

## - EDITORIAL -

### A Century's Perspective

The year 1999 has deep significance for South Africa. One hundred years ago, a war broke out on the subcontinent of southern Africa that was to have a profound effect upon the shaping of the region. This war, historicised as the Second Anglo-Boer War, was a watershed in South African history and for this reason it has been for many decades a major focus of South African history writing and particularly in the annals of Afrikaner history. By any measure, the war affected South African society severely. Smuts wrote some years later that this was one of the first 'total' wars of the twentieth century and its impact on South African politics, economics and social life was therefore profound.<sup>1</sup> He might have added that the more 'total' the experience, the heavier the impact of the war upon the historical and national consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

The Union Defence Force, an essentially unhappy marriage between the British and Boer military systems, was formed in July 1912 as a result of this war. A Defence Council, largely ineffective, was appointed to deal with conflict. The UDF, had to face two Afrikaner rebellions - one in 1914 and another under the flag of the Ossewa-Brandwag during the Second World War - before the Afrikanerisation of the military under Adv F.C. Erasmus and the 'assault' upon the English-medium regiments in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup> The UDF, amidst this change and reorientation, was renamed the South African Defence Force in December 1957. Yet, the vast majority of South Africans were oppressed by rather than represented in, the politico-military system.

A second watershed, of far greater significance, took place at the end of the century. In April 1994, the SADF together with the defence forces of the former-TBVC states combined with the non-statutory forces such as *Umkhonto weSizwe* and APLA to form the South African National Defence Force. Almost concurrently, South Africa received a Supreme Constitution, a *grundnorm* to which all actions of the South African military are subject, and the full impact of this Constitution has still to be seen. This was truly the dawning of a new age, a second attempt at a "New South Africa" and the third at a new defence force. And 1999 marks the fifth anniversary.

The published material on the South African National Defence Force - and particularly its eight roots or 'ancestral forces' - has mushroomed over the past two decades. Although the focus has been largely on the former SADF, the Mayibuye Centre has accomplished much good work with its *History and Literature Series*. Serious hiatuses still exist yet, at the end of a century and facing a fresh start, the time has now surely come for a consolidation of work. To this end, the Military History Department of the Faculty of Military Science will host a conference around the theme of 'South Africa at War in the Twentieth Century'. A conference notice and call for papers appears in this issue.

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Executive Editor

<sup>1</sup> G. Nattrass and S.B. Spies (eds.), *Jan Smuts; Memoirs of the Boer War* (Jonathan Ball: Johannesburg, 1994), p 19.

<sup>2</sup> See R.J.B. Bosworth, *Explaining Auschwitz and Hiroshima; History Writing and the Second World War, 1945-1990* (Routledge: London and New York, 1998); and Ian Buruma, *Wages of Guilt; Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (Vintage: London, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> E.P. Hartshorn, *Avenge Tobruk* (Cape Town, 1960), pp 207-225; and, for a general statement, N.M. Cowling, 'A history of military nomenclature in South Africa', *Militaria* 23(3) 1993, pp 1-13.