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Commentary of Andrew Stewart: the Klopper affair

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h-diplo **Article** REVIEW

Andrew Stewart.[*] "The Klopper Affair: Anglo-South African Relations and the Surrender of the Tobruk Garrison." *Twentieth Century British History*, 17:4 (2006): 516-544.

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This is a straightforward and workmanlike account of one of the worst British military disasters of the Second World War. As Andrew Stewart's article shows, following the catastrophic fall of Singapore, the surrender of the Tobruk garrison in June 1942 proved a crisis of confidence in the British imperial war effort, leading to international questioning of Britain's ability to fight on against the Axis powers, and causing acute strain on the Anglo-South African relationship at a critical juncture in the Second World War. With the benefit of hindsight, it is possible to see that in contrast to the parliamentary autopsy on the Norwegian campaign of 1940, and trenchant criticism in the House of Commons on the debacle of intervention in Greece in April 1941, the Prime Minister Winston Churchill managed to weather parliamentary criticism with relative ease. In retrospect, the blow to British pride and military resolve proved remarkably short lived and by the time of the victory at El Alamein in November 1942, the surrender of the Tobruk garrison had mercifully faded. However, this study provides a welcome analysis of the insidious impact of military setback on metropolitan-Dominion relations, setting this in the context of political personality and cooperation and the broader context of imperial/Dominion relations between London and Pretoria.

Stewart's study begins with comment on the circumstances of the fall of the Tobruk garrison. The rapid surrender of the fortification, under the command of a relatively youthful South African general, supported by a division of South African troops, stunned the British public. It seemed incomprehensible that Tobruk, which had successfully withstood a siege by the Italian army the previous year, should surrender so swiftly to General Rommel's onslaught. This led to accusations of cowardice and incompetence in Britain and South Africa, reviving questions in Britain of the reliability of the South African's commitment and contribution to the war effort, and of the disadvantages of the British connection among elements of the South African Afrikaner community.

The analysis provided in this article emphasises the particular, and peculiar role of the long-standing personal friendship and working relationship between Churchill and Jan Smuts, dating back to the Anglo-South African war at the turn of the twentieth century. The Anglophile Smuts was the most imperially minded of the Dominion Prime Ministers, and had been a member of the Imperial War Cabinet during the First World War, and thus was a politician of unique standing in the eyes of London. The author could also

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profitably have made reference to the crucial contribution made by Smuts to Eden's decision in Cairo in early 1941 to gamble on a campaign in Greece. The British Cabinet had been appalled by Eden's apparently insouciant pursuit of a Balkan front as the vital element of this venture, and the British archives at Kew show Smuts' advocacy in support of this peripheral strategy had been the deciding factor.

This article would have been strengthened by re-arranging the structure of the overall argument -spelling out more clearly at the outset the significance of Tobruk in Anglo-South African relations and how this rift was overcome. For example, it would have been beneficial at the outset to flag up the importance of Afrikaner opinion and the neutrality debate within South Africa – and its implications – at the start of the article. It investigates the available material at the National Archives, from PREM [U.K. Prime Minister's Office records], Dominion Office, and War Office files, providing a useful summary of British understanding of South African thinking, drawing on sound research into the primary and secondary material. However, additional consultation of multi-archival sources would have strengthened the weight of analysis. There is evidence of consultation of Churchill and Smuts' personal papers, but what of the Eden papers at Birmingham, the Leo Amery papers at Churchill College, Cambridge, and the Ismay papers at King's College, London? It must be said a research trip to the South African National Archives in Hamilton, Pretoria, would also have been extremely fruitful to provide primary evidence and detailed complexity to the South African angle of this story. Further comment on Smuts' moral authority – stemming from his personal experience, relationship with Churchill and consequent authority – would have been welcome. The author also misses the importance of the earlier Greece debacle in Anglo-imperial relations: just as at Gallipoli in 1915, the Greek campaign had involved Australian and New Zealand troops – and this too ended in disaster. In May 1941, the British led forces had been obliged to withdraw from Crete. Given the resonance of imperial troops' involvement in British-led military strategy – and associated Dominion sensitivity of autonomy and sacrifice – it would have been a bonus if, funds permitting, the author had been able to consult Australian and New Zealand archives for first hand evidence of opinion elsewhere in the Dominions of the South African role in the Tobruk debacle.

This is a minor quibble, but the article contains a number of irritating errors, and raises important questions in the mind of the reader. South West Africa was not 'handed' to Pretoria in 1919. It constituted a League of Nations Class C mandate, to be administered by South Africa. The British Nationalist government did not survive the withdrawal of British and Commonwealth forces from Greece 'with relative ease'. The Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, was given a particularly rough ride in the House of Commons. How difficult WAS Churchill's decision to reverse his earlier rejection for an enquiry into Tobruk? Why was the British Government afraid Smuts might be 'assassinated'? – as opposed to merely losing the confidence of his political constituency? At important points, the clarity of the development of the argument is clouded by the author's syntax. However, in the main these are indeed minor points. Stewart rightly sets the iconic importance of the fall of Tobruk firmly in terms of an aspect of imperial relations which is all-too-often forgotten: that the Anglo-South African relationship in 1939-1942

constituted a unique set of tensions, dating back to the turn of the century, and which had been highlighted on the eve of the Second World War. The existing historiography focuses on South African doubts and obduracy in the run up to conflict in 1939. This article underlines that South Africa's contribution to continental defence stemmed in overwhelming part to the personality and outlook of General Jan Smuts – as London was only too painfully aware. It also underlines that the residual strength of Boer opposition to British imperialism and London's conception of its vital national interests, was very much in the minds of policy makers in London, and concerted efforts were made to limit the potential serious rift from developing within the Imperial alliance.

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse