

“All just grandiose plans and talk”: The destruction of Oswald Pirow’s reputation as Minister of Defence, 1940

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Abstract

The popular perception of Oswald Pirow is that of an incompetent Minister of Defence, much derided for his bush carts pulled by oxen in the era of the *blitzkrieg* doctrine of dive-bombers and tanks. However, this was not the perception of him in the years between 1933 and 1939. When Pirow became Minister of Defence in 1933, the Union Defence Force was in a poor state. During the Great Depression between 1929 and 1933, austerity measures had reduced the already small army to an insignificant force. In what has been described as a Pirowian renaissance he succeeded in improving the preparedness of the Union Defence Force drastically. Ian van der Waag points out that with the outbreak of the Second World War, South African defences were in a better state of preparation than during any other period in its peacetime history. This was a considerable achievement, as Pirow had to deal with the vehement hostility of the National Party who viewed the Union Defence Force as a tool to serve British imperialism. In addition, the average white voter was extremely reluctant to pay taxes to fund a standing army, while the rise of Nazi Germany made it near impossible to secure modern armaments from Britain. What ultimately destroyed Pirow’s reputation as Minister of Defence was his disastrous performance in the 1940 parliamentary session. His vindictive attacks on Jan Smuts made it possible for the premier to launch a devastating counterattack, condemning him as a fraud and an incompetent windbag. In the process, Smuts succeeded in destroying Pirow’s reputation as a highly regarded administrator and as a potential prime minister.

Introduction

At the end of August 1939, Oswald Pirow, the United Party (UP) member of parliament (MP) for Gezina and the Minister of Defence, was one of South Africa’s most controversial politicians. For some English speakers, he was too pro-German, and he had autocratic tendencies, while the National Party (NP) viewed him as a puppet of British imperialism. And yet, he was the odds-on favourite to succeed JBM. Hertzog as prime minister. The reason for this was that he was an outstanding orator and parliamentary debater, as well as a highly rated cabinet minister. He was the founder of the South African Airways, reviver and moderniser of the bankrupt railway system, and as the Minister of Defence the rebuilder of the neglected Union Defence Force (UDF).

In October 1938, the London *Sunday Times* expressed its admiration in the following terms, “Pirow is a remarkable man ... as an administrator, he probably has no superior in the British Empire”.² For General JC Smuts, the deputy prime minister, he was one of the “coming leaders of the country”.³ However, by May 1940, he was vilified as a fraud and an incompetent windbag. This article sets out to explain the factors and events that shattered Pirow’s political reputation during the 1940 parliamentary session and which left a lasting perception of him as a disastrous Minister of Defence.

Biographical background

Oswald Pirow was born in Aberdeen in the Cape Colony on 14 August 1890. His parents were German-born. His father, Carl Ferdinand, a medical doctor, was the son of a missionary, and had emigrated to South Africa in 1888. When Pirow was three years of age, his parents settled in Potchefstroom in the Transvaal where they became naturalised citizens of the South African Republic. In 1905, due to a lack of educational facilities in South Africa, Pirow went to study at Itzehoe Gymnasium in Holstein, Germany. On completion of his school education, he attended the Middle Temple in London from 1910 to 1913 to qualify as a barrister. On being called to the Bar, he returned to South Africa in 1914, determined to follow a political career.⁴ That he was raised with German as his home language, was educated in Germany, and that he was a member of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church meant that, in the eyes of many Afrikaners, he was not one of them. Paul Sauer, a prominent Cape MP, defined it as Pirow’s *Duitsheid* (German attitude).⁵

Minister of Defence and the poor state of the Union Defence Force, 1933

Despite the doubts about his Afrikaner identity, Pirow had a meteoric political career in the NP, the political platform of Afrikaner nationalism. He was elected to parliament in 1924 and became the Minister of Justice in 1929. On 31 March 1933, with the forming of the coalition government of the NP and South African Party (SAP), he became Minister of Railways and Harbours, as well as of Defence. The Union Defence Force (UDF) was in a poor state. During the Great Depression, austerity measures between 1929 and 1933 had reduced the already small UDF to an insignificant force. In 1927, the UDF had consisted of 151 officers and 1 259 men and was dependent on the Active Citizen Force (ACF) part-time soldiers for the defence of the country. Because of the financial hardships, 49 ACF units and 54 Defence Rifle Associations (the commandos) were disbanded. Between 1930 and 1934, the army could not afford even small-scale training exercises. The poor state of the UDF provided Pirow with an opportunity to enhance his political prospects. Energetic, dynamic and with a burning desire to become prime minister he had to show himself as an efficient administrator, as well as a defender of the white minority in South Africa. Turning the ramshackle UDF into an efficient fighting force would help to pave his way to the premiership.

Pirow immediately set out to rebuild the UDF.⁶ It was a challenging task as most of his fellow NP MPs felt that the traditional commando system, made up of volunteers, was more than enough to protect the country, as a professional standing army would

be an instrument for British imperialism. This was reflected in the opposition to the founding of the Special Service Battalion (SSB) to assist poor white youths. Within days of his appointment as the Defence Minister, Pirow had to decide about the SSB being part of the UDF. On 17 March 1933, General AJE (Andries) Brink, Chief of the General Staff and Secretary of Defence, had submitted a detailed plan for such a battalion to Pirow's predecessor Colonel FHP Creswell.⁷ Eager to prove the coalition's determination to deal with poverty amongst white people and to enhance his own political image, Pirow accepted the proposal on 18 April. During the defence budget on 12 June 1933, Paul Sauer – who resented the contemptuous and autocratic way Pirow treated NP backbenchers – used the founding of the SSB to settle a score with him. His speech oozed loathing for a man he regarded as too arrogant and too German in his attitude:

The hon. the Minister of Railways is, I would not like to say, contemptuous, but he is very near it. He has got Prussian antecedents, and he does not believe much in democracy ...⁸

Sauer then proceeded to claim that the SSB could be the nucleus of a Nazi corps, sneeringly demanding to know whether the young men of the SSB would wear the black or brown shirts of the fascists, or red shirts to commemorate Pirow's visit to communist Russia in 1925. Although other MPs praised the SSB to the skies, Sauer did harm Pirow's reputation as it created the perception that he had a soft spot for authoritarian ideas. Other republican NP MPs also felt that the SSB was an unsuitable institution for South Africa as it was an attempt to militarise the Afrikaner youth as potential cannon fodder for the British Empire in any future war.⁹ The hostility of these NP MPs to any rebuilding of the UDF increased after 5 December 1934 with the merger of the SAP and NP to form the UP. DF Malan, leader of the Cape NP, refused to join the new party as he viewed the SAP as a puppet of British imperialism. He became the leader of the remaining ultra-nationalistic rump of the NP, the "Purified" NP.¹⁰

For his defence plans, Pirow also had to bear a sceptical white electorate in mind. As the country had no enemies, geography and British domination of the continent after the First World War had given South Africa safe land borders, while the Royal Navy, with its base at Simon's Town, was responsible for the defence of the coastline.¹¹ Voters were therefore reluctant to pay any more taxes for the upkeep of a standing army. As a result, Pirow focused on one of the reasons for the founding of the UDF, namely the fear of a potential black uprising in Africa north of the Limpopo against colonial rule, which might imperil the "white civilisation" in South Africa¹² to secure public support for an enlarged and modernised UDF. In July 1933, at a Committee of Imperial Defence meeting in London, he pointed out that, although it was not governmental policy, it was possible that South Africa could provide military assistance in the British colonies of Kenya, Uganda and Tanganyika (now Tanzania) in "a case of protecting whites against natives". General Sir Pierre van Ryneveld, the Chief of the UDF's General Staff, informed British officials that Pirow's "plea for co-operation in defence of the white civilization of Africa was really a political cry to justify the retention of the Union Defence Forces".¹³ This led to Pirow emphasising the growing military might

of imperial Japan and that a Japanese victory over Western colonial powers in Asia could create the opportunity for a black uprising in Africa, unleashing an invasion of South Africa.¹⁴ The “maintenance and supremacy of our white civilisation” became the essence of Pirow’s five-year plan, compiled with the assistance of Generals Van Ryneveld and Andries Brink and presented to parliament on 2 May 1934 to rebuild the UDF.¹⁵

The five-year plan was a significant change to South Africa’s security strategy. Up to 1933, the NP government’s strategy was limited to the land defence of the Royal Navy naval base in Simon’s Town in terms of the 1922 agreement with Britain. There was a determination not to use the UDF outside of South Africa, as it was feared that it could be used to support the British Empire in the case of a European war. The change in South Africa’s security strategy convinced Major AN Williams of the Royal Marines – the Royal Navy’s intelligence officer and liaison officer with the UDF in South Africa – that Pirow was a whole hearted Imperialist, working hard to make South Africa a valuable link of the Empire, and that there was the possibility that South Africa might participate in a war against Japan. Although he accepted that the country would be reluctant to participate in a war against Germany, Williams thought that, if the Germans attacked Great Britain, South Africa would come to its assistance.¹⁶

Pirow’s re-organisation plan was approved by parliament, and he secured an increase in the defence budget, the first since 1924. The budget would increase every subsequent year.¹⁷ And yet, Pirow still did not have the necessary funds to achieve his goals. Even with war clouds gathering in Europe in 1939, the budget for the UDF would be smaller than the one for the police.¹⁸ An important reason for this state of affairs was political pressure, as the NP viewed Pirow’s black invasion warnings as a smokescreen to serve the interests of Britain. In 1935, Malan rejected Pirow’s warnings of attacks by black hordes from the north, or by the Japanese as a scare story to convince Afrikaners to give up their freedom by seeking protection from the British Empire.¹⁹

That concerns about the NP as an electoral threat had a profound influence on Pirow’s defence plans was evident in his determination in 1935 to secure a 15-inch gun battery to defend Cape Town. The British War Office and the Committee of Imperial Defence felt that 9.2-inch guns were more than adequate to deal with any hostile naval raiders.²⁰ Pirow claimed that the bigger guns were a case of political necessity. Although the UP was on the crest of the political wave and even though it would win the next election, it was impossible to say what would happen after that. Fearing the growth potential of the NP, Pirow wanted big measures to counter NP propaganda that the UP was a puppet of British imperialism.²¹ The 15-inch guns had to serve as proof that the UDF was not in the service of the British Empire, but was the defender of South Africa’s neutrality. In this, Pirow had the full support of Vice Admiral Sir ERGR Evans, officer-in-command of the Royal Navy’s Africa Station, who regarded Pirow as his greatest friend in the southern hemisphere. In his memoirs, Evans wrote that Pirow’s “company to me was like a glass of champagne after a successful Admiral’s inspection”.²²

To secure South Africa's goodwill and especially that of Pirow, who was perceived as Hertzog's successor in any future European conflict, the British government approved his request for 15-inch guns. To protect the city in the period that it would take to install such a gun battery, the monitor HMS Erebus with its two 15-inch guns, was offered on loan to South Africa.²³ As it was essential for Pirow to present to parliament a complete scheme for the defence of Cape Town, he demanded support and assistance from Britain to ensure that the use of a monitor was a viable protection scheme. The high commissioner in Pretoria promptly urged Malcolm MacDonald, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, to provide support, "[i]t is important that we should do our best to meet the wishes of Pirow who would be rather seriously embarrassed politically in the event of the scheme collapsing."²⁴ MacDonald concurred and wrote to Sir Samuel Hoare, First Lord of the Admiralty, to give the most sympathetic consideration to Pirow's requests – "I need not say how important it is from the political point of view that we should do everything that we can to help him."²⁵

Rebuilding the UDF

Under the leadership of Pirow, a gradual process to rebuild the UDF started. The number of commissioned officers in the standing army was enlarged, while the training of troops was improved as money was provided for the field training of ACF units. Large field exercises were held in 1937, 1938 and 1939.²⁶ Pirow instructed Colonel George Brink to visit Britain, Germany, France and Italy to study their armed forces. On his return, Brink was appointed Director of Army Organisation and Training. He was to be promoted to Deputy Chief of Staff in 1938, and played a leading role in reorganising the army and improve its training.²⁷ After the Italian invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1935, Pirow set out to create a modern air force to counter any possible Italian aggression.²⁸ After World War I, the main aim of the South African Air Force (SAAF) was internal security and white hegemony, for example, the bombing and machine gunning of rebellious African groups, such as the Bondelswart Nama in South West Africa (Namibia), and the crushing of the revolt by white miners in Johannesburg. For this, the obsolete aeroplanes of the SAAF were adequate, but not for dealing with a modern air force such as that of the Italians. Pirow became convinced that, if the SAAF had a thousand modern planes, no foreign country would venture an attack on South Africa. To make this a reality, he announced a scheme to train a thousand pilots over five years with the commensurate expansion in the strength of the air force and the creation of four new airfields.²⁹ To implement this scheme, the state subsidised flying clubs to train civilians. The aim was to recruit university students. On completion of their training, these new pilots would be contractually obliged to undergo part-time military training and to be placed on the SAAF Special Reserve. In 1938, a hundred Hawker Hart aircraft, purchased from Britain, started to arrive in the country to be used for the training of pilots. To assist with the training process, a new airbase in Pretoria, the Waterkloof Air Station, was built. This allowed the Swartkop Airfield to be used solely for training purposes.³⁰

An insurmountable challenge for Pirow was the difficulty to secure up-to-date weapons as Britain, increasingly concerned about the growing might of Nazi Germany, refused to part with modern armaments. In 1935, 400 Bren guns were ordered by the

South African government. After two years, only 15 had however been delivered.³¹ Not even Smuts with his high standing in London could convince the British government to provide the UDF with these machine guns.³² To deal with the shortage of weapons and military equipment, Pirow set up a War Supplies Board in May 1937. The first step of the Board was to initiate the process to establish a small arms ammunition factory.³³

In this period of growing concern about the aggressiveness of Nazi Germany, Pirow – with his German background – went out of his way to distance himself from national socialism. He publicly declared his support of democracy. On 6 June 1937, he announced, “South Africa will never depart from its democratic system, and it will be deplorable, therefore, if that system is undermined or rendered impotent.”³⁴ In the defence budget debate of 7 September 1938, Pirow addressed accusations that he had German sympathies by forcefully denying that he was pro-Nazi:

I am not pro-Nazi and I am not anti-Nazi. I am once and for all in favour of our democratic system, and I do not get hot and bothered about what is going on in other countries.³⁵

Mission to Nazi Germany, November 1938

The Sudetenland crisis of September 1938 convinced the Hertzog government that South Africa was ill-prepared to defend itself. The decision was made to send Pirow to London in November of that year to secure modern armaments. The visit provided Pirow an opportunity to offer his services to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to act as a mediator with Hitler to prevent a war. He knew that, in a European war, it would be difficult for South Africa to remain neutral. A war could only shatter the achievements of the UP government and damage his chances of becoming prime minister. On 18 November 1938, in a Berlin meeting, Pirow informed Hermann Göring, head of the German air force, that in a war between Germany and Britain, South Africa would not enter immediately. However, as government-embracing neutrality would struggle to survive, South Africa would be fighting on the side of Britain within six months. He also made it clear that South Africa would be part of the British Empire for the next hundred years or so.³⁶ In his meeting with Hitler, he was shaken by the dictator’s arrogance, impatience and aggression. In January 1939, Pirow told GH Wilson, editor of the *Cape Times*, that while talking to Hitler he felt like a “second rate Roman Consul talking to John the Baptist”.³⁷ He informed Sir Ogilvie Forbes of the British embassy in Berlin that his conversation with Hitler had left him pessimistic. He felt that he was talking to a brick wall, and that it was as if Hitler was addressing a meeting of ten thousand people when talking to him. He claimed that Hitler occasionally thumped the table and that he then thumped the table back.³⁸ Pirow later told Lord Perth, the British ambassador to Italy, that he had made no impression on Hitler and that he was up against a stone wall.³⁹ On 26 November, Pirow left Berlin. The Germans were not sad to see him go. His warnings that in a war with Britain South Africa would eventually be fighting on the British side meant that he was no longer *persona grata* in Berlin. Dr Rudolf Leitner, Germany’s diplomatic representative in South Africa, was instructed that for the Reichsparteitag in 1939 no special effort had to be made for Pirow.⁴⁰

London and the efforts to secure modern armaments for the UDF, November 1938

Pirow's visit to London was equally disappointing as he found that Leslie Hore-Belisha, Minister for War, and General Lord Gort, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, were only willing to part with obsolete weaponry.⁴¹ In his meeting with Malcolm MacDonald, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs on 2 November, he demanded the minister's assistance in buying modern weapons. Pirow pointed out that he had to secure at least 1 400 Bren guns, anti-aircraft guns and searchlights, or he would not be able to face parliament and the public in South Africa. To bolster his case, he argued that South Africa's neutrality was becoming increasingly theoretical as war was no respecter of persons or countries, and that the two countries should be together in a war against Germany.⁴² MacDonald subsequently arranged a meeting for Pirow with Sir Thomas Inskip, Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence. In their meeting, Pirow used South Africa's willingness to defend Kenya against an invasion by Italy to secure modern armaments. He also emphasised South Africa's considerable financial contribution in erecting coastal gun batteries to protect the Cape sea route, an important trade route for Britain. Inskip remained unmoved. Britain needed the required Bren guns.⁴³

In terms of diplomacy and the purchase of weapons, Pirow's visit to Berlin and London achieved little. His self-appointed peace mission was not welcomed in Germany, while it caused embarrassment in Britain. Yet, there was relief in London that Pirow had accepted that in a war with Germany, South Africa would not remain neutral. Ultimately, he managed to allay fears in British circles about his loyalty to the Empire and that he was pro-German. This was evident in an article of Hardie Stewart, editor of *The Torchbearer*, official mouthpiece of the Junior Imperial League in the *Right Bulletin*, organ of the Right Book Club. Hardie Stewart forcefully stated that he hoped that Pirow would be the next prime minister of South Africa as it would be a good thing for South Africa and Britain, "Mr Pirow is a true British subject. His interests are those of the British Commonwealth of Nations."⁴⁴

That Pirow was convinced that South Africa would be involved in a European war was evident in a memorandum from the Quartermaster General of the UDF to the Chief of General Staff on 3 March 1939. The memo stated that six months would elapse after the outbreak of a war before South Africa could become involved on a major scale.⁴⁵ On 18 March 1939, three days after Hitler had invaded and occupied Czechoslovakia, Heaton Nicholls, UP MP for Zululand and a passionate defender of the imperial link with Britain, confronted Pirow on his stance should Britain enter a war with Nazi Germany. He recorded his answer in his diary:

My [Pirow] own position is that while I would not fight for the Empire as you would, I am going to fight for South Africa. I believe we shall have no say in the matter. The fight will be forced on us. I do not trust Hitler. I did, before he made this last move. I do not do so now and he must be resisted.⁴⁶

Nicholls concluded that Pirow and Hertzog would not stand for neutrality should a war result from German aggression. That Pirow was sincere in his determination

to oppose Nazi Germany after a period of neutrality was evident from notes that he provided in May 1939 for a UP pamphlet to be released after South Africa had entered a war against Nazi Germany. In these notes, he explained why the country could not be neutral if Germany were to attack Britain.⁴⁷

Despite this failure to secure modern weapons, Pirow confidently asserted during the defence budget debate on 23 March 1939, that South Africa would be able to defend itself in a war. He gave a comprehensive survey of the measures to strengthen the country's defences and announced that the defence programme, as set out in 1934, had been exceeded in most respects. Five years earlier, there were only 22 learner pilots in the SAAF; in 1939, there were 432, as well as an organised reserve of 140 pilots, compared with the 46 in 1934. In 1934, there were 16 ACF infantry battalions; in 1939 they had increased to 37, while there were 150 000 men in the Defence Rifle Associations (the commandos) compared to 118 000 in 1934. For the first time, Pirow publicly announced, to loud approval from the House, that from 1 September 1939 the HMS Erebus, manned by South Africans, was being lent to South Africa by the British government to protect Cape Town. He furthermore pointed out the difficulty in purchasing modern weapons, as Britain was only willing to sell obsolete equipment.⁴⁸ On 2 May 1939, after Sauer had accused him of providing a false picture of the state of the UDF's readiness and that South African troops would be mere cannon fodder if they had to meet a well-equipped force, Pirow made it clear to parliament that the army was in no state to participate in a major war.⁴⁹

On 8 May 1939, on Pirow's initiative, the government started a National Reserve registration, a voluntary registration of men, not part of the ACF, who were willing to do military service in a war situation. The *Cape Times* (11 May 1939) enthusiastically reported that the Department of Defence had distributed 250 000 registration forms, while an intake of 1 700 ACF recruits was accommodated to do their military training. The NP-supporting *Die Burger* (29 May 1939), also with a tone of satisfaction, reported that only English speakers and Jews were registering. On 8 August 1939, the newspaper announced with glee that hardly any Afrikaners had registered.

Bush carts, 1939

As part of the measures to strengthen the defence of the country, Pirow played a leading role in the development of the bush cart, a type of Scotch cart with one shaft and two large spoked wheels pulled by two oxen or mules. For a man obsessed with the desire to have the latest weapons, the bush cart seemed an odd acquisition. However, for Pirow, who was convinced that in any future European war involving Italy or Germany, the British colonies of Kenya and Tanganyika would form South Africa's strategic frontier,⁵⁰ they were the perfect means to convey material in rough terrain for bush warfare. Here he was influenced by *The South Africans with General Smuts in German East Africa* (1939) of General Jack Collyer, a former mounted infantryman with 50 years of service in Africa and the UDF's former chief of staff during the First World War. Collyer discounted mechanised transport in Africa; only mounted troops could be counted on.⁵¹ The bush carts were formally unveiled at the end of July 1939.⁵² On 8

and 9 August 1939, the UDF held a field exercise with 1 000 men and bush carts in the northern Transvaal near Tzaneen. The object of the exercise was to test the bush carts under active service conditions by transporting equipment through virgin bush country with no roads while the air force had to find the convoy from the air.⁵³ The *Cape Times* special correspondent observing the exercise bubbled over in his admiration and respect for Pirow and declared the manoeuvres exceptionally successful,⁵⁴ an attitude shared by the editor of the *Cape Times* on in a leading article “Our Bushveld frontier”:

The combination of the primitive ox-drawn cart on the one hand, and the most modern instrument of warfare on the other may indeed point to a solution of the difficulties peculiar to military operations on our northern frontier and far beyond it. The aeroplane will be indispensable, if only for the purpose of reconnoitring, but motor vehicles and even tanks may have to make way for a sturdier, more elastic conveyance, manned by soldiers of a race that possesses a natural aptitude for what Mr Pirow yesterday called bushcraft.⁵⁵

The UDF, August 1939

In August 1939, the UDF consisted of 260 officers and 4 600 men (of whom 2 080 were in the air force), the SSB had a strength of 1 900 men, and the ACF boasted 950 officers and 14 000 men. The air force had one Blenheim bomber, one Fairey Battle bomber, four Hurricane fighters and 63 obsolete Hawker Hartbeest planes, and 230 training aircraft. With regard to armaments, the army had two obsolete medium tanks, two outdated armoured cars, two armoured trains, a number of artillery pieces with only 941 rounds of ammunition, and eight anti-aircraft guns.⁵⁶ Although numerically small and poorly armed, the UDF had undergone a dramatic improvement under Pirow’s control since 1933. As Ian Van der Waag points out, “South Africa’s defences reached a peak in 1939 and were in a better state of preparation than any other time in its peacetime history.”⁵⁷ Evert Kleynhans, although critical of Pirow’s lack of strategic planning, concurs and concludes that, in terms of improvements to the military, the period between 1933 and 1939 was a “Pirowian renaissance”.⁵⁸ In a series of articles that were to be published in 1937 as a booklet, the military correspondent of the *Cape Argus* praised Pirow’s “tireless zeal and impatience” in improving the UDF from its “quite useless proportions” in 1933.⁵⁹

Outbreak of the Second World War and the resignation of the Hertzog government, September 1939

On 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, leading to Britain’s declaration of war on 3 September. Pirow told TC Robertson of the *Sunday Times* that it would take at least six months before a decision would be taken by South Africa to declare war.⁶⁰ To Pirow’s surprise, Hertzog’s motion of neutrality was defeated in parliament, splitting the UP and ending Pirow’s career as a government minister. The outbreak of the war shattered the political mould. Pirow’s former NP enemies, who continued to loathe him, were now his allies as Hertzog’s followers formed a united party with the NP, called the Herenigde Nasionale Party (Reunited National Party) (HNP). On the other hand,

most of Pirow's former allies in the UP felt betrayed by his support for neutrality and believed that he had taken them for fools by operating under false political colours, and they treated him with icy disdain. The editors of UP-supporting newspapers, feeling embarrassed by its earlier praise of Pirow, participated in a whispering campaign that left the UDF in a mess. This was after Smuts – as the new Prime Minister and Minister of Defence – had informed John Martin, chairman and managing director of the Argus press group, that Pirow had left the UDF in “woeful state of unpreparedness” for any war.⁶¹ These rumours had a political purpose to undermine Pirow who was feared by Smuts as his most dangerous opponent.⁶²

Pirow and Smuts had a history of enmity. In the 1929 general election, Pirow had left his safe NP seat in Soutpansberg to confront Smuts in his Standerton constituency. By 1929, rural Afrikaners were no longer willing to support the SAP, especially in the wake of Smuts's opposition to the attempt by the NP to remove black people from the common voters' roll in the Cape Province. Pirow, who described the Standerton contest as a battle in which no quarter was asked for or given, made extensive use of black peril tactics. He accused Smuts of being in favour of the vote for black women. “What a lovely state of affairs it will be when aya [derogatory term for a black woman] goes to the polling booth with a little monkey on her back.”⁶³ Smuts retained his seat with a small majority of 173 votes. Personal loyalty to him as a hero of the South African War had pulled him through. Between 1929 and 1933, Pirow did not let up in his scathing attacks on Smuts in the House of Assembly, casting sneering doubts on his abilities as leader of the opposition and on his integrity as a politician. As fellow ministers in the Hertzog government after 1933, Pirow and Smuts made a concerted effort to get along. However, the breakup of the Hertzog government provided an opportunity for Smuts to settle an old score.

Pirow on the attack

Pirow, feeling isolated in the HNP and sensitive to the rumours that he had left the UDF in a mess, had a high opinion of himself and expected recognition and respect for his genius. He decided the best way to strengthen his position in the party and parliament was to confront Smuts and smash him in a parliamentary debate. The opportunity arose on 23 January 1940 with Hertzog's motion that the time has come that South Africa's role in the war with Germany should be ended, and peace be restored. In seconding the motion, Pirow launched a vicious personal attack on the prime minister. The day before the debate, an MP had asked him whether it would be a fight with the gloves off. He replied, “not only with the gloves off but with knuckledusters on”.⁶⁴ It was no empty threat, as Pirow, who was a master of sarcasm and viciousness to belittle and wound his opponents in debates, attacked Smuts mercilessly. After accusing Smuts of behaving dishonourably in his support of a war against Germany, Pirow defended his own tenure as Minister of Defence.⁶⁵ It was a poor speech, unfocused, rambling, and vindictive – creating the perception that he was pursuing a personal vendetta against Smuts. In doing so, Pirow strengthened the alienation of his former supporters in the UP who did not take kindly to his abuse of their beloved party leader. He also did himself no favours with the former NP MPs as he had created the impression that he was pursuing his own

agenda instead of the interests of Afrikaner nationalism. For CR Swart, who had lost his parliamentary seat in the 1938 general election, the speech showed that Pirow was a fool, and that it was a source of derision for friend and foe alike.⁶⁶ More ominously, Pirow had aroused the resentment of Smuts who had listened in silence to him, with his face turning red when Pirow was at his most insulting.⁶⁷ Smuts was not a person to turn the other cheek, but as a shrewd politician, was awaiting the right opportunity to strike back at Pirow. Until then, he left the counterattacking to his acolytes.

What Pirow did not realise was that his defence of his administration of the Department of Defence provided an opportunity for Smuts to strike at him. Before 23 January 1940, there was only a whispering campaign. Smuts could not afford a public condemnation, as it would elicit the question why he did not raise any concerns about the state of the army while he was in the cabinet with Pirow. There was also the realisation that Pirow could not be held accountable for the inability of the UDF to enter a war immediately. When Deneys Reitz, the Minister of Native Affairs and a close ally of Smuts, met with Anthony Eden in London in October 1939, he pointed out that the UDF was in a deplorable state, but that Pirow had not wilfully run down the armed forces.⁶⁸ However, Pirow's blistering attack on Smuts made it possible for the prime minister to unleash a coordinated attack on him. In the lead of the counterattack was PV Pocock, UP MP for Pretoria Central and the chairperson of a committee to investigate South Africa's defence needs. On 25 January, Pocock claimed in the House of Assembly that Pirow had spent none of the money budgeted for defence and that he had left the UDF in a dismal state, leaving the country defenceless. In effect, he accused Pirow of misleading parliament about the true state of the UDF's military readiness, and that his reputation for competence and as a go-getter, was a mere façade.⁶⁹ A furious Pirow, who had already used his speaking opportunity in the debate, could only respond with an interjection, "[w]hy don't you ask the Prime Minister?" drawing attention to the fact that, as a fellow cabinet member, Smuts had never criticised his stewardship of the defence portfolio, and had approved of all his defence plans.⁷⁰ This was not how the UP supporting press saw it, as in a leading article under the heading "What Pirow didn't" the *Cape Times* (26 January 1940) condemned him for giving the country an army without equipment, artillery without ammunition and an air force without modern planes. The *Rand Daily Mail* dubbed him the "Get nothing done ex-Minister of Defence".⁷¹ It was a shock for Pirow to turn overnight from the blue-eyed boy of the UP-friendly press into what he ruefully described as an "evil person".⁷² The shock was aggravated by the lack of support in his own party. For the *Cape Times's* parliamentary correspondent, it was obvious that the former NP MPs enjoyed Pocock's assault on Pirow.⁷³ A badly bruised Pirow was determined to get back at Smuts. Confident that he could force Smuts to concede that he had left the UDF in a good state, Pirow launched an attack on Smuts on 7 February during the War Measures Bill. His confidence was boosted by the fact that Smuts had retained the high command he had created for the UDF. After condemning him once more for breaking his pledge on neutrality, Pirow challenged Smuts to formulate what was wrong with the UDF.⁷⁴ So vehement and personal was his attack that Sauer noted that it was motivated by hatred.⁷⁵

Smuts's counterattack

Smuts maintained his silence, but behind the scenes, he was preparing a counter-attack with the assistance of General Collyer who had become his military secretary on 11 September.⁷⁶ Collyer, a fierce Smuts loyalist, provided him with a detailed memorandum on the state of the UDF in September 1939. The document, compiled early in 1940, was in effect a charge sheet against Pirow, as Collyer held him responsible for the fact that the UDF was unable to fight an immediate war. Ignoring Pirow's statement of 2 May 1939 that the UDF was in no state to participate in a major war, Collyer accused him of exaggerating the preparedness of the UDF to parliament and that his statements were in effect "smoke and mirrors".⁷⁷ In his determination to get at Pirow, Collyer resorted to using Sauer's claim that South African troops were so poorly armed that to put them into a combat situation amounted to "nothing less than murder".⁷⁸ He ignored Sauer's opposition to the improvement of the UDF as money wasted on British imperial interests. The memorandum was a powerful weapon in the hands of Smuts who was determined to destroy Pirow.

In the defence budget debate on 14 March, a confident Pirow set out to force Smuts to concede that, as a fellow member of the Hertzog government, Smuts had approved and supported Pirow's defence policy, and that Smuts was kept fully informed of the UDF's state of readiness. Pirow rejected the accusations thrown at him as false and unfair, challenging Smuts to provide the facts and figures of his alleged incompetence, or to appoint a parliamentary select committee to investigate his claimed neglect of duty. If the prime minister did not formulate his charges, the country would know that false accusations had been levelled against him.⁷⁹ In his response, Smuts protested that he was baffled by Pirow's anger about his silence, as he personally had not laid any charges against him, but in the face of his challenge, he could not remain silent any longer. In a measured tone, he proceeded to savage Pirow's tenure as Minister of Defence as all just grandiose plans and talk. He had no criticism of his five-year plan for the UDF, as it was a good plan, but as Pirow had done nothing but making beautiful speeches, he had failed miserably in implementing the plan. In a mocking tone, with UP MPs encouraging Smuts with loud cheers and laughter, he condemned as a folly the hiring of the HMS Erebus (in September 1939, on the request of Winston Churchill, the loan had been cancelled).⁸⁰ In doing so, Smuts distorted events by ignoring the intention to create an anchorage for the monitor at Robben Island by claiming that, with the Erebus moored in Cape Town harbour, it was a greater threat to the city than to any enemy.⁸¹ The firing of its guns would cause great destruction to the docks and would cause half of Cape Town to collapse. Smuts then went on to compare Pirow's 1934 vision and the real state of the UDF in 1939, listing the lack of weapons, including a shortage of 833 Bren machine guns, omitting the fact that not even Smuts could convince the British government to sell them to South Africa.

With a continuous stream of interjections, Pirow attempted to disrupt Smuts's onslaught, but the Prime Minister with contemptuous ease batted them away. Resorting to Collyer's memorandum, Smuts quoted Sauer's "plain murder" claim if the UDF had to face a combat situation. However, the most damaging blow to Pirow came with an

interjection of a UP MP. This was after Smuts had mocked Pirow's intention to create a mechanical battalion, by pointing out that the UDF had only two obsolete tanks, two obsolete armoured cars and two armoured trains. "And bush carts" a UP MP called out.⁸² In the aftermath of Germany's destruction of the Polish army with its *blitzkrieg* doctrine of dive bombers and tanks, the bush cart methods seemed comical. With this interjection, UP MPs collapsed into mocking laughter.⁸³ Smuts then pronounced that he was going to carry out the five-year plan. He concluded on a devastating note:

[T]he fact of the matter is that when the hon. member [Pirow] left the department our defence system even after his five-year plan was something on paper with which we could not go out to face any enemy, it was more of a danger than a protection to the country, and in those circumstances the hon. member has no reason for boasting of his achievements.⁸⁴

Within a few minutes, Smuts had destroyed Pirow's reputation. After 14 March 1940, any speech by Pirow would be interrupted with calls of "bush cart", and mocking laughter. In responding to his speeches, UP speakers would brush it off, as any comment by the creator of the bush cart strategy was not worthy of any consideration.⁸⁵ In contrast to the UP's hounding of Pirow, there was little support for Pirow in the HNP's parliamentary caucus. The former NP MPs, after years of being on the receiving end of his sneering sarcasm, relished the fact that Smuts had humiliated him. In his recollections, Pirow admitted that he had found the open pleasure these MPs derived from his savaging far more painful than the attack itself.⁸⁶ Sauer was one of those who made no attempt to hide his satisfaction. In a letter to CR Swart, Sauer expressed his admiration for the cool and calm way Smuts had cut Pirow down to size. For him, Pirow's failure in the defence budget debate was final proof that he was a political lightweight:

I never knew that Pirow could be so utterly useless as I now discover ... Blackie [Swart], you must come and help. This utter superficial, frivolous bantam rooster will become a great danger for us in the future. (author's translation)⁸⁷

Smuts's hatchet job on Pirow led to jubilation in the UP-supporting press. *Die Suidersstem* (15 March 1940), which until September 1939 was sycophantic in its admiration of Pirow, praised the speech as "Pirow ontmasker" (Pirow unmasked). The HNP-supporting newspapers were lukewarm in their support of Pirow. *Die Burger* had a tradition of reporting parliamentary debates in the most heroic light for NP MPs. The furthest the newspaper would go was to point out that Pirow was on the defensive against Smuts, and that his debating performances were improving.⁸⁸ The lack of support by his own party harmed Pirow, as he was an effective speaker when the political tide and wind were favourable, but not so when he had to deal with a hostile House.⁸⁹

During Smuts's attack, a seething Pirow promised that he would respond during the committee stage of the defence budget. Four days later, he had his opportunity, condemning the prime minister's claims on the state of the UDF as preposterous. However, the main aim of his attack was to damage Smuts's reputation as a war leader by

claiming that the cancellation of the loan of the *Erebus* had left Cape Town at the mercy of German naval raiders. Against what the parliamentary representative of the *Cape Times* described as “uproarious government laughter”,⁹⁰ Smuts once more portrayed the hiring of the HMS *Erebus* as a costly and grandiose scheme that was more a danger to the city than to the enemy.⁹¹ Smuts kept the pressure on Pirow, as on 15 April, in the Committee of Supply for the Department of Defence, he once more attacked him for leaving the UDF practically speaking, in an unarmed and hopeless state. In effect, Smuts accused Pirow of being a liar, as he had left the country with the wrong impression that “our defence was in a magnificent state”.⁹²

The Blackwell debacle

Pirow responded that it was Smuts who was misleading the country with deliberate false statements, as he knew that Britain had refused to sell modern armaments, such as machine guns. As Pirow for once controlled his passions and temper, he levelled the accusation in a tone of sorrow that a former cabinet colleague could attack him in such a way. In this, he was supported by Klasie Havenga, the highly respected former Minister of Finance, who pointed out that Smuts, as a member of the Hertzog government, was jointly responsible for the state of the UDF, especially as Pirow had taken him into his confidence on military affairs.⁹³ It was an effective counter-attack, but Pirow’s behaviour after Havenga’s speech destroyed any possible positive outcome.

Pirow left his seat when Leslie Blackwell, UP MP for Kensington, started to address the chamber, condemning his attack on Smuts. Blackwell shouted that he had to remain seated and Pirow snarled back, “[a]re you so important” and stormed out of the chamber. An outraged Blackwell exploded, “[t]he hon. member is walking out like a whipped pup, frightened as usual to face the music.” He then proclaimed that the dismal state of the UDF was the result of Pirow’s pro-German sympathies. As proof, it was pointed out that Pirow’s daughter had attended a Nazi labour camp in Bavaria. What Blackwell referred to was that Else Pirow, on her way to Germany, had admitted to the *Daily Express* in London in an interview on 6 June 1939, that at home, the Pirows spoke German and thought in German, and that she thought of Germany as “home” and that it was her lifelong ambition to be a good German.⁹⁴ Blackwell furthermore claimed that Pirow’s defence policy was a deliberate attempt to sabotage the security of South Africa, and that he was the local version of Vidkun Quisling. (The debate took place against the background of the German invasion of Norway where Quisling, a former Minister of Defence, played a leading role in collaborating with the German invaders.) Blackwell demanded that, instead of a select committee to investigate Pirow’s tenure as Minister of Defence, the House should impeach him for his neglect of duty and for playing a double game.⁹⁵ Blackwell in his memoirs after the war ruefully conceded that it “would be wrong to put him [Pirow] down as a mere Quisling”,⁹⁶ but in 1940, he had effectively created the image of Pirow as a German agent. During the parliamentary session, Pirow had not made a single pro-Nazi or pro-German statement and the HNP MPs were outraged by the accusation, but he forfeited their support by not facing Blackwell, a man they viewed with contempt as a beyond the pale jingo.⁹⁷ His behaviour ultimately destroyed any remaining possibility of him being a leading figure

in the HNP. A desperate Pirow, marginalised and viewed with contempt in his own party as a spent force, and with his parliamentary reputation destroyed, hitched his ambitions to the seemingly unstoppable military might of Nazi Germany with the founding of the national-socialist New Order (NO) of South Africa on 25 September 1940. By 1943, his gamble on a Nazi victory had failed, as Germany's defeat seemed inevitable. He entered the political wilderness with a reputation as a disastrous and much-mocked Minister of Defence with his bush carts.

A case of self-destruction

Keith Hancock, Smuts's best biographer, concedes that to place the blame for the state of the UDF on the shoulders of Pirow was "perhaps unfair", as he was handicapped as neither the government nor the people of South Africa were willing to contemplate any substantial switch of economic resources to produce military weaponry.⁹⁸ Pirow was an able administrator, and before 1940, his management of the UDF was not questioned, as he had improved it. However, as FS Crafford, a Smuts biographer of the 1940s points out, the prime minister's savaging of Pirow served the political purpose of the hour – to boost the confidence of the hard-pressed UP with its small parliamentary majority, to enhance his own reputation as a parliamentary strategist, and to weaken Pirow as a dangerous opponent. Smuts deprived Pirow of the confidence of the electorate by stripping him of his reputation for thoroughness and administrative ability.⁹⁹ For the rest of his life, it rankled with Pirow that Smuts, who was informed of his bush cart methods, had used it to destroy him.¹⁰⁰ In reality, the shattering of his reputation was a case of self-destruction. As Blackwell gleefully informed the House of Assembly, "[t]he hon. gentleman who conducts the campaign against the hon. member for Gezina is the hon. member for Gezina himself. He is his own worst enemy in the House."¹⁰¹

By turning his administration of the Ministry of Defence into a public issue, Pirow had created the perception that he was a thin-skinned egoist who cared more for his own reputation than for the state of his country, and that he was pursuing a petty vendetta against Smuts. In doing so, he provided an opening for Smuts to attack him, as the prime minister reminded him while putting the boot in during the defence budget debate, "[y]es, the hon. member does not like this accusation and I would never have made it if he had not made this challenging speech of his."¹⁰²

The attack on Pirow was so savage that, according to the journalist GH Calpin, "[p]erhaps on no occasion has a South African minister had to undergo such a scathing indictment." Pirow buckled under the onslaught and overnight, the confident and feared political gladiator collapsed into a self-pitying whinger that either stormed out of the House when under attack, or "glowered in fury and blanched in anger".¹⁰³ For Leif Egeland, the UP MP for Zululand and a former friend and admirer, he cut a pathetic figure in the face of these merciless attacks.¹⁰⁴ Most MPs would have concurred with Rudyard Kipling's memorable line in his iconic poem "If" that, if you could meet triumph and disaster and treat these imposters as the same, you would be a man. Pirow's lack of mettle to cope with disaster after years of triumph and success left him a diminished figure in parliament, and especially in the HNP. After the 1940 parliamentary session,

his reputation would never recover despite his attempts to rehabilitate himself with his recollections in the NO's newssheet *Die Nuwe Orde*, and in his biography of Hertzog. He died in 1959 with an established reputation as a disastrous Minister of Defence.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Prof FA Mouton studied at the University of Pretoria, and lecture modern South African History at the University of South Africa. He is the author of biographies on Margaret and William Ballinger, Schalk Pienaar, FS Malan, and a group biography on the leaders of the South African Parliamentary opposition between 1992 and 1993. This article is part of a biographical project on Oswald Pirow. The author is indebted to Tilman Dederig and Ian van der Waag, as well as the *Scientia Militaria* referees, for their insights.
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