally bound. But this

¹³⁷ *Times of Natal*, 12 October 1899. August Prozesky mentions in his diary, p. 22, that a proclamation by the governor around 5 October 1899 stated that any British subject who assisted the Boers would be punished by death and his property confiscated. No evidence to support this statement could be found.

¹³⁸ PAR, NCP, Vol. 6/1/1/52: Proclamation No. 106 issued by Governor W Hely-Hutchinson, 15 October 1899; *Natal Witness*, 16 October 1899; *Times of Natal*, 16 October 1899.

¹³⁹ J Kleinig, “Loyalty”, pp. 1–19.

loyalty was trumped by their deep-seated feelings towards their kith and kin in the Transvaal and the OFS and the republican cause.

This was not how the Natal authorities interpreted the bulk of information gathered by official and unofficial means. They showed little appreciation of the reality that Natal Afrikaners were experiencing a clash of loyalties with a sympathetic (yet unassertive) loyalty to the republics superseding their loyalty to the Empire and the colony. As far as the authorities were concerned the Afrikaners were not offering the Natal government the undivided loyalty it sought. In official eyes they were acting suspiciously by associating with the republics and sympathising with their cause; they seemed to be purchasing far too many rifles and they refused to abide by the new rifle association rules that demanded an oath of allegiance to the crown. Furthermore they were heard to speak disparagingly of the British and wrote letters in support of the republican ideals. The government decided they were collectively disloyal and had to be managed accordingly. Restrictions were placed on their rights to purchase rifles; they were hounded out of the armed forces; and steps were taken to spy on them as if they were the enemy within. Finally, on the eve of the war, in a disloyal act of its own, the Natal government deserted its Afrikaner subjects by providing neither support nor adequate guidance on how they should act during the hostilities.