

# GERMAN ESPIONAGE AND BRITISH COUNTER-INTELLIGENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND MOZAMBIQUE, 1939–1944\*

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**ABSTRACT.** *For most of the Second World War, German and Italian agents were actively engaged in a variety of intelligence gathering exercises in southern Africa. The hub of this activity was Lourenço Marques, the colonial capital of Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique). One of the key tasks of Axis agents was to make links with Nazi sympathizers and the radical right in South Africa, promote dissent, and destabilize the imperial war effort in the dominion. Using British, American, and South African archival sources, this article outlines German espionage activities and British counter-intelligence operations orchestrated by MI5, MI6, and the Special Operations Executive between 1939 and 1944. The article, which is part of a larger study, examines three broad themes. First, it explores Pretoria's creation of a humble military intelligence apparatus in wartime South Africa. Secondly, it examines the establishment of several British liaison and intelligence-gathering agencies that operated in southern Africa for most of the war. Finally, it assesses the working relationship between the South African and British agencies, the tensions that arose, and the competing interests that emerged between the two allies as they sought to contain the Axis-inspired threat from within.*

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Nazism was gradually growing in South Africa. Agents were widespread and they were indulging in fairly open propaganda methods. They were enabled to do this not only because a portion of the populace, sympathised with them, but because, in the very Cabinet itself, there were those who were tolerant of the germ.

Quotation from J. C. Smuts's biography written by his son, 1952<sup>1</sup>

Looking back on its wartime achievements, 'W' section of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) wrote in February 1945 that since its establishment in March 1941 a number of key goals had been accomplished in east and southern Africa. Foremost amongst them were its successful covert operations conducted prior to the invasion of Vichy-controlled Madagascar in May 1942 and the

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<sup>1</sup> J. C. Smuts, *Jan Christian Smuts* (London, 1952), p. 370.

assistance rendered by its agents when total occupation of the island was achieved five months later. Nonetheless, equally important contributions had been made in the neutral colony of Portuguese East Africa and the turbulent Union of South Africa when, after intense infighting, SOE expanded its remit to these regions in early 1942 during the preparations for the neutralization of Madagascar.<sup>2</sup>

SOE's successes in both these territories were indeed remarkable. They ranged from the mundane but all-important duties of pinpointing and monitoring Axis wireless traffic; to identifying and shadowing Nazi agents and pro-fascist elements amongst the European population in Mozambique; as well as tracking on behalf of Pretoria dissident South Africans sympathetic to the Axis cause. SOE – dubbed the ministry of ungentlemanly warfare by its inspirational founder, Prime Minister Winston Churchill – also scored notable victories during several cloak and dagger operations. They included the kidnapping and extraction in May 1943 of a menacing agent from Mozambique, the Italian-born Alfredo Manna. As well, and with the assistance of disaffected German colonists, the British terminated a diamond smuggling ring that had been operating out of the German consulate at Lourenço Marques. Finally, SOE was instrumental in compiling hard evidence for the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) that led to the expulsion in October 1944 of a leading Nazi and spy master, Dr Luitpold Werz, from Portuguese East Africa.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the story that unfolds in southern Africa does not simply provide additional insights into the pressures experienced by British intelligence agencies in that region during the Second World War. For those interested in wartime intelligence activities, it also provides an opportunity to delve into an interesting but unexplored dimension in alliance politics. Using newly released British, American, and hitherto ignored South African archival material this article investigates three broad themes. First, it examines the creation by Pretoria of a humble military intelligence apparatus in wartime South Africa, one which compared with its allies, at least until 1943–4, was operated on a financial shoestring. Secondly, it analyses the establishment of several British liaison and intelligence-gathering agencies including SOE that operated under a number of guises in southern Africa between 1940 and 1944. Thirdly, it gauges SOE's activities in the region, its working relationship (or not) with South African intelligence agencies, and the tensions which arose between London and Pretoria when competing national interests, inter-departmental rivalries, and personal vendettas threatened to undermine operational directives. In the end, this analysis

<sup>2</sup> For SOE's involvement in the Madagascar operations see Martin Thomas, 'Imperial backwater or strategic outpost? The British takeover of Vichy Madagascar, 1942', *Historical Journal*, 39 (1996), pp. 1049–74; E. R. D. Harrison, 'British subversion in French East Africa, 1941–1942: SOE's Todd mission', *English Historical Review*, 114 (1999), pp. 339–68.

<sup>3</sup> 'W' section achievements – East and South Africa, 25 Feb. 1945, London, The National Archive (TNA), HS 3/14. Ironically, in William Mackenzie's, *The secret history of SOE: the Special Operations Executive, 1940–1945* (London, 2000), South Africa receives a two line mention and only in its capacity in support of operations in neighbouring Madagascar (p. 326).

reveals a number of facets about the wartime management, extension, and operation of British intelligence in a politically sensitive part of the empire, and how internecine the politics became between these various agencies which, at times, expended more energy fighting amongst each other than against the enemy.

## I

Like her sister dominions of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, South Africa was utterly unprepared for war in September 1939. However, unlike its imperial cousins, South Africa was unique in that it not only faced the threat of external aggression; it also had to combat a serious threat to its internal security posed by a number of pro-Nazi, anti-British, and predominantly right-wing Afrikaner groups, such as the Afrikaner Broederbond and the *Ossewabrandwag* (OB). In other words, South Africa was – at least until mid-1943 – forced to fight a war on two fronts, potentially the most dangerous being those subversive elements within her own borders, the ‘enemy from within’.<sup>4</sup>

The story of Germany’s long-standing connections with South Africa prior to the Second World War is a familiar one, which does not need repeating here. Suffice it to say, that over the years a number of works in English, Afrikaans, and German have been written examining the commercial, diplomatic, and ideological linkages – especially between Nazi Germany, the radical right in South Africa, and the associations between European fascism and Afrikaner nationalism. The work of Patrick Furlong comes immediately to mind,<sup>5</sup> as does that of Robert Citino, Albrecht Hagemann, Brian Bunting, and more recently Christoph Marx.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in 1992, the *South African Historical Journal* published a series of engaging articles that not only widened and updated the historiographical debate,<sup>7</sup> but also provided new insights into the topic as well as mapping new avenues for research, such as German propaganda broadcasts to South Africa in 1940–1.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This was certainly how the director of military intelligence and army education, Dr E. G. Malherbe, saw it. See his autobiography, *Never a dull moment* (Cape Town, 1981), p. 215.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick J. Furlong, *Between crown and swastika: the impact of the radical right on the Afrikaner nationalist movement in the fascist era* (Hanover and London, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Citino, *Germany and the Union of South Africa in the Nazi period* (New York, 1991); Albrecht Hagemann, *Südafrika und das ‘Dritte Reich’: Rassenpolitische Affinität und machtpolitische Rivalität* (Frankfurt, 1989); Brian Bunting, *The rise of the South African Reich* (London, 1969); Christoph Marx, *Im Zeichen des Ochsenwagens: Der radikale Afrikaner-Nationalismus in Südafrika und die Geschichte der Ossewabrandwag* (Münster, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> See Patrick J. Furlong, ‘Fascism, the Third Reich and Afrikaner nationalism: an assessment of the historiography’, and Albrecht Hagemann, ‘The very special relations: the “Third Reich” and the Union of South Africa, 1933–1939’, *South African Historical Journal*, 27 (1992), pp. 113–26 and 127–47 respectively. Also see Werner Schellack’s review article in the same issue, ‘The Afrikaners’ Nazi links revisited’, pp. 173–85.

<sup>8</sup> Christoph Marx, ‘“Dear listeners in South Africa”: German propaganda broadcasts to South Africa, 1940–1941’, *South African Historical Journal*, 27 (1992), pp. 148–72. Horst J. P. Bergmeier and Rainer E. Lotz, *Hitler’s airwaves: the inside story of Nazi radio broadcasting and propaganda swing* (New Haven and London, 1997), p. 42, is disappointingly brief on the South African dimension.

Much has been made of German wartime espionage activities in South Africa, but very little detailed analysis exists of just what went on, how it was countered by the Union government, and, most importantly, how much of a threat this subversive activity was to the dominion's internal security.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, how serious was Germany in its efforts to destabilize the Union? And how strong were the connections between the radical right, such as the OB, and German intelligence agencies? For many South Africans, the linkage between Nazi spy rings, sabotage, and subversion are best epitomized by the not very successful antics of the ex-police sergeant and one-time boxing champion Robey Leibbrandt. Although idealized as a hero in some Afrikaner circles at the time – and equally vilified in English-speaking circles as a ‘bully and a thug’ – in the end this individual cut a tragic figure.<sup>10</sup> The fact remains, however, that Germany saw South Africa as one of the ripest targets in its attempt to disrupt the imperial war effort during the early stages of the Second World War.

In a very instructive and recently declassified ‘History of chief of staff intelligence’, Ian van der Waag and Louise Jooste have demonstrated that prior to 1939 the Union government had no plans whatsoever for an effective counter-espionage strategy inside the country. It was the South African Police (SAP) that were in possession of *all* information concerning Nazi activities.<sup>11</sup> This is ironic since in the last resort it was the military who were ultimately responsible for the defence of the Union, yet they knew very little of what was going on security-wise within its borders. Despite pleas from the pro-British Union Defence Force (UDF) to enlarge its intelligence establishment so that it could monitor the burgeoning activities of German and Italian agents throughout southern Africa, the German-born minister of defence, Oswald Pirow, refused the request for additional funding made by the South African chief of the general staff (CGS), General Sir Pierre van Ryneveld. His refusal to support a grant of £5,000 in the Parliamentary Supplementary Estimates of early 1939 was, in Pirow's opinion, unnecessary since domestic intelligence gathering was the sole responsibility of the SAP. As Van der Waag suggests, Pirow may have been deliberately trying to sabotage the creation of an enhanced intelligence capability. It certainly seems plausible when one considers Pirow's political leanings; leanings that became more right wing and were articulated through his New Order movement.<sup>12</sup>

All changed quite dramatically, however, when J. C. Smuts regained the reins of power on 6 September 1939. As well as prime minister, ‘Slim’ Jannie had also

<sup>9</sup> There is one notable exception from a former South African Police officer engaged in counter-intelligence during the Second World War. George Cloete Visser, *OB: traitors or patriots?* (Johannesburg, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> Hans Strydom, *For Volk and Führer* (Johannesburg, 1984); ‘Intelligence organisation and MI5/SIS responsibilities in South Africa 1939–1944’, p. 81, TNA, KV 3/10.

<sup>11</sup> Ian van der Waag and Louise Jooste, ‘History of chief of staff intelligence’ (Pretoria, 1990), p. 20. Van der Waag's section of the report was declassified in 2002. Miss Jooste's section, which deals with the post-1968 period, is still classified. My thanks to Ian van der Waag for a copy.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

taken the portfolios of defence and external affairs. Within two weeks £1,250 was expressly allocated to the defence budget under the heading 'Miscellaneous and Incidental Expenditure' to focus primarily on the payment of agents 'specially selected to obtain information necessary for military purposes'.<sup>13</sup> In December, the new post of director of intelligence was created and transferred to the office of the CGS. The first director was Colonel B. W. Thwaites (1939–41) who was at once responsible for civil security, local censorship, and propaganda.<sup>14</sup> The steps taken to enhance the Union's internal security were mirrored by the military in February 1940 when a second intelligence agency was created at South African defence headquarters. Appointed as deputy director of military intelligence (DDMI), Lieutenant-Colonel H. T. Newman, Royal Marines (who had been seconded to the UDF headquarters just prior to the war), was responsible to the director general of operations (Colonel P. de Waal) for all military intelligence and security, including censorship and propaganda when the UDF was on active service in operational theatres outside South Africa.<sup>15</sup>

'As you know', wrote Van Ryneveld to a government supporter in the Orange Free State, 'the Union is being subjected to a subtle but concentrated offensive by the Nazis with their propaganda machine, all according to Hitler's well known method of "conquest from within". Unfortunately a large number of our own people are dupes and are consciously playing the Nazi game. We are gradually gathering in all the threads.'<sup>16</sup> One of these threads was gathered up in May–June 1940. During the early part of 1939 there was strong evidence to suggest that subversive elements were trying to undermine the loyalty of the Rand miners and even secure control over the South African Mine Workers' Union. To counter these activities, a liaison was established between the UDF (Intelligence) and three police forces: the SAP; the railway police; and the mine police. When war broke out, however, these arrangements proved far from satisfactory because of insufficient manpower. In their stead, two new organizations were created: the Essential Services Protection Corps (ESPC); and the Civilian Protection Services

<sup>13</sup> 'Memorandum to accompany application for a special warrant', secretary of defence, Colonel C. H. Blaine, 23 Sept. 1939; D. Sloan, assistant secretary, finance, to Blaine, 22 Sept. 1939, Pretoria, Documentation Centre, South African Department of Defence Archive (SADDA), records of secretary of defence (DC), Group 2, box 3836, DF 1259. Quotation found in first archival reference and cited in Van der Waag and Jooste, 'History', p. 18. Between 1939 and 1947 a total of £45,954 was spent on intelligence gathering by the Union government. *Ibid.*, p. 28. This compares with the staggering figure of \$115,547,232 allocated to the OSS during its lifetime between 1942 and 1946. Lawrence H. McDonald, 'The OSS and its records', in George C. Chalou, ed., *The secrets war: the Office of Strategic Services in World War II* (Washington DC, 2002 edn), p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> Van der Waag and Jooste, 'History', p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20; memo. by H. S. Wakefield for CGS, entitled: 'Organisation – Intelligence section, defence headquarters', 21 Feb. 1940, SADDA, DC, Group 2, box 3836, DF 1259; Sir Edward Harding, UK high commissioner to South Africa, to Viscount Caldecote, secretary of state for dominions affairs, 31 July 1940, TNA, DO 35/1008/7, WG 429/40. Also see memorandum for historical section, UDF, 'History of the intelligence section of the Union Defence Force from 1937', by Colonel Thwaites (Dec. 1945), SADDA, Union War Histories (Civil), UWH 169.

<sup>16</sup> Van Ryneveld to D. P. Mercier, 17 Jan. 1940, SADDA, CGS (War) box 223, file 49/1.

(CPS).<sup>17</sup> The ESPC was in effect a special constabulary comprised largely of veterans from the Great War and under the operational command of Colonel F. C. Stallard, minister of mines. The ultimate responsibility, however, lay with the department of defence. Its main function was to assist the SAP and help safeguard government buildings and strategic civilian installations like communications and power-generating facilities from would-be saboteurs. The CPS, especially its 10,000-strong Civilian Guard, under the direction of the ministry of the interior, was instituted to assist local authorities in the preparation and execution of civilian defence measures.<sup>18</sup>

In May 1940, while Hitler unleashed his blitzkrieg on western Europe, a cabinet committee was quickly appointed to make recommendations with regard to internal security measures. The minister of justice, Dr Colin Steyn, and the minister of the interior, H. G. Lawrence, immediately constituted an inter-departmental committee which included, among others, the controller of censorship, Colonel H. J. Lenton, the commissioner of police, Colonel G. R. C. Baston, the chief control officer, Colonel Sir Theo Truter, and the heads of the railway police, CPS, immigration, and railway board. 'It is an undoubted fact that the so-called "Fifth Column" is strong in the Union', it reported.

All political opponents of the Government are not necessarily members of that column. But no section of the opposition has exposed their cards and it is not known to what extent defections from the Hertzog-Havenga group have joined the Malan extremists. If support for the *Ossewabrandwag* is to be taken as an indication of the strength of the pro-German element, then it can be accepted as a fact that the Government has to contend with something that is widespread and not weak. Evidence keeps pouring in that in every corner of the Union the cankerous growth has taken a foothold and is showing its existence now that the Germans are enjoying success overseas.<sup>19</sup>

The urgency surrounding the general outline on internal security submitted by the inter-departmental committee at the end of May 1940 was, in part, to assuage public fears about the growing threat of subversion. As a result, in early June, it was recommended by a small working party that a system of vigilance committees be established throughout the whole of the Transvaal, Orange Free State, northern Natal and in districts of the Eastern Cape where there were large concentrations of German-speakers, such as King Williams Town and East

<sup>17</sup> Van der Waag and Jooste, 'History', pp. 20–1.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21. H. J. Martin and Neil Orpen, *South Africa at war: South African forces World War II, VII: Preparations and operations on the home front, 1939–1945* (Cape Town, 1979), p. 34; 'Civilian protective services: Cape peninsula command, 1940–1946', report by its chief executive officer, M. C. du Plessis, University of Cape Town Archives and Library (UCTAL), H. G. Lawrence papers, BC 640, E3.142; Jeremy Lawrence, *Harry Lawrence* (Cape Town, 1978), p. 118.

<sup>19</sup> Memo. on internal security, 30 May 1940, Pretoria, South African National Archive (SANA), Transvaal Archive Depot (TAD), J. C. Smuts papers, A1, vol. 143; recommendations of first meeting of internal security committee (ISC), 23 May 1940, UCTAL, Lawrence papers, BC 640, E3.158; 'Report of the sub-committee appointed by the departmental committee on internal security', 27 May 1940, *ibid.*, E3.163; hand-written notes and resolutions of ISC meetings, 28–9 May 1940, *ibid.*, E3.164.

London.<sup>20</sup> Under the overall direction of a cabinet minister, the committees were specifically designed to provide a rapid system of communication between the central government and rural districts. These committees, of not less than three and no more than five men, performed four major functions:

- To watch espionage, sabotage, and hostile action by groups.
- To report promptly upon all cases of intimidation, tampering with natives, subversive speech or action, and parachutists, should the latter arrive.
- Immediately to report all cases of hardship from whatever cause arising as affecting the wives and families of those away on active service with a view to prompt examination and where necessary, early redress.
- Generally to watch for any movement or action which may tend to impair security.<sup>21</sup>

Over the next several months further reforms were initiated. In late September, the defence advisory committee under the chairmanship of the aging deputy prime minister and minister of native affairs, Denys Reitz, reported that there was a 'great deal of confusion, overlapping, and delay in regard to the collection and distribution of intelligence information'. He complained that there was no central co-ordinating agency which processed and disseminated a wide variety of sensitive material, much of which was confidential and required immediate action. According to Reitz, what was urgently required was an intelligence clearance bureau, responsible to the prime minister through the minister of the interior, which would serve as the central point for receiving intelligence information.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively known as the Intelligence Records Bureau (ICB), this agency was headed by the immensely able controller of censorship, Colonel (later Brigadier) Lenton. The ICB would meet weekly and consisted of senior officers from the departments of censorship, military intelligence, SAP, railway police, the treasury, immigration, and customs.<sup>23</sup> This organization would in no way interfere with the normal functions and responsibilities of the DDMI, but would complement it in so far as all information of military value which it might obtain from sources not tapped by DDMI would be relayed to it. In other words, the ICB would not undertake investigations of individuals involved in 'subversive, disloyal or suspicious activities within or outside the Union'. Rather, it was a clearing-house for the processing, recording, and transmission of information.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Memo. by General Andries Brink, commandant-in-chief, burger commandos, Louis Esselen, chairman of the railway board, and General J. J. Collyer, secretary for the minister of defence, 6 June 1940, SANA, TAD, Smuts papers, A1, vol. 143. For the politics of internment in South Africa see Douglas Busk, office of the UK high commissioner, Pretoria, to Sir John Stephenson, under-secretary of state for dominions affairs, 2 July 1940, TNA, DO 35/588/2, G 91/385.

<sup>21</sup> Memo. by Brink, Esselen, and Collyer, 6 June 1940, SANA, TAD, Smuts papers, A1, vol. 143.

<sup>22</sup> Reitz to Smuts, 27 Sept. 1940; Van Ryneveld to adjutant-general and director of military operations and intelligence, 25 Oct. 1940, SADDA, CGS (War), box 224, 49/15.

<sup>23</sup> Van der Waag and Jooste, 'History', pp. 21–3.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence to secretary for external affairs, D. D. Forsyth, 5 Nov. 1940, SANA, BTS 9/9/1/5, vol. 1; memo. on the ICB, 22 Oct. 1942, SADDA, CGS (War), box 224, 49/15.



One immediate consequence of this badly needed reorganization of South Africa's domestic intelligence network was that the bureau, in Reitz's words, provided an essential 'link in the Imperial chain of intelligence centres' integrating the Union with Singapore, Nairobi, Cairo, and London.<sup>25</sup>

## II

Meanwhile, the war office was discussing the necessity of establishing a military liaison mission in South Africa. In September 1940 Major-General Sir G. N. Macready toured the dominion before he took up his appointment as assistant chief of the imperial general staff. It was made quite clear to him in discussions with the local military authorities that the establishment of a permanent mission would be warmly welcomed. This was grist to Macready's mill. As he informed Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Haining, vice-chief of the imperial general staff, because of the increased flow of men and material through and around South Africa northwards to east Africa and the Middle East – and the importance South African forces would assume in upcoming operations in these theatres – some sort of imperial military authority was badly needed in Pretoria, 'whatever the political people might think'.<sup>26</sup> Macready was already pushing at an open door as a broad consensus was emerging within the war office that British military interests needed further safeguarding. True, an air ministry mission had toured South Africa in May–June 1940 to co-ordinate the rapidly expanding British Commonwealth Air Training Scheme. Its remit, however, was very specific. So, too, was the establishment in March 1940 of the Royal Navy's 'Y' organization, which worked closely with Lenton and his censorship department at the South African postal service in monitoring enemy signals traffic.<sup>27</sup>

The war office argued that a permanent military mission would eventually cover a greater and wider ranging number of issues. Nonetheless, during the initial stages of these deliberations, the focus was on the administration and maintenance of convalescent and hospital facilities for injured and sick British servicemen, the provision of welfare and transport officers, and provost personnel. However, the real long-term benefits were not lost on those involved. A permanent military mission in South Africa would provide a much needed and direct channel of communications between UDF headquarters and the war office itself. Smuts concurred and endorsed the idea.<sup>28</sup> But he also warned the UK high

<sup>25</sup> Reitz to Smuts, 27 Sept. 1940, SADDA, CGS (War), box 224, 49/15.

<sup>26</sup> Macready to Haining, 29 Oct. 1940, TNA, WO 32/15329.

<sup>27</sup> Martin and Orpen, *South Africa at war*, vii, pp. 51–2; report by Lieutenant-Commander J. S. Bennett, RNVR, staff officer (Y) on 'Y' organization in South Africa, 24 June 1943, submitted to Vice-Admiral W. E. C. Tait, C-in-C South Atlantic station, TNA, ADM 1/26888; 'South Atlantic "Y" Organisation' (c. 1942), TNA, WO 208/5111; formation of 'Y' committee in South Africa, Mar. 1942, TNA, WO 208/5156.

<sup>28</sup> Harding to Smuts, 13 Dec. 1940, and Smuts's reply, 17 Dec. 1940, SANA, TAD, Smuts papers, A1, vol. 145.



commissioner, Sir Edward Harding, of the unique domestic circumstances that existed in the Union. Care had to be taken so that the arrangements made between the two governments 'might not be misconstrued [in the Union] as placing the Union Defence Forces under the "Tutelage" of the United Kingdom military authorities'.<sup>29</sup> This was sound advice which Harding and his successor as high commissioner, Lord Harlech, were never tired of reiterating to London: 'more regard must be paid to [the] political situation which sometimes rules out [an] otherwise obvious course'.<sup>30</sup> With these pearls of political wisdom, 203 British Military Mission was established in early 1941 under the command of Brigadier Salisbury Jones.

There was a great deal for London to be worried about in South Africa as the political dynamic was seemingly in constant flux between 1939 and 1942. Smuts, according to Harlech, stood 'head and shoulders in mental and moral stature above all his Cabinet colleagues'. In fact, as he reported to Churchill in October 1941, the seventy-one-year-old South African prime minister was 'extraordinarily well and vigorous' and was one of the 'youngest minded men' he knew as he carried the 'burden of State with a lion's heart'. Harlech continued: 'His optimism about the war, the future of the world and of South Africa is positively excessive as he with his large vision cannot comprehend how small minded so many people are here.'<sup>31</sup>

As for the rest of the cabinet, it contained a lot of 'old dead wood'. Harlech was particularly scathing of Richard Stuttaford, the minister of commerce and industry, Senator C. F. Clarkson, minister of public works, and Colonel Stallard, minister of mines. All were described as 'three elderly backward looking men who are administratively weak and cut no ice in the country'.<sup>32</sup> As a result, the day-to-day work fell to Smuts and his ministers of finance, railways, justice, health, and the interior (J. H. Hofmeyer, F. C. Sturrock, Colin Steyn, and H. G. Lawrence respectively). Reitz, the deputy prime minister was, according to Harlech, 'charming but completely idle [a man who] practically never does any work of any kind'. Lawrence, the only young man in the cabinet and who had the all-important responsibility of maintaining domestic security, was described by the high commissioner as having 'little innate mental capacity [who found] even his departmental work a burden, taking unnecessarily long hours to get through' it.<sup>33</sup> An unfair analysis of Lawrence,<sup>34</sup> but at least Harlech was accurate in identifying one of Smuts's own weaknesses: his 'extreme tenderness for old friends and colleagues [who had served him well] in past struggles and a reluctance to try out new men'.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Harding to under-secretary of state for the dominions, 15 Dec. 1940, TNA, WO 32/15329.

<sup>30</sup> Harlech to dominions office, 10 Sept. 1941, *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Harlech to Churchill, 2 Oct. 1941, TNA, PREM 4/44/1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> The biography of Harry Lawrence written by his son, combined with the hugely important collection in the Lawrence papers at UCT, would suggest that Harlech was wrong about this minister.

<sup>35</sup> Harlech to Churchill, 2 Oct. 1941, TNA, PREM 4/44/1.

Elements of the South African military leadership did not escape the ire of British officials either. At the outbreak of war, General van Ryneveld was described as ‘absolutely loyal’ but weak in character and without initiative. These latter observations were proven to be inaccurate. Almost two years later, the deputy high commissioner, C. R. Price, agreed that the intense wartime pressures had probably increased Van Ryneveld’s natural tendency to deal in generalities and to be ‘somewhat impatient of detail’, but he had stood up to the strain ‘remarkably well’. In fact, he praised South Africa’s good fortune in having an officer of his ‘ability, energy and resilience’ in overall command.<sup>36</sup> Colonel (later General) George Brink, Van Ryneveld’s one-time deputy CGS, was credited as being the ablest soldier at Union defence headquarters. ‘He knew his job, he was original in his ideas, and he had a real capacity for organization.’ Although intensely ambitious, his major shortcoming was, according to one observer, that he ‘fundamentally disliked the British’. Suspensions were also cast as to his ultimate loyalty. For it was alleged that prior to the war Brink had been in ‘extremely close’ contact with Pirow and the then administrator of the Free State, Dr J. F. J. ‘Hansie’ van Rensburg, who in 1941 became commandant-general of the OB.<sup>37</sup>

British intelligence had equally low opinions of most of their South African counterparts. Colonel Pierre de Villiers, chief of the SAP, was the MI5 ‘link’ on all matters concerning the movements of undesirable people who posed a security risk to the dominion. But the situation was far from ideal. In 1938, when MI5 were approached by De Villiers for advice on setting up a parallel security organization on MI5 lines, the British tacitly refused, fearing that they were being used as a stalking horse in South African interdepartmental politics. ‘As far as [we] are concerned’, admitted MI5, ‘while officially we are responsible for watching enemy activity within the Union and mandated territories, we are in practice so handicapped by the delicate nature of our relations with the Union authorities that the results are practically negligible’.<sup>38</sup>

After the reorganization of the entire Union security apparatus in October 1940, when it appeared to London that the trustworthy Lenton would be the new intelligence ‘link’, the fact that Colonel de Villiers’ successor, Colonel Baston, now handled intelligence liaison duties, MI5’s initial reaction was one of bewilderment. Once again, rivalry between the SAP and military intelligence had, in British eyes, prevented the establishment of a sound framework for intelligence gathering in South Africa. As a result, ‘routine contact’ on civil security matters between MI5 and Pretoria had declined to such an extent that MI5 was ‘virtually

<sup>36</sup> Office of the UK high commissioner in South Africa to Stephenson, 29 Sept. 1939, TNA, DO 35/1008/7, WG 429/13; Price to Viscount Cranborne, secretary of state for the dominions, 26 May 1941, *ibid.*, WG 429/51.

<sup>37</sup> Office of the UK high commissioner in South Africa to Stephenson, 29 Sept. 1939, *ibid.*, WG 429/13. A future prime minister, B. J. Vorster, was interned for part of the war because of his actions as a leading OB general. H. O. Terblanche, *John Vorster: OB Generaal en Afrikanervegeter* (Roodepoort, 1983).

<sup>38</sup> Appendix, ‘Intelligence’, TNA, KV 3/10.

out of direct touch with internal events in the Union' until 1941.<sup>39</sup> This was not helped by the fact that the British condemned the SAP, which was the chief counter-espionage and security body in the Union, as both 'inefficient and corrupt'. Moreover, London deemed the new chief of police as incompetent; a man who was dominated by his chief of CID, Colonel J. J. Coetzee, a staunchly anti-British Afrikaner, later discovered to be a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, British and US intelligence agencies universally reviled Coetzee. When Washington was informed of Coetzee's death in August 1944 by the Office of Strategic Service's operative in Pretoria the evaluation of the former head of CID was frank and unsympathetic. 'The unsavoury reputation of this gentleman has been reported to you at various times for various reasons. By and large, he has been the cause of most frustrations of allied intelligence operations. None of us were sorry to see him go.'<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, growing anxiety about the vulnerability of allied shipping in the southern oceans forced London in March 1942 to relocate the South Atlantic station from Freetown in Sierra Leone to Simonstown. More importantly, London was also forced to investigate port and air security in all its African territories, including South Africa, because of Japan's entry into the war in December 1941. Using the British Military Mission as cover, the war office selected Major (later Lieutenant-Colonel) W. H. A. Webster as their security trouble shooter. An ex-Indian policeman, for the past sixteen years Webster had been the chief police officer for the port liaison authority in India. A recognized expert on port security, his experience dovetailed nicely with his secretive role as Britain's chief MI5 officer in the Union. His assistant, a Major Luke, focused his attention on counter-espionage and counter-sabotage. According to MI5, it was through Luke's contacts that it learned of the betrayal of Leibbrandt by Van Rensburg in early 1942.<sup>42</sup>

What of SOE? One of its first operatives in the region, Lieutenant F. Wedlake RNVR, was assigned in January 1941 to run SOE's Madagascar mission from Cape Town. His objective was to establish links with prospective agents in Vichy-controlled Madagascar, develop a propaganda campaign into the island, and

<sup>39</sup> 'Report on the operation of oversea control in connection with establishment of D[istrict] S[ecurity] O[fficer]s in British colonies and liaison with security authorities in dominions 1939-45', section XIII D - South Africa (n.d.), TNA, KV 4/18. Baston succeeded De Villiers in October 1940 upon the latter's promotion to major general and his appointment as officer-commanding, 2nd South African Division.

<sup>40</sup> Appendix, 'Intelligence', TNA, KV 3/10.

<sup>41</sup> Pretoria to Washington, 1 Aug. 1944, College Park, Maryland, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), records of the Office of Strategic Services, RG 226, entry 148, box 123, folder 2134.

<sup>42</sup> Appendix, 'Intelligence', TNA, KV 3/10; and Webster's recommendations on South African port security make for interesting reading. Webster to deputy chief of staff, South Africa, 11 Dec. 1941, SANA, BTS 9/71. A fleeting reference to Webster's appointment is made in John Curry, *The security service, 1908-1945: the official history* (London, 1999), and F. H. Hinsley and C. A. G. Simkins, *British intelligence in the Second World War, IV: Security and counter-intelligence* (London, 1990), pp. 154-5.

undertake any other subversive activities in Vichy territory when London saw fit. Wedlake also developed an excellent rapport with the governor of Mauritius, Sir Bede Clifford, who was an enthusiastic champion of SOE.<sup>43</sup> However, SOE was keen to expand its operations and saw south-east Africa as a promising venture. In August 1941, terms of reference were drafted for an east African mission, which included outposts in the Zanzibar protectorate, Mauritius, and South Africa to work into Vichy-held territories and neutral Portuguese East Africa. Its first head, Lieutenant-Colonel John Todd, was a senior partner in a London stock broking firm. The internecine warfare, which broke out in Whitehall over the formation of the new mission, need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that the colonial secretary, Lord Moyne, supported by the foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, were concerned that an SOE mission with operational interests in Portuguese colonial territory would endanger Anglo-Portuguese relations.<sup>44</sup> Facing stiff resistance, SOE eventually won the struggle. SOE representatives were appointed to each of the British consulates in Mozambique and a headquarters was quickly established in Durban by February 1942 with the full support of Prime Minister Smuts and his senior military advisers.<sup>45</sup>

The priority for Todd's mission was the eviction of the Vichy from Madagascar. However, well before this was achieved, he had already been gathering support for the extension of the mission's remit to include 'possible action against suspected subversive enemy activities in [Portuguese East Africa] directed against neighbouring territory' including South Africa. In view of the OB's subversive activities on the Witwatersrand in early 1942 (more below), Todd's arguments that SOE could perform an equally useful function in combating German efforts to establish a sabotage network directed against the Union and orchestrated from Lourenço Marques gathered pace.<sup>46</sup> In May 1942, with the initiation of military operations against Madagascar, according to SOE, Portuguese East Africa became a 'hot spot', no longer on the operational fringe but 'at the very heart of British controlled East Africa' because of the continued presence of enemy spies in the region.<sup>47</sup> Lord Selborne, who had replaced Dr Hugh Dalton in February 1942 as minister of economic warfare (and thus SOE) continually emphasized the growing Nazi threat in the colony.<sup>48</sup> It was clear by linking Axis espionage to the growing internal dissent in the Union that SOE was trying to carve out a larger role for itself in southern Africa. The obvious

<sup>43</sup> 'East African mission: terms of reference', 4 Aug. 1941, TNA, HS 3/7; Harrison, 'SOE's Todd mission', pp. 340–1. For the intriguing role played by the SOE mission based in Mauritius see Ashley Jackson, *War and empire in Mauritius and the Indian ocean* (London, 2001), pp. 131–51.

<sup>44</sup> Harrison, 'SOE's Todd mission', pp. 342–5.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 348–50.

<sup>46</sup> Clarence Ezard, British consul in Beira, to foreign office, 20 Feb. 1942, TNA, HS 3/7; Caesar to AD/W, 3 Feb. 1942, and memo. on German sabotage on the Rand, 5 Feb. 1942, *ibid.*, HS 3/8; WK to Caesar, 9 Mar. 1942, *ibid.*, HS 3/12.

<sup>47</sup> W/S to AD/W, 'Extension of east African mission to PEA', 14 May 1942, *ibid.*, HS 3/14.

<sup>48</sup> Selborne to Eden, 10 Apr. 1942, TNA, HS 8/901. For Dalton's role in SOE see Ben Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (London, 1985), pp. 299–345.

jurisdictional overlap, which resulted between SOE, MI5, and MI6, caused endless friction and jealousy between these intelligence agencies and their South African colleagues which was never fully resolved.<sup>49</sup>

### III

Let us turn our attention to the 'enemy from within'. Founded in February 1939, according to Christoph Marx, the OB became the biggest mass movement of Afrikaner nationalism. Originally established as a cultural organization in Bloemfontein under the leadership of Colonel J. C. Laas, the OB spread rapidly throughout the Union; first in the platteland (the rural heartland of Afrikanerdom) and then into the industrial and urban centres, primarily in the Transvaal. At its peak in 1941, and then under the leadership of Van Rensburg, its membership was estimated at 300,000, including a paramilitary wing known as the *Stormjaers* (storm troopers).<sup>50</sup> At first, Smuts tried to play down this threat to his government despite the OB's growing attraction within the Afrikaner community. He also dismissed rumours of a German-orchestrated coup, one in May 1941 and another in early 1942.<sup>51</sup> In private, however, the canny prime minister was not so up beat. In July 1940, at the nadir of the allied fortunes in western Europe, he knew only too well that Afrikaner nationalists saw an Axis victory as their key to power. Even with Japan's entry into the war in December 1941, however, he was heartened by promising political intelligence being gathered by United Party faithful. The sporadic but 'senseless acts of sabotage', which had been going on for some months, reported Captain G. R. Ribbink, had

sickened a very large percentage of the decent minded one-time Government opponents, and above all it is the realization that Gen[era]l Smuts' strong stand has resulted in South Africa and South Africa's forces to-day being honoured and respected throughout the world which has made thousands of the Prime Minister's erstwhile opponents come over to his side to-day.<sup>52</sup>

In the previous month, Ribbink had commented that during his recent trips throughout the country a 'new spirit' was making itself felt in the 'once bitterly anti-Smuts sections'.<sup>53</sup> However, an Axis victory could still swing public opinion against the government.

The *Stormjaers* instigated these acts of sabotage, largely directed against transportation and communication systems. These extremists were under the direct

<sup>49</sup> 'Intelligence', pp. 32, 67, 72 and 77–8, TNA, KV 3/10.

<sup>50</sup> Christoph Marx, 'The *Ossewabrandwag* as a mass movement, 1939–1941', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20 (1992), pp. 195–219.

<sup>51</sup> British ambassador, Ankara, to minister of external affairs, 17 Apr. 1941, where information of the coup had been received from Bucharest by 'a friendly neutral military attaché', SANA, BTS 1/4/6, vol. 1; Furlong, *Crown and swastika*, pp. 131–2.

<sup>52</sup> Report by Ribbink, 28 Dec. 1941, Pretoria, University of South Africa Library and Archive, United Party archives, Central Head Office papers, intelligence service, vol. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ribbink to Oosthuizen, 11 Nov. 1941, *ibid.*

orders of Van Rensburg, who had long before been identified as a Nazi agent. Patrick Furlong has charted some of these acts of violence including Van Rensburg's offer to the Germans in August 1940 to stage a coup. This idea was quickly dropped because the militants had limited funds and few weapons to launch such an endeavour successfully. Although the country was gripped by fear, despite this war of nerves, the *Stormjaers* – labelled a 'bunch of desperados' by MI5<sup>54</sup> – lacked a coherent strategy to mount a sustained terror campaign. As Van Ryneveld assured his opposite number in London, General Sir Alan F. Brooke, chief of the imperial general staff, the only danger to South African security was from sabotage. 'All over the country there have been isolated cases of sabotage, but they have been on a minor and individual scale, amateurish, incoherent and unrelated.' According to the South African CGS, internal security had never been 'sounder or safer' since the beginning of the war.<sup>55</sup> As a result, the unrepentant Van Rensburg and his followers placed their trust in a comprehensive German victory. This was to be the mechanism by which the OB would depose the Union government and seal the victory for Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>56</sup>

As the upsurge in violence continued, the Germans launched a most audacious plan. In June 1941, the former Olympic heavyweight boxer Robey Leibbrandt was landed on a secluded spot on the Atlantic coast by a German yacht (or in the words of one intelligence report 'had entered the Union without conforming with the normal Immigration requirements').<sup>57</sup> His mission was to assassinate Smuts and lead a coup with the help of the most extreme members of the *Stormjaers*. Furlong claims that the plot came close to succeeding. Perhaps, but what is more astonishing is that after a few daring exploits in Potchefstroom and on the Witwatersrand, Van Rensburg betrayed Leibbrandt to the government by confirming that he was in the country. On Christmas Eve 1941, after a long police chase, Leibbrandt was finally arrested. Furlong argues that Leibbrandt's 'impulsive fanaticism' and maverick tactics threatened Van Rensburg's own power base and authority.<sup>58</sup> There is a great deal of truth in this that was confirmed by an MI5 intercept. When he reported his reasons for taking this action to the German consul general in Lourenço Marques, Van Rensburg stated that Leibbrandt was making a 'bad impression and endangering the cause'. Moreover, he had threatened a number of senior OB officers and was compromising other German agents operating in South Africa.<sup>59</sup>

Further arrests followed, including several uniformed and plain-clothes policemen. In fact, Leibbrandt's arrest allowed the authorities to purge the SAP on the Rand and in Johannesburg. During January 1942, in a surprisingly secret operation, over 400 police officers were rounded up and detained by brother

<sup>54</sup> 'Intelligence', p. 7, TNA, KV 3/10.

<sup>55</sup> Van Ryneveld to Brooke, 15 Jan. 1942, TNA, WO 32/10204.

<sup>56</sup> Furlong, *Crown and swastika*, pp. 141–2. Hans van Rensburg, *Their paths crossed mine: memoirs of the commandant-general of the Ossewa-Brandwag* (Cape Town, 1956), makes for interesting reading.

<sup>57</sup> Cape area intelligence notes, no. 137, 5 Jan. 1942, SADD, DC, box 3512, 17926/11/1, vol. 2.

<sup>58</sup> Furlong, *Crown and swastika*, pp. 146–7. <sup>59</sup> 'Intelligence', p. 8, TNA, KV 3/10.

officers supported by the national volunteer brigade. Bomb-making equipment and explosives were found in several houses. Undoubtedly, a serious blow had been dealt to the subversive elements in South Africa and the extensive weeding out of disloyal members of the SAP must have improved security in one of the most important regions of the country.<sup>60</sup> However, it did not stop Van Rensburg from continuing his clandestine work on behalf of the Axis.

#### IV

Ever since the beginning of the war, Lourenço Marques was a hotbed of intrigue and intelligence gathering. When Huntington Harris, the head of OSS operations in Portuguese East Africa arrived there in late 1941, he described it as being as 'lively as a flea-circus'.<sup>61</sup> It was also a sanctuary for German, Italian, and South African dissidents who had either evaded or escaped internment in the Union. 'We have a number of Germans at the Hotel', wrote one guest to a Greek friend near Bristol in April 1941, '[and] within the last two weeks four [have] arrived after escaping from the[ir] internment camp. How they get through is amazing, but then again I am sure it is with the help of the OSSEWE BRANDWAG [sic]'.<sup>62</sup> It most certainly was to the continued annoyance of the Portuguese authorities in Lourenço Marques. As for Van Rensburg, according to MI5, he was 'fair and square in the middle of the espionage picture'.<sup>63</sup>

As we have seen, Robey Leibbrandt had been in communication with Van Rensburg, but he was not the only German agent that the OB leader had contact with. From an early date, Van Rensburg had also been in communication with the Dutchman, former journalist and professor of literature, H. J. Rooseboom, who at one time had been an official stenographer in the Union parliament. In October 1939, he left Berlin with instructions from the German high command to initiate a propaganda campaign in the South African press, particularly the Afrikaans newspapers, which presented the German point of view on the conduct of war. Using his journalism as a cover, he in fact was responsible for passing secret information to Berlin via neutral Holland. This channel was severed when Germany in May–June 1940 overran the Low Countries and France.

<sup>60</sup> Cape area intelligence notes, no. 140, 27 Jan. 1942, SADD, DC, box 3512, 17926/11/1, vol. 2.

<sup>61</sup> Huntington Harris to Washington, 10 Jan. 1942, NARA, RG 226, entry 108C, box 13, folder 77. Histories of the OSS are many but they focus primarily on European operations, and to a lesser extent on North Africa and the Far East. The rest of Africa seems to have been ignored by scholars so far. Some useful works are Richard Harris Smith, *OSS: the secret history of America's first central intelligence agency* (Los Angeles, 1981 edn); Bradley F. Smith, *The shadow warriors: OSS and the origins of the CIA* (London, 1983); Jay Jakub, *Spies and saboteurs* (London, 1999); Chalou, ed., *The secrets war*; and Nelson MacPherson, *American intelligence in war-time London: the story of the OSS* (London, 2003), provides a very useful literature survey in his introduction.

<sup>62</sup> Censored letter, Z. A. Falas, Cardozo Hotel, Lourenço Marques, to G. R. Phitidis, Bristol Flying School, Yatesbury, Wiltshire, 16 Apr. 1941, SANA, BTS 9/9/1/7, vol. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Secret report no. 28, by E. K. Scallan, Union consul general, Lourenço Marques, 20 May 1941, SANA, BTS 4/2/26A, vol. 1; 'Intelligence', p. 8, TNA, KV 3/10.



Rooseboom, whose activities had been closely monitored by British agents while he had been in Europe and by South African authorities upon his arrival in the dominion, was interned at Leeuwkop in the Transvaal. Three months later, however, he escaped with OB assistance and set about establishing a clandestine wireless network which had been the real objective behind his assignment to South Africa. FELIX, the code-name used to describe this mission, involved two other agents – Lothar Sittig and Olaf Paasche – who also received OB assistance to escape together from Leeuwkop in August 1940. Indeed, Van Rensburg's farm near Vryburg was often used to harbour these and other German agents involved with espionage in the Union, men such as Walter Kraizizek and Hans Masser who had also escaped from South African internment facilities with OB assistance.<sup>64</sup>

So who were these German agents, what were their tasks, and how did they communicate with their superiors in Berlin? Axis intelligence gathering was centred in Lourenço Marques – a natural centre for ‘intrigue and gossip’<sup>65</sup> – and operated through the German and Italian consul generals. The German consul general was Paul Trompke, who SOE at one time considered such a threat that they planned to assassinate him using a car bomb.<sup>66</sup> The British assessment stood in stark contrast with that of their American allies. The sixty-three-year-old was described by the OSS as a ‘pleasant sort. Not stupid but takes only a very small part in ... German espionage activities.’<sup>67</sup> His deputy as consul was Dr Luitpold Werz. Werz had served in Sydney, Australia, before being transferred to Pretoria in 1936 to undertake the role as secretary to the German legation. Born in Munich, the thirty-seven-year-old was the architect and controller of the entire German espionage network in southern Africa, which may have numbered approximately 100 agents, mostly German, and who had escaped from South African internment camps.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, it was Werz who developed a series of South African contacts before his hasty departure to Portuguese East Africa when war broke out in 1939. Fluent in Afrikaans, English, French, and Portuguese, as well as competent in Italian, his main function was to provide information on allied shipping traffic. This came from two sources: observations and intelligence gleaned in Lourenço Marques (which was almost always accurate); and reports of shipping in the region and in the Union of South Africa (which according to British naval intelligence was almost entirely inaccurate). Werz, who was alleged

<sup>64</sup> ‘Intelligence’, pp. 8 and 25, TNA, KV 3/10; affidavit concerning the activities of H. J. Rooseboom, 28 June 1942; UCTAL, Lawrence papers, BC 640, E5.78; *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 Sept. 1940, announcing the seven-man break from Leeuwkop including Rooseboom, Sittig, and Paasche. Also see Visser, *Traitors or patriots?*, pp. 77–91, which looks at Masser and Kraizizek.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Portuguese East Africa’, 13 Dec. 1941, TNA, HS 3/7.

<sup>66</sup> E. R. D. Harrison, ‘“Something beautiful for ‘C’”’: Malcolm Muggeridge in Lourenço Marques’, in K. G. Robertson, ed., *War, resistance and intelligence: essays in honour of M. R. D. Foot* (London, 1999), p. 186.

<sup>67</sup> Alphabetical index cards, Jan. 1944, NARA, RG 226, entry 92, box 603, folder 25.

<sup>68</sup> Harris to George Lincoln, OSS Washington, 9 June 1942, *ibid.*, entry 92A, box 4, folder 50.

to be a Gestapo man, was in direct radio contact with Berlin.<sup>69</sup> This well-educated bachelor possessed a great deal of charm and proved very popular with the young ladies within the colonial elite, one of the social centres of which was the Polana Hotel.<sup>70</sup>

Agents in the field received their instructions from sympathizers, couriers, or by radio. Reports received by the consulate were transmitted to three agencies in Berlin: the German Foreign Office, the *Abwehr* (secret service), and the Reich Security Head Office. An important supplement to this network was the assiduous efforts of the Italian consul, Umberto Campini. Although his shipping reports were considered useless by British naval intelligence, as they were claimed to be simply a rehash of Werz's, according to one historian, Campini had developed a highly effective network of contacts (prostitutes, musicians, and dock workers) who elicited information from unsuspecting allied seamen. More importantly, he had direct access to highly sensitive industrial information in Pretoria as well as a sophisticated web of informants in the Union who apprised him of South African military dispositions and movements.<sup>71</sup> For instance the British – who had been reading Campini's telegraphic reports from early 1942 – discovered to their horror just how well connected he was in Pretoria. The intercept addressed to the Italian legation in Lisbon read:

In a few days the Lourenço Marques intelligence centre, having obtained direct access to staff papers, will be able to report the dispositions of the South African forces, which will be telegraphed to your Legation ... In regard to the reports of the production of war materials ... it is the result of [efforts] which have been carried out over a period of [years].<sup>72</sup>

Well-placed contacts such as these, in the eyes of MI6, made Campini more dangerous than Werz.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the greatest threat was posed by FELIX because of his high-level contacts with Van Rensburg. It was alleged that he received his instructions from Berlin by direct wireless communications, but was never able to get his reports back to Berlin in the same manner. He therefore had to send his reports to Werz by courier, who then relayed them on to Berlin. It was also believed, perhaps for

<sup>69</sup> 'Lourenço Marques', 19 Apr. 1943, TNA, ADM 223/296, NID 12. The South African official history written by L. C. F. Turner, H. R. Gordon-Cumming, and J. E. Betzler, *War in the southern oceans, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 159, 168, and 220 makes fleeting references to enemy espionage and signals intercepts.

<sup>70</sup> Alphabetical index cards, Jan. 1944, NARA, RG 226, entry 92, box 603, folder 25. In March 1940, Scallan informed Pretoria just how disarming Werz's charm could be. Mrs Dorothy Charles, manager of the Scala Bioscope in Lourenço Marques, had often been seen dancing with Werz at the Polana Hotel. Warnings had been sent through her friends that as a British subject she should not be so friendly with the German. Her reply was that she was a 'cosmopolite and would choose her own friends'. This forced Scallan and his British counterpart to regard her attitude as 'unfriendly and a potential source of danger'. Scallan's secret report no.11, 19 Mar. 1940, SANA, BTS 4/2/26A, vol. 1. Visser also commented on Werz's charm and how disarming he could be. *Traitors or patriots?*, pp. 46–53.

<sup>71</sup> Harrison, 'Malcolm Muggeridge', pp. 186–7.

<sup>72</sup> Campini to Lisbon, 6 May 1942, TNA, HW 1/556.

<sup>73</sup> Harrison, 'Malcolm Muggeridge', p. 186.

security reasons, that FELIX and Werz never communicated with each other by wireless. Instead they relied on couriers, such as the spirited Olaf Paasche who carried coded messages encrypted in Afrikaans newspapers between Van Rensburg and Werz. Not only was FELIX extremely dangerous because of his direct involvement with the OB, but there was also a real possibility (provided he could get the necessary equipment) that he was going to start direct transmissions of shipping movements to U-boats operating in South African and Mozambican waters. One of the more elaborate schemes hatched by British intelligence during 1943 was to trap FELIX when he attempted to rendezvous with the U-boat bringing him the transmitter he needed for this task. It was never carried out, owing more to the infighting between the various British intelligence agencies now working in southern Africa.<sup>74</sup>

One of the real intelligence coups pulled off by SOE occurred in May 1943 with the kidnapping of Alfredo Manna, an ardent fascist who worked closely with Umberto Campini. Manna was head of the Stefani News Agency in Portuguese East Africa, a highly effective cover used for Italian espionage directed specifically at allied shipping traffic. He had also become the newly appointed acting Italian consul in Beira. Well versed with the entire Italian organization in Lourenço Marques, Manna, not deemed a dangerous enemy agent, was nevertheless considered a prime target for allied counter-intelligence because of his intimate working knowledge of Axis spy networks. His kidnapping had first been mooted by MI6 in March 1943; probably by Malcolm Muggeridge, London's man in Lourenço Marques. The MI5 representative in South Africa was consulted and after discussing the plan with London interest in the operation was expressed. The arrival of an SOE representative in Lourenço Marques that April meant that SOE took responsibility for the mission dubbed operation SMOKESCREEN. The approval of Lord Harlech and Prime Minister Smuts (code-named TYRANT) were secured; Harlech arguing that the matter did not require final reference in London.

On the night of 21 May 1943, Manna – who had a ‘weakness for women’<sup>75</sup> – was lured to a secluded rendezvous by a Union national, Anna Levi, a well-known prostitute or ‘taxi-dancer’ who was used as the decoy. Abel Ferreira, the deputy chief of the Portuguese secret police, who was on the allied payroll, oversaw the operation. Several dissident Italians and one Polish refugee named Lieber, who was in Muggeridge's pocket, were recruited for the mission. Knocked unconscious, Manna was then driven to the Swaziland border in his own car where he was taken into custody by the Royal Air Force police, escorted to Durban, and handed over to Royal Navy authorities. From here he was

<sup>74</sup> ‘Lourenço Marques’, 19 Apr. 1943; ‘BJ Series of diplomatic messages’, 6 Nov. 1945, TNA, ADM 223/296, NID 12. Also see alphabetical index cards for Paasche's potted biography, NARA, RG 226, entry 92, box 603, folder 25.

<sup>75</sup> Oliver Hoare, ed., *Camp 020: MI5 and the Nazi spies: the official history of the MI5's wartime investigation centre* (London, 2000), p. 256.

transferred to Cape Town where, after a preliminary interrogation by Union authorities, he embarked on a ship bound for England. SOE wanted to interrogate Manna in Cape Town, but MI5 disagreed, preferring instead to have him debriefed at their highly secret detention facility, Camp 020, on the Isle of Man.

Meanwhile, SOE had been busy organizing a cover-up operation. Ferreira immediately launched an investigation, taking 'prompt and efficient action' sending his men to guard all frontier posts and going personally to investigate the site where Manna had crossed. For their part, SOE began spreading rumours that Manna had left Portuguese East Africa to sell his services to the allies. Anna Levi was deemed an innocent bystander and no charges were brought against her. This was just another deception invented by the intelligence agencies. OSS reports reveal that she was far from innocent and that her reasons for co-operating had nothing to do with patriotism either. Her relationship with Manna had drawn her to the immediate attention of E. K. Scallan, the resourceful Union consul and Pretoria's main source of intelligence in the Portuguese colony. Levi's association with Manna had resulted in her blacklisting. Therefore her co-operation had been motivated solely to gain re-entry into the Union.<sup>76</sup>

Naturally, Manna was indignant about the way in which he had been hoodwinked by the allies. At first, he refused to co-operate with them and was extremely uncooperative revealing very little detailed information. Portending his continued loyalty to Italy and still aggrieved by the manner of his abduction, time eventually soothed his indignation and unlocked some of the operational secrets he possessed. The capture of two further agents in South Africa – Lambertus Elferink (code-named HAMLET, the agent whom Robey Leibbrandt had threatened to compromise); and Basil Batos (code-named LEO, a Greek journalist, who according to OSS was a 'dangerous enemy agent, [an] associate of all the worst characters') – gave SOE, MI5, and the South African security agencies invaluable information on enemy operations in the region.<sup>77</sup>

The success of the Manna operation prompted further plans to kidnap other important enemy operatives, such as Hans Masser, who had escaped four times from South African internment camps and was deemed to be in possession of crucial information about the links between Werz and German agents operating in southern Africa.<sup>78</sup> In the end these plans were shelved. Unhappy with not being consulted during the final preparations of the Manna kidnapping, the foreign office – which had the ultimate authority over all espionage activities

<sup>76</sup> Manna's kidnapping reported in a letter from AD 4 to CD, 16 June 1943, TNA, HS 3/17; 'SOE in Lourenço Marques', 18 May 1943, NARA, RG 226, entry 92A, box 7, folder 99; 'Scallan and Preston', June 1943; A. R. Preston, American consul general, Lourenço Marques, to Washington, 25 May 1943, *ibid.*; Harlech to C. R. Attlee, secretary of state for the dominions, 26 June 1942, TNA, FO 371/31116/C 8403. Also see SOE Africa war diary, May–June 1943, pp. 159–60 and 173–7, *ibid.*, HS 7/235.

<sup>77</sup> Hoare, ed., *Camp 020*, pp. 256–7; 'Intelligence', pp. 8 and 19, TNA, KV 3/10; index card on Batos, 29 Jan. 1944, NARA, RG 226, entry 92, box 603, folder 25.

<sup>78</sup> DZ 1 to AD 4, 17 Sept. 1943, TNA, HS 3/19.

overseas – was reluctant to sanction further operations of this kind because of the potential damage this might inflict on Anglo-Portuguese relations. Although neutral Portugal had become much more co-operative with the allies – Lisbon’s permission for them to use the Azores bases in the Atlantic for anti-submarine operations being a case in point – London was forever sensitive that aggressive ‘cloak and dagger’ missions such as kidnappings in Portuguese colonial territory might damage future co-operation in other matters. The foreign office was therefore keen to minimize such covert activities preferring instead to use diplomatic means to break up Axis spy rings in the Portuguese colonies.<sup>79</sup>

Reports on the ground also intimated that Portuguese co-operation in Lourenço Marques would be harder to maintain if allied agents continually used strong-arm tactics like assault and abduction. These violent activities were bound to irritate the colonial government and, in the words of the American consul general in Lourenço Marques, A. R. Preston, ‘perhaps hamper other more orthodox, and, to my mind, more effective methods’.<sup>80</sup> SOE agreed. By October 1943, the Portuguese colonial authorities had stiffened their resolve not to bend to allied pressure about the expulsion of enemy agents. And if they were eventually expelled it would be done on the initiative of the Portuguese authorities and not by allied espionage. As a result, strong-arm operations were deemed ‘absolutely impossible’ now that the Portuguese authorities would not for the moment play the diplomatic game. As one SOE officer so poignantly remarked: ‘[I]t would be just too obvious who had done it if [any enemy agents] suddenly disappeared.’<sup>81</sup> Indeed, this was precisely what happened to Werz and Campini. Both were expelled from Portuguese East Africa using diplomatic means, and not, as it was mooted, kidnapped or assassinated.

## V

Even before the expulsion of Campini in October 1943 and Werz in October 1944,<sup>82</sup> British intelligence agencies were beginning to wind down their operations. The eviction of the Axis from North Africa in May 1943, which opened the door to the invasion of Italy soon after, allowed the allied navies to regain control of the Mediterranean and re-establish more direct supply lines to allied theatres of operation in the region. Combined with mounting U-boat losses, this, in turn, began to relieve the pressure on the South African theatre and allied vigilance of

<sup>79</sup> DZ 1 to AD 4, 8 Sept. 1943, TNA, HS 3/18; W to DZ 1, 20 Sept. 1943, *ibid.*, HS 3/19. Useful background to the broader diplomatic nature of Anglo-Portuguese relations can be found in Glyn Stone, *The oldest ally: Britain and the Portuguese connection, 1936–1941* (Woodbridge, 1994).

<sup>80</sup> Preston to Washington, 25 May 1943, NARA, RG 226, entry 92A, box 7, folder 99.

<sup>81</sup> DZ 1 to AD 4, 6 Oct. 1943; progress report no. 3 by DZ 1, 1 Sept. – 1 Oct. 1943, TNA, HS 3/19.

<sup>82</sup> Both men were interrogated by the British. Campini with his wife, governess and secretary were all interrogated in Cape Town while on board the SS *Angola* before being allowed to return to Europe via Portugal. Werz was interned and sent to Camp 020 where he underwent extensive debriefing. For a transcript of Campini’s interrogation see either TNA, HS 3/24 or NARA, RG 226, entry 210, box 219, folder 8589. A copy of Werz’s affidavit is located at UCTAL, Lawrence papers, BC 640, E5-47.

its shipping along the Mozambique Channel. The invasion of north-western Europe in June 1944 contributed further to London's decision to wind down its SOE and Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) operations in southern Africa. Furthermore, South Africa's internal situation had stabilized after 1942; the failure of the extreme right to forge an alliance against the United Party, and Smuts's re-election in July 1943, helped strengthen allied confidence in the region's security.

Nevertheless, the battle against Axis propaganda and espionage in southern Africa was not without its casualties; in particular, trust and inter-allied co-operation. Despite the glossy claims made by 'W' section at the beginning of this article, in this secretive world lurked personal ambition, intense rivalries, and conflicting interests between and within allied intelligence agencies, which, at times, waged a much more intense internecine campaign amongst and against each other. For instance, MI5 and SIS increasingly believed that SOE was trying to horn in on their respective domains in the region. And as the Cinderella service, it suffered greatly from Whitehall obstructionism. London was equally critical of its US ally. During the Manna affair, SOE complained that the OSS operative in Portuguese East Africa, Huntington Harris, had been informed of their kidnap plans. This surely was a violation of the agreement between the two allies that had clearly designated the Portuguese colony as a British jurisdiction. SOE was not questioning the American right of having a liaison mission in the region to help gather intelligence. What they objected to was Harris's knowledge of British operational activities.<sup>83</sup> However, should one be that surprised at Harris's access to this information? After all, Malcolm Muggeridge and he shared the same lodgings in Lourenço Marques!<sup>84</sup>

Finally, there is the all-important South African dimension. Co-operation between Britain and South Africa was a delicate issue because of the internal dynamic in the dominion for most of the war. When London terminated its military mission in Pretoria in 1944, it was made crystal clear to the British just how difficult their assignment in South Africa had been. The director of military intelligence from 1942 to 1948, the liberal Afrikaner, Dr E. G. Malherbe, was courteous and appreciative of MI5's work in South Africa. Brigadier Lenton, who was the only official all three British intelligence agencies had any respect for, wrote to London praising the 'very hard work', especially that of Major Michael Ryde (who had succeeded Colonel Webster as the MI5/MI6 representative in Pretoria). Ryde had been 'put in on a difficult assignment in a strange country', continued Lenton, 'and under conditions of finding not only no active assistance and co-operation in quarters where he reasonably expected them, but passive indifference and indeed actual opposition'.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, police commissioner Baston was relieved to see the dismantlement of all the British

<sup>83</sup> AD 4 to CD, 29 June 1943, TNA, HS 3/17.

<sup>84</sup> SOE Africa war diary, pp. 174-5, TNA, HS 7/235. For Muggeridge's experiences as an MI6 operative see his *Chronicles of wasted time*, II: *The infernal grove* (London, 1973), pp. 120-86.

<sup>85</sup> Appendix, 'Intelligence', TNA, KV 3/10.

intelligence networks in the Union and welcomed a return to normality. ‘[A]t times it has been just a bit embarrassing to find our “Secret” work intruded upon and frequently overlapped by zealous, and well-meaning, yet still amateur operatives ... I of course refer to Union matters only on which I and my Secret Staff, thoroughly conversant with the language and character of the Afrikaner, were more qualified to judge.’<sup>86</sup> These petty jealousies combined with the high drama, intrigue, and derring-do make southern Africa a remarkable and fascinating but hitherto unexplored case study in the world of wartime espionage.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.