

# From fund-raising to Freedom Day: The nature of women's general activities in the Ossewa-Brandwag, 1939-1943

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## *Abstract*

The Ossewa-Brandwag (OB) was a mass-movement that originated as a result of the euphoria created by the 1938 Centenary Celebrations of the Great Trek in South Africa. With far-reaching and very ambitious aims the OB was in essence a multi-layered organisation that had an impact on the lives of hundreds of thousands of Afrikaners. It existed for more than ten years, from 1939 to 1954. Despite the evident Afrikaner nationalist and republican ideals for which the movement stood, the OB was also swept by the tide of the ideological “zeitgeist” between the two World Wars. It was outspokenly National-Socialist, anti-British and with the outbreak of the Second World War it openly sided with Germany and was involved in several attempts to sabotage South Africa's participation in the war. Despite these more radical aspects, the OB also had a cultural and social side in which most of its members participated – including women. Until recently the role of women in the OB has not been dealt with in “any” detailed way. Women formed a dynamic, vibrant and outspoken group in the OB that not only participated in the cultural and social aspects of the movement, but also the more violent resistance towards the government's pro-British sentiments. This article focuses on the nature of women's more general activities in the OB during the movement's early years from 1939 to 1943. These “general” activities include women's agency in the cultural, social and financial spheres of the OB as well as their indispensable role as organisers. As mainly a descriptive historical study, this article aims to introduce readers to the women of the OB, whose role in the movement has been shamefully neglected in South African historiography.

**Keywords:** Afrikaner women; South African women; Women's history; Gender; Women; Women's labour; Ossewa-Brandwag; Afrikaner nationalism.

## Introduction

The Ossewa-Brandwag (OB or “Oxwagon Sentinel”) was one of the main manifestations of how the ideological currents of Fascism and National Socialism influenced the South African public between the two world wars. Established in February 1939, the OB initially set out to be a cultural movement riding on the emotional wave caused by the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek in 1938. The organization expanded rapidly and soon became a mass-movement, existing for more than a decade until it was disbanded in 1954. With the outbreak of the Second World War it began to show a distinctly dualistic nature. “Afrikaner culture” was propagated on the one hand and on the other hand the unique combination between Afrikaner Calvinist nationalism and National Socialism was not only propagated, but used as motivation for activism, rebellion and attacks on party politics, democracy, the Smuts government and South Africa’s participation in the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

The opportunity to react to world events and work together to expand the ‘Afrikaner cause’ in South Africa was not confined to men in the OB. Of the tens of thousands of members belonging to the movement, women formed a formidable corpus. The history of the role of women in the OB has hitherto been neglected in scholarship dealing with this radical Afrikaner nationalist movement. Most academic works have been written from the perspective of the universal male while only passing comments are made about women.<sup>2</sup>

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1 P de Klerk, “Die Ideologie van die Ossewa-Brandwag”, PF van der Schyff (ed.), *Die OB: Vuurtjie in Droë Gras* (Potchefstroom, PU vir CHO, 1991), pp. 292-400.

2 AJH van der Walt, *’n Volk op trek: ’n Kort geskiedenis van die ontstaan en ontwikkeling van die Ossewa-Brandwag* (Johannesburg, Kultuur en Voorligtingsdiens van die Ossewa-Brandwag, 1944); HG Stoker (red.), *Agter tralies en doringdraad* (Stellenbosch, Pro Ecclesia, 1953); JFJ van Rensburg, *Their paths crossed mine* (Cape Town, CNA, 1956); GC Visser, *OB: Traitors or patriots?* (Johannesburg, Johnathan Ball, 1976); PF van der Schyff (red.), *Geskiedenis van die Ossewa-Brandwag* (Unpublished Report, Department of History, PU for CHE, 1984); JJ Badenhorst, “Die organisasiestruktuur van die Ossewa-Brandwag” (MA thesis, PU for CHE, 1985); D Prinsloo, “Dr HF Verwoerd en die Ossewa-Brandwag, 1938-1952”, *Kleio*, 17(1), 1985, pp. 73-85; LM Fourie, “Die Ossewa-Brandwag en Afrikanerereenheid” (D Litt thesis, PU vir CHE, 1987); JJ Badenhorst, “Vroeë organisasiestruktuur van die Ossewa-Brandwag”, *Joernaal vir Eietydse Geskiedenis*, 12(3), Desember 1987, pp. 54-82; P de Klerk, “Afrikanerdenkers en die beginsels van die Ossewa-Brandwag”, *Joernaal vir Eietydse Geskiedenis*, 14(1), Junie 1989, pp. 43-81; P de Klerk, “Die Ossewa-Brandwag se ideaal van ‘n nuwe samelewingsorde in Suid-Afrika”, *Joernaal vir Eietydse Geskiedenis*, 14(2), Desember 1989, pp. 90-131; PF van der Schyff (red.), *Die Ossewa-Brandwag: Vuurtjie in droë gras* (Potchefstroom, PU for CHE, 1991); PJ Furlong, *Between crown and swastika: The impact of the radical right on the Afrikaner Nationalist movement in the fascist era* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1991). Also see PJ Furlong, “Fascism, the Third Reich and Afrikaner nationalism: An assessment of the historiography”, *South African Historical Journal*, 27, 1992, pp. 113-126; C Marx, “The Ossewabrandwag as a mass movement, 1939-1941”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 20(2), Junie 1994, pp. 195-219; C Marx, “‘Dear listeners in South Africa’: German propaganda broadcasts to South Africa, 1940-1941”, *South African Historical Journal*, 27, 1992, pp. 148-172; C Marx, *Oxwagon Sentinel: Radical Afrikaner nationalism and the history of the Ossewa-Brandwag* (Pretoria, UNISA, 2008).

This is problematic when one considers that the archives abound with material where women's historical agency cannot only be teased out by the historian, but also sheds new light on our understanding of the Ossewa-Brandwag as part of South African history.<sup>3</sup>

The administrative goal of the OB leaders was to organise the movement according to the commando system of the former Boer republics. This would form the basis of the organising structure, and divisions were organised into commandos throughout the country with the aim of seeking collaboration with all existing Afrikaans cultural organisations and those focusing on the economic development of the Afrikaner.<sup>4</sup> During one of the formative meetings of the OB on 17 July 1939 a decision was made that each commando would consist of two separate divisions, namely male and female. Each division would have its own officers of equal rank up to that of commandant. The male commandant, however, would command the entire commando because he was regarded as the more senior commandant.<sup>5</sup> At this meeting the Ossewa-Brandwag Women's Division came into existence. Higher up in the hierarchy of the OB itself was the Women's Auxiliary Council (WAC) which was responsible for the organisation and leadership of the hundreds of women commandos that were organised throughout the country. The WAC also sat on the OB High Council, the highest administrative organ of the Ossewa-Brandwag.<sup>6</sup> Thus it was clear that women were part of the OB from its very start.

This article aims to describe the nature of women's general activities in the OB from 1939 to 1943. The goal is to inform readers about the role women played as part of the OB as a cultural movement during the war years. Furthermore this article attempts to shed light on a topic never before described in South African historiography and to contribute to breaking the silence on the women who were part of this radical nationalist movement. Research has already been published on the role OB women played in

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3 I refer here to the Ossewa-Brandwag Archives Museum housed at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University.

4 JJ Badenhorst, "Organisasiestruktuur van die Ossewa-Brandwag", PF van der Schyff, *Die OB: Vuurtjie in droë gras* (Potchefstroom, PU for CHE, 1991), p. 173.

5 Ossewa-Brandwag Archives, Ferdinand Postma Library, Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University (hereafter OBA): Grootraad collection., B/L 1/2, file 11: Minutes of meeting, 17 July 1939.

6 For a detailed description of the organisation of the Women's Division, see C Blignaut, "Volksmoeders in die kollig: 'n Histories-teoretiese verkenning van die rol van vroue in die Ossewa-Brandwag, 1938 tot 1954" (MA, NWU, 2012), pp. 136-152.

resisting South Africa's participation in the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> These works on OB women should not be regarded as mere supplements to the works researched and published on the OB already. Rather they should be seen as part of a growing body of work dealing with the history of the OB from the perspective of Afrikaner women and, although this particular article is a descriptive study, their agency should also be seen against the backdrop of gender as a category of historical analysis. A more critical engagement with the nature of women's agency described in this article will be undertaken at a later stage in another article.

Indeed, the OB was an organisation which attempted to assert itself in all spheres of Afrikaner life. Its members pursued the enhancement and practice of Afrikaner culture according to a specifically construed ideal, especially in the case of women where the "volksmoeder"<sup>8</sup> took a leading role. This pursuit can be linked to what was referred to as the Afrikaner's "national movement" and the OB claimed that these ideals were first established in the OB itself.<sup>9</sup> As an organised unit the OB declared that it was an organisation of the "volk" which "intended to stand guard over all spheres of the life of the 'volk' on behalf of the 'volk'".<sup>10</sup> These spheres naturally included what contemporaries called "the world of women" where the so-called "cultural" or general objectives of the OB Women's Division were to be realised.<sup>11</sup>

### **"The world of women": The general activities of OB women with specific reference to 1939-1943**

Most of the women's activities took place within the separate OB Women's Division. It was here in their own "special place", to use their contemporaries' reference to the division, where women, against the backdrop of contemporary gender constructions, could assert themselves as historical agents. Especially during the period 1939 to 1943 women pursued the original cultural objectives of the OB but in 1943 the role of women underwent a shift in

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7 See in this regard C Blignaut, "Goddank dis hoogverraad en nie laagverraad nie!": Die rol van vroue in die Ossewa-Brandwag se verset teen Suid-Afrika se deelname aan die Tweede Wêreldoorlog", *Historia*, 57(2), 2012, pp. 68-103.

8 The *volksmoeder* (mother of the nation) was an Afrikaner nationalist construction representing the ideal of womanhood to which every Afrikaner women had to aspire.

9 OBA, DJM Cronje collection, B/L 15, file 4, *Ossewa-Brandwag: Vanwaar en waarheen? (From where and where to?)*, p. 10.

10 OBA, Ketting-Vlugskrifte, (Circular Pamphlet) No. 1, 1941.

11 See *Volksblad*, 6 February 1939, 15 April 1939 and *Die Volkstem*, 13 February 1939.

emphasis and the Women's Division also started paying attention to a clearly formulated idea of "volksorg" (taking care of the "volk").<sup>12</sup> This article focuses on the first period.

In each province the Women's Auxiliary Council was responsible for taking a lead in women's activities. It was decreed that the WAC would supervise the objectives of the women's division in relation to the objectives of the OB as a whole. Senior women officers of the different areas would ensure that the activities of the women commandos under their specific authority met the official objectives of the Women's Division and they were also responsible for coordinating activities.<sup>13</sup> For this reason the duty of women in the OB (from 1939 to 1943) was described in greater detail by the WAC in the following terms:

- That women would encourage the men to service and devotion and where needed give moral support to the men to meet the objective stated in the OB constitution.
- Propaganda for the "volk", especially propagating our own government system as set out in national circular No. 2/41 and everything of our own so that the "volk" will learn to love that which was born from the sweat and blood of our ancestors.
- To raise funds by selling refreshments at meetings of the Ossewa-Brandwag, asking people who were well disposed for contributions and gifts so that the enormous organisation of the OB could continue to mobilise the "volk" for the last charge.
- To train members in administration, hygiene, educational issues, home care-giving, national nutrition and first aid.
- To encourage the singing of folk songs and folk dances among the people.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently the role of women in the OB is described by referring to the way women acted as indispensable agents in the Ossewa-Brandwag by fulfilling the duties decreed for the Women's Division and the WAC. This being so, women's role as fund- raisers as well as their participation in the cultural activities of the OB will be discussed.

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<sup>12</sup> See C Blignaut, "Volksmoeders in die kollig...", pp. 238-289 for a detailed description of "volksorg" in the OB.

<sup>13</sup> OBA, Cape governing body collection, B/L 5(i)/1, file 5: Die Vroue-afdeling van die Ossewa-Brandwag (The Women's Division of the OB) Cape Province.

<sup>14</sup> OBA, Free State governing body collection, B/L 6/1, file 2: Order No. 5/42, appendix A.

**“Women devoted in their service”:<sup>15</sup> OB women and fund-raising**

The Ossewa-Brandwag Emergency Fund was set up in 1941 as a result of the mass arrests and internment of OB members under the War Measures Acts of the Smuts government. Hundreds of persons were detained in gaol or in internment camps because they resisted the war effort or were regarded as a threat by government agents. Others were on the run and had to be provided for as they fled from one house sanctuary to the next.<sup>16</sup> The Emergency Fund had to ensure that there was enough money to provide for the needs of dependants of the detained, fugitives and interned persons. This is where women fulfilled one of their most significant functions in the OB, namely as the financial heart of the Emergency Fund.

Shortly after the arrest of the first political prisoners under the Emergency Regulations of the Smuts government in 1940, the Transvaal Governing Body of the OB swiftly took steps to take care of the dependants of the prisoners. For this purpose the “Boerevolk” Emergency Fund was set up. In November of the same year the administration of the Fund was transferred to the FAK (Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Organisations).<sup>17</sup> The fact that so many members of the Ossewa-Brandwag were interned led to its Transvaal Governing Body once more taking over the administration of the fund from March 1941.<sup>18</sup> With the detention of masses of bread winners at a time when women had no access to occupational labour “a situation of dire need arose”.<sup>19</sup> Because of these circumstances, the leader of the OB, Commandant General (CG) JFJ van Rensburg called up every member of the OB to ensure that a “national disaster” would be averted: “Convert your commandos into havens of rescue! One for all, and all for one!”<sup>20</sup> With this call from the CG the OB Emergency Fund came into being on 22 February 1942 replacing the “Boerevolk” Emergency Fund. Shortly afterwards a command was issued that all OB women had to stop raising funds for any other organisation for the time being and concentrate their efforts on the OB Emergency Fund.<sup>21</sup> Therefore mainly fund-raising by women commandos would become the symbols of these so-called “havens of rescue”.

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15 OBA, *Die OB*, 18 December 1942.

16 E Theron, *Sonder hoed of handschoen* (Kapaalstad, Tafelberg, 1983), p. 42.

17 OBA, G Cronje collection, B/L 1/12, file 1: Die OB Noodhulpfonds (The OB Emergency Fund).

18 OBA, Tape recording, interview (tr.) tape Nos. 76-77, 1979: HM Robinson/JH Coetzee, p. 18.

19 OBA, G Cronje collection, B/L 1/12, file 1: Die OB Noodhulpfonds (The OB Emergency Fund).

20 OBA, *Die OB*, 28 January 1942.

21 OBA, Cape governing body collection, B/L 5(i)/1, file 5: Order.

The Emergency Fund was administered directly from the office of the CG in Pretoria.<sup>22</sup> At the head of the Emergency Fund was Professor Geoffrey Cronjé. He is renowned for his ideas on race and the influence they had on the later policy of apartheid<sup>23</sup> but he also played a major role in teasing out the role of women in the OB. As a sociologist at the University of Pretoria since 1936 he was to leave his mark on family sociology which would later influence the Women's Division and the official ideology of the OB. Cronjé strongly identified with the organisation and also held high positions in the OB, such as general for Pretoria, secretary of the "Grootraad" (Main Council) (1947/48), head of the Emergency Fund and later on head of Women's "Volksorg".<sup>24</sup>

The fund was placed under the control of a board of trustees as well as a committee of at least four OB members appointed by the CG. Between 1940 and 1943 the board consisted of academics from all over South Africa as well as the chief female generals in the Western Cape, namely Mrs Emmie du Toit, Mrs M de Villiers and the famous Mrs ME Rothmann, the latter who was eminently suited to be a trustee of the fund as a consequence of her involvement in the ACVV (Afrikaans Christian Women's Association). The administrative committee consisted of Gen. P Meyer as chairman, the chief female general from the Witwatersrand, Mrs K Malan as vice-chairwoman and three other OB members. The fact that Mrs Malan served on the central committee is significant, since the Emergency Fund was not only used for supporting the families of the interned but huge amounts were also spent on uplifting the "poor whites" of the Witwatersrand.<sup>25</sup> Apart from the administration and bookkeeping of the Emergency Fund this central committee had to oversee the investigation of all circumstances in cases of need which required the granting of a monthly contribution to the needy.<sup>26</sup> Each commando was responsible for monitoring the needy who were suffering as a result of the emergency measures and for each commando a list of people in need was drawn up and brought to the attention of the Emergency Committee. For instance, at the time when the internment started in 1941 the OB authority

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22 OBA, Tape recording, interview (transcription), tape no. 34, 1985: LM Fourie/KJH Behrens, p. 5.

23 JM Coetzee, "The mind of Apartheid", *Social Dynamics*, Vol. 17(1), 1999, pp. 1-35.

24 See C Marx, *Oxwagon sentinel...*, pp. 505-507, as well as C Bignaut, "Volksmoeders in die kollig...", pp. 277-285 for more detail on Cronjé's influence on OB policy concerning women. "Volksorg" was a term used in the OB to describe the works of charity done by women and the responsibility women had to take as "caregivers of the nation".

25 C Marx, *Oxwagon sentinel...*, p. 337.

26 OBA, G Cronje collection, B/L 1/12, file 1: Reëls van die OB Noodhulpfonds (Rules of The OB Emergency Fund).



of Pretoria provided for no less than sixteen families monthly.<sup>27</sup> Erika Theron wrote that for many women the fund was “the only help available”.<sup>28</sup>

The fact that male and female commandos were separated often led to confusion about who was responsible for the administration of emergency relief in a specific commando. Initially the male commandant was held responsible for the investigation and report back on all emergency cases in his area. However, this measure led to “unhappy friction between male and female officers” on the issue of who would actually be responsible for the work of investigation, reports and recommendations. G Cronjé gave advice with regard to this friction which is significant concerning the gender relationships between the male and female commandos. He wrote: “the work (can) never be replacing – it should be complementary”.<sup>29</sup> This correlates with the official policy of the OB regarding women, namely that they were the “assistants” of the male commandos and were more or less regarded as an “auxiliary division of the men’s division”.<sup>30</sup> In spite of this discourse women’s “help” was of such a nature in the Emergency Fund that women commandos became indispensable. Cronjé realised this and it was stipulated that the social activities of the fund would be managed mainly by the women’s division. Visiting needy families was a matter exclusively for the women and was described as something that had to be done regularly in the spirit of “a visit by a sympathetic sister to the home of a needy sister”. Moreover the fund not only accepted money, for “some people would rather give a sheep than half a crown”. Thus the fund often received a lot of farm products which were distributed together with the monthly allowance among families. Distributing these products could be handled by any commando but donations such as clothes and shoes had to be managed solely by the local organisation of the Women’s Division.<sup>31</sup>

A specific procedure was laid down for handling emergency cases in the jurisdiction of a commando. A female commandant was responsible for investigation in order to ascertain any needs in her commando’s jurisdiction. Thereafter she had to submit a report and recommendations to the secretariat of the Emergency Fund. Final recommendations would come from the chief female general of an area (in other words the WAC). When persons in need had been identified, a lady from the commando paid a visit in the form of a “true

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27 OBA, MSF Grobler collection, B/L 1/7, file 1: Noodhulp gevalle (Emergency cases).

28 E Theron, *Sonder hoed of handschoen*, p. 42.

29 OBA, G Cronje collection, B/L 1/12, file 1: Die OB Noodhulpfonds (The OB Emergency Fund).

30 OBA, PJ Meyer collection, B/L 1/4, file 7: Doelstellings en taak (Objectives and duty).

31 OBA, G Cronje collection, B/L 1/12, file 1: Die OB Noodhulpfonds (The OB Emergency Fund).



boer visit” or a “trip in your car to an OB function or to some or other social entertainment, to the Zoo or just out into the veld.” Women also had to give moral support to their needy sisters so that “there would be no atmosphere of humiliating charity”. Within the ranks of the OB it was felt that women had a particular bent for this duty.<sup>32</sup> As soon as a person in the area of a particular commando had been interned the women’s commando usually investigated and provided funds if help was urgently needed.<sup>33</sup> However, this procedure does not describe the extent of the aid which ordinary OB women provided by means of their fund-raising and the organising of events. The following statement on the objectives for which funds were applied, sheds some light on the impact of the funds raised by women on those who suffered under the emergency regulations:

- Support for “dependants” of interned men and political prisoners.
- Paying of hire purchase instalments, insurance premiums, and the protection of other possessions which could be needed for the security of families of the above-mentioned interned or political prisoners.
- Payment of essential and/or desirable transport costs for such “dependants” and/or their household possessions.
- Payment of essential amounts regarding medical and/or dental services on behalf of such “dependants”.
- Payment of amounts for supplies, and similar services to political prisoners and the interned.
- Payment of amounts for study facilities for the interned and political prisoners so that they could better prepare themselves for service after the war.
- Payment of such other essential and/or desirable amounts for the security of the interned or political prisoners and/or the families dependent on them.
- Making available loans on security of promissory notes or as otherwise stipulated to discharged interned or political prisoners which would reasonably enable them to realise a mode of existence for themselves and their “dependants”.<sup>34</sup>

As mentioned above, the contributions of the women to emergency relief included more than the stipulated raising of funds. Women also provided for the basic needs of men in the internment camps and gaols. They used the money at their disposal to buy food “and everything a man actually needed

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32 OBA, PJ Meyer collection, B/L 1/4, file 4: Die OB Noodhulpfonds (The OB Emergency Fund) Memorandum.

33 OBA, Free State governing body, B/L 6/2, file 7: Minutes of WAC meeting, 13 February 1942.

34 OBA, G Cronje collection, B/L 1/12, file 1: Reëls van die OB Noodhulpfonds (Rules of The OB Emergency Fund).

in the camp we had to collect” according to Mrs CW Rautenbach, Chief Woman (‘Hoofvrou’) of Northern Transvaal.<sup>35</sup> The women commandos of Pretoria and the Witwatersrand in particular aided political prisoners as the Central Prison in Pretoria was nearby. During the time of the mass internments in 1942 these women supplied foodstuffs for up to 75 men in prison, in spite of the scarcity of food. Petrol was rationed and it was often difficult to get to the prison. Mrs WJ Seymore, chief female commandant of Pretoria (Northern Transvaal), related that when the women could not get transport to the prison “I had ladies who carried that large amount of food and walked to the gaol.” The women also saw to the payment for suits to be tailor-made for the prisoners who had to appear in court.<sup>36</sup> At Christmas time special efforts were made to spoil the men in the internment camps. There were two women in particular who did this kind of work, namely Mrs Lenie Tom and Mrs Lenie Jack. Mrs Lenie Jack’s husband was the commandant of the Koffiefontein commando and there was a good relationship between him and the camp officials of the Koffiefontein Internment Camp. This gave the two women the opportunity to provide much help to the interned in the nearby camp. During one specific Christmas they made a hundred and three plum puddings between the two of them.<sup>37</sup> Women also wanted to support their husbands in more ways than simply material care. The women’s commando of Vryburg, for instance, decided to go and sing to the men in the prison. They were transported to the prison in two trucks and stood before the goal singing folks songs for hours. Mrs J Marais related: “We wanted to give moral support to our men out there in prison. And they did hear us. They say it was a great inspiration to them that we did it.”<sup>38</sup>

As can be seen from the official objectives and activities of the Women’s Division and WAC the duty of fund-raising was regarded as a task to be managed by the OB women. Local units usually organised special Emergency Fund events or collecting events (bazaars) after consulting with the WAC. Women were the organisers of events par excellence. Mrs CW Rautenbach even went as far to describe the difference between the men and women in the OB as follows: “The men were always holding meetings. We simply brought

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35 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 23, 1973: HM Robinson/CW Rautenbach, p. 5. I refer to the gendered title of these women because it was the way contemporaries referred to each other.

36 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 82, 1975: HM Robinson/W Seymore, p. 3; Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 61, 1975: HM Robinson/F Botha, p. 11.

37 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 131, 1977: LM Fourie/CM Immelman, pp. 6-7.

38 OBA, Tape recordings (tr.), tape No. 208, 1985: Memories of Mrs J Marais, p. 3.

together the women and we just organised.”<sup>39</sup> For this reason “hard-working women with a talent for organising” had to be found to take the lead at events.<sup>40</sup> There was no end to the OB women’s work in this regard. Mrs B Roux of Paarl was an aide for ten years in her women’s commando and she describes the activities of the Women’s Division as follows:<sup>41</sup>

Every Friday afternoon we gathered at the house we rented. The Boerejeug (Boer Youth) and the Women’s commando gathered and there we did... goodness, what a lot of things we did! We made the most of what we had to raise funds for the Emergency Fund. We held lectures and gave demonstrations and we had a spinning wheel there and a loom. It was really a very busy time to raise money for the Emergency Fund.

Every week, month and year numerous functions of various kinds were organised to raise funds. Huge and small functions were organised – most of the time under the unfavourable circumstances of the war years. It varied from taking up a collection at the doors at a meeting to a variety of gatherings which bore witness to the women’s ingenuity. One such event which was quite popular was the so-called “Apron Evening”. Each woman in the commando would bring an apron and wear it to the function. Men who were present at the function then threw coins into the pocket of the apron they liked best and at the close of the evening the aprons were auctioned. OB women availed themselves of every opportunity to collect funds. For instance, during every OB function the women officers would sell coffee and tea.<sup>42</sup> Women regularly organised bazaars too. Mrs WJ Seymore tells about a bazaar held in a public park in Wonderboom South, Pretoria. In 1941 there was a gathering of thousands of people. The OB women of Pretoria sold pancakes at a ticky each. At the end of the morning they had made £100 in this way.<sup>43</sup> This means that they had baked approximately 3 000 pancakes!

Women attached great value to their role as fund-raisers. One of the work schedules of the women commandos in the Free State, possibly stipulated by female general C Meyer of the Free State, describes this role in the following terms: “Just as women in the olden days poured bullets for the man to shoot with so that their safety and survival could be guaranteed, so the women in the Ossewa-Brandwag will take care of the necessary funds so that the

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39 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 23, 1973: HM Robinson/CW Rautenbach, p. 4.

40 OBA, Cape governing body collection, B/L 5(i)/1, file 5: Mobilising women’s strength.

41 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 202, 1985: HM Robinson & WR Laubscher/B Roux, p. 1.

42 OBA, Free State governing body collection, B/L 6/2, file 6: Suggestions to women’s commandos.

43 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 82, 1975: HM Robinson/WJ Seymore, p. 2.

struggle can be taken further and victory can be gained.”<sup>44</sup> The reason for this action may be that women were not only responsible for collecting money for the Emergency Fund but also for the Ossewa-Brandwag itself. The economic policy of the OB aimed at helping the Afrikaner gain his or her rightful place in the economic sphere. Economic uplifting did not stop with the care and support of the families of the interned but also entailed increased support to the “Reddingsdaadbond”, support of farmers and the raising of several funds to carry out the policy of uplifting.<sup>45</sup> With this objective in mind the OB meetings were used as a good source of income. It was reported in “Die Burger” and “Die Transvaler” that women “usually” made more than £600 during a huge OB function.<sup>46</sup> Thus it is no surprise that the “Vaderland” on one occasion reported that the heavy financial pressure on “culturally inspired” meetings eventually led to the waning of OB members’ enthusiasm for functions.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, there was always money to collect during events of this kind. The greatest of these functions was called Union Funds Day, Organisation Day or OB Day and took place annually on 8 August.<sup>48</sup>

Next to the celebration of the Boer victory over the British on 27 February 1881 during the First Anglo Boer War, called Freedom Day, Majuba Day or OB Day was the second largest official festive day on the calendar. OB Day was closely linked to the Voortrekker Centenary of 1938. On 8 August 1938 the ox wagons of the symbolic ox wagon trek left Cape Town on their trip northwards. It was regarded as the birthday of the Ossewa-Brandwag because, according to OB leadership, on that day the “volk” started “moving forward” in the form of the OB as mass movement.<sup>49</sup>

OB Day was celebrated for the first time in 1942 and was honoured up to 1952. It was regarded as the “greatest countrywide endeavour by women” and OB women referred to Fund-raising Day as their “main celebration”, meaning fund-raising event.<sup>50</sup> Women saw it as a day of sacrifice where “the “volk” has to be taught to make sacrifices.”<sup>51</sup> It would seem as if on this day the gender tables were turned. It was decreed that the initiative for Fund-raising Day

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44 OBA, Free State governing body collection, B/L 6/2, file 6: Work Schedule: Women’s Auxiliary Council, Orange Free State.

45 PJ Prinsloo, “Kultuurbeeld van die Ossewa-Brandwag...”, p. 359.

46 *Die Burger*, 5 September 1941; *Die Transvaler*, 4 February 1941, 28 February 1941, 6 March 1941, and 21 March 1941.

47 *Die Vaderland*, 28 May 1941.

48 OBA, *Die OB*, 8 April 1942; 9 December 1946.

49 OBA, Area A collection, B/L 5(i)(a)/3, file 16: Feesdag: 8 Augustus (Celebration: 8 August).

50 OBA, Free State governing body, B/L 6/2/7, file 6: Minutes of WAC meeting 12 March 1942.

51 OBA, Free State governing body, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meeting 9 May 1942.

would be left exclusively to the women, but that “the whole-hearted support and cooperation of the men were essential”. During this day the men would take a “special” place, since “the men would have to make a special effort to support and help the women in all respects wherever possible.”<sup>52</sup> On this day the Youth Front would also cooperate and organising them was also the women's responsibility.<sup>53</sup> The “fund-raising efforts of every man, woman and child” were divided along gender lines. Men could sell livestock and donate the value on Fund-raising Day while the women had to occupy themselves throughout the year by creating needlework or works of art which they could sell beforehand or on Fund-raising Day itself. All through the year the youth collected “pennies and tickets”.<sup>54</sup>

The WAC had various methods of collecting money for Fund-raising Day throughout the year. One method was to give small amounts of money to the women officers of the different commandos to be used for generating more money. On 8 August they would then declare their profits. The women's division of Tzitsikama was given two shillings in 1942. The women made articles from coffee bags and sold these. They also had a hen hatch some eggs and sold the chickens. On 8 August 1942 they had increased the two shillings to £7-9-0.<sup>55</sup> The idea was that, in the midst of the shortages resulting from the war, the women had to be frugal and make “something out of nothing”. Thus women were encouraged to make “thrift articles” or “junk articles”. The objective was to raise funds but it was also regarded as educational, since the idea was “to guide people and inspire them to think for themselves and devise and create things ... [it] encourages useful handiwork and whets the sense of resourcefulness ...”<sup>56</sup>

The diversity of articles made by women knew no end. Articles included children's toys such as abacuses made from empty spools, doll's playthings from match boxes, porcupine quills, fish tins and shoe boxes, blankets, buttons from sawn up spools or sliced peach stones or decorated walnut shells, serviette rings made from marrow bones, painted by artistic women, articles

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52 OBA, Transvaal governing body collection, B/L 8(i)/1, file 1: Fondsdag: 8 Augustus (Fund-raising Day: 8 August).

53 OBA, A Potgieter collection, B/L 1/1, file 1: Herinneringe aan die Boerejeug (Memories of the *Boerejeug*), 1942-1946.

54 OBA, Transvaal governing body collection, B/L 8(i)/1, file 1: Fondsdag: 8 Augustus (Fund-raising Day: 8 August).

55 OBA, *Die OB*, 18 December 1942.

56 OBA, G Cronje collection B/L 2/11, file 3: Die maak van rommelartiekels [sic] (Making junk articles).

from flour bags and a variety of clothes, etc.<sup>57</sup> Women commandos worked all the year round on these articles and sold them before or on Fund-raising Day.<sup>58</sup> The OB women of the Free State collected money by means of a so-called “floating painting” for years. The Cape Province WAC received eleven paintings from one Mrs Ferguson-Louw in 1942. Each WAC member in the Cape Province received one painting to sell as a fund-raiser and one painting was given to the chief female general of each area to use as fund-raisers. The Free State WAC immediately voted against a lottery and came up with a better “more acceptable” method. It was decided that the painting would be auctioned in the different commandos in the Free State. The commando which made the highest bid received the painting for one year. Afterwards the commando which generated the most money received the painting for one year. In this way the painting became the “trophy” of the Free State women commandos and was awarded on Fund-raising Day.<sup>59</sup>

8 August was celebrated through small and great festivals all over South Africa. Mrs B Roux explained how OB Day was celebrated in Paarl in the form of a huge bazaar in the town hall which lasted from the morning to the evening. There was an incredibly huge quantity of food which was prepared with the aid of donations of farm products made by numerous farmers. The “Boerejeug”<sup>60</sup> had their own table and there also was “a huge table with needlework”. The evening ended with a dinner.<sup>61</sup> Women were also responsible for selling articles which were on offer but had not been sold during the celebrations – nothing was wasted.<sup>62</sup> Many Fund-raising days also included entertainment that was “typically Afrikaans”. During the afternoons “Boeresport” was often held, including competitions like target shooting, “jukskei”, three-legged races, and similar activities. Staging folk dances was also on the programme and another highlight was when veterans from the Anglo-Boer War shared their experiences with the youth.<sup>63</sup> The calls made for Fund-raising Day were definitely propagandist at times, clearly using singular interpretations of the idea of the “volksmoeder”.<sup>64</sup>

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57 OBA, G Cronje collection B/L 2/11, file 3: Die maak van rommelartiekels [sic] (Making junk articles).

58 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 202, 1985: HM Robinson & WR Laubscher/B Roux, p. 1.

59 OBA, Free State governing body, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meeting, 9 May 1942. Free State governing body collection, B/L 6/2, file 6: Voorstelle vir Vrouekommandos (Suggestions for Women's commandos).

60 This term refers to the youth wing of the OB.

61 OBA, Tape recording, interview (tr.), tape No. 76–77, 1985: HM Robinson & WR Laubscher/B Roux, p. 3.

62 OBA, Free State governing body, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meeting, 17 October 1942.

63 OBA, Transvaal governing body collection, B/L 8(i)/1, file 1: Fondsdag: 8 Augustus (Fund-raising Day: 8 August).

64 OBA, *Die OB*, 22 July 1942.

If the mothers of the volk in the past were willing to sacrifice their sons, yes even their infants, on the altar of our freedom, are you not prepared to sacrifice just a small part of your income on the altar for the same freedom which has not yet been realised? You will be given this opportunity on 8 August.

It is important to keep in mind that Fund-raising Day was not held to raise money for the Emergency Fund. Female general C Meyer spelled it out clearly in 1942: "The funds raised on this day will be going solely and exclusively to the Ossewa-Brandwag as a movement ...".<sup>65</sup> The Free State OB women in 1942 raised more than £3 000 on Fund-raising Day "for the provincial coffer"<sup>66</sup> and tried to double it each year.<sup>67</sup> Although this ideal was not completely reached the Free State OB women increased the amount each year. In 1944 female general Meyer made the following appeal to her commandos: "I am proud of what the women in this area have already accomplished. In 1942 we raised £3 200, in 1943 we increased this amount to £4 500. Shouldn't we summon all our strength and attempt to reach £5 000 this year?"<sup>68</sup> If one takes into account that a similar income was received annually from each of the OB districts<sup>69</sup> it can be assumed that women were the financial lifeblood of the Ossewa-Brandwag.

Apart from grand occasions such as Fund-raising Day or smaller functions geared towards full time fund-raising the OB often served as a form of social contact between fellow Afrikaner women. It offered housewives the opportunity of making themselves felt outside the house. Women who lived on remote farms received the opportunity to interact with others via the OB. An example of this was the creation by the Free State women of a "Ladies' Restroom" in Bloemfontein. By May 1942 it was envisaged to furnish a special place for "ladies who for instance come to the city just for a day, so that they can leave their parcels there or come and sit down to rest when necessary."<sup>70</sup> Because of the financial pressure caused by the war the idea was not taken further at that stage. However, women were very enthusiastic about the idea and by October 1942 the Free State WAC had rented Room No 60 on the fourth floor of the S.A.S. Bank Building in Bloemfontein. An anonymous person who was well-disposed donated furniture and, although the governing

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65 OBA, Free State governing body, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meeting, 9 May 1942.

66 OBA, Free State governing body collection, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meeting, 17 October 1942.

67 OBA, Free State governing body collection, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meeting, 12 March 1943.

68 OBA, JAS de Wet collection, B/L 1/7, file 3: Correspondence: JAS de Wet/C Meyer, 5 June 1944.

69 See OBA, Area F collection, B/L 8(i)(b)/4/26, file 2: Sesmaandelikse verslag (Six monthly report), 1944.

70 OBA, Free State governing body collection, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meeting, 9 May 1942.



body of the Free State OB offered to pay the rent, the OB women declined and one month's rent had already been collected in advance by the WAC.

The Free State WAC nominated a "Restroom Committee" which would be responsible for organising a monthly lecture to be held in the Restroom. It would be advertised in advance in the "The OB" newspaper. Furthermore the room would also be used to divulge "all information in connection with shops, boarding houses and doctors who can be supported" (in other words, those who were kindly disposed towards the OB). Women found it necessary to mention during a meeting that "men would also be allowed, but smoking would be strictly prohibited".<sup>71</sup>

Four months after the appointment of the committee the Restroom was already a great success. The room was frequently visited and women from the Bloemfontein commando were on duty every day. Three lectures were given during that time and women also started procuring a collection of books. Apart from the lectures women also used the Restroom as an opportunity to generate funds. Tea and coffee were sold at 3d a cup and between October 1942 and March 1943 the committee collected £24 6/7½d of which £5 6/11d was used for maintaining the restroom. The balance was sent to the Free State head office.<sup>72</sup> The Free State Ladies' Restroom as well as OB friendship centres across the country gave OB members the chance of mixing socially with like-minded people and thereby strengthened the spirit of unity in the organisation.

In this way OB fund-raising activities often meant a lot to individual OB members. Mrs J Marais remembers "it was always very pleasant; there always was a very pleasant atmosphere. We all felt the same and there were never any quarrelling or such like. Everybody would agree with one other. It was really very pleasant. We all had the same feeling, being together."<sup>73</sup> It would seem as if the camaraderie of key groups of people who worked together in different commandos even outlived the OB as a movement. Mrs CJH Steenkamp remembered almost 50 years later:<sup>74</sup>

You were always surprised when you saw the small group of people who attended the function. Then you were always surprised when you counted the money at the end of the evening. One almost felt like crying when you thought

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71 OBA, Free State governing body collection, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meeting, 17 October 1942.

72 OBA, Free State governing body collection, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meeting, 12 March 1943.

73 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 208, 1985: Memories of Mrs J Marais, p. 3.

74 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 165–166, 1985: LM Fourie/KJH Steenkamp, p. 8.

the people were actually poor and you saw how much the small number of people had brought in, but the cooperation was always lovely and everyone did what they could. Even years after the Ossewa-Brandwag I noticed when we held functions – of whatever kind, for the church or the Party – you would always find the small number of former Ossewa-Brandwag members there ... people who did the hard work and on whom one could really depend, they were the small number of Ossewa-Brandwag people.

OB women's fund-raising activities were unique in the sense that it was considered to be an exclusively women's affair. In this regard the men supported the women. It was the area in which women could have the greatest impact. However, fund-raising was only one feature of women's agency in the early years of the Ossewa-Brandwag.

### ***OB women's general cultural activities***

Throughout its existence the OB would project a distinct cultural touch. Especially in the period 1939 to 1941 the OB was generally regarded as a cultural organisation.<sup>75</sup> The functions and activities of the OB were *inter alia* described as follows:<sup>76</sup>

Celebrating national Afrikaans festivals and birthdays of our heroes, setting up memorials, wreath-laying at monuments, tracing and maintaining historical places and graves of Afrikaners who died for South Africa, organising gatherings like target-shooting, throwing the jukskei, et cetera, doing folk dances and folk songs, holding marches, holding regular meetings of an educational and social nature, staging stage productions, organising lectures on history, our literature, national matters and the world of women, debates, camps for men and women, etcetera.

But the OB attempted to be more than just a merely cultural organisation: it had to be a continuation of the complete concept of Afrikaner unity achieved by the 1938 Voortrekker Centenary festivals. Thus the OB was seen as a means of achieving cooperation between Afrikaners outside and above politics in order to realise their ideal of political, economic and cultural freedom. When he became the CG in 1941 Dr Van Rensburg began to utilise the cultural activities of the OB to serve more extensive goals. For him the OB was a tool

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75 See PJJ Prinsloo, "Kultuuraktiwiteite van die Ossewa-Brandwag...", PF van der Schyff, *Die OB: Vuurtjie in droë gras*, pp. 332-384.

76 *Die Volksblad*, 6 February 1939, 15 April 1939 and *Die Volkstem*, 13 February 1939. See also PJJ Prinsloo, "Kultuurbeeld van die Ossewa-Brandwag...", p. 33.

to arouse and escalate a spirit of activism among Afrikaners.<sup>77</sup> He considered the movement exceptionally suitable for this task. He regarded it “as the mobilised Afrikaner, mobilised for the struggle for survival in the different spheres of the life of the people.” Through the OB he wanted to mobilise the Afrikaner economically, culturally and for mutual protection.<sup>78</sup> Under Dr Van Rensburg’s leadership the cultural activities of the OB were focused solely on the republican ideal.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore the function of extending the *volk’s* culture was mainly to emphasise the inclusion and equality of all Afrikaners in the Ossewa-Brandwag, as well as retaining their “own” in the name of a future republic.<sup>80</sup> Against this background the cultural activities of OB women will be described.

In the cultural activities of the OB the “world of women” would in essence be expressed by the role they played during women camps and national festivals. That the OB was a “gendered” movement clearly emerges from the fact that a clear distinction was often made between the activities of men and those of women. For instance, it was decreed that, as in the case of separate commandos based on gender, there would also be separate camps for men and women. Women camps was an important activity in every OB area and individual commandos regularly organised their own camps. Camps for males and females would form an important element of the OB’s activities where physical training, drilling, social intercourse and cultural activities would be the order of the day.<sup>81</sup> At the camps all members had to be in uniform. Women were clothed in white dresses and hats. Although camps differed in nature, there were certain similarities between male and female camps. The singing of folk songs was promoted at the camps as well as drilling together in exercise for future marches.<sup>82</sup> Other activities envisaged consisted “inter alia” of study circles, hiking and touring divisions and sports gatherings.<sup>83</sup> The aim with the latter was to bring the Afrikaner back to their “national” games and to provide an opportunity to OB members to get to know one another better and to socialise.<sup>84</sup> Moreover camps were regarded as an aid

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77 *Die Burger*, 25 February 1941.

78 AJH van der Walt, ‘n *Volk op trek...*, pp. 39-40.

79 OBA, Commandant General collection: Speeches: Laertrek te Bloemfontein (*Laager-trekking* at Bloemfontein), 13 April 1941.

80 C Marx, *Oxwagon sentinel...*, p. 339.

81 *Die Transvaler*, 26 January 1939.

82 *Die Volksblad*, 15 April 1939.

83 OBA, *Grootraad* collection, B/L 1/2, file 11: Minutes of meeting, 10 August 1939; 26 September 1939.

84 PJJ Prinsloo, “Kultuurbeeld van die Ossewa-Brandwag...”, PF van der Schyff (red.), *Die Ossewa-Brandwag: Vuurtyjie in droë gras*, p. 38.

in the struggle for freedom because they could be used to foster a spirit of discipline among Afrikaners – one of the aims of the OB. During camps strict discipline was maintained and usually there were speeches which were fraught with republican ideas.<sup>85</sup> Within the ranks of the OB a camp was referred to as “laager-trekking” (originally setting up camp by drawing wagons into a closed circle for protection, from the time of the Great Trek). In this context it is important to ask the following question: What was unique to the women’s “laager-trekking”?

The main aim with laager trekking and camps for women was to train women in what the OB regarded as “matters for women of the *volk*”.<sup>86</sup> For instance, the Vice-Commandant General (VCG) of the Ossewa-Brandwag, JA Smith, who was the head of the women’s division before 1943, took a strong stance by saying in a speech that “OB “laagers” should not be seen as picnic outings but as disciplined “laager-trekkings” where members undergo certain courses to equip them spiritually and physically for the tough struggle for the “volk” that we are waging.”<sup>87</sup>

The first report on an OB women’s camp is that of a camp held in the Transvaal from 14 to 20 September 1942. The camp took place on a farm where more than a hundred women underwent “intensive courses”. During this camp, for instance, lectures were given on “first aid, gardening, the influence of a mother on her child, art needlework, “volk” ideals and democracy, child care, etc.” During this camp the women were addressed by the CG on the position of women in a future Afrikaner republic.<sup>88</sup> Lectures held at a Transvaal “laager-trekking” from 7 to 14 May 1943 included similar themes, mainly conducted by men who were regarded as “experts” in the field, namely “Nervous disorders” (Dr V Bürman), home nursing of infectious diseases (chief female commandant P Wassenaar), healthy living before giving birth (Dr GB Bücher), posture and its relation to health (Dr J Röscher) and discipline (chief female commandant A Röscher).<sup>89</sup>

As already mentioned, discipline was an important component of women’s camps. Thus it was reported that at the entrance of the above-mentioned camp a female guard controlled movement at the gate and a second lady escorted a

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85 PJJ Prinsloo, “Kultuurbeeld van die Ossewa-Brandwag...”, p. 69.

86 OBA, Area C collection, B/L 6/5, file 27: Area command no. C.8/43.

87 OBA, *Die OB*, 8 April 1942; 9 December 1946.

88 OBA, *Die OB*, 7 October 1942.

89 OBA, *Die OB*, 14 April 1943.

visitor to the camping site but “it is no use to try and exchange a few friendly words with your escort, for she has orders not to speak to strangers while on duty and she strictly adheres to these instructions.”<sup>90</sup> During the camps there was also singing and every woman had to take along either a copy of the *FAK* (volume of folk songs) or the official OB song book.<sup>91</sup> Camps also gave women the opportunity to test their expertise in first aid. For instance, during a women’s camp of Area C in the Free State a special first aid tent was erected where demonstrations and lectures on this theme were given.<sup>92</sup> Ever true to their “official function” the OB women often also used the camps as an opportunity for raising funds or doing welfare work. For example, food left-overs after a camp was sent to an orphanage and one Free State camp was organised in such a way that an amount of £85 of the camp expenses that were not utilised, which was paid into the Emergency Fund.<sup>93</sup>

During a Free State women’s camp in 1947 the women had to bring along “necessities for making a doll” so that each woman at the camp could produce a hand-made doll to sell, as it was noticed that “dolls sold very well at functions”.<sup>94</sup> In addition the republican “activism” of Dr Van Rensburg also shone through during women’s camps as can be seen from the propagandistic value attached to flags. At a typical camp there was a flag hoisting ceremony every morning as well as at least one formal striking of the colours during the course of the camp (see Figure 1). Further, the women actually attempted to apply in practice what they had learned at the camps. Thus Mrs J Williams wrote in *Die OB*: “Everybody tries so hard to live up to all the good things they experienced in the camp. In more than one home a young revolution takes place concerning meals, general health and discipline. It is amusing to see how some of the men and brothers meekly comply with these things.”<sup>95</sup>

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90 OBA, *Die OB*, 2 February 1943.

91 OBA, Area C collection, B/L 6/5, file 28: Circular 1/47.

92 OBA, *Die OB*, 14 Maart 1945.

93 OBA, *Die OB*, 28 February 1945. Also see OBA: Transvaal governing body collection, B/L 8(i)/1, file 1: Organisasietemete van die OB (Organisational method of the OB).

94 OBA, G Tomlinson collection, B/L 1/5, File 3: Vrouekamp (Women’s camp).

95 OBA, *Die OB*, 11 September 1943.

Image 1: Women's camp at Bellville



Left: Formal striking of the colours; Right: Socialising around the camp fire

Source: OBA, OB Photo collection, photo No. 1219: Wagkamp (Guard camp), 18 November 1945, Bellville.

Organising a female “laager-trekking” took a lot of preparation. For instance, the Free State women could not hold a “laager trekking” in their area in 1942. Female general Meyer stated at a meeting: “It is too late to organise a camp this year since at least two months is needed for its organisation”.<sup>96</sup> Officers and “Brandwagte” (ordinary OB members) were usually expected to attend camps. Food was often supplied at the camp and women only had to bring along the kind of supplies that was scarce during the war such as tea, sugar, toilet soap, candles and matches.<sup>97</sup> Apart from these items the women had to provide their own bedding and stretchers as well as tableware and similar items. Women also paid a camp fee which went into the organisers’ cashbox to cover costs such as paying a cook. The woman who would take charge of the cooking received remuneration of £5 for her trouble.<sup>98</sup> Due to all the above-mentioned arrangements circulars were sent out months in advance to prepare the women.<sup>99</sup> The typical programme for a women’s “laager-trekking” was the following:

96 OBA, Free State governing body collection, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meetin, 17 October 1942.

97 OBA, Area C collection, B/L 6/5, file 28: Circular 1/47.

98 OBA, G Tomlinson collection, B/L 1/5, file 3: Circular, 17 January 1947.

99 OBA, G Tomlinson collection, B/L 1/5, File 3: Vrouekamp (Women’s camp).

## **Preliminary Programme**

Image 2: Free State Women's Camp 13 to 16 February 1945

<b>Tuesday, 13 February</b>	
3 p.m.	Opening ceremony
4 p.m.	Coffee
4.45 p.m.	Singing
5 p.m.	Lecture by Vice-Chief female commandant V Rooyen
7.45 p.m.	Singing
8 p.m.	Film show
	Evening prayers
<b>Wednesday, 14 February</b>	
6 a.m.	Whistle to rise
7 a.m.	Flag hoisting and morning prayers
8 a.m.	Breakfast
9 a.m.	Lecture by Prof G Cronje
10.30 a.m.	Tea
11 a.m.	Demonstration: Making woollen buttons
12.30 p.m.	Lunch
3 p.m.	Lecture by Prof G Cronje
4.30 p.m.	Coffee
5 p.m.	Demonstration: Sun hat and leather girdle
7.45 p.m.	Singing
8 p.m.	Lecture on national health by a doctor
	Evening prayers
<b>Thursday, 15 February</b>	
6 a.m.	Whistle to rise
7 a.m.	Flag hoisting and morning prayers
8 a.m.	Breakfast
9 a.m.	Lecture and demonstration: cutting & fitting patterns
10.30 a.m.	Tea
11 a.m.	Lecture continued
12.30 p.m.	Lunch
3 p.m.	Meeting CG, VCG and AG (Area General)
3.30 p.m.	Coffee
4 p.m.	Speech: Area General
4.30 p.m.	Speech: Vice-Commandant General
7.45 p.m.	Singing
8 p.m.	Speech: Commandant General



	Evening prayers
<b>Friday, 16 February</b>	
6 a.m.	Whistle to rise
7 a.m.	Flag hoisting and morning prayers
8 a.m.	Breakfast
9 a.m.	Lecture: Dr P Meyer
10.30 a.m.	Tea
11 a.m.	Demonstration
12.30 p.m.	Lunch
3 p.m.	Closing ceremony

Source: OBA, Area C collection, B/L 6/5, file 28, Omsendbrief, 29/11/1944: Program van vrouekamp (Program of women's camp).

The OB Women's Division was also responsible for organising camps for young women, called "Boeredogters" (Boer girls), of the Ossewa-Brandwag "Boerejeug". Sometimes joint camps for boys and girls were held but more often they were held separately. The "Boeredogters" were under the supervision of the women's division. It was decreed that: "The girl's division of the Youth movement has to fall under the Women's Division. The main objective of the youth movement is the education of girls and boys as future men and women according to the demands that the community will make on them when they are grown-ups. It stands to reason that the women and mothers of the "volk" should be entrusted with this education and forming of the girls."<sup>100</sup> In line with the way members and leaders of the OB understood gender differences, the activities of the official youth wing were also divided on the basis of gender. The activities were divided between the boys and girls of the "Boerejeug". Some of the activities were similar but if one pays attention to the OB's division of labour on the basis of gender, it is not surprising that the activities were geared towards equipping the male and female genders each for their particular duties.<sup>101</sup>

In an official OB pamphlet it was maintained that it was "the duty of every true Afrikaner boy or girl to exert themselves and jointly fight the foreign class differences in the life of the 'volk' and work for true unity and total freedom of the 'volk'".<sup>102</sup> Knowledge was very important to make sure that the youth

100 OBA, JS de Vos collection, B/L 1/8, file 8: Die taak van die vrou in die beweging van die volk (The duty of women in the movement of the "volk").

101 C Blignaut & JA du Pisani, "Om die fakkel verder te dra": Die rol van die jeugvleuel van die Ossewa-Brandwag, 1939-1952", *Historia*, 54(2), 2009, pp. 133-157, p. 146.

102 OBA, *Boerejeug* collection, B/L 9/1, file 8: *Boerejeug* pamphlets, "Die Boerejeug".

would not forsake this duty. Thus official OB ideology was impressed on both boys and girls during camps although matters concerning politics of the “volk” took up a greater part of lectures held for the boys. Where boys were occupied with field work such as direction-finding, drawing and reading maps, tracking, “tricks of attacking” and crawling up on the enemy, OB women paid particular attention to training “Boeredogters” in first aid.<sup>103</sup>

First aid was an important part of the girls’ training right from the launching of the youth wing. The emphasis on first aid should also be seen within the context of the time when the OB was born. While the Second World War was raging in Europe and the OB was propagating the possibility of a war on their own soil, it was essential for the girls to have a basic knowledge of first aid.<sup>104</sup> Even after the Second World War first aid courses still remained an important part of the “Boerejeug” activities. A first diploma awarded by the South African First Aid League was considered to be the ultimate ideal of OB first aid courses. Where there was no branch of the First Aid League in the vicinity of a specific OB area arrangements would be made during camps for the “Boeredogters” to take the tests. First Aid knowledge equivalent to the requirements of the diploma course was regarded as sufficient.<sup>105</sup>

Members of the “Boerejeug” also had to choose a minimum of two subjects and specialise in a certain field. Children also had to have an elementary knowledge of all fields.<sup>106</sup> The subjects from which girls could choose were needlework and knitting, metal work, photography, folk dances, interior culture, spinning and weaving, bookbinding, cooking and decorating, home nursing and a knowledge of at least one musical instrument.<sup>107</sup> These activities were not intended as mere pastimes. Every Boer girl had to learn something from which she would benefit in the future.

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103 OBA, *Boerejeug* collection, B/L 9/1, file 6: Uniforms, klere en wapens: Ereleure toegeken deur die Boerejeug (Uniforms, dress, badges: Badges of merit awarded by the Boerejeug), 1948.

104 C Bignaut & JA du Pisani, “Om die fakkel verder te dra...”, *Historia*, 54(2), 2009, p. 147.

105 OBA, *Boerejeug* collection, B/L 9/1, file 2: Correspondence DJ van Rooy/PJ Taljaard, 4 May, 1948.

106 OBA, Area F collection, B/L 8(1)(b)6, file 34: *Boerejeug* orders, 1943.

107 OBA, *Boerejeug* collection, B/L 9/1, file 6: Uniforms, klere en wapens: Ereleure toegeken deur die Boerejeug (Uniforms, dress, badges: Badges of merit awarded by the Boerejeug), 1948.

Image 3: The “Boeredogters” of the Ossewa-Brandwag



Left: A “Boeredogter” in her official uniform;<sup>108</sup> Right (above): Singing “Boeredogters” clothed in uniform;<sup>109</sup> Right (below): Joint flag parade of “Boeredogters” and boys.

Source: OBA, OB Foto collection, photo No. 1112: Kruger Day celebrations, 10 October 1941/1942.

The uniform dress of the “Boeredogters” had to mirror the discipline of the OB in general (see Figure 3). Mrs A Potgieter told about her memories of the “Boerejeug” during camps: “...the strict discipline was remarkable ... the atmosphere was always very serious but simultaneously a relaxed spirit, with humour, camaraderie and relentless discipline which was accepted unconditionally by everyone”.<sup>110</sup> Discipline and military organisation were also represented in the parade work in which “Boeredogters” were also trained. During OB marches and formal flag parades the “Boerejeug” could always be seen. Ceremonial parades had to be executed smoothly and the “Boeredogters” practised for this during the “laager-trekking”. There were two types of flag parades in the “Boerejeug”: those where boys and girls held separate flag parades and others where the boys and girls acted together (see Figure 3). Officers of individual women’s commandos right through the

108 OBA, OB Foto collection, photo No. 1156: *Boerejeug* uniform.

109 OBA, *OB Jaarboek* (Year Book) 1948, p. 49.

110 OBA, A Potgieter collection, B/L 1/1, file 1942–1946: Herinneringe aan die Boerejeug, (Memories of the Boerejeug, 1988).

country were responsible for organising the girls as part of the “Boerejeug” commando.<sup>111</sup> Thus this work also constituted a great part of OB women’s cultural activities in the organisation. Another important cultural activity in which women were involved was OB festive days.

The two most important festive days celebrated by the OB were the ones already mentioned, namely Fund-raising Day and Freedom Day. Freedom Day was also called “Majuba Day” and commemorated the Boer victory over British forces on 27 February 1881 in Natal. The day was also closely linked with the ideal of the OB, namely the struggle to become completely free from any British influence.<sup>112</sup> From 1942 to 1952 Freedom Day was an annual celebration, organised countrywide by the OB. The biggest festival was held at Majuba mountain itself. The OB had purchased the farm “Majuba-North” where the Amajuba mountain is situated on behalf of the “volk”. Ownership of the mountain was taken on behalf of the “volk” at a huge OB festival attended by approximately 20 000 people on 2 January 1941. OB women immediately started organising, sending out subscription lists and arranging functions to pay off the debt for the farm purchase.<sup>113</sup> The celebration of Freedom Day by both men and women served to fuel the burning idealism of freedom felt in the movement under the leadership of Dr Van Rensburg.<sup>114</sup> He called upon OB members to celebrate Freedom Day countrywide: “Let us fall in line right through our fatherland on that day, man, woman and child, knowing that the day of liberation is fast approaching.”<sup>115</sup>

The first Freedom Day celebration of 27 February 1942 at Majuba was attended by more than 7000 people. The highlight of the three-day festival was the lighting of the “freedom fire” on Amajuba.<sup>116</sup> In “Die OB” it was described as follows: “an impressive ceremony, so spectacular that those present burst into shouts of joy and into tears. The flames leapt into the air forty feet high and simultaneously the fire was lit on top of Amajuba which formed a massive black silhouette against the background.”<sup>117</sup> Apart from lighting the “freedom fire” on Majuba the commandant of each OB commando had to

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111 OBA, *Boerejeug* collection, B/L 9/1, file 4: Die Boerejeug: Sy doel, organisasie en administrasie (The Boerejeug: Its aim, organisation and administration), 1946.

112 PJJ Prinsloo, “Kultuuraktiwiteite van die Ossewa-Brandwag...”, PF van der Schyff (red.), *Die Ossewa-Brandwag: Vuurtjie in droë gras*, p. 371.

113 *Die Transvaler*, 2 January 1941.

114 OBA, *Die OB*, 4 March 1942.

115 OBA, *Die OB*, 30 December 1941.

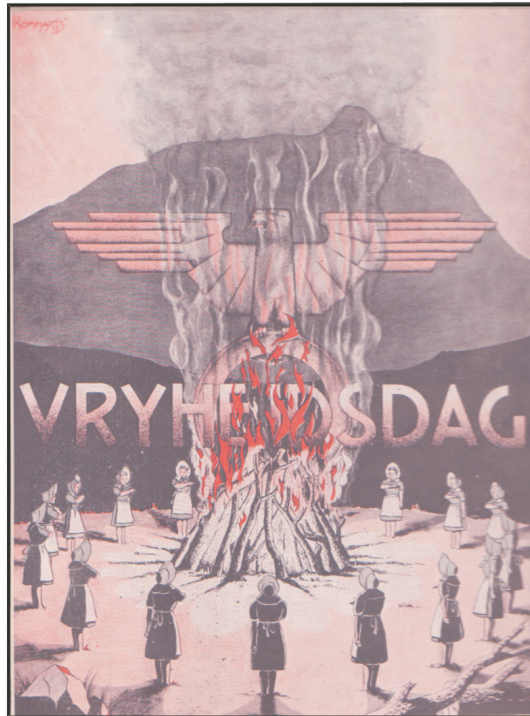
116 See PJJ Prinsloo, “Kultuuraktiwiteite van die Ossewa-Brandwag...”, PF van der Schyff (red.), *Die Ossewa-Brandwag: Vuurtjie in droë gras*, p. 372.

117 OBA, *Die OB*, 11 March 1942.

see to it that at nine o'clock on the evening of 27 February a bonfire would be lit on a high place in his area.<sup>118</sup> PJJ Prinsloo related that in this way “every year a republican chain of fires originated in the country”.<sup>119</sup> Female general E Theron, Chief Woman of the Cape Province, described this custom as follows:<sup>120</sup>

One interesting custom of the OB's was to ask all “republican and freedom conscious Afrikaners” to celebrate the victory on Majuba on 27 February. All over the country freedom fires had to be lit at a fixed time that night on a hill or high place. We had a fixed programme to be carried out strictly by everyone, wherever they were in the country. At one stage, according to the orders, we had to gaze silently into the fire for a few minutes. Some of us found the “gazing into the fire” somewhat amusing, but still it was a good event. The mere thought that thousands all over the country thought, felt, and did the same, was in itself a great support.

Image 4: OB “Boeredogters” gaze into the fire during Freedom Day on Majuba



Source: OBA, OB Jaarboek (Year Book) 1948, p. 32.

118 OBA, *Grootraad* collection Orders: KG bevel rakende 27 Februarie 1947 (CG command re 27 February 1947).

119 PJJ Prinsloo, “Kultuuraktiwiteite van die Ossewa-Brandwag...”, p. 371.

120 E Theron, *Sonder hoed of handskoene*, p. 43.

After the war, from 1946 onwards, Freedom Day was also used for fund-raising. Women took up their places and collected money by means of subscription lists and “cafés” on the grounds where they sold refreshments.<sup>121</sup> Women saw a direct link between their duty of raising funds and the republican ideal which was symbolised by the celebration of Freedom Day. In 1947 female general Meyer for instance called up her commandos “to make a concerted effort to raise as much money as possible on Freedom Day ... Let the fires rise high on every “koppie” in your area. Let us make out whether February will be the month of the King (of Britain) or the month of the Republic. Let each one bring his sacrifice and regard it as a sacrifice for FREEDOM.”<sup>122</sup>

Apart from Fund-raising Day and Freedom Day several other festive days and important historical events were celebrated by the OB. From 1941 onwards celebrations of Heroes’ Day were organised countrywide by the OB. PJJ Prinsloo mentions that there were three motives behind these celebrations, namely to bring homage to heroes of the “volk” in the best possible way, to gather OB members in their tens of thousands with a view to having 10 October declared as a day for the “volk” and to repair the graves of fallen heroes.<sup>123</sup> Some of the greatest heroes of the OB not only included men, but also women and children – especially women and children who had died during the South African War. For instance, on 13 October 1941 female general Du Toit of the Cape Province observed a wreath-laying on behalf of the OB in Bloemfontein.<sup>124</sup> Also 31 May was kept as a day of mourning by the OB since “on 31 May 1902 the Boer ‘volk’ was robbed of its freedom at Vereeniging”. OB members were forbidden to take part in any festivities and spent the day in “mourning and deep reflection”.<sup>125</sup> Women tried to act as embodiments of moral standards by reminding the men of the religious nature of such a day and that it also had to be kept as a day of prayer.<sup>126</sup>

The birthdays of the CG, Dr JFJ van Rensburg, and the VCG, Mr JA Smith, were also celebrated as OB festive days on which parades were held, and there was joint singing and “jukskei” was played.<sup>127</sup> For this, too, the women had

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121 OBA, JAS de Wet collection, B/L 1/7, file 3: I/S Vryheidsdag (I/S Freedom Day), 13 February 1945.

122 OBA, Area C collection, B/L 6/5, file 28: Oproep Vryheidsdag Feesvieringe (Call: Freedom Day celebrations), 10 February 1947.

123 PJJ Prinsloo, “Kultuuraktiwiteite van die Ossewa-Brandwag...”, p. 371.

124 OBA, PJ Nienaber collection: Minutes of the first Laager of OB officers, Bloemfontein, 13-14 October 1941.

125 OBA, Free State governing body collection, B/L/ 6/2/7, file 7: Free State OB Order, 5/42.

126 OBA, Free State governing body, B/L 6/2/7, file 5: Minutes of WAC meeting, 9 May 1942.

127 OBA, Cape Province Province collection, B/L, file 5: Notice 1/8, 21 October 1941.



to collect funds.<sup>128</sup> In her memoirs Mrs B Roux recounted that:<sup>129</sup>

... the most outstanding event I can remember was with the birthdays of the CG and the VCG: The march began on Church Square at the strooidak church (a historical Dutch Reformed church in Paarl with a thatched roof). The spearhead with the flags was right in front, then followed the great OB brass band, and then all the divisions and in the middle of the march was the CG and the Vice-CG, then the women's commando and after them came the cars.

Women also took part in several cultural activities outside the official organisational structure of the OB Women's Division, but still acted as a part of the OB. The best example of this is the "Katdoring Toneelgeselskap" (Theatrical company), founded by a prominent OB woman, Anna Neethling-Pohl as well as the Cape Town "Remskoene Toneelvereniging" (Dramatic Society).<sup>130</sup> They were in no way "silent" or absent as roleplayers in the history of the Ossewa-Brandwag.

## **Conclusion**

From the above description of women's activities in the OB it is clear that they formed a dynamic and active component of the organisation. Even though the division of labour was done along gender lines, it does not imply in the least that women did not play an important role in the organisation. No organisation can exist without money and this is where the women played an indispensable role in the OB. Despite their fund-raising roles the movement also empowered women and gave them the opportunity to voice their nationalistic and republican sentiments through their participation in, and organising of, events. It is important to consider that the above mentioned description of women's activities in the OB does not merely do justice to their role as historical agents that contributed to change in the OB. However, it also sheds light on a topic never before described in South African historiography and contributes to breaking the silence on the women who were part of this radical nationalist movement. The noble aim of writing up the stories of women's lives, as part of the more generic objectives of women's and gender history, is still necessary if one takes the archival base of this study

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128 OBA, BC Seymore collection. B/L 1/2, file 10: Correspondence: BC Seymore/P Widd, 26 May 1951.

129 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 76-77, 1985: HM Robinson & WR Laubscher/B Roux, p. 2.

130 See C Blignaut, "Volksmoeders in die kollig...", pp. 191-192 for a description of the *Remskoene Toneelvereniging* and pp. 216-223 for a detailed description of the *Katdoring Toneelgeselskap*.



into account. Female activities in the OB also throw light on the way their contemporaries understood gender differences. As a summary of the nature of women's general activities and how women saw their own role in the movement, the following description by a female OB leader is revealing:<sup>131</sup>

The duty of women in the Ossewa-Brandwag is a taxing one. In many respects much is expected of her. No-one ever has a life completely free from problems. Opposition and disappointments will always be part of it. Nevertheless the woman in the Ossewa-Brandwag faces all troubles and fills her humble position. She realises that the volk needs her services and she gives them in an unselfish way. She has undertaken to come forward in these dark days and exert herself. She gives moral and practical support to her compatriots who sit helplessly between four walls. To their families who are equally helpless she offers her best advice and lends a helping hand everywhere. Yet she is not smug neither sits back at ease for there still is a long way to go.

Eventually the OB Women's Division would follow the same path as the OB itself. After the Second World War it became evident that the OB could not live up to its ideals. It had to redefine itself and the movement became focused on the propagating of republicanism and this also affected the women folk. Women became a symbolic resource as an inspiration in their role as caregivers of the nation through caring for the families of the interned up until 1948. With the victory of the National Party the OB started to decline rapidly and the Women's Division with it. The legacy of the OB Women's Division, however, lived on in the incorporation of women into the structures that supported Apartheid, such as the National Party and the Dutch Reformed Church. After the disbanding of the OB in 1954, women continued their role as fund-raisers and organisers in the above mentioned organisations. From there the words of Mrs Steenkamp: "Even years after the Ossewa-Brandwag I noticed when we held functions – of whatever kind, for the church or the Party – you would always find the small number of former Ossewa-Brandwag members there... people who did the hard work and on whom one could really depend, they were the small number of Ossewa-Brandwag people."<sup>132</sup>

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131 OBA, BC Seymore, "Women in the Ossewabrandwag" in *OB Jaarboek* (Year Book), 1947, p. 28.

132 OBA, Tape recordings, interview (tr.), tape No. 165–166, 1985: LM Fourie/KJH Steenkamp, p. 8.