Introduction

**WARS ARE FOUGHT, AND LIVED,
BY REAL PEOPLE**

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The literature on the Second World War has mushroomed since the firing of the first shots and will increase in volume and complexity as the centennial clock ticks down steadily.¹ That this growth has been multifaceted comes as no surprise as the war – global, modern, and total – left roughly 24 million soldiers killed and some 73 million civilians dead, and fundamentally changed the lives of its survivors. For a long time historians have focused on such numbers, and on grand politics and military campaigns, which, while important, tend to be fact based, hail meticulous archival work as the only grail, and often reduces events to cold, impersonal accounts in which the pulsating qualities and the vitality of human endeavour are lost. Such accounts, which ‘forget the human point of view’, Tancredi Artico has recently argued, are ‘incomplete narrations’.² As may have been expected, historians are now attempting to recover the human dimensions of the larger war story. Wars are, after all, fought, and lived, by real people.

This is not to say that the notion of a ‘human history’, or of a ‘bottom-up’ view of the war, is new. Writing in July 1944, Private S Falkson of the 1st Battalion of the Rand Light Infantry expressed his desire to ‘convey in print’ the ‘experiences, trials and triumphs’ of ordinary South African soldiers. He saw himself as ‘merely a representative’ of these men and he wanted to convey to his readers ‘just what our men have had to go through’ – the discomforts, the sorrows, their endeavours – and give ‘the folk back home in South Africa ... an impression of what desert fighting is really like’. In doing so, Falkson asserts that his story was not just his own, but that of the ‘many thousands of South Africans’ who had fought in North Africa and had ‘so nobly added to South Africa’s glorious past’.³ Yet, in South Africa, negating any such present glories, these voices were often silenced – first by wartime censorship, and then by an increasingly self-assured and inward-looking nationalist government, and the wider international marginalisation of South Africa’s war effort.⁴

Political controversy and military complexity marked South Africa’s war effort. The Union Defence Force (UDF), small and languishing at the hands of a sequence of interwar defence officials, was expanded dramatically and, in response to pressure from the opposition National Party, was reorganised on an entirely voluntary basis. Three divisions were raised and orange tabs were worn by all who took the oath to serve anywhere in Africa. Numerous other combat and support units were formed, including twenty-eight specialist companies of the South African Engineer Corps. The air force expanded rapidly and Smuts, winning an early diplomatic victory, wrested control over the naval assets of the Union away from the Admiralty.⁵ Concurrently, the command structure expanded and a new-look Defence Headquarters emerged from where the war effort was administrated. Two divisions left the Union’s shores in the first two years: the 1st SA Division (1, 2 and 5 Brigades) was sent to East Africa and then, following the defeat of the Italian armies in Abyssinia and Somalia, was ordered to Egypt, where it was joined by the 2nd SA Division (3, 4 and 6 Brigades).

In North Africa they suffered the disasters at Sidi Rezegh (November 1941) and Tobruk (June 1942). Practically the whole of the 2nd Division went ‘in the bag’, leaving the 1st Division to engage in the battles around Alamein before returning to the Union in early 1943. In the meantime, during the second half of 1942, 7th SA Brigade, part of the reserve 3rd Division, took part in the invasion and conquest of Vichy-governed Madagascar. The 6th SA Armoured Division was formed on 1 February 1943 to serve in Italy and it drew servicemen from the former 1st Division, all taking the general service oath to serve anywhere in the world until the war’s end. These operations – in Africa and Europe – were supported by a rapidly expanding South African Air Force and South African Naval Force.⁶ On campaign in Africa and Italy, the South African soldier, the Springbok, ‘evolved as a type’. The average Springbok was physically large, tanned and accustomed to large quantities of sunshine, and quick to assess a tactical situation yet unwilling to suffer needless losses. According to Major G Tylden, the well-known military antiquarian, they were also ‘inclined to think themselves as good as their officers’,⁷ something they inherited from the old commando system. However, if well handled – especially by the higher command, which for this war was mostly British – they were also excellent fighting men. The typical South African soldier was, according to one British officer, ‘tough, outgoing, friendly’.⁸

Gratifyingly, the writing of the history of the South African military has grown exponentially, and particularly so over the past decades. While the two world wars have featured prominently in this endeavour, the campaign experience and combat behaviour of the ordinary South African soldier remains a much neglected area of study. There are significant exceptions. Jonathan Fennell, for one, examined and enhanced our understanding of morale, unit cohesion, and combat performance in the British and Commonwealth armies of the Second World War,⁹ while Gustav Bentz has followed a single South African infantry company from their initial enlistment in 1939 through to demobilisation in 1946.¹⁰ These aspects, which now enjoy increased recognition, are important. ‘The literature’, as Edward Coss explains albeit in terms of Wellington’s army, ‘has shown that a unit’s combat efficiency is largely dependent upon how well its members adapt to and are shaped by small groups whose norms demand active battlefield participation’.¹¹ Much exciting work, shaping a more sophisticated understanding of these dynamics in the South African armed forces, and on a wide front, remains to be done.

This book, which focuses specifically on South African uniformed personnel, seeks to contribute to this discussion. It emanates from a one-day seminar held on 6 September, 2019, at the Saldanha Campus of Stellenbosch University, to mark the eightieth anniversary of South Africa’s entry into the Second World War. While the call for papers advertised a broad theme (*Africa and the Second World War: The Soldiers’ Experience*), the papers submitted, and those selected for presentation on the day, had a specific South African focus and form the substance of Chapters 3 (Karen Horn),

4 (Evert Kleynhans), 5 (Ian van der Waag), 6 (Fankie Monama) and 8 (Surya Chetty). The remaining chapters were headhunted after the event to address specific aspects. Even though this collection focuses on military personnel, it in no way negates the roles played by civilians during the war or diminishes the dislocation and suffering experienced by non-combatants. South African civilians, at home and abroad, warrant their own study.

Broadly stated, this book aims to convey insights into the experience of the Springbok soldier during the Second World War. It is divided into three parts and comprised of ten chapters, each opening specific avenues of inquiry, and an appendix. Chapter 1 addresses the genre of soldier narratives. These are sometimes generated alongside, sometimes in reaction to, the official histories, which can be very ‘patriotic’, and the regimental histories, which tend to be ‘memorials’. Soldiers and service personnel of course expressed their individual experiences in different ways. These are as diverse as Gunner Keith Ford (who was prepared for ‘more death and gore and hell on earth than flags and glory’), Miss Sampie de Wet (‘I have never been more proud of being a South African and an Afrikaner’), and Private Arthur Bintliff (for whom Madagascar was ‘a protracted picnic’), which raises the notion that there were perhaps *different wars*. For some the war was hard and crudely brutal. For others it was softer, an experience that produced opportunities rather than scars. For David Brokensha, no matter how hard, the war gave him time and space to find himself. While each soldier’s story is unique, each military life, as Falkson noted, also embodied something of the common experience, which, when distilled, reveals insights into officer-man relations, the interrelationships between the men and women in uniform, interactions with local populations, morale and combat efficiency, and so much more. Sam Hynes, whose influence is clearly discernible throughout this book, has shown the utility of these narratives in terms of what soldiers say (and what they don’t say) about themselves, about the war, and about how the war changed them and their societies at home.¹² Moreover, as Gustavo Corni has argued more recently, when studied together these personal narratives also provide a more sophisticated understanding of a complex sequence of world events.¹³

Part II consists of four chapters, each of which is a window into the lives of a few individual soldiers, or smaller groups of service personnel, who were deployed abroad and whose experiences reveal stories that are, in the words of Hynes and Corni, interesting and informative. Soldier testimony, of course, cannot stand alone as a source of evidence. The historian must draw evidence from a variety of sources, which are marshalled, organised, analysed and interpreted in an endeavour to produce a credible rendition of an always elusive truth. In this way, the personal narrative might usefully supplement other, more formal evidence, which invariably provides the larger context – the political, economic and institutional developments – in relation to the lives of

ordinary soldiers. In this way, historical sources reinforce each other and give meaning to each other, and so explain the hidden significances in each other.¹⁴

Carl Punt, drawing on a variety of evidence in Chapter 2, examines the story of four Natal brothers. The four Lugg boys were born into a family with a tradition of service to their country. Their father, Harry Lugg, had been Chief Native Commissioner for Natal and was a veteran of past colonial wars. The brothers' war story is reminiscent of the storyline in *Saving Private Ryan*. Lugg Senior appealed in February 1945 for his youngest son to be posted 'to some base job': his oldest son had been reported missing in early 1944 during a night bombing raid on Plovdiv, the second had been killed in a flying accident in the Sudan, and, in January 1945, the third was reported missing in Palestine, while the youngest was a private in Prince Alfred's Guard. Two of Lugg's four sons survived the war. Yet, in his own memoirs, Lugg Senior makes no reference to the wartime service of his sons.¹⁵ This loss and the trauma, as Punt suggests, was perhaps too painful and too private to share. Lugg Senior was fighting his own inner war at home.

South Africa suffered a total of 38 208 casualties. Of these, 4 084 had been killed in action or died of wounds, while a further 8 137 had recovered from battle-inflicted wounds.¹⁶ These men passed through the military medical system in a variety of theatres of war. Karen Horn, in Chapter 3, discusses the medical arrangements in North Africa and the Middle East, where the South African Medical Corps ran an efficient organisation comprised of dressing stations, casualty clearing posts, field ambulances and general hospitals. A praiseworthy medical service was rendered despite the demanding operational environment. Focusing on the hospitals in the Middle East, Horn provides us with a better understanding of the daily routines, exceptional cases, and the challenges both staff and patients faced. Although her focus falls on the hospitals in Egypt, she does refer to the smaller medical units and sections as well as military hospitals in other theatres of the war. She conveys the human experience all the way through, particularly for the medical personnel for whom the work in the Middle East was 'a test of endurance which required huge doses of initiative and good humour'.

Chapter 4 follows a small contingent of South African troops to Madagascar in 1942. In this chapter Evert Kleynhans recovers a lost voice in a campaign for which there are few papers, no campaign history and little regimental history.¹⁷ However, the fortuitous survival of the letters written by Private Arthur Bintliff whilst he was serving with the Pretoria Highlanders provides a unique window through which to view the South African operations on this tropical island between July and November 1942. Kleynhans supplements these letters with a range of official material, and gives us insights into the tedium of guard and garrison duty. Despite the bugs and other discomforts, for these men, far away from hard warfighting, the campaign in Madagascar was little more than a 'protracted picnic'. Notwithstanding, there are

interesting insights in terms of morale and the experience of active combat. He shows how a ‘missing narrative’ might be reassembled or supplemented by the official record and the materials gathered by the War Records Section at Defence Headquarters.

Early on in the war Smuts had recognised the importance of creating an historical record. He saw, as Canadian historian Tim Cook has noted, that ‘the true experience of war could not always be uncovered by an examination of the War Diary or an interview with a senior officer’.¹⁸ A section called War Records, later War Histories, was created at Defence Headquarters in Pretoria and placed under the watchful eye of John Agar-Hamilton. Historical recording officers were attached to each South African formation and it was in this role that Eric Axelson found himself in Italy, in 1944, attached to the 6th SA Armoured Division. Recording officers had to ensure that each unit and formation completed and submitted a credible war diary; they had to supplement this record with interviews after important events, and they had to ‘rake in’ historical material relating to the campaign, including pertinent snippets from local newspapers and propaganda pamphlets dropped by the enemy, and they had to take photographs. At the end of the war they had the additional task of assisting the various South African units and formations with the compilation of their respective unit and formation histories of the war years. Chapter 5 introduces the work they did and, using Axelson and his small recording section in Italy as a vehicle, investigates the environmental and organisational constraints imposed upon historians in the field and the mixed responses to the narratives they wrote.

The stories told here are mostly told by men and, more specifically, mostly by white men. This of course does not imply that the experiences of black people or of women are any less important. Their perspectives reveal different dimensions of the South African military experience, including, for example, nursing and social work, and black views on military service in the racially-divided armed forces of a segregated country, which are likely to contrast with the evidence of white men. The difficulties of investigating such experiences and perspectives should not be underestimated. Patriarchy and paternalism remain major obstacles. Black people and women were in general often not supposed to view the world through their own lenses. Kept in the background while white male soldiers were interviewed or wrote their memoirs, black and female voices are mostly silent. They had little agency in the context of the time and they make almost casual appearances, as second- or third-tier actors, in the published narratives. Yet, in practice, armed forces are structured and layered, and – for the sake of the completeness of the narration – it is important for different ranks, different services, representative of all peoples in the forces, to be studied.¹⁹

Part III consists of a further five chapters and, focusing on largely marginalised groups and revealing wider social experiences and forces, deals with what might be called the common experience. Fankie Monama, in Chapter 6, examines Lt Col EG Malherbe’s

propaganda campaign that was aimed at the Springbok soldier. The Army Education Services (AES) had been designed to combat subversion and troop apathy, and boost morale and the mental and emotional state of Springbok troops. The programmes focused on ordinary Springboks, their affinity for a sense of ‘national unity’, and awareness of the longer-term challenges facing South Africa. Unsurprisingly, as Monama argues, these programmes had a mixed reception. The reading materials, ‘mini parliaments’, and the steps taken to alleviate boredom and influence the minds of the soldiers to reject fascism and extremism, and adopt more liberal values, were severely criticised from all sides. This highlighted the severe limitations of Malherbe’s programme which, as he later conceded, had perhaps only a limited influence on the consciousness of the troops and then during the war only. The AES was perhaps little more than a short-term, storm-weather programme.

The departure of the fighting battalions created a manpower crisis after 1940, forcing the government to adopt measures to recruit black, Coloured and Indian South Africans, as well as women and foreign nationals. These are the themes for the next three chapters. Some 79 258 men served in the Native Military Corps (NMC) and a further 46 412 in the Cape Corps (CC) and Indian and Malay Corps (IMC). (Such terms and unit names, including the Non-European Army Service, have been kept in their historical context.) In Chapter 7 Rishika Yadav addresses the experience of South African prisoners-of-war (POWs), and specifically the 1 032 Cape Corps soldiers captured by Italian and German forces during the course of the war. Although deployed in fighting roles during the First World War, the CC was used almost exclusively in auxiliary roles during the Second, and served in all of the theatres of war in which South Africans played a role. The majority of CC prisoners were taken at South Africa’s twin disasters at Sidi Rezegh (November 1941) and Tobruk (June 1942). Some of these men were kept by their captors as labour details in North Africa, perpetuating menial roles, while a smaller number were transported to Italy and interned in Europe. In examining the POW experience of the CC men interned in Italy and then Germany, their story as marginalised soldiers and men in a racially divided society is being told for the first time. The story of these men, she argues, is shaped by three features: their community, which had a proud tradition of military service; the fact that they had all volunteered (there were no enlistees); and, being ‘neither white nor commissioned’, they had nevertheless done so. Their experiences as POWs, often harsher than that of their white compatriots, are carefully reconstructed and the impact of their long internment is examined.

Suryakanthie Chetty draws our attention to the role of white women in Chapter 8. Thousands responded to the national call to fill vacancies in industry, or volunteer in one of the five auxiliary services of the Women’s Army Defence Corps (WADC). They undertook clerical, cooking, mechanical and transport duties in the Women’s Auxiliary Army Services (WAAS), the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), the

South African Women's Auxiliary Military Police Service (SWAMPS), and the South African Women's Auxiliary Naval Service (SWANS), while hundreds more served as nurses in the South African Military Nursing Service (SAMNS). Over and above the WADC organisation, some 65 000 are estimated to have served in the South African Women's Auxiliary Services (SAWAS), all volunteers, serving in uniform, and arranging leisure and social activities for the men serving in the Union and abroad. As Chetty argues, enlistment and service in these organisations had its own dynamic and complexities. Moreover, *The Women's Auxiliary*, the official monthly periodical of the WADC, 'portrayed a particular vision for women's war work'. Her analysis of the 58 issues of *The Women's Auxiliary*, supplemented by personal testimony and autobiography, suggests three phases in the editorial pitch (onset and recruitment, war weariness, demobilisation), while addressing the roles women might play in each of these phases of the war.

Fankie Monama turns our attention to a third marginalised group in Chapter 9. Foreign nationals and 'enemy aliens', were in an invidious position. Enemy aliens were interned or effectively placed under house arrest, while other foreign nationals were initially prevented from volunteering to serve in the UDF. However, as Monama shows, once the country was confronted with the shortages of manpower and the scarcity of skills, foreign volunteers were accepted, especially in technical fields such as medicine and aviation. The Smuts government, forever wary of political ramifications, spread the foreign volunteers across the Defence Force in order to maintain visible 'unity' and avoid the formation of an exclusive 'alien grouping'. Fewer than one thousand foreign nationals volunteered and they did so for a variety of reasons: there was first-generation patriotism, and economic and politico-ideological motives, while some hoped that permanent residence and citizenship might be a consequence. As Monama shows, the motives were as complex and as varied as the personal circumstances of the Palestinian, Greek, French, Danish and Dutch men who stepped forward at the recruiting booths.

Historically, military veterans have been largely marginalised in South African society. Graeme Plint and Anri Delpont investigate the roles they played in post-war South African politics in Chapter 10. Adopting a prosopographical approach, they examine a group of South African politicians and parliamentarians with wartime service. Their path, from the large-scale demobilisation at the end of the war through to 1960, 'when most of the loose threads of the Second World War seems to have been resolved or were superseded by other events', forms the core of this chapter. The sample therefore includes members of official political parties as well as extra-parliamentary movements, such as the Torch Commando and the banned South African Communist Party. Plint and Delpont use the aggregate biographical data – garnered from war-service records, election results and biographical data – to gauge the impact of war service on post-war politics.

Of course, care must be taken in using personal narratives. They were not written with a common purpose and their perspectives and rationales differ vastly. Some are long, considered pieces of writing, others hastily scribbled letters or diaries. Letters and diaries have a spontaneity or, as Samuel Hynes puts it, ‘the virtues of immediacy and directness’. They may be empty and rambling, but they are also intensely personal. Memoirs and autobiographies, on the other hand, are premeditated, planned, deliberate, and may be calculated to ‘set the record straight’. Memoirs are written for posterity, although perhaps more so in the case of officers, who may have a greater need to enhance, rationalise and protect their reputations. Ordinary soldiers, on the other hand, had fewer axes to grind and mostly recorded what they saw and experienced. Sometimes there may be boasting. Yet, despite their drawbacks, personal narratives remain important. Comparative evaluations emerge when the historian considers the words of not one but many men, all of whom experienced the same campaigns, the same battles, the same hardships and challenges, and the same emotions and horrors. Triangulating their perspectives not only deepens our understanding through the widened context, but also provides verification.²⁰

If used alongside official material, personal narratives provide the historian with a deeper understanding of the Springbok soldier. Such narratives, which catch the essential human perspective, number literally in the hundreds if not thousands. Often partial in nature, they provide a corpus of first-hand information on life in the Union Defence Force. Most of course remain unpublished and survive only in archives rather than in formal published form. The appendix to this collection takes the form of a select guide to the published South African soldier narratives. These sometimes take the form of published journals, diaries and letters; more often they are the memoirs and reminiscences left by volunteers. But taken together with the official and regimental histories, this body of literature represents an almost forgotten dimension of English-speaking historiography in South Africa, which is typically cast in the usual liberal terms. Here then is a body of writing that followed its own logic, quite independently from other literature.²¹ Yet, unlike Australia, Canada and New Zealand, this literature was never considered important in South Africa’s wider, national narrative.

Any book racks up a number of debts – and they are usually substantial. In the first instance, I would like to thank my colleagues in the Department of Military History. We are few, but we are a fine team, we enjoy working together, and we love our discipline. The general bonhomie in the department, on the road to teach at the SANDF Colleges in Pretoria or embedded behind mountains of files at an archives repository, is much appreciated. I must also thank our colleagues who have worked on this book with us as well as the frontline workers in the archives and repositories cited in our references. In particular, we must mention Steve de Agrela and the reading room personnel at the Department of Defence Archives in Pretoria, and Gerald

Prinsloo, the manager of the photograph collections there, as well as Michal Singer and her staff at the UCT Libraries, Dr Mark Coghlan of the Natal Carbineers Archives, and the staff at the South African Museum of Military History. I would then like to thank Professors Albert Grundlingh and Christopher Saunders for reading portions of the manuscript, Evert Kleynhans for the map, and Andries Fokkens for some of the paperwork. The team at African SunMedia have again been fantastic. Last, and not least, a big thank you to Sam Tshehla, the Dean of Military Science at Stellenbosch University, for his valued and continued support.

The Second World War involved most of the countries of the world and left so many millions dead and maimed, disorganised and devastated through personal and communal loss. This book recovers some of South Africa's soldiers' experiences from the physical and mental debris. Using memoirs and diaries, the vitality of their endeavours is reasserted, their successes and failures, victories and indecencies are re-examined, and their magnanimity and the general triumph of the human spirit is celebrated. Individuals are important. Their voices 'give us the feel and texture of the past and the descriptions and stories of its people'.²²

Endnotes

- 1 On the writing of South Africa's Second World War, see Jeffrey Grey, "'Standing humbly in the ante-chambers of Clio": the rise and fall of Union War Histories', *Scientia Militaria*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2000), pp 253–66; and Ian van der Waag, 'Contested histories: official history and the South African military in the 20th century', in J Grey, ed., *The Last Word? Essays on Official History in the United States and British Commonwealth* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003), pp 27–52.
- 2 Tancredi Artico, 'Re-thinking War: A History of Voices', in Tancredi Artico, ed., *From the Front; Zibaldone della Grande Guerra* (Canterano: Aracne, 2017), p 19.
- 3 Private S Falkson, "Of Sand and Shells: A True Story of South African Infantry (1st R.L.I.)", UWH, box 164, Department of Defence Archives, Pretoria (DOD).
- 4 Albert Grundlingh, 'The King's Afrikaners? Enlistment and Ethnic Identity in the Union of South Africa's Defence Force during the Second World War, 1939–1945', *Journal of African History*, vol. 40 (1999), p 351.
- 5 Ian van der Waag, "The thin edge of the wedge": Anglo-South African relations, dominion nationalism and the formation of the Seaward Defence Force in 1939–40', *Contemporary British History*, vol. 24, no. 4 (Dec 2010), pp 427–449.
- 6 Ian van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2015), Chapter 5.
- 7 Major G Tylden, *The Armed Forces of South Africa* (Johannesburg: Africana Museum, 1954), p 30.
- 8 Peter Bagshawe, *Warriors of the Sky; Springbok Air Heroes in Combat* (Johannesburg: Ashanti, 1990), p 233.
- 9 Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African campaign; The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Jonathan Fennell, *Fighting the People's War; The British and Commonwealth Armies and the Second World War* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019).
- 10 Gustav Bentz, 'Fighting Springboks: C Company, Royal Natal Carbineers from Premier Mine to the Po Valley, 1939–1945' (Stellenbosch University: MMil thesis, 2013).
- 11 Edward J. Coss, *All For The King's Shilling; The British Soldier Under Wellington, 1808–1814* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), p 4.
- 12 Samuel Hynes, *The Soldiers' Tale; Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp xii–xiii.
- 13 Gustavo Corni, 'Preface', in Tancredi Artico, ed., *From the Front*, p 17.
- 14 Tim Keegan, *Facing the Storm: Portraits of Black Lives in Rural South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988), pp 160 – 161.
- 15 HC Lugg, *A Natal Family Looks back* (Durban: T.W. Griggs & Co., 1970).
- 16 Van der Waag, *A Military History of Modern South Africa*, p 212.
- 17 Two of the main South African regiments in Madagascar – the Pretoria Regiment and the Pretoria Highlanders – have no published regimental histories, while the third (The First City Regiment) doesn't have much. The Cape and Natal regiments stand more strongly in the historiography.
- 18 Chris Cook, *Clio's Warriors; Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars* (Vancouver and Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), p 103.
- 19 Keegan, *Facing the Storm*, pp 160 – 161.

- 20 Coss, *All For The King's Shilling*, pp 4-10. Margaret Macmillan, *History's People; Personalities and the Past* (London: Profile, 2016), pp 2-3. Mehmet Beşikçi, 'How to use memoirs and diaries in historiography?: A methodological analysis based on the ego documents of Ottoman soldiers served in World War I', *Toplum ve Bilim*, vol. 144 (2018), p 292.
- 21 I am grateful to Prof. Albert Grundlingh, who read the chapter on Axelson, for these insights.
- 22 Macmillan, *History's People*, p 189.