

## War and “racial feeling” in the writings of an Afrikaner missionary

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### *Abstract*

This article considers the themes of war, Christian missionary work, and nationalism and the ways in which they could be demonstrated to interact in the life of an Afrikaner Dutch Reformed missionary, the Rev. JA Retief. Retief lived through and actively participated in the Anglo-Boer War, the First World War, and experienced the rise of Afrikaner Nationalism which led to the National Party's apartheid victory in 1948. Retief is a somewhat anomalous case-study due to the fact that he spent most of this period as a missionary in Nyasaland (Malawi). However, he wrote extensively on the above themes, especially missionary work and nationalism, and this article indicates that he came to champion a rather open-ended conception of nationalism, a notion that was most certainly inspired by his experiences on the mission field where he was intimately involved in the founding of an ecumenical indigenous church, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian.

### **Introduction**

The missionary tradition in the Dutch Reformed Church has been blamed, perhaps not unreasonably, for inaugurating racial separation alongside the communion table and between congregations even if religious apartheid was not the specific intention at the time. The role of Andrew Murray and other missionary friends in the decisive 1857 synod is well known. For missionary friends, racially distinct congregations were intended as a pragmatic measure to ensure a future for missionary work within a church that was historically often hostile to such activities. It is nevertheless now possible with the aid of historical hindsight to pinpoint the fact that missionary enthusiasm flamed uncomfortably close to the root of segregation in the Afrikaans reformed churches. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, certain Dutch Reformed Church (hereafter

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DRC) missionary policies have furthermore served to provide a linguistic toolkit and conceptual framework for policies of apartheid and separate development.

On the other hand, certain individuals who cut their public theological teeth within this missionary tradition were also some of the earliest anti-apartheid voices within the Afrikaner community. Ben Marais, Beyers Naudé, Nico Smith, and David Bosch, among others, were all influenced in one way or another by this tradition.<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore my contention that there exists a large amount of historical ambiguity relating to the Afrikaner missionary tradition, and it might serve the purposes of historical enquiry to not gloss over this theme, but rather to draw it out as much as possible. For the purposes of this article I focus on the life of one Afrikaner missionary, the Rev. Jacobus Arnoldus Retief (1876-1962).<sup>2</sup> He is of interest because he spent thirty two years as a DRC missionary in Nyasaland (Malawi) until his retirement in 1941, but also because he fought as a Cape Colonist on the Boer side in the Anglo-Boer war, where he first discovered his missionary vocation. There is also a somewhat hidden history regarding his involvement in the First World War on the side of the British East Africa Campaign. He was furthermore intimately involved in the DRC negotiation of the Nkhoma Synod to join the ecumenically founded indigenous church in Nyasaland, the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (Hereafter CCAP). After his retirement from the mission field, Rev. Retief spent much of his time writing a book about his missionary experiences, as well as certain essays and letters on the theme of “nationalism”.

### **The Anglo-Boer War and the stirrings of a missionary vocation**

Retief hailed from a farm in the district of Graaff Reinet, in the Cape Colony. He had trained as a teacher at Victoria College in Stellenbosch and with the outbreak of war he was employed in Dal Josafat at a primary school. Incensed at the biased way the Boers were depicted in the Cape English newspapers, Retief and a few friends decided to travel up North to throw in their lots with the Boer Republics.

Retief had an adventurous time on commando as related in a newspaper article that appeared in 2000 on his life.<sup>3</sup> But his missionary career was also conceived during the war years. He relates how he had read a novel during this time in which the protagonist decides to become a missionary in a

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<sup>1</sup> See Muller, “Evangelicalism and Racial Exclusionism in Afrikaner History”.

<sup>2</sup> Although my own interest in him is academic as a significant representative of the DRC’s Nyasaland missionary enterprise. I mention in the interest of transparency that I am also a direct descendent of JA. Retief.

<sup>3</sup> Retief, “Ds. Kotie Retief, Rebel van Graaff-Reinet Se Sneeuberge”.

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remote part of the world, and how he suddenly had the insight that he had to do something similar with his own life. Another impetus some months earlier was a visit made by three members of the Beyers Commando (JA Retief, C Raath, and JF Naudé) to a Swiss mission station during their trek through the Transvaal low veldt. The *Commando Dank Zending Vereniging* that after the war dedicated itself to the support of a missionary in the Zoutpansberg area was born out of this event.<sup>4&5</sup>

Retief was eventually captured in Natal and nearly executed in the Cape colony as a "Rebel" to British imperial rule but through a fortuitous/providential series of events, involving among other things an outbreak of the measles on the ship that carried him, was allowed to stay on board in the Cape Town harbour. In a state of quarantine the ship continued onwards to St. Helena where Retief joined his other former comrades at arms as a prisoner in Deadwood Camp.<sup>6</sup>

The awakening of the missionary spirit received further encouragement on St. Helena where along with a number of other POWs Retief came under the influence of the Boer chaplain, AF Louw who held some revivalist sermons and camp meetings there.<sup>7</sup> Louw himself was an ardent missionary enthusiast, who after the war became principal of the newly founded *Boere Zendinginstituut* at Worcester.<sup>8</sup> Kok writes that the awakening of missionary vocations among POWs in "exile" in both St. Helena and Ceylon was a common theme, with quite a number of ex-prisoners signing up for missionary service upon their return to South Africa.<sup>9</sup> Of course one might argue that in the way missionary work was conceptualised at the time as a white man's burden among the heathen darkness of Africa, that this was a logical choice of career for war veterans. Were they merely exchanging temporal weaponry for spiritual armour to carry on fighting in a different realm?

Whatever the case, upon his release from Deadwood Camp, Retief returned to Stellenbosch to study theology. Shortly after completion of the degree program there, Retief and two of his colleagues went first to London for a medical course in tropical diseases, which was followed by further study in missionary studies at Princeton Theological Seminary in the USA. This was in 1907.<sup>10</sup> On board the R.M.S. "Oceanic" from England to New York, Retief described his experiences in a Dutch-language newspaper article. Although he and his colleague DJ Malan travelled second class, the

<sup>4</sup> Retief, *Ontdekkings in Middle-Afrika. [On the Author's Experiences as a Missionary.]*, 18..

<sup>5</sup> See also Naudé, Beyers, and Kemp, *Vechten en vluchten van Beyers en Kemp "bókant" de Wei, door JF. Naudé ...*, pp. 163ff.

<sup>6</sup> Retief, "Ds. Kotie Retief, Rebel van Graaff-Reinet Se Sneeuberge".

<sup>7</sup> Retief, *Ontdekkings in Middle-Afrika. [On the Author's Experiences as a Missionary.]*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Kok, *Sonderlinge vrug.*, 49ff.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Retief, "Ds. Kotie Retief, Rebel van Graaff-Reinet Se Sneeuberge".

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helpful service on the ship was really “first class”. Retief describes everything from the sound of the telegraph to the diversity of passengers aboard the ship. Regarding this last point he writes: “The passengers on board are a cosmopolitan lot. There are but a few countries that are not represented here. At table with us sit two black fellows” [my transl.], “zo piekfyn als jy maar hebben wilt, op ieder draai vind men hen in’t voorgestoelte. De Europeanen zyn doorgaans er vry in hun omgang met de gekleurden.”<sup>11</sup> Although these lines register a certain amount of surprise in the estimation of the young Boer world traveller, it is also noteworthy that no judgement regarding the relative propriety of such racial mixing is made either way.

### The Nyasaland missionary field and the blurring of boundaries

There are indications in Retief’s account of his life in the Nyasaland mission field that this level of racial mixing would over time cease to be anything unusual. This becomes for example apparent when he describes the behaviour and sayings of his own children – who were quite acculturated to Nyasa indigenous values and lifestyles – on occasions when they were on leave in South Africa. In one such incident when they were having dinner with friends in Pretoria, his young son was quite bothered when he discovered a black servant eating alone in the kitchen. “Father, why is that uncle eating in the kitchen?” the boy wanted to know, obviously not accustomed to what must have been correctly perceived as a less than equal eating locale.<sup>12</sup> This tale of a child’s naivety should however not necessarily imply that early Nyasaland missionaries and indigenous people actually shared table fellowship as a rule, as will become apparent below.

While Africa’s indigenous people in the estimation of Retief were on the one hand clearly at a lower level of development, having lived in a state of isolation and removed from the benefits of the type of civilization that the missionaries were now bringing to them, the missionary writer on the other hand discounts colonial discourses of African racial inferiority:

In die algemeen kan gesê word dat hulle ook mense is net soos ons. Die Psalmis sê: “Laat die heidene weet, hulle is mense.” Paulus sê: “Hy het uit een bloed al die nasies van die mensdom gemaak.” Een groot onderskeid is dat hulle deur die invloed

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<sup>11</sup> ‘As proper as you might like, at every turn you’ll find them in the front seats. The Europeans are uniformly free in their fellowship with the coloureds’ [my transl.]. Retief, “Naar Het Verre Westen: Aan Boord ‘T R.M.S. ‘Oceanic,’ Op de Atlantiese Oseaan”.

<sup>12</sup> Retief, *Ontdekkings in Middle-Afrika. [On the Author’s Experiences as a Missionary.]*. 160.

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van die sonstrale 'n swart of liewer bruin kleur ontvang het,  
verder is hulle mense net soos ons.<sup>13</sup>

So although the above quotation would clearly seem to identify blacks with 'heathens', it is noteworthy that in a different part of the book Retief explicitly rejects any idea of blacks being the so-called cursed descendants of Ham, a theory that was quite common at the time. Retief writes that for Christ there was no such thing as the descendants of Ham.<sup>14</sup>

The question of nationalism is something that kept our writer intermittently busy. To be sure, he was no ideologue. Afrikanerdom was certainly an idea that he identified himself with quite strongly as would be evident from his earlier voluntary participation in the Anglo-Boer war, and which could further be seen in his letter to the Rand Daily Mail, discussed below. However, in his book he decries post-WW2 nationalisms in their worldwide manifestation as a grave threat to missionary work. He writes that all resources are pulled together for the benefit of one's own nation and country to the exclusion of the plight of heathen nations that are far removed from home. Closer to the bone, regarding the South African context, Retief laments one example of a DRC church member who used to support missionary work in Nyasaland, but then ceased his contribution because, and I quote: "Meneer, ek het nie meer die gevoel vir die siele van die heidene in Midde-Afrika wat ek vroeër gehad het nie en wat meer is, ek voel dat ek alle kragte moet inspan, geestelik en geldelik, om my eie nasie te help en op te bou." This kind of sentiment reflects the attitude of nine tenths of the Christian community today, Retief muses.<sup>15</sup> In reading this lament I am reminded of Johannes du Plessis' earlier agitation against Afrikaner dichotomization of poor white alleviation over against cross-cultural missionary concern.<sup>16</sup>

### **World War I and the hidden history of Retief's participation**

That Retief had a rather open-ended conception of nationalism has perhaps already become apparent. But the fact is that he was a Boer war veteran and as such drawn into a web of discourses not so easily disentangled. The

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<sup>13</sup> "In general it might be said that they are people just like us. The Psalmist says, 'Let the heathens know, they are people.' Paul says, 'He has made all nations of people from one blood.' One significant distinction is that due to the rays of the sun they have received a black or rather a brown colour, but they are people just like us" [my transl.]. Retief, *Ontdekkings in Middle-Afrika. [On the Author's Experiences as a Missionary.]*, 177.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 272.

<sup>15</sup> "Sir, I no longer have the feeling for the souls of the heathens of Central Africa that I earlier had and what is more, I feel that I have to employ all powers, spiritually and financially, to help and build up my own nation" [my transl.]. *Ibid.* 269.

<sup>16</sup> See J. du Plessis, *De Arme Blanke en De Heiden-Zending. Open Brief aan den Redacteur van "De Volkstem"* (Kaapstad: Z.A. Bijbel Vereeniging, 1917).

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Nyasaland mission might however have served as a kind of liminal space, in the sense that the type of person who might otherwise have been the most strident of Afrikaner nationalists found that they had other concerns to mitigate.<sup>17</sup> Such was perhaps the background to Retief's own decision to volunteer himself as a chaplain for the British East Africa campaign when Nyasaland became affected by the war effort in 1916.<sup>18</sup> That he did eventually serve in some capacity is a certainty, but exactly how and for how long is difficult to determine. According to his own brief comments he went deep into East Africa and saw much of interest along the way. There is however something of a hidden history here in that even in his family annals and oral recollections none of this has been told, in open contrast to the tales of his heroic exploits during the Anglo-Boer war.

The situation during WWI was that the DRC Nyasaland mission found themselves deeply dependent on the good graces of the British authorities. From reading the war-time records it is abundantly clear that they felt obliged to send personnel to serve in military transport whenever called upon to do so. Whether Retief actually ever served as a chaplain as he had initially requested, or rather in the service of military transport, which seems more likely, like many of his peers that I could indeed find mention of, is not entirely clear from my investigation of primary sources in the DRC Archive. MW. Retief's description of these events, however mostly corresponds with my best assumption. Accordingly Retief, along with AL Hofmeyr went, as called upon by the authorities, as supervisory personnel for military transport. MW Retief does not mention anything about his uncle, JA Retief's offer to go as chaplain. He does however make it clear that both Hofmeyr and Retief voluntarily offered themselves for service.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps one can conjecture that the original chaplaincy offer was a strategic move made by the missionaries precisely in order to circumvent the situation in which they had to effectively dance to the pipes of the British overlords. If so, this appears to have been a failed ploy. Further correspondence between WH Murray, the "baas" of Nkhoma, and the representatives of the Imperial forces in any case reveal a great deal of tension and

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<sup>17</sup> An interesting comparison is the case of J.F. Naudé who along with Retief and C. Raath visited a Swiss mission station in the low veldt, which led to the formation of the *Commando Dank Zending Vereeniging*. However, after the war Naudé did not enter the mission field but became planted firmly within the fold of the DRC and its programs for the eradication of the 'poor white' issue. He was a 'bittereinder' in die Anglo-Boer war and if anything became an even stronger advocate of Afrikaner nationalist concerns in subsequent years. See Milde Weiss, *Vuurtooring: Biografie van ds Jozua Francois Naudé* (Milde Weiss, Stellenbosch, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Kerkargief, KS 1104: official letter dated 11/03/1916 to Sir George Smith, governor and commander in chief of the Nyasaland protectorate from the superintendent of the Dutch Reformed Church Mission.

<sup>19</sup> Retief, *William Murray of Nyasaland.*, p. 120.

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unhappiness on the side of the mission for the way in which they felt themselves forced to cooperate with the war effort. What is particularly interesting is where Murray clarifies one of the reasons for the mission's reticence, which is that on the front their representatives were expected to flog the natives under their supervision, which in turn would compromise their credibility as preachers of the gospel once the war effort was in the past.<sup>20</sup>

**The CCAP, the DRC and Retief's role in defence of ecumenicity**

The Rev. JA Retief played an important role in making the case for the joining of the presbytery of Nkhoma to the CCAP, both in the preliminary negotiations involving Scottish missionaries and indigenous ministers,<sup>21</sup> and in 1924 at the synod of the Cape DRC. At this synod he stood in for the chief superintendent of the DRC mission ["die baas"] WH Murray, due to the fact that Retief was in Cape Town on leave at the time, and so he could easily attend the meeting. This planned conjoining and the way in which missionaries of the DRC would henceforth effectively stand under two over-seeing bodies (the DRC and the CCAP) as well as the ecumenical nature of the venture made it a tricky proposition for a DRC that on the home front was increasingly turning its theological trajectory towards a Christian nationalist and confessional direction.

The Nkhoma proposal was ecumenical because it involved the synods of the Free Church of Scotland (Bantyre and Livingstonia) that were also throwing in their lots with the CCAP. This mixing of confessions would cause a great deal of controversy later on, so much so that the missions of the DRC in Northern Rhodesia, which stood under the control of the Free State Synod, was eventually forced to forego their original intention to also become part of the CCAP.<sup>22</sup>

However, even the situation of the Cape DRC and its missionary involvement with the CCAP came under fire in the 1940's under the critical gaze of the by then strongly flowing confessional stream within Afrikaner religiosity, which had a particularly committed spokesperson in Johannes Gerhardus Strydom, the missions' secretary of the Free State DRC Synod. The year 1940 saw a heated debate unfold on the pages of *Die Kerkbode* between JA Retief from Nyasaland and JG Strydom. At issue was the relationship between the missions of the DRC and the CCAP. The theme was

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<sup>20</sup> Kerkargief, KS 1104-1917: letter addressed to the Hon. F.S. Malan, Houses of Parliament, Cape Town.

<sup>21</sup> Murray, *Ons Nyasa-akker*., 250ff.

<sup>22</sup> See CM. Pauw, CM. Pauw (Christoff Martin), *Mission and Church in Malawi: The History of the Nkhoma Synod of the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian 1889-1962* [PhD dissertation, Stellenbosch University, 1980], pp. 280-281.

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initiated by an article written by Retief apparently with the aim of specifically laying to rest some fears and concerns of “mission friends” regarding this relationship that the recipients of their monetary goodwill had entered into.

Retief advocated the Nyasa mission’s stations’ commitment to unity with the CCAP, and in the article he emphasised the different reasons for maintaining this situation. These reasons all had a missionary foundation. Strydom responded with an article stating the “other side” of the argument. The tone in general is that the DRC is Calvinistic and Reformed, whereas the Scottish church and its missionaries are increasingly becoming modernist freethinkers who wholeheartedly accepted higher criticism. “Hoe kan ’n ortodokse Kerk of Sending met ’n liberale Kerk saamsmelt?”<sup>23</sup>

However, closely related to the confessional issue for Strydom is the DRC missionary policy pertaining to the issue of race, a policy in the construction of which he himself had a heavy hand.<sup>24</sup> The DRC, he writes, has a “vaste en besliste *sendingbeleid* en wel dié van *algehele sosiale apartheid* tussen blankes en kleurrasse van Afrika.”<sup>25</sup> This issue clearly looms equally large for the writer as a problem because the Scottish church had the “absolute opposite policy”. For Strydom, cooperation between churches is strictly speaking only possible when they have the same “biblical foundation” and “mission and race policies”. Liberal and free thinking churches conspire to the weakening of any united front that could otherwise have existed.<sup>26</sup> Point for point he refutes every argument Retief had previously made in favour of the ecumenical union, but in all cases the themes of orthodoxy and race policy, along with the allegation that the Scots had influenced the DRC missions away from emphasising pure evangelisation to rather focus on “civilization” and education are the main bones of contention for Strydom.

Some months later Retief responds in detail to Strydom, with a great deal of expressed incredulity at what he considers the gross amount of inaccuracies, ungrounded insinuations and wrong portrayals in Strydom’s writing.<sup>27</sup> He strongly defends the orthodoxy of the Scottish missionaries as well as the confessional nature of the CCAP, denies that there was any “modernism” present at Nkhoma, and basically concludes the matter by stating that he has in any case no need to answer to Strydom in the Free State, but rather to the Cape Synod under whose jurisdiction the Nkhoma missionaries resorted.

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<sup>23</sup> “How can an orthodox Church or Mission unite itself with a liberal church? [my transl.] Die Kerkbode, 07/08/1940, vol. 46, p. 240.

<sup>24</sup> Elphick, *The Equality of Believers.*, pp. 228 and 231 ff.

<sup>25</sup> “fixed and definite *mission policy* and to be precise that of *total social apartheid* between whites and coloured races of Africa” [my transl]. Die Kerkbode, 07/08/1940, vol. 46, p. 240.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 242.

<sup>27</sup> Die Kerkbode, 25/09/1940, vol. 46, p. 566-568.



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Retief's apologia on the race question is rather intriguing. He affirms in no uncertain terms that the DRC missionaries in Nyasaland tolerate no social equalisation: "it is our mission policy ..." In fact, contrary to Strydom's allegation that they were being influenced by Scottish liberalism on this point, the reverse was actually true.<sup>28</sup> Retief intimates that the Afrikaners were actually "improving" the Scots through their continued intercultural contacts. But then in a curious twist to the debate he reminds his readers that the policy of racial separation had not until more recently been strongly enforced within their own DRC. Many white congregations had previously had "coloured" members and they used to share in Holy Communion. Retief himself was confirmed in the Grootte Kerk along with a number of coloureds. Whites went to school together with coloureds in the old Cape colony. But now we have come to "better insights" and we are influencing the Scots to our point of view, he argues.

Retief concludes this section by shifting the perspective with a re-appropriation of a metaphor previously flung in his direction by Strydom. The latter had warned of bad apples and how when mixed in a barrel with good apples all the good ones soon also turn bad, to emphasise the dangerous nature of how liberal Scottish theology and social ideas could contaminate the DRC mission. Retief inverts the metaphor stating that in Nyasaland they were seeing a miracle of bad apples becoming good apples. "The rotten apples are the rotten heathen. The good apples are the children of the Lord. We are not dealing here with South African apples, but with living souls."<sup>29</sup>

Apart from all the theological differences apparent between Strydom and Retief in which Strydom in fact had the last say, the outstanding issue is on the one hand a total abhorrence of any kind of social mixing between good Afrikaner Confessional Christians and all "others" vs. a more open-ended, if ambiguous, position on the other hand. Retief's split positioning however, was untenable, as social integration would increasingly be demanded within the context of Nyasaland and the CCAP. A 1951 letter from the then Nkhoma DRC mission representative, JJ Stegman to the General Mission Secretary in Cape Town states in no uncertain terms the difficulties experienced by the

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<sup>28</sup> MW Retief actually describes a situation during the negotiations where unbeknownst to the Afrikaners the Scottish missionaries had arranged a dining hall in such a way that black and white representatives would eat together, sitting next to one another. This led to great consternation and nearly jeopardised the negotiations regarding DRC participation in the CCAP. The head of the DRC mission, WH. Murray apparently approached Donald Fraser of the Scottish mission immediately after the meal and demanded that other arrangements be made in future. In the ensuing argument Fraser accused Murray of not being a consistent Christian, whereupon the latter asked the former whether he would allow his daughter to marry a native. When Fraser replied no, Murray pointed out that this was equally inconsistent. Murray's argument eventually prevailed, and different eating arrangements were made, also to the satisfaction of the natives, according to M.W. Retief. See Retief, *Verowering Vir Christus*, p. 234.

<sup>29</sup> Die Kerkbode, 25/09/1940, vol. 46, p. 567.

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fact that locally it was expected of their missionaries to integrate, yet the missionaries were faced with the sure knowledge that: “Na ons oordeel skyn dit hopeloos om te verwag dat ons kerk tuis die beleid van integrasie sal goedkeur.”<sup>30</sup>

### Later writings on nationalism and enemy no. 1: Racial feeling

In a probably unpublished and undated letter to the editor of the Rand Daily Mail, the Rev. Retief as a senior citizen in retirement in the 1950s on a farm near Middelburg in the Eastern Transvaal, writes under the pseudonym “Old Burgher” regarding “racial feeling” [his emphasis], which he describes as “enemy number one” in South Africa.<sup>31</sup> He has some interesting things to say on this score, starting with a defence of the Boer point of view, which I quote at length:

... Boers are a nation, a selfcontained (sic) nation perhaps the smallest in the world but an autonomous nation like the Danish or Swedish nations with our own language, our own church our own culture and aspirations. Secondly we like most other nations are national. Nationalism is as it were inborn and ingrained, we simply cannot help feeling so. To our mind the great majority of the Boers are national, and we see little or no difference between nationalism and Afrikanderdom. Why is nationalism so strong with us? Nationalism to our mind is born when a nation is in danger of being destroyed, when it is humiliated, when it is treated unjustly or is convinced that it was treated unjustly. The Boer nation was really born at the time of the Great Trek. It was reborn during and after the Anglo-Boer war ... During that war the Boers suffered defeat, were humiliated, suffered severely losing one tenth of their population, six seventh of whom were women and children. Our country and its remaining inhabitants were turned into an asheap (sic) but out of these ashes like the Phoenix of old there arose a new nation, a national nation.

Reading further it is evident that this new “national nation” is certainly the Afrikaner nation, rather than a more generic South African nation. Retief rails somewhat against what he sees as foreign incursions into South Africa. He is

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<sup>30</sup> “According to our judgment it seems hopeless to expect that our home church would endorse the policy of integration” [my transl.] Kerkargief, KS 1027 Diverse Notule 1904-1960: 4 July 1951 letter by J.J. Stegman to Algemene Sendingsekretaris, ds. Van Heerde.

<sup>31</sup> Retief, “The Editor, ‘The Rand Daily Mail’.”

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particularly scathing about the movement "led by the Torch Commando",<sup>32</sup> which he calls "a new Foreign Legion". He contrasts this new movement with the good English stock of old. He warns however that attacks on Afrikaners only serve to strengthen nationalism. They act "as boomerangs".

Retief furthermore denounces the popular English depiction of Afrikaner religiosity as an Old Testament religion. "There is little or no difference between our church and the Scottish Presbyterian Church either as regards our confessions, our preaching and practices in general."

Regarding the future, Retief describes that it is of paramount importance to eradicate "enemy no. 1: Racial feeling between so many English and Afrikaans speaking people". Many of the misunderstandings are the result of English people having no conception of what the Boers went through. "[I]t is only through experience that we arrive at real knowledge. The English were never defeated nor humiliated, nor did they ever lose their independence as we did. They never endured such suffering."

In a passage that to my mind strongly reminds of some of the more contemporary public discourses in South Africa when the media is sometimes cautioned to exercise self-censorship, Retief writes regarding the way Boers are portrayed that a "strong appeal must be made to all newspapers and public speakers and writers in heavens (sic) name to refrain from insults and detestations and humiliations".

Retief finally pleads for the development of a common policy, which should lead to "the formation of a *strong South African nation*." But what exactly is this nation supposed to be comprised of? Lest one should be led to expect the stirrings of a real inner revolution in the outlook of this "Old Burgher", he tells his intended readership who in all likelihood would have fully agreed at least on this point: "We feel that we must build up a real S. African nation with absolute equal rights to all sections of the *European communities*" [my italics].

Although the South African 'non-European' population is uniformly absent in Rev. Retief's disputation for a South African nation, it is interesting that he chooses to compare the South African context to that of India, and to uphold the latter as an example to be followed. He firmly denies that the Boers had any plan of instituting a "Boer Republic" and argues instead that a republican form of government "should be a death blow to "racialism." The Indians hated England but as soon as a Republic was established the hatred towards England ceased." In support of his plea for this "broad nationalism" Retief argues that "the practical application of our Christian principles" will in the final instance make the breakthrough to the eradication of "racialism." After all "we Europeans in S. Africa have enough fundamental resources at

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<sup>32</sup> The Torch Commando was an anti-fascist South African organisation comprised of WW2 veterans.

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our disposal to overcome our great common enemy [racialism] and all other obstacles ...”

That Retief did continue to give thought to the issue of the indigenous African also in retirement is however apparent from an article in *Op die Horison*, which deals specifically with the “native question”.<sup>33</sup> He acknowledges that blacks had many valid reasons for feeling aggrieved, and that “Bantu nationalism” was also a legitimate ambition for them. This might sound promising, but the reader looks in vain for any thought to the possibility of a “strong South African nation” across colour lines in the writing of Retief. Instead it evidently remains the firm belief of the writer that all problems emerging out of the “native question” would be resolved if only whites would change their insulting and abusive attitudes and forms of speech, make friends across colour lines, support indigenous churches, and so on.

### Conclusion

In conclusion I refer to an official letter from the office of the Prime Minister HF Verwoerd to Rev. Retief on 9 January 1960 (just over two months before the Sharpeville massacre), found in Retief’s personal records. This is a response to an apparently earlier letter from Retief, dated 27 October 1959, a copy of which, to my knowledge, unfortunately no longer exists. The tenor of the letter might however be deduced from Verwoerd’s response which informs the retired missionary that he could be sure the government was carefully considering all repercussions both nationally and internationally regarding “our policy and legislation”. Verwoerd rather blithely dismisses what were apparently expressed concerns regarding the explosive nature of the context and the growing opposition to the implementation of apartheid policies. Verwoerd states that these originated from a small group of liberals, and the government who is in contact with foreign governments is fully able to gauge possible danger levels for South Africa. The Prime minister emphasises that South Africa will not allow itself to be intimidated by these voices of dissent “away from the full implementation of its policy of self-preservation” [my transl.]. The reason for exacting so many apartheid measures in 1959 was to ensure that in this year (1960) being the “Uniefees-jaar” [50 year anniversary of the South African Union], the government would be free from having to enact any further measures. Verwoerd then concludes the letter: “Ook in dié sin kan u dus gerus wees” [also in this respect you may put your mind at rest].<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> JA Retief, “Op die Rand Van ’n Vulkan: Die Naturelle-vraagstuk,” *Op die Horison*, 14.1 (1952):16-23.

<sup>34</sup> HF Verwoerd, official letter from the Prime Minister’s Office to “Ds. J.A. Retief”, 9 January 1960.

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Was his mind set at peace by these words of the iconic Prime Minister? In rooting for the intercultural missionary experience to finally kick in and serve as a further catalyst of internal change within the outlook of the historical missionary, I would hope not, particularly not with what was to occur in South Africa shortly after in that fateful year. However, I have no indication either way. Retief himself lived only a couple of years more, and to all intents his writing career, whether in the form of books, articles, or letters to newspaper and government was hereby concluded. What might be said with a certain amount of confidence is that the ideal of nationalism, whether imagined as something specific to the Afrikaner or the somewhat more inclusive version encompassing the wider South African "European" community – i.e. the vision that Retief hoped for in retirement – was steadily cracking under the pressure of a wider reality of black South Africa that increasingly refused to be silenced.

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