

History essay

[Politics](#), [Communism](#)



History Essay SSH201 Rand Revolt of 1922 and its economic and political repercussions. Introduction: In my essay I shall be discussing the Rand Revolt and its outcomes: Why it began, who the leaders were, the end result of the fighting, political repercussions, economic repercussions and ending with my conclusion. The Rand, or Red, Revolt includes a number of important people on both sides of the conflict. Unlike many other conflicts around the country at the time, this was a white on white conflict. Not necessarily a British vs Afrikaner fight because both sides had people of both origins on their side. This event was the result of a build-up of riots and itself carved a path for some political and economic reforms. The revolt itself is a major part of South African political history on its own. There was a great deal of wrong from both sides and no one in particular was the bad guy in a common sense. The workers that survived saw it as " a valiant struggle for the democratic rights of labour..." (Herd, 1966, p. 13) and the from another viewpoint it was seen as " an unheroic defeat for labour's basic principles..." (Herd, 1966, p. 13) The ideas of the workers, however, were very conflicting as I will discuss later on in the essay. The Beginning: Scholars have varied ideas about why the revolt began. These range from the mine owners' proposal to remove the colour bar to the need to the mine owners' taking an offensive against white labour by providing black miners with better opportunities. (Krikler, 2011). The mine owners were about to implement a plan to cut back on white skilled labourers and introduce black labourers into semi-skilled and skilled jobs that they would be willing to do (for far less money) than what the mine owners were paying their white employees. White mine workers constituted 20000 of the of the 200'000 strong

workforce, with that 20'000 costing them more than the entirety of the black workforce. Thus the owners would be removing the colour bar, not in its entirety, but enough so that they could get rid of expensive white labourers and subsidise them with black labourers. The strikes started in January and by March it turned into an uprising which was " the biggest demonstration of workers of European origin in the history of Africa."(<http://continuityafrica.com/south-africa/88/292-rand-revolt-1922.html>) Now, the mine workers were striking for unfair labour practices, which is quite contradictory considering that 10's of thousands of black labourers were working for way below minimum wage. The mine owners, instead of actually removing the colour bar completely, were actually exploiting it in a way. The white mine workers had no choice but to strike and revolt. The Afrikaners needed the money as they had been forced off the land and into poverty, leading them into the only work they could find: the mines. " The Afrikaner workers... identified the theme of the struggle with the policy of the National Party: the continuing power and security of the white race." (Herd, 1966, p. 21) Of course, none of the black workers went on strike or joined the revolt. They were the ones who would actually benefit. One could say that the black miners were actually rooting for the government to put down the revolt, so that they would have better jobs and obviously earn more money. They could not possibly know that the mine owners were only exploiting them. The educated elite probably saw it as a step in the right direction, as blacks were now getting more opportunities to find work on the mines and finding it easier to support their families back home. The revolt was actually just a classic class struggle, free from political influence as ruled out by evidence.

The workers were resentful towards the mine owners and their contemptuous attitudes. (Herd, 1966, p. 19) The leaders of the Rand Revolt: Over the course of time, some trade union members around the mine became attracted to the idea of socialism and some became communists. The revolt itself was lead by the Communist Party which, in turn, was lead by W. H. Andrews, otherwise known as 'Comrade Bill' (<http://weaponsandwarfare.com/?p=2693>) The leaders of the rebellion had conflicting ideas, and in the end it was their own quarreling amongst themselves and indecisiveness that lead to their defeat at the hands of Jan Smuts. The communist party stressed the idea that the worker's only true allies were each other against the capitalist mine owners and the ruling capitalist class. Due to the Communists Party unwavering support of the mine workers, many communists were elected to the strike committee. The role of the Communist was important in that it inspired the workers to fight back against the 20'000 strong army of Jan Smuts. However they were eventually defeated and 4 of the Communist Party leaders were hanged, singing the revolutionary song " The Red Flag" on their way to the gallows. The end result of that just served to create martyrs for the supporters of socialism and the Afrikaners who looked to them as their leaders and the reason for their revolt. One could say that the execution of their leaders was too harsh and just served to inspire Afrikaner nationalism even further. The fighting and the end result: " The Rand Revolt developed very rapidly into a series of local rebellions, an uprising" (Krikler, The Rand Revolt, the 1922 insurrection and racial killing in South Africa, 2005, p. 215) the mobilization of the revolts ended up in a number of suburbs of Johannesburg were taken

including Brakpan and Benoni. Those where the planning of the revolt was taking place were taking fairly easily, although police put up strong resistance around their stations and the post offices. The police were supported from the air by planes dropping supplies and then dropping bombs among the striking miners. 1922 demonstrated the State's determination to resist insurrection, with extreme violence if they found it necessary. In March of 1922, the state declared Martial Law as the strikes were getting out of hand, with the miners and their backing commandoes particularly interested in taking the city of Johannesburg. The police could no longer defend the city without the aid of the relatively new Union Defense force, made up of veterans returned from WW1 and those that had been involved in the recent civil war. Jan Smuts himself commanded the army, made up of foot soldiers, cavalry and light armoured vehicles along with air support. The revolting 15000-20000 mine workers stood no chance against the military backed state, yet continued to assault the city at all costs. One could say the government itself is to blame for letting the riots get out of hand. The problem could have been dealt with sooner. Smuts was left to deal with the strikers severely and quickly. The revolt was quickly crushed once the army was brought in to deal with it. " The army was lying in wait from the start" (Krikler, *The Rand Revolt, the 1922 insurrection and racial killing in South Africa*, 2005, p. 256) The army had begun preparing for a massive reinforcement of the police should things get out of hand. Plus minus 200 people were killed during the week-long assault on the miners and their occupied suburbs, many of those including policemen, over 1000 were injured during the fighting. 15000 thousand men, now put out of work,

returned to their ransacked homes (ordered looted by the government once Martial Law was established) Many of the strikers were arrested, with the leaders announced to be hanged. A rather harsh punishment, considering they were standing up for their beliefs, even if those beliefs were seen as harsh and cruel by the capitalist society. The enduring hatred of the working class towards the upper class was flamed even more after how Jan Smuts handled the putting down of the revolt. (Giles, 2012) Political Repercussions: The political ramifications of the Rand Revolt. Jan Smuts' handling of the revolt ended up with him being challenged for his seat in parliament in the general elections of 1924. Smuts tried to curry favour from the public before the 1924 elections by releasing many of those who had been incarcerated by the Special Criminal Court. (Krikler, The Rand Revolt, the 1922 insurrection and racial killing in South Africa, 2005, p. 291) however, this was not enough, as the white electorate tossed him out and " the National Party and Labour Parties came to power in alliance and formed the Pact Government of 1924" (Krikler, The Rand Revolt, the 1922 insurrection and racial killing in South Africa, 2005, p. 219) The belief was that the strikers had finally emerged victorious, as the Pact Gov. was determined to keep the white working class privileged. However, the government made no plans to reverse what the mine owners had already done, this meaning that black mine workers were now being put into semi-skilled work positions for a cheaper price than that of white workers. The result of the new government coming in was the Mines and Works Amendment Act of 1926, to ensure that skilled positions on the mines were to be given to whites. 2 more acts included the Wage Act and The Industrial Reconciliation Act of 1924 which " set up machinery for

consultation between employers' organisations and the trade unions."

(<http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/rand-rebellion-1922>) However, as I have mentioned, the achievements of the mine owners were not reversed.

Meaning that it was not a true victory for the miners. One could say that both the miners and mine workers won on the political front: The workers got their privileges and the mine owners did not have their actions reversed, a

triumphant victory for the owners, not so much on the side of the workers. A victory is still a victory, if a small one at that. Economical Repercussions: The

Rand revolt occurred during a time of economic depression. Mine owners were forced to lay-off white workers so that they could employ cheaper black labour in their place. This was done to increase profits in a trade that was

declining. More than 2000 white workers were to be laid-off while the rest were forced to take wage cuts or else lose their job. After the fighting was

over, white workers were forced to take their pay cuts and many more black workers were brought in. This resulted in an increase of gold production and

once again, the mine owners started making their profits. New machines were also brought in to save labour expenses. " As South Africa grew

increasingly industrialized, the government came under stronger pressure to protect skilled white workers in mining and in the manufacturing industry. "

(<http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/rand-rebellion-1922>) This insured the white's their job security, and also let the mine owners increase their profit

margins by utilizing many more black labourers. South Africa's economy could now flourish under the guidance of a new government and new labour

laws. Conclusion: As I have said before and pointed out, the strike was of a contradictory nature. The workers were calling for a united work front but at

the same time they were calling for the colour bar not to be removed at the mines. The strikes leaders and the communist party were divided on the ultimate goals of the revolt; this played a part in the downfall of the miners at the hands of General Smuts. Smuts dealt with the situation too harshly according to critics and was, in turn, trumped in the general elections of 1924. One could say that the defeat of the miners turned out to be a victory at the elections. However, as we have discussed, this was not the case in point as the achievements of the mine owners to install the black workers in semi-skilled white jobs had succeeded before the strike was over. While the miners won the political victory, it came at a cost. The political reforms that took place after 1922 could be said to be as a direct result of the revolt. The National Party came into power bringing with it laws of segregation and white privileges. Smuts' decision to remain neutral during negotiations resulted in the mine workers striking, making him ultimately responsible for the killings and injuries of the thousands of people involved in the bloody conflict. One could go as far to say that the Rand Revolt set off, or at least influenced, the political voting patterns until the laws of apartheid came into being. Bibliography (Book and Journal sources): Giles, G. (2012). Rand Revolt of 1922 and faith in the future. GilesFiles, 1-2. Herd, N. (1966). 1922: The Revolt on the Rand. Johannesburg, South Africa: Blue Crane Books. Krikler, J. (2005). The Rand Revolt, the 1922 insurrection and racial killing in South Africa. Jeppestown: Jonathan Ball Publishers (PTY) LTD. Krikler, J. (2011). Lost Causes of the Rand Revolt. South African Historical Journal, Vol. 63, No. 2, June 2011, 318-338. Alexander, P. (2012). Coal, Control and Class Experience in South Africa's Rand Revolt of 1922. <http://www.cssaame>.

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