

Explanations for the 1914 Rebellion – a “midsummer madness” and “vague malaise”?

Grundlingh, Albert & Swart, Sandra. 2009. **Radelose rebellie?**

Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis. 149 p. Prys: R150,00.

ISBN: 978-1-86919-308-9.

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In their book, *Radelose Rebellie* published in 2009, Albert Grundlingh and Sandra Swart promise to reinterpret the 1914 Rebellion, relying on a closer examination of the economic and socio-political context at work in galvanising violent protest. Grundlingh and Swart propose to focus especially on class, gender and race, a desire which can only be applauded. At bottom we are looking for those incentives which the participants judged worth fighting and dying for.

Grundlingh and Swart consider the Rebellion to be one of the three most significant events in Afrikaner history, including the Great Trek and the Anglo-Boer War. This is a doubtful hypothesis at the crucial level of poverty and “poor whiteism”. The urbanisation process rolled on without government/ruling class intervention despite the graphic lessons of the Rebellion. Substantive efforts to assist poverty-stricken Afrikaners only occurred with the emergence of the Pact government, but more especially during the Great Depression.

What does the failure of substantive efforts at human salvage reveal about the Botha/Smuts government? Did this regime recognise the burgeoning dangers of “achteruitgang” – what Malan later refers to as the “second Great Trek” to the cities? Whilst the Rebellion certainly created a discontented group of voters, it is also obvious that continuing poverty and the apparent lack of sympathy on the part of the Botha/Smuts government were also important factors in producing Boer discontent.

The failure to adequately examine the government position on the rebellion points to what, in my opinion, is the cardinal failure of this work, namely the failure to reveal the most important incentives

behind the Rebellion. We are left with the overwhelming impression that the Rebellion was provoked by a few old and discontented ruling class politicians and a large number of *bywoner* rogues and hooligans who were coerced into going on the rampage. This was also the government's version of events.

Whilst the “poor white problem”, desire for political freedom, hatred of the British, mobilisation efforts of “Siener” van Rensburg, squabbles within the Afrikaner ruling class, all appear necessary dimensions of the Rebellion, yet we are left with the overwhelming impression that something is missing; that these factors are insufficient in and of themselves for men to fight and die for them.

Much more is needed on the motivations of the rebel leaders, and unfortunately Grundlingh and Swart do not venture very far in this direction. Was the Rebellion merely an extension of the Anglo-Boer War by other means? Was the Rebellion primarily an outpouring of Free State resistance to the supposedly anglicised Botha/Smuts government? In the mixture of incentives, how important was the call to war? Grundlingh and Swart appear to argue that the call to freedom was not immediately employed, but developed later as a means of legitimising the Rebellion (p. 55). What about the continued influence of the “Age of the Generals”? We know that *bywoners* followed De Wet, and that De le Rey was mobilising “his people” in the Western Transvaal. There is also evidence that Botha and Smuts mobilised ex-Boer War combatants from Standerton, and what was formerly “the New Republic”, now part of Natal.

Then there is the military aspect of the Rebellion and the efforts of Beyers and Kemp to foment rebellion within the armed forces. Were these men Afrikaner patriots or merely pro-Germans determined to oppose South Africa's entering the war? How attractive was the pro-German option for the majority of the Boers? Were these pro-German leaders merely engaged in a struggle for power and promotion in the army which both had been denied in various ways, or were their efforts dictated solely by a hatred of Britain as has been argued. Then there is the belief that many “hensoppers” and “joiners” who had been excluded from post-war society to the extent of having to form their own churches, now attempted to reintegrate themselves by joining the Rebellion. How many of this class were present in the Rebellion; show us the evidence for the reintegrative efforts of these *verraaiers* (traitors)?

The important relationship of the Boer, gun and horse is mentioned by Grundlingh and Swart, but for some strange reason, the Bible is

not included. The failure to address religious motivations behind the Rebellion must be considered a fatal error. The picture of the five *dominees* who participated in the Rebellion is predominantly placed in the book, yet the role of religion is largely ignored. Remembering the fundamentalist exegesis during the 1950s to the 1980s, and the important role “dominees” have always played in keeping Nationalist parties alive, one can only shudder with repugnance at the church’s role in goading the Boers into rebellion.

The first chapter of this book, which is based largely upon the work of John Bottomley, is the strength of the work. This work, however, still fails to satisfactorily discuss the importance of prevailing social conditions and to integrate events within their societal ambit. For instance, the important role of women in the Rebellion was not merely a random event. With the migration of *bywoners* from the Free State as a result of wealthy farmers moving up from the Cape, and the very specific agricultural benefits which followed the coming of the railways, benefitting some to the detriment of others, a sea of destitution arose and was bound to have an effect on the role of women in this patriarchal society. One can readily imagine that in a period of abject and increasing poverty, women would assume an ever increasing burden of providing for their households. Prostitution was merely one important way in which women sought to keep their families alive.

There is also the significance of the “swart gevaar” – the threat posed by the black population as an incentive to rebel. The twentieth century saw the Boer population threatened by blacks on a broad front. One has only to think of the creation of the ANC in 1912 and of the extreme brutality of the 1913 Land Act to grasp this. In the rural areas, blacks were replacing *bywoners*, as a cheaper and more pliable workforce. In the urban areas black workers were undercutting their Boer counterparts when it came to labouring/unskilled jobs. Numerous Boer families were completely integrated into multiracial slums where they posed a serious threat to Boer ethnicity. This future was apparent to all – and one must ask to what extent the fear of the *swart gevaar* played a role in the mobilisation of the most threatened sectors of the *volk*.

Finally, the other important question the reader would like answered is what exactly the Rebellion achieved. It is suggested in the book that the Rebellion opened the door to feminism in South Africa. The long walk of women in Pretoria must be recognised as an important factor in provoking feminine mobilisation. However, the success of the organisations set up at this time such as the Reddingsdaadbond,

which were to transform themselves into Sanlam and Santam and become crucial in the Nationalist future, deserve elucidation. What about the setting up of the Broederbond at that time. We must ask whether the Rebellion was to play any role in determining the future leadership of the nation.

This book shows little evidence of primary research except in the first chapter which is dependent upon the work of earlier researchers. The extrapolated chapters dealing with “Siener” and masculinity fit poorly with the rest of the book and imply that they were earlier papers integrated in a haphazard fashion merely in order to fluff out the book. The lacunae in this work show that discourse on the Rebellion is still wide-open to research – “aluta continua”.