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## Liberation Struggle in South Africa

### Constructing the Union of South Africa; negotiations & contestations, 1902-10



Scanned in copy of the last page of the Treaty of Vereeniging, click to enlarge and view other pages

Industrialization and British imperialism in South Africa, driven by economic and political ambitions, and the individual actions of mining magnates like Cecil John Rhodes, resulted in a slow but steady expansion of manufacturing and transport infrastructure in late 19th and early 20th Centuries. After the [South African War of 1899-1902](#) (also known as the Anglo-Boer War, or Boer War), the British began focussing their attention on rebuilding the country, in particular the mining industry.

By the end of the 19th century, the indigenous peoples of South Africa had lost most their political and economic independence and the post-war systems left Black, Coloured and Indian people completely marginalised. The authorities imposed harsh taxes and reduced wages, while the British caretaker administrator encouraged the immigration of thousands of Chinese

to undercut any resistance by African mineworkers. Black, Coloured and Indian resentment of government policies exploded in various rebellions and protests, but the British moved ahead with their plans for union.

The peace brought by the [Treaty of Vereeniging](#), which had brought the Second Anglo-Boer War to an end, remained fragile. The Afrikaners found themselves in the ignominious position of poor farmers in a country where big mining ventures and foreign capital rendered them irrelevant. Britain's unsuccessful attempts to anglicise them, and to impose English as the official language in schools and the workplace particularly incensed them. Partly as a backlash to this, the Boers came to see Afrikaans as the volkstaal (people's language) and as a symbol of Afrikaner nationhood. Several nationalist organisations sprang up. However, when the Act of Union of 1910 brought together the previously separate colonies of the Orange Free State, Transvaal, Natal and the Cape to form the Union of South Africa, the British and the Boers (Afrikaners) put aside the bitterness of war in order to entrench White power and privilege at the expense of all Black South Africans.

### The Legislative Framework and Opposition to White Rule

Even before the Anglo-Boer War, relations between Black and White were very strained. The pro-white policies of the British colonial administrator Alfred Milner engendered considerable resistance from Black people and led to the formation and growth of new political bodies. British segregationist legislation included the Franchise and Ballot Act (1892), which limited the black vote by finance and education, the Natal Legislative Assembly Bill (1894), which deprived Indians of the right to vote; the General Pass Regulations Bill (1905), which denied blacks the vote altogether, limited them to fixed areas and inaugurated the infamous Pass System; the Asiatic Registration Act (1906) requiring all Indians to register and carry passes.

In 1902, Coloureds in Cape Town formed the [African Political Organisation](#) to represent the interests of “educated ... Coloured people.” [Abdullah Abdurahman](#), who became the President of the organisation in 1904, stressed his organisation's displeasure at the political discrimination to which Coloureds were subjected. By 1910, he had managed to build an organisation of 20 000 members.

Discrimination policies assumed new urgency with the formation of the South African Native Affairs Commission in 1903. That year witnessed the

introduction of the pass system that would later be the focus of much resistance by [Mohandas Gandhi](#), among other people. The pass system effectively meant that Africans could not be employed by any farmer, miner or industrialist without a pass.

The following year, indentured Chinese labourers (who were repatriated to their country in 1907) were imported to work on the gold and diamond mines, with the consequence that Black workers' wages were further eroded. Poor wages together with inhumane working and living conditions were among the major causes of worker disgruntlement at the time and various working class trade unions and groups struggled against this exploitation.

[Labour Struggles in South Africa, the Forgotten Pages](#) by Evangelos A. Mantzaris.

*'This is a book about forgotten pages of South Africa's rich worker history from 1903 to 1921. It includes socio-historical analysis of the Cape Town 'answer' to the Bolshevik Party (the Industrial Socialist League). Jewish Trade unionism in the Mother City at the turn of the 20th century and Uncovers the struggles and tribulations of various sections of the working class against exploitation and poverty'*



**Indaba held at Greytown to explain the details of the hut tax to Bambatha and other African chiefs, 1906. The imposition of this tax led to the Bambatha Rebellion. © Local History Museum Collection, Durban**  
[The Bambatha uprising](#)

The situation was further exacerbated by the introduction of a poll tax (a flat-rate tax levied on all members of the population and often a requirement for voting eligibility) in 1906. Failure to pay taxes, which included taxes on salt and homes (the hut tax), compelled the Black population to seek work in White-owned businesses. Anger around this 'poll-tax' culminated in the Bambatha uprising in which 3 000 Black and 30 White men were killed at Nkandla in Natal.

In 1906, Indian political activist, Mohandas Gandhi, began a [passive resistance campaign](#) against the pass laws, leading Indians in Natal and the Transvaal (they were legally prohibited from living in or entering the Orange Free State)

in demonstrations and organising stop-work protests that won thousands of supporters. In its historical development, passive resistance in South Africa has been closely associated with Mohandas Gandhi and his philosophy of 'Satyagraha', a term he coined in 1906. This was a new technique of fighting social and political injustice, a campaign method conducted without hatred and without violence. During the next eight years, he used this method with a measure of success, until 1914, when he reached an agreement with the South African Government and left for India. It was as the author and sole practitioner of Satyagraha that, in 1919-20, he entered the Indian political scene, which he was to dominate for the next three decades.



**Ghandi at Reverend Doke's home in Braamfontein, South Africa (early 1900's).** © Museum Africa. [Passive resistance campiagns of 1906 and 1913.](#)

Gandhi's comment on the term satyagraha was as follows: *I coined the word "Satyagraha" in South Africa in order to give a name to the power with which the Indians there fought for a full eight years (1906 - 1914). I spoke of "satyagraha" in order to force a wedge between this power and the movement which was referred to in Great Britain and South Africa as "passive resistance".*

After the 1906 Passive resistance campaign, there were further passive resistance campaigns in later decades by Indians, Blacks and progressive Whites in South Africa. Gandhi believed in the effectiveness of what he called the 'soul force' in passive resistance, maintaining that the suffering experienced by the resisters inspired a change of heart in the rulers.

The formation of the union of South Africa and its constitution

Constitutional discussions towards Union took place between 1908 and 1909. Numerous meetings organized by Africans, Coloureds and Indians protested the Whites-only exclusivity of these constitutional discussions. In 1909, a group of Black delegates from the four provinces attended the South African Native Convention (SANC) in Waaioek, Bloemfontein, to propose ways of objecting to the draft South Africa Act, and the Union constitution. [John Dube](#) and [Dr. Walter Rubusana](#) convened the SANC. They decided to send a

delegation to London to convince the British government not to accept the Union in its present form. This delegation was led by former Cape Prime Minister [William Schreiner](#), but the delegation failed in its aim. White supremacy was to be entrenched under a unitary state.



**Market Square in Johannesburg, crowds await the result of the first Parliamentary election of the Union of South Africa held on 15 September 1910. The Government Party won even though Louis Botha lost his Pretoria East seat. © Museum Africa**

In 1910, the South Africa Act was passed in Britain granting dominion to the White minority over Native (African), Asiatic (mostly Indian) and “Coloured and other mixed races”. This Act brought the colonies and republics - Cape Colony, Natal, Transvaal and Orange Free State - together as the Union of South Africa. Under the provisions of the Act, the Union remained British territory, but with home-rule for Afrikaners. Each of the four unified states was allowed to keep their existing franchise qualifications and the Cape Colony was the only one which permitted voting by (property owning) non-whites.

The British Government was interested in creating a unified country within its Empire; one which could support and defend itself. It was necessary to have Afrikaner and English working together, especially following the acrimonious end to the Anglo-Boer War, and the satisfactory compromise that had taken eight years to reach. A union, rather than a federalised country, was more agreeable to the Afrikaner electorate since it would give the country a greater freedom from Britain. [Louis Botha](#) and [Jan Christiaan Smuts](#), both highly influential within the Afrikaner community, were closely involved in the development of the new constitution. Written into the new constitution was a requirement that a two-thirds majority of parliament would be necessary to make any changes to the constitution.

The British High Commission Territories of Basutoland (now Lesotho), Bechuanaland (now Botswana), and Swaziland were excluded from the Union because the British Government was worried about the status of the indigenous populations under the new constitution. It was hoped that, at some time in the (near) future, the political situation would be right for their

incorporation, but at this time, they remained under direct rule from Britain.

General Louis Botha, the first Prime Minister of the Union, introduced the policy of formal racial segregation, leading to the further erosion and the Black majority's political rights and the aggravation of the plight of African communities. Under the new system of government, for example, white magistrates were given increased control of local African communities. Nelson Mandela would later describe this reform as the capture of the institution of chieftaincy "to suppress the aspirations of their own tribesmen". From the outset, the White Union government implemented a policy of Apartheid (the separate development of the races) and it became highly unpopular as successive laws further curtailed the rights of the Black majority.

English and Dutch became the official languages. Afrikaans did not gain recognition as an official language until 1925. Despite a major campaign by Blacks and Coloureds, the voter franchise remained as in the pre-Union republics and colonies, and only whites could gain election to parliament.

Most significantly, the new Union of South Africa gained international respect with British Dominion status putting it on par with three other important British dominions and allies: Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

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