

The Rand Rising of 1922

[My mother was born in Benoni, South Africa in 1909. Her father, who had worked in the gold mining industry, died in 1914 . Seven years later, when she was twelve, my mother left the country for Great Britain with *her* mother. She was thus spared the horror and tragedy of events that took place in the mining communities of the Transvaal only a few months later.]

The transformation of peaceful workers into armed insurrectionists is, happily, a rare occurrence. That they should so transform at all is deplorable, yet to condemn utterly without trying to understand the reasons is to bury one's head in the sand of self-righteousness. Revolutions do not happen overnight. They usually have their origin in small, unresolved grievances, which grow in the mind and fester, before erupting into a violent clash of race, class or culture. And all of these factors were present during the 1922 mineworkers' strike in the Transvaal and in its horrific climax.

It is clear that the Transvaal miners were dissatisfied with the outcome of the strikes of 1907, 1913 and 1914. No doubt, there were a few among them with a declared political agenda and who saw advantage in stirring the discontent. However, that in itself would hardly have led to revolt. Even on the back of the Russian revolution, the communists in South Africa were too few to foment disorder of the kind seen on the streets of the Rand in 1922.

There was a racial issue too, though not in the sense that black people and white took opposite sides in the dispute. The declared intention of the politicised Europeans, especially the Afrikaners, was the creation of a 'White Man's Republic,' and their banners

bore witness to this objective - *'Workers of the World Fight and Unite for a White South Africa!'* John Higginson, Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts writes, in *A World Briefly Upended*, that *'...race and violence were indeed integral features of South Africa's industrial and labor [sic] history but [they] do not sufficiently explain the moments when discrete groups of people ... chose to use them as weapons ...'* However, though the native Bantu were, politically, in a sense, always bystanders, they could not escape the strike's economic effects nor its bloody aftermath.

At the outbreak of war between Britain and Germany in 1914, General Smuts, the Treasury Minister, despite his Afrikaner origin and his role during the Anglo-Boer War, supported the British side. Thousands of South Africans enlisted and followed him into the field. However, many Boers had long carried resentment at British imperialism and saw Smuts position as a betrayal. In the Transvaal, the former Boer republic, where by 1922 nearly 50% of the white labour force was Africa-born, these feelings were especially strong and were carried into the workplace, it has to be said not only by Afrikaners, but by men of British descent. Many saw Smuts, by his intervention in the disputes of 1913 and 1914, as implacably anti-union.

At the heart of the 1922 industrial dispute, at least in its initial stages, were the interests of workers seeking simply to protect themselves against the cavalier actions of their employers. In 1921, the Chamber of Mines, representing the owners, announced wages cuts for certain key white workers, made changes to working conditions underground and proposed to replace some 2,000 white semi-skilled workers with black. This meant an annulment of the so called Status Quo Agreement, a compromise reached in 1918 which prevented further encroachment by black workers into 'white jobs'. The lesson, that the mining operation could be run with many fewer employees and thus at a much lower cost, had been learnt in 1907 and 1913, at a time when thousands of

additional men, black and white, eager for work, were still pouring into the Transvaal.

The Mineworkers Union called a strike on January 10th 1922. It was supported by the vast majority of the mineworkers. Essential service workers were called out on January 14th. Many of the strikers had served in the Great War and had learned combat skills. They formed military-style battalions called *Commandos* that drilled in public squares, with rifles when they had them or without when they did not. Their leaders maintained military discipline in the ranks, and sought out and punished strike breakers with ever increasing violence. Women formed 'commando' units too and were especially militant in their attitude to 'scabs'. They roamed the streets with whips and hosepipes exacting vengeance on any who dared defy the strike order.

On February 13th, following a speech by Smuts calling for a return to work, the Government launched its strike-breaking policy. On the 28th, three strikers were killed in Boksburg in a clash with police. On March 6th the trade union movement called for a general strike, which began the following day. The employers had played into the hands of the revolutionaries by refusing to talk to the official union leaders in the South African Industrial Federation (SAIF).

Jeremy Krikler, in his book *'White Rising'*, describes how the strike then turned into a full scale rebellion against the state, and attempts to explain it. Of course, in some districts and towns, the union leaders and the commando leaders were one and the same but towards the end of the strike proper, power began to slip from the SAIF to these military style bodies. The strike movement was generally stronger in the East Rand than in the West and the revolt when it came followed a similar pattern. Boksburg seems to have been an exception. The use of firearms by police during a demonstration at the local jail, when the three strikers died, may have somewhat dampened the enthusiasm for more violence.

Johannesburg, Benoni and Brakpan were among the most militant towns. The violence in Benoni had begun even before the strike developed into a full-scale revolt against authority. Late in February, a woman attacked scabs and detectives with flails made from bicycle chains attached to pick handles. According to a report in the local press, the victims ended up looking *'like red pulp'*. Then, in the last week of February, a mob of some 500 people - in which the *'women were very prominent'* - broke into a house and smashed and burned furniture of a supposed scab.

After the employers spurned an attempt by union leaders to bring the two sides together, the revolutionary elements in the movement took the initiative. The rebels quickly seized control of strategic communications and held it for several days. People were drawn into the dispute who were not party to it. *'[T]he house of a cab driver, who would not allow the Johannesburg commando the use of his horses,'* Professor Krikler writes, *'was dynamited on 3rd March.'* Kathleen Booth, a woman who had been *'too busy with her domestic work'* to support the strikers, *'had her Benoni house bombed and set alight on 6th March.'*

By March 7th in Benoni, *'every business concern was shut [and] there were enormous crowds moving about. A few men who had not stopped work were attacked and some property burned.'* On the 9th of the month, someone threw a home-made bomb into the police station.

The armed rebellion began on 10th March. Strikers fired on the car of the manager of the New Kleinfontein mine, wounding him and two others, and killing a detective. Early that morning, an armed mob of several hundred stormed the Apex Mine at Brakpan, in those days a Benoni suburb. It was defended only by a few dozen company officials and policemen, supported by African employees carrying sticks. Humphriss and Thomas in their history, *Benoni, Son of my Sorrow*, quote a newspaper report describing the scene:

'... the attackers broke doors and windows [of an office] and rushed in. Those inside surrendered to vastly superior forces. Some had arms; the others handed over theirs. Then the massacre began.' One of the officials, a Mr Cook, gave his account of what it had been like: *'They were all lying on the floor half-conscious as the result of the battering they had received. Several shots were fired as they lay there.... I saw a man point a gun at me and I immediately ducked my head; the flash singed me and I lay still as if I were dead.'* The mine manager said that while he was at the underground manager's office, *'some shots went off. I learned subsequently that it was the wounded men being shot, and it is apparent that it was not done in the heat of capturing the mine. Patterson was shot while he had his hands up. Rogers, the mine secretary, was battered and left for dead. Momsen was so badly clubbed that he died from his injuries.'*

The same day, Thursday March 10th, the rebels seized control of Benoni from the police and occupied it despite the presence of government troops. They inflicted severe casualties on the men of the Transvaal Scottish Regiment who had been sent to keep order. The town was out of the control of the state forces from early morning until about 7am on the following Monday. The trades hall was sandbagged and used as the revolutionaries' headquarters.

The government retaliated, using bombs and machine gun fire from aeroplanes. The strikers fired back with some success. No planes were shot down in Benoni but some were later found to have holes in the fuselage. Elsewhere, however, aircraft were downed and pilots and gunners killed.

The bombing of Benoni began on the 10th and continued until the rebellion was put down. The terrified population scurried for shelter. There were fears for the safety of the children holed up in the convent. According to Jeremy Krikler's account, bodies piled up in the mortuary because *'... the dead outstripped the supply of coffins and some corpses*

were lowered into the earth in white-painted boxes.'

Notwithstanding the anger of the mineworkers, there can be little excuse in human terms for some of the more extreme acts: for the derailing of trains; for the indiscriminate firing into mine buildings at Brakpan; for the killing of mine officials and Africans alike; for the hunting of unarmed Africans through the streets; for the government using tanks and airpower to suppress the strikers. Yet every one of those things happened in the days leading up to the first week of March and in the fortnight which followed.

The rebels' military triumphs were short-lived. The rising was finally crushed on Monday March 14th. Mike Rautenbach, the commando leader in Benoni, had fled the scene on the Sunday and disappeared, accompanied by his chief lieutenants. Faced with defeat, the rank and file gave up the struggle. In the hours that followed, some drunken miners, the raggle-taggle of the rising, went on the rampage, looting and exacting revenge on people they saw as their enemies.

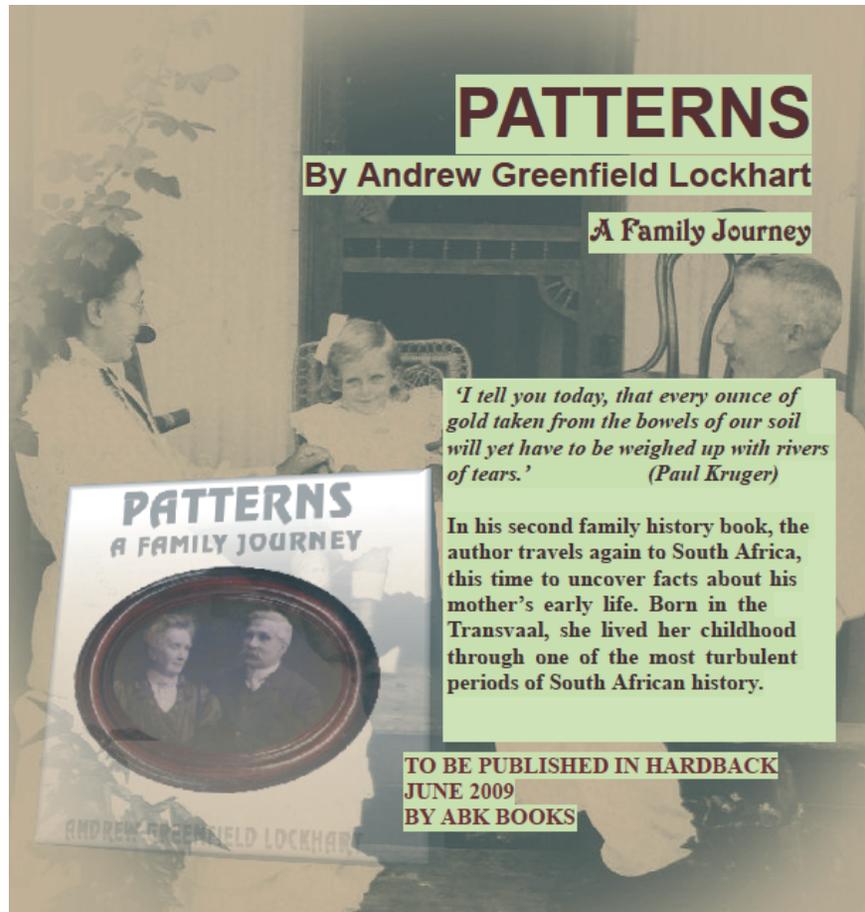
Humphriss and Thomas describe it as an orgy, when *'[S]hops were burned, windows smashed, and looting was widespread. Bottle-stores were broken into, and there was a brief reign of terror in the Bedford Hotel in the centre of the town when drunken strikers came in firing off their guns indiscriminately.'* Krikler admits the orgy but questions whether the shooting was indiscriminate. *'No evidence of random shootings was ever produced in court,'* he writes.

Nor were the state troops blameless in the aftermath. There were many instances of the army and police being unscrupulous in the search for rebels and taking liberties in people's homes, with their property and persons. But Benoni was relieved. The authorities assessed the damage, picked up the pieces (and the bill) and set about dealing with its prisoners. The Chamber of Mines exacted its own revenge by re-engaging 50,000 Bantu workers and throwing 3,000 white miners out of work.

The last act of the Rising took place at Fordsburg in Johannesburg. The strikers' leader, Percy Fisher, seen by many as the grand architect of it all, turned a gun on himself in an upper room of the Market Hall and, misguided or not, died for the cause he believed in.

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