

Biography of Jan Christian Smuts (1870-1950)

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Jan Christian Smuts was probably one of the most eminent South Africans ever alive.



Although some brand him as a forerunner of apartheid, this would not do justice to his many achievements for South Africa, in particular his understanding, that racial problems have to be addressed, although this only came late in his life. He had so many talents; he was not only an outstanding scholar and statesman, but a highly successful military commander and - last but not least - one of the driving forces behind the creation of the United Nations. A fine example of Smut's conciliatory character is given by the fact that he was personally on a friendly level with most of his political and wartime opponents, like Mahatma Gandhi,

General von Lettow Vorbeck and even his fiercest opponent in Parliament, Hertzog.

Humble beginnings

Jan Christian Smuts was born on 24 May 1870, in the house "Bovenplaats" on the farm Ongegend near Riebeeck West in the British Cape Colony. He had Dutch-German roots, as his paternal ancestor, Michiel Cornelis Smuts had emigrated around 1692 from Middelburg, Holland and his maternal ancestor, Johann Christiaan Davel from Bautzen, Germany in 1734.

Jan started school only at the age of 12, but he left it top of his class five years later. In 1886, he attended Victoria College at Stellenbosch, where he met Isie Krige, who was later to become his wife. He then proceeded to study law at Christ's College, Cambridge, from where he graduated with highest honours. In 1895, he returned to South Africa where he was admitted to the Cape Colony bar. Although English-trained, he got disenchanted with them when the news broke about the abortive Jameson Raid against the Transvaal on 29 December 1895. As a result, Jan Smuts moved to Johannesburg in January 1897, where set up offices in Commissioner Street. On 30 April, 1897, he married Isie Krige. In June 1898, Smuts was appointed State Attorney of the Transvaal Republic and the young family moved to Sunnyside, Pretoria.

The Boer War

After the start of the Boer War and the fall of Pretoria in June 1900, Smuts joined General Louis Botha and took part in the Battle of Donkerhoek. The Boers regrouped after Donkerhoek. General Botha moved east and General De la Rey, with Smuts as his assistant, west. In December 1900, Smuts, who had in the meantime learnt much about military tactics from De la Rey, took control of the south-western Transvaal and led successful campaigns near Potchefstroom. On August 1, 1901 he set out with 340 Transvaalers to invade the Cape Colony. They crossed the Orange River near Zastron and by early October they were within 80km of Port Elizabeth. They then turned west, fighting numerous encounters with the British. By beginning of 1902, he was operating in the Western Cape. In April 1902 - Smuts' troops had just taken the towns of Springbok and Concordia and were surrounding O'Kiep - he received an urgent message to take part in a meeting between the English and the Boers in Vereeniging. He travelled by troopship to Cape Town and by train to the Transvaal, where a peace treaty was negotiated. The first draft was made on May 19 and the final version of the Treaty of Vereeniging was signed on May 31, 1902. In the meantime, Smuts' wife Isie had fallen seriously ill. She had to undergo surgery in June 1902, but by middle of August, she had recovered sufficiently to travel back to Pretoria. Smuts had to return to the Cape Colony to supervise the disbanding of his commando, before resuming his legal practice in Pretoria.

The Union of South Africa

Smuts could resume his political career soon after the war. In January 1903, the British High Commissioner Milner asked the Generals Botha, De la Rey and Smuts to serve on the new legislative council. The three held a meeting of the Afrikaner people to discuss the offer, but it was turned down.

The Smuts family was growing rapidly: Santa was born in 1903, Cato in 1904.

In 1905, Louis Botha and Jan Smuts launched the “Het Volk” party in Pretoria, which successfully obstructed the Lyttelton constitution. At the end of 1905 Smuts travelled to Britain in order to ask the Liberals, who were set to win the elections, for support of the Afrikaner case. The Liberals did win and Smuts managed to win over the new Prime Minister, Campbell-Bannerman, who was already sympathetic to the idea of self-government of the Boers. On February 8, 1906, Campbell-Bannerman persuaded the cabinet to grant the Boers self-government and two days later, Smuts returned home. In July 1906, his son Japie was born. In February 1907, Het Volk won the Transvaal elections. Louis Botha became Prime Minister and Smuts Colonial Secretary and Minister of Education. Smuts was soon accused to be pro-British, as he made English the medium of instruction above Standard IV. Yet apart from practical reasons, he was trying to show the Boer’s willingness of conciliation towards the English. In 1907 a clash with the Indians about the Transvaal’s Immigration restriction act started. Smuts negotiated with Mahatma Gandhi well into 1908, but the agreement they reached was unclear and led to further problems.

In July 1908, Isie gave birth to another baby, Sylma.

Smuts purchased the farm Doornkloof near Irene, some 20 km from Pretoria, in 1908. As there were no proper buildings, he bought an officer’s mess made of corrugated iron and timber, which had stood at Kitchener’s headquarters in Middelburg. It was disassembled, transported to Pretoria and re-erected. He never replaced it with a more elaborate building.

The same year, the idea of a union of South Africa was proposed. Smuts drew up a draft constitution, advocating a unitary rather than a federal form of government. English and Dutch were going to hold equal status. Although Smuts was at this point still against franchise rights of the blacks, he agreed to maintain those already existing in the Cape. In September 1909, the draft South Africa Bill was passed by the British Houses of Parliament and in 1910 the Union of South Africa came into being. Louis Botha was appointed Prime Minister and Smuts minister of the interior, mines and defence. In 1911, the South African Party, which was standing for conciliation between English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, was constituted., Smuts exchanged his portfolios of Mines and Interior against the portfolio of finance in 1912. Although he was said to work very hard, he found time to write a philosophical manuscript “An Inquiry into the Whole”. It was only to be completed in 1926, and published under the title of “Holism and Evolution”. Isie gave birth to a son, Jannie. Another confrontation with Gandhi occurred in 1913 about the policy of the South African Party towards the Indians. When (white) socialist riots erupted in Johannesburg, Smuts drove at considerable risk to Johannesburg and negotiated an agreement with the demonstrators. But when another strike was announced by the end of 1913, Smuts called in 10000 troops and arrested the leaders. In 1914, Smuts met Gandhi to negotiate the Indian’s grievances and they reached a settlement.

From 1912 to 1919 Smuts made no comment in Parliament on “Native Policy” but in a speech in London he favoured separate institutions, which was well received at the time.

World War I

In 1914, the first World War broke out and South Africa was automatically at war with Germany. When the British government asked South Africa to seize German South West Africa and destroy the powerful wireless transmitters there, Botha and Smuts gladly accepted. They met bitter opposition by a staunch Afrikaans minority who preferred to side with the Germans. The rebellion was set back when Smuts friend De la Rey, who was partaking in the rebellion, was accidentally killed in a police roadblock. Smuts consequently named his youngest daughter, who was born in November 1914, Louis Annie de la Rey. Eventually, 11400 men rose up in rebellion but were defeated at Mushroom Valley. But in the course of it, Smuts and Botha were blamed for the death sentence of one Jopie Fourie, who had defected from the Active Citizens Force. This led to a strengthening of the National Party. In February 1915, the campaign to seize German West Africa started. In March 1915, Smuts commandeered the South African forces in the South, conquering Lüderitz within three weeks. In November, he was asked by the British government to take command of the British troops in East Africa. Smuts arrived in Mombasa in February 1916. Although his opponent, General von Lettow Vorbeck, was excellently equipped Smuts took the Germans by surprise at the foot of the Kilimanjaro and drove them into the Usumbara Mountains. By September 1916, two-thirds of Tanganyika had been conquered, but the men had to endure incredible hardships, were suffering from tropical diseases and even Smuts picked up Malaria. When the Imperial War Conference took place in London in 1917, Smuts was appointed to represent South Africa. Smuts was not only successful to protect the Union's sovereignty, he made himself so indispensable that he was asked by Lloyd George to join the British War Cabinet. Smuts was appointed chairman of the committee which established the Air Ministry and thus became one of the founders of the Royal Air Force. Furthermore, he headed the War Priorities Committee, which expedited production and supply of weapons efficiently. In 1918, he travelled to France, Palestine and Egypt. When he met Dr. Chaim Weizmann, they immediately liked each other and became life-long friends. Smuts was nicknamed, because of his many talents, as the "Handyman of the Empire". When Germany was defeated, Smuts was asked to give his legal opinion on the matter of the reparations. He was devastated learning about their total amount and did everything in his power to have them reduced.

Smuts as Prime Minister

In 1919, Louis Botha died and Smuts became prime minister. Hertzog and the Nationalists kept pointing out Smuts' "alienation" from his people and "betrayal" of their quest of independence, although in fact he had successfully defended South Africa's sovereignty at the 1917 Imperial Conference and the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. In the 1920 elections, the South African Party lost its majority. Through the support of the Unionists and the Independents, Smuts was able to govern, but only with a four-votes majority in parliament. In 1921 he announced new elections and gained a large majority over the Nationalists, though at the expense of his coalition partners. Concerning South Africa's Status with Britain, Smuts proposed that the term "Empire" should be replaced with "Commonwealth of Nations" in which all states were free and equal. It was only to be effected in 1926. Smuts was even asked to intervene and mediate in the "Irish Question". He managed to negotiate a settlement, which resulted in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1921. The same year, the world economic crisis affected the gold mines badly and when they threatened to lay off 2000 white staff, 20000 white miners went on strike. The white unionists demanded that the "status quo agreement" which retained a colour bar in mine employment, would not be abolished. Although Smuts tried to negotiate a settlement, neither of the parties was ready to give in. The strikers marched with banners reading "Workers of the world fight and unite for a white South Africa". Smuts declared martial law on March 10. After fierce street fighting and

bombardment by the air force, the red flag was lowered and the strike leaders committed suicide. How far Hertzog's involvement in the riots went, was never discovered. The same year an overeager commissioner, Gys Hofmeyr, waged a war - over a dog tax - against the tribe of the Bondelswarts in South West Africa. Ironically, although they had no interest in the black cause, the Nationalists put the blame on Smuts. Smuts could have exempted himself easily, but he stood by Hofmeyr. Smuts was disappointed when in October 1922, the whites of Rhodesia decided not to be incorporated into South Africa. To make matters worse, the 1924 elections were a defeat and Hertzog triumphed.

The Nationalist Government

The defeat gave him the time needed to complete his work "Holism and Evolution". His income dropped and as he had never had ambitions to become rich himself, "he was constantly in the red", but he still had some property that he had bought when he was practising as a lawyer and thus was able to allow all his children to have an excellent education. He spent most of his time botanising and reading. In 1925 he became president of the South African Association for the Advancement of Science. When Hertzog made his proposals for segregation, Smuts, who so far was in favour of parallel institutions, played for time. Although he was not in a position to oppose Hertzog openly, he made quite clear that he was not able to follow this path. In the 1929 "black peril" elections, the National Party exploited the racial question and claimed, that Smuts stood for equality of the races. The Nationalists won the elections again. Smuts went on Safari to the Zimbabwe ruins. He then went lecturing at Universities in England, Scotland, the USA and Canada. In 1930 the Royal College of Science elected Smuts a Fellow and president in its centenary year. When the Parliament intended to pass a Quota Bill, intended at curbing the influx of Jewish and Central European immigrants, Smuts became very upset at his party's indifferent position and rallied them up to oppose it in the third reading. In 1931, Gandhi and the British government asked Smuts to mediate over the issue of India. By 1932, pressure mounted on Smuts to form a coalition government with the Nationalists. He eventually agreed and Hertzog announced it on 28 February 1933. Smuts became deputy prime minister and held the portfolio of justice. By August 1933, fusion plans of the South African Party and the Nationalist Party were under way. In December 1934 the parties merged, to form the United Party - "a marriage of convenience, not a union of hearts". In February 1936, after 10 years of relentless battle against Hertzog's native legislation, Smuts agreed to the infamous Native Bill No. 2, for the sake of the political survival of the alliance and because he was of the opinion that he could not wring more from Hertzog. He said "...I have died in the last ditch...".

South Africa experienced a period of economic prosperity between 1933 and 1939. Smuts had kept in contact with Europe, though, and followed Hitler's ascent with increasing misgivings.

Prime Minister again

When Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, Hertzog insisted on neutrality, while Smuts asked the cabinet to declare war on Germany. Smuts won by a majority of 7 against 6 votes. In an unprecedented incident in South African history, Smuts, acting as a deputy prime minister, opposed the Prime Minister Hertzog openly in Parliament. Smuts won the vote comfortably. Hertzog resigned and Smuts was once again Prime Minister of South Africa. He immediately started to enact the legislation needed to build up South Africa's strength, whereby his authoritative and decisive style of leadership was certainly no disadvantage. Hertzog joined D.F. Malan in the "Herenigde Nasionale Volksparty" and demanded that a separate peace with Germany be made. Smuts' seventieth birthday was celebrated publicly by Smuts and his family in Pietersburg. In 1940, the first South African soldiers left for East Africa. By 1941, South African soldiers marched into Addis Abbeba, re-installing the emperor Haile Selassie.,

The German-friendly Ossewa-Brandwag was founded in the Oranje Vrystaat and the Herenigde Nasionale Volksparty took such a right turn, that even Hertzog and Havenga, both no liberals, walked out.

World War II

In 1941, King George VI bestowed the rank of Field Marshal on Smuts. South African troops were sent to North Africa, defending Gazala and Tobruk. In June 1942, Gen. Klopper was besieged in Tobruk and had to surrender with 25000 men, 10722 of them South Africans. In August 1942, Smuts was requested to meet Churchill in Cairo, where they decided on a new war strategy. When Rommel attacked the South African troops near El Alamein, the line held. Shortly afterwards, Churchill sent urgent messages to Smuts asking him to join him in the War Cabinet in London. Smuts was flown in from Cairo in Churchill's special aircraft. In November, the Battle of El Alamein had been decisively won. The fact, that the war was starting to turn against the Germans, gave Smuts political reassurance at home. The 1943 elections were thus a major triumph for the United Party.

Since April 1943, South African troops had been fighting in Italy. Smuts went officially to London to attend a meeting of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers, spent a weekend with the Royal Family at Windsor Castle and held his "explosive speech" to the Empire Parliamentary Association, warning from the growing power of Russia. On his return flight, he stopped in Cairo, where he met President Roosevelt. Stalin refused to accept Smuts' proposal of an advance South to North and insisted on a two-pronged advance, giving him more freedom in eastern Europe. Smuts warned that Russia would divide Europe. When D-Day started, Churchill asked Smuts to accompany him to Normandy. Back in London, Smuts met the Danish nuclear physicist Niels Bohr, who confided the allied' plans for an atomic bomb to him.

A less favourable chapter developed at home in South Africa. Dr. A.B. Xuma, president of the ANC, sent a document "African Claims in South Africa" to Smuts who read it, but refused to discuss it with him. Even his deputy Jan Hofmeyr was not willing to meet the ANC delegation. To make matters worse, the "pegging act", forbidding Indians to buy land for a period of three years, was enacted and although there were negotiations, no conclusion could be found.

In 1945, Smuts travelled again to Britain, to attend the Prime Ministers' Conference. When he heard that Roosevelt had died, he immediately left for America. In the forerunning of the San Francisco Conference, he wrote the preamble of the UN Charter. Yet he did not approve of the powers of the Security Council or Russia's veto power. He proceeded to visit Washington, where he met President Truman and Ottawa, where he met the Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King. From there he travelled to London, meeting Winston Churchill and Italy, where he spoke to the South African troops.

Racial problems

Back in South Africa, Smuts was devastated to hear of Churchill losing the elections. After this very active period, he resumed his duties as Prime Minister of South Africa. The most serious problems were the issues of the blacks and Indians in South Africa. Smuts had changed some of the aspects of the United Party's "native policy" during the war years, replacing Hertzog's segregation policy with "trusteeship", a social upliftment policy. The Native's Representative Council demanded the abolition of pass laws, recognition of black trade unions and the repeal of the banishment act. Smuts was seriously considering the proposals. He said that "our native policy will have to be liberalised at a modest pace but public (white) opinion has to be carried with us [...]". He invited some of the African leaders

to Cape Town for discussions. Although he was not prepared to honour their demands in full, he made a proposal for an improved black representation. They refused, saying it did not go far enough. In 1948, the Fagan report was released, saying that complete segregation was impracticable, but complete abolition of discriminatory laws was unacceptable to many white South Africans. It recommended a permanent existence of black and white communities side by side, with a more liberal administration. Smuts was well aware that the colour issue was contradictory to the fundamental human rights he had written into the UN Charter. But he was realist enough to understand that without selling his ideas to the white electorate he would not be able to persevere. He was very hurt by the fierce opposition he met at the UN assembly in New York, where Pandit Nehru's sister attacked South Africa's colour discrimination severely. Consequently, Smuts' attempt to have South West Africa incorporated into the Union failed.

A high honour was bestowed on him when Smuts was host to the Royal family, when they visited South Africa in 1947.

The Fagan recommendations on race relations were never to be introduced, as Smuts was swept out of office in the May 1948 election. White South Africans felt obviously threatened by the liberalization that had taken place during the war years and the United Party's course away from segregation. The concept of apartheid seemed appealing to them, offering an easy solution to a complicated problem.

Leader of the opposition

At the age of 78, Smuts decided not to retire, but to become leader of the opposition. He still led a very active life. He travelled once again to England, where he had been elected Chancellor of Cambridge University. On his return to South Africa, Smuts learned that Jan Hofmeyr had suddenly died, at a young age. The same year, Smuts' son Japie died of acute cerebral meningitis. The events aged Smuts and "made him work harder than ever". He returned to England, to visit the Gilletts and Chaim Weizmann, and to launch a fund to plant a forest in Israel. In 1949, when he delivered a speech at the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, he was the last surviving Boer General. But he was mistrusted by many Afrikaners for his liberal outlooks and some left when he held his speech. On 11 May 1950, his 80th birthday was celebrated. On 29th May Smuts suffered a coronary thrombosis. He was confined to bed and died on 11 September 1950.

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