

“Ik Weet Niets van de Ontploffing”: An Examination of the Braamfontein Explosion of 1896

by
Garth Tai-shen Ahnie

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Supervisor: Prof Albert Mauritz Grundlingh

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the causes and origins of the Braamfontein Explosion or disaster of 1896, while outlining its immediate effects. Various sources do discuss or mention a cause for the explosion, yet on a closer inspection of the evidence, it becomes apparent that the causes were not as simplistic as suggested in these works. The investigation discusses the critical chain of events that led up to the explosion, while proposing what can be considered the possible cause or causes. To do so, this thesis will be looking at the various industrial and social components that surround the perception of the explosion such as the dynamite industry, the railway company and the official investigation that followed. Additionally the thesis will be a lens upon the unique characteristics of the Witwatersrand of that time, by presenting the nuances of its various people that were involved with and or affected by the explosion. The year 1896 was not a particularly pleasant year for the Rand – it was on alert following the Jameson Raid, it was enduring a drought that led to water scarcity, as well as the average feature of town fire or the odd homicide. Thus the explosion came at a difficult time, and affected the most vulnerable of the town. It is the hope that this thesis will recount the events before, during and after the explosion, to create a fuller and more accurate image, but by no means can it encompass all facets of the event.

Opsomming

Hierdie tesis ondersoek die oorsake en oorsprong van die ontploffing of ramp in Braamfontein van 1896, sowel as die onmiddellike gevolge daarvan. Daar is sekondêre bronne wat wel 'n oorsaak vir die ontploffing bespreek, maar by nadere betragting het dit geblyk 'n oorvereenvoudige vertolking te wees. Hierdie ondersoek bespreek die kritiese ketting van gebeure wat aanleiding tot die ontploffing gegee het, terwyl dit alternatiewe redes vir die ontploffing oorweeg. Dienooreenkomstig let die tesis op die verskillende industriële en sosiale komponente wat die persepsie van die ontploffing omgee het, soos byvoorbeeld die dinamietbedryf, die Spoorwegmaatskappy en die amptelike ondersoek wat gevolg het. Verder poog die tesis om 'n lens te wees op die unieke eienskappe van die Witwatersrand van daardie tyd, deur onder meer genuanseerde ontledings van die verskillende mense en hulle belewenisse wat betrokke was of direk deur die ontploffing geraak is. Die jaar 1896 was nie 'n baie aangename jaar op die Rand nie – daar was paniek na die Jameson Inval, daar was 'n droogte saam met waterskaarste, sowel as die gebruikelike brand en moord. Die ontploffing het op 'n moeilike tyd gekom en die dorp se mees kwesbare mense geraak. Daar word gehoop dat hierdie tesis die gebeure voor, tydens en na die ontploffing duidelik te berde sal bring om 'n volledige en meer akkurate beeld te skep. Dit gee egter nie voor om alle fasette van die ontploffing te dek nie.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The Braamfontein Explosion took place in the heart of the poorer districts of early Johannesburg – itself at the time, a cauldron of social, industrial and political broiling.¹ What makes the explosion fascinating is not only its unique collective setting, but the fact that the direct cause of it remains a mystery. It is the intention of this thesis, to delve into the chain of events that took place prior to the explosion, as well as the experience of the explosion itself and the immediate repercussions. This is in the hope of revealing and understanding more about the cause or causes, while framing the event within the overhanging currents of the early Witwatersrand.

Literature Review

Disaster is a broad term – in the English speaking world, the word disaster refers to all large scale destructive catastrophes, such as “natural disasters” including earthquakes, flooding, storms, fires and epidemics as well as “human made disasters” or “technical threats” such as power plant accidents, wars, acts of terror and in the case of this thesis accidental explosions.² The history of disasters as a genre is still a developing field, even though it has been cultivated in different disciplines for decades, it has been recognised as neglected in the field of history. Arno Borst, in his prominent 1981 work regarding the Carinthian earthquake of 1348, acknowledged that historical disaster research was largely neglected and asserted that disasters (namely natural disasters) were an essential part of the social experience and therefore belonged within the field of history.³ With that being said, disasters still attract the attention and interests of researchers, compelling their desire for historical events. Disasters are also attractive from the conceptual standpoints of economics and politics, as their examination is connected with attempts to improve and prepare infrastructural conditions for their eventual return. Gerrit Schenk tells us that there has been no “comprehensive history of the engagement with disasters from an explicitly historical angle”.⁴ He further advocates that

¹ C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 2; A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 71.

² G. J. Schenk: “Historical disaster research. State of Research, Concepts, Methods and Case Studies,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, (32), (3), 2007, p. 12.

³ A. Borst: “Das Erdbeben von 1348,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, (233), (JG), 1981, p. 532.

⁴ G. J. Schenk: “Historical disaster research. State of Research, Concepts, Methods and Case Studies,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, (32), (3), 2007, p. 11.

due to the extensive differences between disasters, historians should identify what makes them a “uniformed researched object,” for the purposes of a specific analysis.⁵ What can be referred to as true “historical disaster research” only began appearing, in a more tangible sense, in the 1990s, with many of its scholars coming from the University of Grenoble. These French scholars encouraged an all-inclusive cultural studies analysis of disasters and their reasoning is seen through the words of two of them:⁶ “A history of 'total' disaster, taking into account their components (geographic, social, economic, cultural), is possible and necessary.”⁷ German historian Arno Borst was another pioneer of this idea of a comprehensive disaster history and his structure of analysis was focussed on perception or experience, interpretation, description, reactions, coping, and remembrance.⁸

Disasters have been classified based on their consequences – for example “those which involve loss of life especially to breadwinners,” and “those which involve destruction of property, and frequently life as well.”⁹ Other academics have distinguished disasters based on their characteristics and their consequences, through the idea of looking at the “character of the precipitating event, or catastrophe, and the scope of the resulting cultural collapse.”¹⁰ And based on this idea they have identified four types of disasters: a) an “instantaneous-diffused type,” which occurs and ends before anyone can do something about it, and affects the whole community; b) an “instantaneous-focalised type,” which affects a concentrated area within a town or community and thus leaves the rest of the infrastructure physically undamaged; c) a “progressive-diffused type,” this type of disaster can last for several hours or days, and affect the entire community; and d) a “progressive-focalised type,” which is a concentrated disaster that unfolds in several hours such as the sinking of the *Titanic*.¹¹ The Halifax Explosion of 1917 was used as an example to explain the “instantaneous-diffused” disaster type mentioned above.¹² This explosion took place on the morning of December 6, 1917, in the Canadian city of Halifax, Nova Scotia, towards the tail end of the First World War. The explosion was the

⁵ G. J. Schenk: “Historical disaster research. State of research, concepts, methods and case studies,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, (32), (3), 2007, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15. French scholars Jacques Berlioz and Gregory Quenet.

⁷ In the original French: “Une histoire 'totale' des catastrophe, prenant en compte leurs composants (géographique, sociale, économique, culturelle), est possible et nécessaire.”

⁸ G. J. Schenk: “Historical disaster research. State of research, concepts, methods and case studies,” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, (32), (3), 2007, p. 16.

⁹ S. A. Queen & D. M. Mann: *Social pathology*, p. 431.

¹⁰ L. J. Carr: “Disaster and the sequence-pattern concept of social change,” *American Journal of Sociology*, (38), (2), 1932, pp. 201-210.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² L. J. Carr: “Disaster and the sequence-pattern concept of social change,” *American Journal of Sociology*, (38), (2), 1932, pp. 201-210.

outcome of a collision between a Norwegian relief freighter and a French munitions ship, containing a cargo of high explosives and barrels of flammable benzol – a normal yet dangerous shipment for wartime. Before the blast the French ship had caught fire following the accident, and burned for twenty five minutes, which allowed the crew of the ship to escape and take refuge on shore. The explosion caused great damage to the city, killing approximately 2000 people, injuring another 10 000 and until the invention and use of nuclear weapons, was considered the largest man-made explosion.¹³ The Braamfontein Explosion can be seen to fall within the same designation of an “instantaneous-diffused” disaster type, because it transpired and ended before anyone could act, and before anyone actually knew what had happened. While affected a large component of the community of Johannesburg, the effects of the blast decreased as the distance from the epicentre increased, thus it can also be considered that the explosion was an “instantaneous-focalised” type of disaster, as the main destruction was centred on three suburbs of the town, as will be seen later.

Associated literature informs us that around 3:15 p.m. on 19 February 1896, within the railway yard of the Nederlandsche-Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorweg Maatschappij,¹⁴ hereafter the Railway Company, a train of ten trucks containing dynamite exploded.¹⁵ The yard was in the vicinity of Braamfontein Station, at the time known as Johannesburg Railway Station, with the train in question, stationed on one of the sidings. The explosion occurred after the dynamite trucks had been left on the siding for three days in the summer heat of February. After which it is believed by different sources that either a shunting train intended to move the trucks and the contact set off the consignment of ‘sun damaged dynamite’; or that another set of trucks was being moved by the shunting train, and through an error crashed into the dynamite trucks, causing the explosion.¹⁶ The force of the explosion left a massive crater and practically destroyed every home and structure in the vicinity, leaving between 1500 and

¹³ J. Kitz, “The Halifax Explosion, December 6, 1917,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale*, (12), 1992, p. 6.

¹⁴ English Translation: Netherlands South African Railway Company.

¹⁵ ZA HPRA A3353-1 – Johannes de Veer, Autobiography. Excerpt: Blumberg, J. G.: “The Great Dynamite Explosion”, Fairmount School, Johannesburg, p. 5.; J. Hyslop: “A Ragged Trousered Philanthropist and The Empire: Robert Tressell In South Africa,” *History Workshop Journal*, vol. (2001), (51), 2001, pp. 64-86.

¹⁶ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 72.; H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, p. 128.; J. Davenport: “The Great Dynamite Explosion that Devastated a Fledgling Joburg”, *Creamer Media’s Mining Weekly*, <http://www.miningweekly.com/article/the-dynamite-explosion-that-devastated-a-fledgling-joburg-2015-01-23> (11 October 2016).

3000 homeless.¹⁷ The exact number of those killed by the blast was unknown as many were simply blown to pieces or “disappeared”.¹⁸ It is understood that most of the victims were women and children as most of the men were at work.¹⁹ The injured were cared for at many locations, while hospitals overflowed, the Wanderers became an infirmary and the Agricultural Show-Yard was organised to shelter the many homeless.²⁰ The president wept, dignitaries sent condolences, a relief fund was set up and requests and inquiries were made.²¹ The question to be asked is: what really caused the explosion? The most commonly held belief is that the aforementioned contact or collision with the shunting locomotive, in collaboration with the intensity of the three day heat was the cause.²² However when considering the chain of events that preceded the crash it becomes apparent that there might be more to the origins of this disaster than initially thought. The explosives on the train had come from the Zuid-Afrikaansche Fabrieken voor Ontploffbare Stoffen, hereafter the Dynamite Company, and were in fact cases of blasting gelatine and not regular dynamite.²³ This form of explosive was and is, in terms of explosives, considered one of the safest to transport, and which required detonators to be set off, which raises further questions about the cause.²⁴

In Hedley Chilvers’s 1929 book about the early days of the Rand, he proposes a theory about the cause of the explosion, whereby he holds the Jameson Raid as indirectly accountable – by creating a situation that made it so the dynamite would have to remain at the station.²⁵ Chilvers discusses William Hosken, an uitlander and businessman on the Rand, who was

¹⁷ ZA HPR A3353-1 – Johannes de Veer, Autobiography. Excerpt: Blumberg, J. G.: “The Great Dynamite Explosion”, Fairmount School, Johannesburg, p.7.; Correspondent: *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.; T. Gutsche: *A Very Smart Medal: The Story of the Witwatersrand Agricultural Society*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁸ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*; ZA HPR A3353-1 – Johannes de Veer, Autobiography. Excerpt: Blumberg, J. G.: “The Great Dynamite Explosion”, Fairmount School, Johannesburg, p. 7.; G. A. Leyds: *A History of Johannesburg: The early years*, p. 243.

²¹ R. Crisp: *The Outlanders: The Men Who Made Johannesburg*.

²² A. H. Smith, (ed.): *Pictorial History of Johannesburg*. p. 47.; ZA HPR A3353-1 – Johannes de Veer, Autobiography. Excerpt: Blumberg, J. G.: “The Great Dynamite Explosion”, Fairmount School, Johannesburg, p. 5-7.; A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 72. H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, p. 128.

²³ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 71.

²⁴ K. Fant: *Alfred Nobel: A Biography*, pp. 109-110.

²⁵ H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, pp. 127-128.

representative of the dynamite giant Nobel, and an opponent of the dynamite concession. Although at a point he was on the board of the Dynamite Company, Hosken's feelings surrounding the unfair trade of dynamite would not subside and he joined the infamous Reform Committee that would be held accountable after the failed Jameson Raid of 1895/1896. Before the events of the Raid, the Dynamite Company had been using dynamite magazines belonging to Hosken and following the events of the Raid, relations between him and the Dynamite Company were severed and the use of the magazines denied. The explosives establishment had other magazines but Chilvers implies that this loss of storage space created a situation whereby the dynamite that arrived from Leeuwfontein had no place to go, as the Company's magazines were possibly full at the time.²⁶ This will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

In a different account, Robert Crisp discussed a similar incident although very briefly. He wrote that there was an argument between the yard foremen and the Selling Agent's representative, who informed the foreman that the dynamite would have to stay on the train, as there was no space at the magazines. The representative further said, that as they were delivering dynamite frequently, space would be made available soon.²⁷ There is no other mention of this discussion, however Crisp's work can often be described as indulgent. Further in this realm of causes and conditioning are the opinions of A. P. Cartwright, who notes the level of carelessness and recklessness when it came to the conduct involving explosives and how an accident was bound to occur.²⁸ The State Mining Engineer J. Klimke, was convinced that most of the accidents on the mines were due to "negligence, incompetence and recklessness in the use of dynamite"²⁹. Following his own investigations, he discovered that accidental explosions were the main cause of death and injuries in the mines, and were caused by misfires and dynamite being left lying around.³⁰

Anna H. Smith offers a more intriguing yet extremely brief conceptualisation of events where she attributes the explosion to "complications due to concessions and political undercurrents", through which the dynamite trucks were left at the station. Although this is

²⁶ H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, pp. 127-128.

²⁷ R. Crisp: *The Outlanders: The Men Who Made Johannesburg*.

²⁸ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, pp. 73-74.

²⁹ E. N. Katz: "Revisiting the Origins of the Industrial Colour Bar in the Witwatersrand Gold Mining Industry, 1891-1899," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, (25), (1), March 1999, p. 84.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

promising it ends right there, as is probably expected from a pictorial history.³¹ Other literature alludes to, but never really addresses the fact that the presence of constant dynamite trains in the middle of the thickly populated suburbs was theme of contention.³² There were many controversial facets within the entire concession system of the Transvaal, and several will be touched on here. Yet the main role of this thesis is to discuss the causes of the explosion, thus these theories and stances are intriguing for that purpose, however at the moment they present a dated view of events.

When one delves into the economic politics of Rand history, comments and discussions of the concessions are surely to present themselves. With regard to this research, the railway and dynamite concessions featured prominently and their roles within the disaster will become more visible later on. For decades now, scholars have discussed and identified the rivalry between Great Britain and Germany on the African continent, with special interests in South Africa after the discovery of diamonds (1867) and gold (1886). With their interests heightened, the two European powers sought to stamp their commercial influence over the mineral rich land, with its potential for wealth through commerce seemingly promising. Britain excelled in advancing its capital interests within the interior of South Africa through the British South African Company and its mining companies. While Germany, who did have a few mining interests, looked at other avenues, one being the successful acquisition of the railway monopoly in the Transvaal.³³ However this was not the Germans entirely. The railway concession would be Dutch run but German financed. This concession, among others, became a contentious aspect that dramatically affected the relationship between the Transvaal and Britain.³⁴ The same can be said about the Dynamite concession which was also a German affair – Chapter 2 discusses the Dynamite Company more thoroughly.³⁵ These two concessions were an integral part of the mining industry, as dynamite was used to get to the gold, and the railway as a fast means of not only getting the dynamite to the mines, but also other supplies and machinery. The deeper miners had to go for gold, the more dynamite was

³¹ A. H. Smith, (ed.): *Pictorial History of Johannesburg*, p. 47.

³² Such as the mentioned literature by Cartwright and Chilvers.

³³ J. J. Van Helten: "German Capital, The Netherlands Railway Company and the Political Economy of the Transvaal 1886–1900." *The Journal of African History*, (19), (03), 1978, pp. 369-368.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ C. T. Keto: "The aftermath of the Jameson Raid and American decision making in foreign affairs, 1896." *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, (70), (8), 1980, p. 10.

needed, and with a fixed price the dynamite concession gained, while the mining companies had to pay more than what the explosives were worth at the time – but more on this later.³⁶

Rand history, as brought to us by Charles van Onselen, offers one of the most important and realistic looks into the social atmosphere that was being forged by the many forces arriving and already present.³⁷ Johannesburg of the late 19th Century was a toddler who immediately entered a rough adolescence, with greed and the promise of fortune as its mentors. There were no limits set for its social and economic growth, as well as the debauchery it could summon. The discovery of gold in 1886 made this all possible, yet it is the will of human-beings that drive the practical endeavours of the imagination.³⁸ To write about any historical event during the early stages of the city, one would certainly have to understand the context of the inner workings and social nature of its people and their industry. The explosion caused the most destruction in the suburbs of Braamfontein, Fordsburg, Vrededorp and the Location, and as such affected the working class and labour force and the unemployed.³⁹ In hindsight 1896 has been referred to as not being a ‘good year’ for the people of the Rand and this will be discussed briefly later.⁴⁰ Chilvers referred to the period of 1895/96 to 1899 as four years of drama, illustrating the complex and tumultuous atmosphere of the Rand.⁴¹

There has only been one definitive work on the Braamfontein Explosion, and it is also the only academic article written about the event. The article by J.J. Fourie, is a brief yet comprehensive study of the explosion, and forms a good starting point for any further consideration.⁴² Furthermore there are small references, descriptions and eyewitness accounts of it in wider historical books and studies that discuss early Johannesburg and the early dynamite trade on the Rand.⁴³ Journal articles and theses also mention the explosion but yet again in a minor role – one of the more recent mentions of the explosion was in 2001, in an academic article by Jonathan Hyslop, who briefly mentioned the event in passing while

³⁶ C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 14.

³⁷ Works such as: C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*.; C. van Onselen. *Showdown at the Red Lion: the life and times of Jack McLoughlin, 1859-1910*.

³⁸ C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 2-3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5; 8; 145-146; 173.

⁴⁰ A. H. Smith, (ed): *Pictorial History of Johannesburg*, p. 47.

⁴¹ H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, p. 125.

⁴² J.J. Fourie: “Die Dinamietontploffing te Braamfontein op 19 Februarie 1896,” *Historia*, (31), (2), 1986, pp. 17-25.

⁴³ A. P. Cartwright. *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*.; G. A. Leyds. *A History of Johannesburg: The early years*.; H. A. Chilvers. *Out of the Crucible*.; *Like it was: The Star 100 years in Johannesburg*.; A. H. Smith, (ed.): *Pictorial History of Johannesburg*.; A.J. Hoffman: *Op die Spoor van di Misdadiger*.

explaining something else.⁴⁴ Internet Sources hold the easiest access to information about the explosion, however these lack substantiation and credibility.⁴⁵ Subsequently, the National Archives and National Libraries hold the most important information pertaining to this event.

There exist small annoyances in some of the works, for example that of Cartwright and Crisp, with the former expressing the following: “The white population of the town grabbed its hat and rushed towards the railway station. The black population dropped whatever it was doing and rushed in the opposite direction.”⁴⁶ Whether this is true or not, it offers an annoying interpretation of race consciousness. If the black population had run in any direction it would have been because their homes had been among those to bear the full brunt of the explosion. The ‘poor white’ population, which had also suffered at the hand of the explosion, would have surely had their hats blown away. Thus, only the more affluent member of society, coming from the centre of town would have had a hat to wear at all. Those from the centre of town did run towards the scenes of the explosion, with their hats already on, however it was more out of curiosity than an immediate desire to help their fellow man. Yet on arrival to the terrible scenes among the townships, curiosity would evolve into an urgent need to do something.⁴⁷ Peculiarly newspapers reported that “all nationalities and races [were] merged in one grand endeavour to do their best for the survivors” and that there was little discrimination in the subsequent medical treatment.⁴⁸ Crisp on the other hand presents a very Uitlander-centric view in his work.⁴⁹ Therefore it can be seen that existing literature concerning the Braamfontein Explosion, is old and out-dated. This thesis will hopefully be the starting point for further research into this topic or on the other hand present the lack of significance in this event.

⁴⁴ J. Hyslop: "A Ragged Trousered Philanthropist and the Empire: Robert Tressell in South Africa," *History Workshop Journal*, (51), (2001), p. 74.; V. Horler: "Gone With the Shining Things", (Master's Thesis, University of Cape Town, 2013).

⁴⁵ www.johannesburg1912.wordpress.com/2014/07/27/history-of-braamfontein-pt-1/ (10 February 2015).; www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/dynamite-explosion-braamfontein (11 February 2015); www.allatsea.co.za/blog/the-dynamite-explosion-memorial-in-braamfontein/ (12 February 2015).

⁴⁶ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 71.

⁴⁷ A. J. Hoffman: *Op die Spoor van die Misdadiger*.

⁴⁸ Correspondent: *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.;

Correspondent: *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 7.

⁴⁹ R. Crisp: *The Outlanders: The Men Who Made Johannesburg*.

Methodology

The title⁵⁰ of this thesis is taken from the testimonies of Robert Bell and Thomas Lent, who both begin their testimonies with these words.⁵¹ It illustrates the attitudes of those who experienced the explosion, in that most did not know what occurred and that those who were directly involved, always attempted to avert blame from themselves by claiming they knew nothing or very little. Bell and Lent were not directly involved, but the phrase still seemed appropriate. The quote is also in reference to the fact that not many people today have heard of the explosion and those who have, do not know very much, but a survey would have to be carried out to obtain statistical data pertaining to public knowledge of this event.

The National Archives Repository in Pretoria (formerly the Transvaal Archives Repository) had the most available primary sources pertaining to the event. One document in particular that was significant, was the minutes of the Commission of Inquiry, both the hand-written and officially typed version.⁵² Along with the hand written report were other documents relating to the investigation, which formed a small collection that was gathered by the commission. This included sketches, telegrams, charts and receipts. It is always difficult when one confronts an event that took place over a 100 years ago, when there are no longer any witnesses alive to interview. However, this also cuts out the difficulties involved in personal communication with interviewees. The lack of specific secondary sources also make matters difficult when initial research is done and for the review of. Fortunately, the existence of primary sources such as recorded testimonies, make matters easier as well as intriguing. The testimonies are crucial primary sources, yet they are susceptible to human error, as they are conveyed by a human, interpreted by a human and then rewritten or typed by another human. A few of the witnesses needed to have an interpreter present as well, further adding a buffer between sources. The scope for error was possible and is visible in the minutes of the Commission of Inquiry, where often a surname would be misspelt or other spelling mistakes made. This is a minor technical offense, but it does plant doubt in the mind of the researcher and creates the suspicion that there may be more mistakes. However, the mistake itself is a source. The biggest obstacle was that most of the primary sources were in Dutch, and as the

⁵⁰ “Ik Weet Niets van de Onploffing” (Dutch) – Translated: “I know nothing about the explosion”.

⁵¹ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 47.

⁵² TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 47.; TAB – SS – R1771/96, Rapport van de Commissie Tot Onderzoek der Dynamiet Ontploffing.

researcher had no experience with this language, the ability to engage with the text was decelerated. Translating the text was done by the researcher using translation software, which was quite useful, yet time consuming and not free from error. The desired sources were however translated and used.

Secondary sources were not used in abundance here, as there are very few that discuss the disaster comprehensively. Even more modern and thorough studies fail to mention the explosion.⁵³ Secondary sources used were thus concerned with the commerce of the Rand, in particular the concessions of the Railway and Dynamite Companies.⁵⁴ Social histories too were consulted for their in depth discussions on the people of the Rand, specifically the people that lived in the suburbs that were most affected by the explosion.⁵⁵

Newspapers were valued primary source, as their “threefold value” came into play.⁵⁶ Tosh explains that newspapers can inform the historian of the social and political views that were relevant at the time in question.⁵⁷ They can also provide a journal-like account of daily happenings, which are instrumental to historians who wish to recount the lives of people or their social environment.⁵⁸ These conditions were bolstered with the invention and use of telegrams in the late 1800s, where reports could be sent by correspondents in the field to their respective newspapers – such was the case with many reports used in this thesis. Lastly Tosh states, that newspapers occasionally present the findings of other more thorough investigations, which garner more accountability and scope than the average news report. It will become apparent that all three of these aspects would apply to the research and understanding within this investigation.⁵⁹ However newspapers do offer problems as well, in the form of their desire to publish the news as soon as possible, the prevalence of sensationalism in certain publications and the existence of editorial bias influencing what is published.⁶⁰ Through source criticism and being cautious researchers can overcome these challenges in collaboration with the examining of the full range of a story’s coverage as well as by consulting different newspapers. As should be expected many would consider *The Star*

⁵³ For example, works by Charles van Onselen.

⁵⁴ As such *The Dynamite Company* by A. P. Cartwright.

⁵⁵ C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 2-3.

⁵⁶ J. Tosh: *The Pursuit Of History: Aims, Methods And New Directions In The Study Of History*, p. 37.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ J. Baumgartner, “Newspapers as Historical Sources.” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*, (9), (3), 1981, pp. 256-258.

to be a prime newspaper resource and rightfully so, however it was not directly consulted in this thesis as the material was syndicated and replicated.⁶¹

The thesis unpacks the events and knowledge associated with the explosion in a linear way, attempting to create an informed narrative of the disaster, while still being analytical with regards to the sources. It discusses the activities of the 19th of February, via the perspectives of those who were directly involved and those who witnessed the explosion, seen through the testimonies given afterwards and newspaper reports during. Secondary literature frames the event within the setting of the expanding Witwatersrand, accompanied with its complex features of social and economic politics.

⁶¹ *The Cape Argus*, 26 February 1896, “Rand Calamity,” p. 5.; A. H. Smith, (ed): *Pictorial History of Johannesburg*. p. 47.; J. Clarke (ed): *Like it was: The Star 100 years in Johannesburg*.

Chapter 2: From the Sea to a “Nauseous Pit of Death”¹

Transvaal Dynamite

“The dynamite had been imported in bulk and made into cartridges in Pretoria, passing thenceforward as Transvaal-made dynamite.”²

To understand the origins of the Braamfontein Explosion, it is necessary to understand the origins of the dynamite itself. There is one man that the early history of dynamite on the Rand cannot be detached from – Eduard Lippert. As someone who has an asteroid named in his honour, Edouard or Eduard Lippert was no stranger to good fortune or reaping what he sowed, at least when it came to matters of business and accumulating wealth.³ Lippert was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1844, but it is his exploits in Southern Africa that bring him to the attention of this thesis. He has been described as a “predator”, “a concession-hunter” and as “one of the most unsavoury financiers who left many traces in Southern Africa”.⁴ However, in an alternative and more favourable light in the Transvaal, he was known for his wide variety of business activities, for his personal charm and had ties to President Kruger.⁵ After a stint with various merchant houses in London and New York, Lippert joined his family’s business, David Lippert & Co. and became its representative in Port Elizabeth. The company, though at first successful, was however liquidated in 1883 after major losses in the Cape. Lippert then bought the company’s South African division but his interests in commerce eventually lead him north of the Vaal River.⁶

As soon as pickaxes and panning could no longer effectively render the precious golden ore vulnerable, new and creative ways had to be thought up or borrowed from prospectors outside of the Rand. Dynamite subsequently began to play a part, and acquiring it became a concern – a growing demand was created and wherever there is a demand for something and there exists a means to pay for it, there will be various suppliers around the corner. The Rand

¹ www.blueplaques.co.za/article/nauseous-pit-death-%E2%80%93-braamfontein-dynamite-explosion (20 March 2015).

² “The Latest Intelligence – The Johannesburg Explosion,” *The Times* (London, England), 22 February 1896, p. 7.

³ Joerg Bauer: *The Flight of the Phoenix: Investing in Zimbabwe’s Rise from the Ashes during the Global Debt Crisis*.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger’s Republic*, p. 28.

⁶ Joerg Bauer: *The Flight of the Phoenix: Investing in Zimbabwe’s Rise from the Ashes during the Global Debt Crisis*.; M. Meredith: *Diamonds, gold, and war: The British, the Boers, and the making of South Africa*, pp. 276-278.

soon became an excellent market for the sale of dynamite.⁷ However there is always a bigger fish and the Rand was well known for this proverbial truth, as there was continually an evolution within the operation of its commerce.⁸ Prospectors vanished, Randlords appeared and monopolies became the talk of the town.⁹ One such monopoly was that of the dynamite trade, and here Lippert played an influential and direct role. Before 1896 there were no high explosives manufactured in the Transvaal, and the large amounts that were being used in the mines were imported either via Kimberley or Durban.¹⁰ It is the dynamite that came via the sea from which played a significant part in the Braamfontein Explosion.

In 1887 Lippert was awarded the highly profitable dynamite concession – a monopoly on the importing, manufacturing and trade of dynamite on the Witwatersrand.¹¹ Lippert, like many other concessionaires, intended to sell his monopoly. He approached both the German and French dynamite associations of the Nobel organisation, but the former turned down the offer due to a price discrepancy, while the French accepted the offer.¹² On December 31, 1887 Lippert was given the authority to establish a dynamite company, the Zuid-Afrikaansche Maatschappij van Ontploffbare Stoffen, and immediately planned to build a factory for the means of its production. The production of the dynamite however was a farce. The factory had machinery and trained workers, but not for the purpose of making dynamite – merely the manufacturing art of reshaping and packaging it. The French supplied the explosives in blocks and Lippert’s factory shaped them into cartridges, packaged them with Dynamite Company labels and packed them into cases.¹³

Lippert or rather the Dynamite Company had such a factory in Leeuwfontein, here the cartridges were wrapped in paper that had been soaked in paraffin, before being labelled and

⁷ J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, pp. 27-28.

⁸ C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*; A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 70.

¹⁰ J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, p. 28.; A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*; C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 2.; J. Behrens: “The Dynamite Factory: An Industrial Landscape in Late-Nineteenth-Century South Africa,” *Historical Archaeology*, (39), (3), 2005, pp. 61-74.; M. Meredith: *Diamonds, gold, and war: The British, the Boers, and the making of South Africa*, pp. 276-278.

¹² J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, pp. 24, 28.

¹³ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 46.

placed in bags which were in turn placed in cases – five bags per case.¹⁴ A case cost the Rand mines £7 10s, when it cost the Dynamite Company only about 18s to make. The entire operation was a monopolist's fantasy. The Dynamite Company made a profit of about a £3 10s to £4 – after charges including transport, Lippert's commission and the 2s royalty to the State.¹⁵

Lambertus G. Vorstmann, an official at the Nederlandsche Bank, who had no real knowledge of dynamite, was appointed as managing director while Lippert was made the sole general agent for the sale of the company's products.¹⁶ The operation which was clearly a scheme, although attempts to hide the reality of it were frequently carried out, was opposed by nearly everyone who had a stake in mining or who could have had a stake in the dynamite trade. The Chamber of Mines was the most vocal, followed by other dynamite importers who rightfully felt robbed and even consuls of various European states were calling foul. However, the company was allowed to continue – for the time being that is.¹⁷

Yet by 1892, the British had had enough and presented an official complaint to the Transvaal government, in which it firmly specified that the dynamite concession was a breach of the London Convention of 1883. The convention stipulated that the Transvaal had to safeguard the rights of British citizens, and ensure that there was to be no unfair trade or favouritism that would be harmful to their interests. The German Government also lodged a complaint. It would be the latter who gained from this.¹⁸ The combined efforts of the government representatives and the influential voices of the mining industry forced President Kruger to act and the Dynamite Company was told that its contract was cancelled because it did not maintain its obligations to the Transvaal. Immediately the French government reacted with demands that their national's company be compensated and that there should be arbitral action concerning this matter. The French government's words were well misplaced because

¹⁴ Friedrich Krieger. Testimony given at the Commission of Inquiry. 11 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 12-13.

¹⁵ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*.

¹⁶ J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, p. 28.; TAB – SS – R1771/96, De Zuid-Afrikaansche Fabrieken voor Ontplofbare Stoffen, Beperkt. *Instructions for Using the Company's Dynamite and Gelatine Explosives*. Rapport van de Commissie Tot Onderzoek der Dynamiet Ontploffing, pp. 129-130.; A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 46.

¹⁷ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*. p. 48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; C. T. Keto: "The aftermath of the Jameson Raid and American decision making in foreign affairs, 1896." *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, (70), (8), 1980, p. 10.; C. D. Penner: "Germany and the Transvaal before 1896." *The Journal of Modern History*, (12), (1) 1940, p. 45.

if any government deserved compensation it was that of the Transvaal. Yet, the mess was made and the Transvaal had to figure out what to do.¹⁹ The international dynamite trade however, was shrouded in irony.

As was said earlier, the French company supplying Lippert and the company was a subsidiary of the Nobel Corporation. Additionally, the protests made by the British government were on the behalf of the Britain's Nobel Company, and the German Government's actions were on behalf of the German Nobel company. These Nobel company entities were not completely separate, but members of the same Nobel Trust, with a bond signed in ink. It is therefore ironic that there were protests and a level of bad blood in the first place, as all the major dynamite players were in the same boat. Perhaps the excitement surrounding the Witwatersrand was too much to handle for the Nobel dynamite family. It can thus be seen as a matter of indifference among the Nobel companies although still an unfair monopoly in the broader sense.²⁰

The response of the Transvaal was to allow the import of dynamite under a permit system and dynamite flowed equally from France, Germany and England.²¹ This created healthy competing among the explosives agencies and the Chamber of Mines was pleased. The permit system was short lived however as Kruger's government wanted to come up with a way to avoid the London Convention for the time being, while they were planning to build a dynamite factory for the Transvaal. A solution was reached and in September 1893. The Volksraad passed a resolution where it made future importing, manufacturing and the sale of high explosives a Transvaal government monopoly. This allowed the government to transfer their monopoly to other individuals and they chose Vorstman, the former managing director of the very Dynamite Company whose contract was cancelled by the same government. Vorstman's selection was possibly a means to appease the annoyed French shareholders – which was already simplified by a private agreement between the Nobel trusts.²²

The agreement changed very little, as the only difference was that the French connection seemed to fall away, while German involvement increased. Evermore ironic was the fact that

¹⁹ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, pp. 47-48.; J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, p. 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, p. 29.; A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 48.

²² *Ibid.*

the new explosives company's shares were basically divided equally between companies owned by the Nobel Dynamite Trust and the Société Centrale de Dynamite. The French received these shares as a settlement for their earlier discontent and claims for compensation for their previous contract. Shares were being handed out to all those who 'needed to be compensated', and among these was the ever fortunate Lippert, receiving 25 000 shares for his lost commission and royalties.²³ The price of a case of No. 1 dynamite was now fixed at a height of £5, upon which the Transvaal government made a royalty of 5s a case. Smaller importers who could now ship in their explosives had to contend with the fact that they were competing with government manufacturing and therefore had to pay a special duty of 9d on a pound of dynamite, additionally to the normal value added tax they already paid. This equalled a duty of 37s 6d a case and severely obstructed the chances of these importers to turn a profit.²⁴

In 1893, when the Volksraad passed the resolution that enabled this monopoly, it had intended that the selected company to manufacture its explosives should within the shortest possible time, with a maximum of two and a half years, establish a dynamite factory that could meet the requirements of the Republic. The Transvaal government however altered this condition without the knowledge of the Volksraad.²⁵ The alteration still mentioned the two and a half years' limit but it now allowed for an extension for the completion of the factory to be determined by the government at regular intervals. Therefore, until the time by which the factory was completed, the government was to import explosives itself, through its agent. The Volksraad's intention was for all imports of explosives to end after the two and half years, but this was not to be.²⁶

In reality Vorstman would be the acting agent of the government and acquired dynamite from the German manufacturers. This dynamite in turn was sold to the mine owners, with a profit of £2 a case, minus royalties and commissions, to the company. With the ever growing demand for explosives on the Rand, this became a very profitable business, and the executives of the new Dynamite Company did everything they could to ensure its survival for the next six years. Lippert made an appearance once again as the company's selling agent,

²³ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 48.; J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, p. 30.

²⁴ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, p. 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

and received the characteristic royalty and commission on every case sold. In June 1894, the new dynamite company, the Zuid-Afrikaansche Fabrieken voor Ontploffbare Stoffen Beperkt, was established – with no real changes made to the original name of the company.²⁷

It has been asked how the dynamite monopoly, which was loathed by so many including the Volksraad, managed to survive for as long as it did. The Transvaal concessions commission, set up by the British in 1900, concluded that it all came down to bribery and in a few cases money or shares were exchanged, but this alone did not enable this survival. President Kruger and State Secretary Leyds were not swayed by financial gain, and defended the monopoly as the “corner-stone of the independence of the republic”.²⁸ Additionally and more to the point was, that Kruger and Leyds considered it crucial to have ‘capitalist allies’ who they could depend on to be a counterbalance against those other capitalists they deemed to be enemies of the republic – this included the mining magnates. Economically the Dynamite Company and the Railway Company were the Transvaal’s strongest allies, who could be called upon in a financial crisis or “embarrassment” to assist, and in fact on occasion they did.²⁹ With this in mind, it would have been misguided for Kruger to terminate the presence of the monopolies from his point of view and they thus survived for the time being.

This sets up the context and origin of the dynamite in question. One specific characteristic of the dynamite on the train was that it was not the No. 1 dynamite mentioned above, but the more powerful and safer blasting gelatine, a variant of dynamite.³⁰ These parties are discussed, because they would be involved in the subsequent investigation following the explosion – specifically the Dynamite Company and the office of Lippert. What is established here, is that the dynamite was an import from Germany; it was shaped and repackaged at Leeuwfontein and sent via train to the Rand, specifically Park Station. What can be added is when the train arrived at the station, there was no one to collect it as it was a Sunday afternoon. It was therefore moved to a Braamfontein Station siding until further notice or movement.

²⁷ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 50.

²⁸ J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, pp. 32-33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ K. Fant: *Alfred Nobel: a biography*, pp.109-110.

The Small Matter of £3

The Nederlandsche-Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorweg Maatschappij (NZASM) or Netherlands South African Railway Company was another establishment that had been blessed with the joys of a concession from the Transvaal. The Railway Company was founded in 1887, by a group of Dutch bankers and financiers, under the blessing of President Kruger who always felt that the Dutch had the best interests of the Transvaal at heart.³¹ The Railway Company was however financed by Germans, who Kruger also had large amount of faith in.³² The Company enjoyed the profit gains of fixed rates, and would not consider co-operating with the mines because this would be negative for profits.³³ The Railway Order Service was the delivery arm of the Railway Company, and distributed the goods throughout the city, by mule or horse drawn wagons – of which the Order Service had a total of 260 wagons.

The dynamite left Leeuwfontein by train, headed towards the Dynamite Company's selling agent Edouard Lippert in Johannesburg. Lippert's office had been informed by management at Leeuwfontein that the dynamite would arrive by Monday morning. To the knowledge of the Railway Company it was to arrive on either Saturday the 15th or Sunday the 16th of February – on Sunday evening it was confirmed by them that it had arrived.³⁴ The dynamite had to be collected by the Order Service and delivered to the magazines via the mule wagons. It took about ten minutes to travel from the Railway Company barracks to Braamfontein station, and another twenty minutes from the station to the dynamite magazines near Auckland Park. Five of the magazines were already holding dynamite, amounting to roughly 6500 cases.³⁵

On the morning of Monday, February 17th 1896, the Railway Order Service received an order from the Chief of the Railway Company Barracks, to collect and deliver the dynamite that

³¹ J. J. Van-Helten, "German Capital, the Netherlands Railway Company and the Political Economy of the Transvaal 1886-1900," *The Journal of African History*, 19 (3). p. 370.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 379.

³³ C. T. Keto: "The aftermath of the Jameson Raid and American decision making in foreign affairs, 1896," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, (70), (8), 1980, p. 10.

³⁴ Johannes Kloek. Testimony given at the Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 23-24.

³⁵ Arthur Rutherford. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 10-12.; William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 7-9.; Alexander Powell. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 10.

was on board the goods train at the Station. The Order Service sent five wagons under the agreement that there would be labourers to offload and load the dynamite, and a loading master. The Order Service eventually sent their own loading master, a man known as Clemm, and an auditor, with the wagons at around 9:35 a.m. The labourers arrived at 10:00 a.m. and the dynamite was loaded and eventually on its way to the dynamite magazines. Around 11:30 a.m., Clemm returned alone to the Service's offices and reported that there was no one at the magazines to receive the dynamite. The head of staff instructed him to return to the magazines and to wait for someone who could take delivery of it. At 1:00 p.m., Clemm came back and reported that there was still no one there, that he had already returned the dynamite to the railway yard and that it was back on the train.³⁶ One of the wagon drivers said that Clemm reloaded the dynamite onto the train himself without an official from the Railway Company.³⁷ On Tuesday the Order Service was yet again contacted by the Stationmaster of the Railway Company barracks, who requested that wagons be sent to collect the dynamite. The employee who received the request did not send any wagons, as he had received no instructions from his superiors who were currently concerned with and involved in strained deliberations with Lippert's office over a payment of £3.³⁸

That Monday afternoon, Edward Jacobs, director of the Railway Order Service, paid a visit to the Chief of the Railway Barracks, and spoke to his first captain inquiring about the procedure regarding the returning and thus delay of the dynamite delivery. On Tuesday morning, he returned to the barracks and asked the captain who would have to pay for the delay. The captain told him that the consignee would have to pay – the consignee is the person responsible for the receipt of a shipment.³⁹ In this case Jacobs saw Lippert as the

³⁶ Edward Jacobs. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 18-20.; Louis Wilson. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896.; TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 20.

Isaak Benjamin Heinemann. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 21.; Fortuin. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 & 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 5, 10.

³⁷ Fortuin. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 5.

³⁸ Edward Jacobs. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 18-20.; Louis Wilson. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 20.; Isaak Benjamin Heinemann. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 21.

³⁹ Edward Jacobs. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 18-20.

consignee, and went to his office to find out what he planned to do. He arrived at around nine o'clock and found William Langley there, a magazine caretaker for Lippert, and queried as to who would pay for the delay. Langley replied that they would not pay for a service not rendered. Jacobs then told him that it would be best that Lippert dealt directly with the Railway Company, and that he refused to send any wagon until the matter was resolved. According to its rules, the Railway Company was responsible for payment, however when goods are ordered, not received and have to be reordered then the consignee has to pay, "immediately and directly" to the Order Service.⁴⁰ The exact contract further stated that this only applied with a certain tonnage, within a particular radius, and then the consignee would have to pay directly. The difference of the payment in this case was £3.⁴¹ In today's terms the relative value of £3 from 1896 would be around £313.10.⁴²

William Langley, a magazine caretaker for Lippert, had a slightly different version of the story to tell. According to him, he and Alexander Powell, an assistant caretaker, were at the magazines from 10 until after 12 on Monday the 17th, at which time they returned to Lippert's office in the city. Langley and Powell returned to them at around 2:20 p.m., this is supported by Powell's testimony, and there was still no sign of the wagons. They remained there until 5 o'clock and returned to the office.⁴³ The Tuesday when Jacobs visited the office and queried about their absence at the magazines, Langley replied that no wagons came. Jacobs explained that the wagons were sent at around nine o'clock to which Langley quipped that it was impossible that the wagons had not arrived yet, if they had left so early the previous day. After Jacobs left the office, Langley went to see Arthur Rutherford the senior magazine caretaker for Lippert and the head of the office, who told him to immediately return to the magazines, but to first telephone the Order Service. Langley did so and asked if the dynamite could be delivered again that day, the reply oddly enough said 'yes, certainly' however no

⁴⁰ Edward Jacobs. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 18-20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare/ (5 May 2016).

⁴³ William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 7-9.; Alexander Powell. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 10.

dynamite would be sent.⁴⁴ Langley and Powell waited at the magazine from 2:15 p.m. to 4:45 p.m., before returning to the office.⁴⁵

The magazines usually received dynamite on a Monday morning from 9:45, with the average amount being around 1600 cases, and the rest being delivered on Tuesdays. Occasionally they would receive the whole amount of dynamite on the Monday, if the delivery was smaller. Unloading the dynamite began at 10:05 a.m. and lunch was taken from 1p.m. to 2:30 p.m., with work being resumed at 2:45 p.m. until 5 p.m. At night, the magazines were not supervised by anyone, but were locked and the keys kept within a safe at the office. Lippert's magazine master had been sick with typhus fever since June 1895, and was therefore not present at the time of the explosion.⁴⁶ Later he was to be replaced with someone who could assist Langley – it is possible that Powell was his replacement, as he had only been working at the magazine for a month at the time of the explosion.⁴⁷

There is a varying degree of conflicting information with regard to the delivery or rather non-delivery of the dynamite to the magazines on the Monday and Tuesday in question. However, this does not distort the real points, which is that there was a level of animosity between the Railway Order Service or the Railway Company itself and the office of Eduard Lippert. This was not the first time that there had been an issue with a dynamite delivery, as it was indicated that in December 1895, Lippert refused to accept a delivery because he maintained that he had not ordered it and the shipment was thus returned.⁴⁸ In another incident, Lippert filed a complaint against the Order Service, when his magazine caretakers had waited most of the day for a delivery which only arrived at 3:30 p.m., an hour and a half before the magazines and offices closed. After the complaint deliveries were on time.⁴⁹ There was another minor disagreement, between Jacobs and Rutherford over the delivering schedule. Delays were occurring and Jacobs wanted to start delivering at 6 am, and asked Rutherford if

⁴⁴ Langley: “Ja, beslis.”; Rutherford: “Ja seker.”

⁴⁵ William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896.; Arthur Rutherford. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 7-9.

⁴⁶ Thomas Bailie. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 13 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 25-26.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*; Alexander Powell. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 10.

⁴⁸ Edward Jacobs. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 18-20.

⁴⁹ William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 7-9

this would be possible. Rutherford refused to allow this as it was not ‘convenient’ for him, because the keys were locked in the office safe and he only got to the office around 9 a.m.⁵⁰ The junior caretakers were not allowed to collect the keys themselves – perhaps the only good precaution.⁵¹ Allowing deliveries to commence at 6 a.m. would have permitted more time for unloading at the magazines and a shorter period of time that the dynamite would have had to stay at the station.

The confirmation that a dynamite delivery would be sent and then was not, was a detestable move by the Order Company – this refers to the afternoon of Monday 17th, when Langley telephoned the service and requested the dynamite to be sent again, and a clerk replied ‘yes, certainly’. The dynamite was not delivered, as Jacobs was clear in his position of no delivery until the £3 was paid.⁵² The question is, why would the clerk say this? It is possible he did not know about Jacob’s proclamation and later when he learnt about it he did nothing, or was he merely being obnoxious?

There is also the behaviour and accusations of Langley. By 1896, William Langley had been working for Lippert for three years as a junior magazine caretaker, and has come across as a man with no small amount of wit and humour.⁵³ However there were allegations made against him, by one of the Order Service drivers, known only as Fortuin, who said that Langley promised to pay him £50 if he would say that he was at the explosion. According to him, he saw Langley at the offices of Peycke & Co., where Langley promised him the £50 but he refused.⁵⁴ However there is no other record or testimony of this other than the Fortuin’s testimony and identification of Langley during the Commission of Inquiry. Langley acknowledged that he spoke to the other drivers on the following Saturday, but that he did not

⁵⁰ Edward Jacobs. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 18-20.; Arthur Rutherford. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 10-12.

⁵¹ Arthur Rutherford. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 10-12.

⁵² William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896.; TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 7-9.; Arthur Rutherford. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 10-12.

⁵³ William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 7-9.

⁵⁴ Fortuin. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 & 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 5.

know Fortuin at all and that he was never at the offices of Peycke & Co.⁵⁵ Why would Fortuin fabricate something like this, yet on the other hand why would Langley offer to pay him to say he was at an explosion that half the city witnessed? Langley came into contact with two other drivers following the explosion, who were both reasonably close to the explosion and who both appeared to come out of the blast virtually unscathed – wagon and dynamite intact.⁵⁶

Perhaps there is a deeper link to this and the accusations of Fortuin, in that these drivers miraculously survived the explosion, when other drivers did not. According to a newspaper report, Fortuin claimed that Langley offered to pay him and the other drivers £50 if they said that they were not at the magazines on Monday the 17th of February.⁵⁷ As stated in the minutes of the Commission of Inquiry, Fortuin said that Langley offered him the money to say that he was at the explosion, and he refused. These alternate descriptions cause confusion as to what was said and furthermore why it was said. Both versions create questions. In the newspaper account it seems like an attempt by Langley to clear his name, for his absence at the magazines on the Monday. The interpretation in the Commission Minutes could very well be wrong or misinterpreted, as in many cases an interpreter was present.⁵⁸

Ultimately Fortuin's testimony was not very clear and he was not specific about when he actually saw Langley – whether it was on the Monday or the Saturday.⁵⁹ These reasons could be why the Committee, who carried out the investigation, did not follow up on this, as it was simply a case of Langley's word against Fortuin's. Still, there is a cloud of suspicion that shrouds Langley. He became by default the more senior caretaker who would be physically present at the magazines, after the absence of the chief caretaker due to typhus fever, and it can be assumed based on the evidence that Langley was not as responsible as he should have been.⁶⁰ For one, where was he when the dynamite was being delivered on the Monday? Yet

⁵⁵ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – *Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg.*; William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – *Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg*, pp. 7-9,

⁵⁶ William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – *Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg*, pp. 7-9,

⁵⁷ *The Cape Argus*, 5 March 1896, "Dynamite Inquiry", p. 5.

⁵⁸ "Doyle Tolk" - TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – *Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ Fortuin. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 & 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – *Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg*, pp. 5, 10.

⁶⁰ Arthur Rutherford. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896.; TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – *Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg*, pp. 10-12.; Thomas

whether or not Langley was present at the magazines, Clemm who was tasked with delivering the dynamite should have shown more patience in his waiting for someone to receive it. Clemm also showed a lack of concern when he repacked the dynamite himself, without the presence of a railway official. It is clear that employees from both the Railway Order Service and the office of Lippert had acted negligently with regard to their respective tasks; moreover, the management of both of the offices did not act accordingly either.

By Wednesday morning negotiations or rather debates surrounding the £3 persisted. Jacobus Pfennig, the clerk responsible for the Railway Company's barracks, was sent to Lippert to once again inquire about the payment, and the dynamite agent's office again refused. Pfennig threatened to send the dynamite back to Pretoria and Rutherford exclaimed that he did not care what happened to the dynamite.⁶¹ It was Corneille Plate, an official at the Railway Company, who finally broke the deadlock, and urged the Order Service to deliver the dynamite and to forget about the £3, which was to be paid by the Railway Company.⁶² Initially Plate was unsure who had to pay the £3 for the delay, but under the circumstances he came to the decision that the dynamite should be delivered to Lippert and the Railway Company should pay the Order Service.⁶³ Clemm and his men returned to the siding to unload the dynamite onto the mule wagons and once again commence delivery.⁶⁴

Shunting the Mistakes

“De wissel was verkeerd.”⁶⁵ – Jacob Bloom, Machinist (driver) for the Railway Company.⁶⁶

Jacob Bloom had been a locomotive driver with the Railway Company for three years by 1896, and had focussed primarily on shunting work. Shunting is the task of pushing or

Bailie. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 13 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 25-16.; William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 7-9.

⁶¹ Jacobus Pfennig. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 23-24.

⁶² Bastiaan Janson. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 13 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 24-25.

⁶³ Corneille Plate. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 20 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 34-35.

⁶⁴ Isaak Benjamin Heinemann. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Bloom. Translation: “The switch was wrong”.

⁶⁶ Jacob Bloom. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 4-5.

pulling a train or part of a train, from the main track onto a siding or alternative track, using a locomotive. Around the same time that Clemm was underway with the unpacking of the dynamite, Bloom was to shunt 31 empty of trucks onto one of the three sidings available at Braamfontein Station. With him was Joseph Williams, a shunter, Hendrik Vermeulen, also a shunter, Matthijs Pienaar, the stoker, and Sydney Oxer, the foreman-shunter.⁶⁷ Of the three sidings at the station, two were occupied with trucks. From the east, the direction which Bloom's train faced, the trucks containing the dynamite were on the right-hand siding; on the middle siding were trucks belonging to Cassel Collieries, and contained coal and other goods.⁶⁸ On the left was the open siding for the empty trucks to be shunted on. In the vicinity of the station was a timber mill belonging to the Rand Timber Co., with the train track curved slightly around the mill's shed. This track linked with another main track which ran from central Johannesburg, towards the railway yard. In front of the sidings was a road that ran across the train track from north to south and formed a crossing there. There was routinely a policeman on duty at this crossing, and the 19th was no different.⁶⁹ At the apex of the bend around the timber mill was a large pile of wood (see Appendix 1). The empty trucks stood 50 yards from the mill at the goods station/shed where they were most likely unloaded.⁷⁰

The crew operating the shunting locomotive had a mixed bag of experience and service with the Railway Company – Bloom had been with the company for three years; Williams, five years; Vermeulen, around seven months; and Pienaar only a few weeks – starting in February. Oxer claimed to be the most experienced crew member, yet the length of his tenure is not known – the others stated their work period at the Commission of Inquiry, Oxer did not.⁷¹ After the shunters connected and prepared the trucks for shunting, Bloom moved in the steam powered machine and gently began to nudge the trucks, before building up a slight amount of speed to push them. The normal speed for shunting was four to six miles per hour,

⁶⁷ Jacob Bloom. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 4-5.; Sydney Oxer. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 29-30.; Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁸ Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2-3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*; TAB – SS – R1771/96, Sketch-card – Rapport van de Commissie Tot Onderzoek der Dynamiet Ontploffing. p. 234.

⁷⁰ Matthijs Pienaar. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 5.

⁷¹ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2, 4, 5, 29.

as was the regulations of the Railway Company – Bloom testified to bringing the train to a speed of two miles per hour, equivalent to 3.2 kilometres per hour. This speed was confirmed by the others who were on the locomotive. Trains went at a slower speed around the timber mill towards the sidings as there was slight slope down this direction, and drivers needed to be more cautious. This was a fairly mundane and ordinary operation for the crew, who would have done this several times a week and thus, would have been quite efficient at this, and most of them had been involved with the shunting of these dynamite trucks, just a few days before.⁷² The locomotive used was a NZASM 40 Tonner 0-6-2T, a model which was used widely during this time.⁷³ Its identification number was thirteen (needless to mention the superstitious implications of that), and was said to be in a good condition, with an impeccable brake.⁷⁴

The ten dynamite trucks that arrived on Sunday afternoon were open topped, scantily covered with sails, while only two were covered with iron. That the dynamite arrived on Sunday could be a reason why no one collected it initially. The sidings were usually locked when trucks containing dynamite stood on them, but it was common for the lock to either be stolen or broken, and for the last three weeks, prior to the 19th, it had not been replaced.⁷⁵ The siding was built at the end of 1890, crossing over into 1891, and was quickly put to use.⁷⁶ Trucks that were stationed on the siding were unconventionally, secured by a large rock, on the side facing west, towards Krugersdorp. The rock would be placed so that the trucks would not roll any further forward – after this there was a ‘stop-block’ to further ensure the trucks from rolling away, however if dynamite was being unloaded, the trucks would not be pushed as far as the ‘stop-block’. Additionally when any unloading was being done on the siding, another rock would be placed on the Eastern side, facing Johannesburg, so that the trucks would not roll backwards, which would have just been precautionary as backwards would have been up the slope.⁷⁷ The trucks were usually disengaged from their locomotive on either a Sunday or a

⁷² Jacob Bloom. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 4-5.

⁷³ D. F. Holland: *Steam Locomotives of the South African Railways, Vol 1: 1859–1910*.

⁷⁴ Matthijs Pienaar. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Sydney Ozer. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 29-30.

⁷⁶ Corneille Plate. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 20 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 34-35.

⁷⁷ Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2-3.; Dirk Soeterik.

Monday. As was said earlier, the station/railway yard was surrounded by various populated areas, namely Vrededorp, Fordsburg, the Brickfields and the various locations within these – the Indian, African, and Malay locations.⁷⁸

As foreman-shunter, Oxer was responsible for delegating work to the other shunters, namely Williams and Vermeulen in this case, while taking on most of the work himself, which he felt was correct because he had the most experience. He also claimed to not always follow the rules, stating that he did not understand the language but that nevertheless he was proficient at shunting. Included in his responsibilities was overseeing the railway turnout or switch, called a ‘wissel’ in Dutch, which is the mechanism that enables trains to be steered from one track onto another that is headed in a different direction or onto a siding (see Appendix 2 for the sketch of the railway switch mechanism).⁷⁹ The switch could be adjusted to lead a train on to any one of the three sidings at the station. On the 19th, Oxer instructed Williams to prepare the empty trucks for shunting, to ensure that the railway switch was correctly set, and to position himself near the front of the trucks so that he could see any possible hazards during the shunting. It was common to have someone near the front of the train as a lookout, because the locomotive would be pushing the trucks from behind. Oxer ensured this so that the responsibility would not be on him.⁸⁰ At around 2:30 p.m. Williams with Vermeulen, left the switch to prepare the trucks, and both noted that it was in order. Williams also remembered that there was a labourer cleaning the switch, or near to it.⁸¹ Bloom also stated seeing this labourer cleaning the switch around this time, while on his way to collect the trucks, but he did not inspect the switch as it was not his responsibility, and he took that fact well to heart, as did most of the Railway Company employees – if it was not their responsibility they washed their hands of a task or were oblivious to it.⁸²

Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 22-23.

⁷⁸ Plan of Johannesburg and Suburbs, 1897.

⁷⁹ Sydney Oxer. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 29-30.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2-3.; Hendrik Johannes Vermeulen. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p.12.

⁸² Jacob Bloom. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 4-5.

Once the crew were ready to get under-way, the movement began, and Williams gave the signal to cross over onto the siding, and then climbed onto the fourth truck while it was in motion. The bend at the timber mill obscured the line of sight of those who were on the locomotive, as did the pile of timber. Going at two miles an hour, the train had just crossed over the switch when there was another signal and a shout from Williams to stop. No one on board the locomotive heard the signal to stop or saw Williams's raised hand indicating the same. Bloom who at first could not see the switch or the crossing eventually saw that he was on the wrong siding and immediately told the stoker to apply the brake, but it was too late and the train crashed into the dynamite trucks. Even though the brakes reacted immediately, a train does not come to a stop immediately, and adding to this was the weight of the 31 trucks. The switch was therefore incorrectly set, as it lead the train onto the dynamite siding instead of the empty siding, as was intended.⁸³

The foreman of the timber mill was observing the shunters going about their business. Earlier in the day he had commented to Oxer, who was busy with the coal trucks at the time, to be careful while shunting, else he would send them all flying into air if he was not – referring of course to the dynamite trucks in the vicinity. On the previous day, he had also seen trucks being shunted against other tucks and this motivated his words of caution.⁸⁴ The foreman could not determine how fast the train was traveling, but he did say that the force was enough to overturn the trucks during the collision. He did not specify which trucks were overturned, and it is also important to mention that no one else testified to seeing any trucks being overturned during the collision.⁸⁵ Another question that can be asked is how a train going at only two miles an hour (as the crew said) could be able to push over another train or cause it to fall over. A possibility is that one of the set of trucks simply derailed and then overturned or fell over during the collision. The slope of the track should also be taken into consideration, as it would have added an extra bit of force at an angle as well as the weight of the trucks.⁸⁶

⁸³ Jacob Bloom. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 4-5.; John Edward McAstin. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 30-31.

⁸⁴ *The Cape Argus*, 14 March 1896, "Dynamite Inquiry," p. 5.

⁸⁵ John Forth. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 13 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 25.

⁸⁶ Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2-3.; Dirk Soeterik. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie

The exact events following the collision are unclear. The testimonies given by those on the train vary, sometimes within a testimony given by the same person. What is known is that the explosion followed the collision – whether immediately, a few seconds later or after a few minutes is what is uncertain. The shunting crew stated that they could not swear that they had hit the dynamite trucks. They all said that they did, but that they could not swear to it without some kind of doubt.⁸⁷ This could have been born out of a fear that they would surely be blamed for the disaster and by telling the truth in this way, they could divert a bit away from themselves – because maybe there was another reason for the explosion, and their being on the wrong siding was just a coincidence.

Pienaar, the stoker, recounted that while he was turning on the brake, the explosion took place and that he did not feel any shock but that he did hear the explosion.⁸⁸ Pienaar like the rest was probably knocked unconscious by the explosion and could have likely suffered from memory loss and the psychological effects of having gone through such an ordeal. Vermeulen recalls Bloom shouting stop, the stoker applying the brake, and then directly feeling the blast, after which he was knocked out. He however did not hear the collision of the trucks, and could not even say whether he knew if the trucks were still moving or had come to a stop when the explosion took place.⁸⁹ Oxeer too, said that he did not feel any collision, however his timing of the explosion varies from the others. He first said that the explosion occurred one minute after the collision, which he did not feel, and later describes it as one and a half minutes after the brake was applied.⁹⁰ Bloom, in the same breathe, said that the explosion followed the collision, and then immediately afterwards said that the explosion was before the shock, before contact was made with the trucks.⁹¹ What he could have meant is that the explosion followed so instantaneously that there was no time for a reaction to the crash itself, or that the explosion did occurred before the collision.

van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 22-23.; John Edward McAstin. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 30-31.

⁸⁷ Jacob Bloom. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 4-5.

⁸⁸ Matthijs Pienaar. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 5.

⁸⁹ Hendrik Johannes Vermeulen. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 12.

⁹⁰ Sydney Oxeer. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 29-30.

⁹¹ Jacob Bloom. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 4-5.

The fact that these witnesses were not sure that there was a collision before the explosion, does not remove the belief here that the explosion did follow the collision. It would be a major coincidence yes, if the explosion occurred just before the collision but one cannot follow coincidences until there is enough evidence that can support it. The crew, whose testimonies are perhaps the most crucial in this thesis, cannot be fully trusted with regard to the exact moment the explosion occurred. The reason being that the event itself would have caused too much of an impact, on both their physical and mental functioning – they would have been injured and knocked unconscious, thus clouding their exact memory. Adding to this unreliability is the fact that those who were on the locomotive were 31 trucks away from the epicentre of the explosion, and they were around a bend with wood and a shed in between them and that area. Williams, who was closer to the front of the train, fell off just as the trains collided and was also knocked unconscious by the explosion or the fall, thus not even he could give specifics about that moment other than it was possible because of the distance of the dynamite trucks from the switch crossing. The man, who was said to be cleaning the switch before the explosion, was later instructed by Williams to be on the first truck during the shunting as an additional lookout, but was not seen again, and was probably instantly killed by the blast.⁹² It should also be noted that around this time Clemm from the Order Service and his workmen were busy unloading the dynamite from the trucks, and would have also been killed instantly by the explosion.

What is clear is, that the switch was incorrectly set, and the crew again could not say how this might have happened. Williams and Vermeulen both claimed that it was in order when they inspected it, Oxeer stated that he instructed Williams to check the switch, and Bloom and Pienaar would have had little to do with it on this day. Oxeer, Bloom and Williams all mentioned the labourer that was cleaning the switch around half an hour before the explosion. They do not specifically say it, but it is implied by them, that this man may have changed the setting of the switch while he was cleaning it. However, none of them could say any more than conjecture – that it was possible that someone either by accident or through ill will could have tampered with the switch.⁹³ A question to be considered is, why was Williams not on

⁹² Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 2-3.

⁹³ Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 2-3.; Jacob Bloom. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van

the front of the train as he was instructed by Oxe – he did put someone else in front, the labourer, but why? Furthermore, Oxe was adamant that from where Williams gave the signal to cross over the switch, he would have been able to see the switch very clearly and seen that it was not in the right position.⁹⁴

What is confirmed here, is that the contact between the shunted trucks and the dynamite trucks was an accident, the dynamite trucks were not going to be moved as they were being unloaded and the dynamite destined to be delivered. The next chapter discusses the effects of the explosion as well the responses to it.

Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 4-5.; Oxe. Sydney Oxe. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 29-30.

⁹⁴ Sydney Oxe. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 29-30.

Chapter 3: “Mijn Huis is Plat”¹

“Nauseous Pit of Death”²

At roughly 3:15 p.m., a loud thundering explosion was heard throughout the Witwatersrand and further away.³ The ten trucks containing 2214 cases of blasting gelatine of 50 lbs. each had exploded following the collision with the shunted trucks.⁴ There was an instantaneous mass of fire and then a powerful shockwave that pushed through and aside everything in its path. A large mushroom cloud stretched up hundreds of feet into the air and was visible from miles away (see Appendix 3 for images of the mushroom cloud). The force of the explosion ripped a massive tear in the ground where the dynamite trucks were standing, sending dust, earth and shrapnel flying in all directions (see Appendix 4).⁵ The exact size of the crater was unknown, but one source initially put it at 100 yards in length, 40 yards in width and about 40 feet deep and another at 200 feet long, 50 feet wide and 25 feet deep.⁶ At the edge of the crater, the train tracks curled up into the air, skew and burnt. The explosion destroyed practically every house within a quarter mile area, with as much as half of Fordsburg destroyed and almost all of Vrededorp.⁷

The Indian location was completely destroyed, along with extensive damage to the other locations. Many of the destroyed homes and dwellings, were made of wood and corrugated iron, and caught fire with concealed people or animals still trapped underneath or within them. The shockwave shattered nearly every window in reach and further away towards the heart of Johannesburg, in Commissioner-street, Pritchard-street and other chief streets, windows had been shattered.⁸ Later the damage in these central parts was found to be greater than initially thought, with not only shattered windows, but damage to large window frames

¹ Kerstina Small. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 1.; Translation: “My house is flat.”

² www.blueplaques.co.za/article/nauseous-pit-death-%E2%80%93-braamfontein-dynamite-explosion (20 March 2015).

³ *The Cape Times*, 20 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.

⁴ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – “Rapport van die Commissie tot Onderzoek der dynamite-ontploffing”, Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 46.

⁵ TAB – Photograph: 3359. “The pit caused by explosion,” 1896.

⁶ *The Cape Times*, 20 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.; *The Cape Argus*, 20 February 1896, “Terrible Explosion on the Rand,” p. 5.

⁷ *The Cape Times*, 20 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.

⁸ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, pp. 71-72.; *The Cape Argus*, 20 February 1896, “Terrible Explosion on the Rand,” p. 5.

and masonry statues.⁹ Windows and doors were later boarded up and resembled a town under siege. The groans of the injured could be heard throughout the devastation and the amount of able bodies was not enough to assist everyone at once. Most of the victims were women, children and the elderly, as the explosion took place in the afternoon, while most of the men were still at work.¹⁰

Kerstina Small, a resident of Braamfontein, experienced the explosion first hand. She witnessed the blast from about 200 yards away, while talking to a neighbour, and noted that it was the trucks that had been there for three days, that had had the collision, but she was unaware that those trucks contained explosives. The collision was followed by one very loud boom and a large column of fire, after which Small was rendered unconscious. Small did not recall seeing a locomotive, but she did remember hearing its whistle. Her entire house was flattened by the effects of the explosion.¹¹ A similar case was that of Christina Nel, another resident of Braamfontein, who was only a few feet behind her house, when the accident took place. She heard the trucks crash and then saw the explosion and the large column of fire, and was subsequently knocked out. Her house too, was completely destroyed. These cases are two of the many that occurred on the 19th, with many of the victims being women who were alone at home at the time.¹² This is not to say that there were no men present during the explosion. Harry Fell, a man of 40 years old, was also a victim and witness to these events. His evidence was almost identical to that of Small and Nel, but he added that the shunting train was moving a little faster than usual before the accident, which is odd because the train was said to be going slower than usual because of the downward slope.¹³ Another man, Adriaan Buitendag, was out selling bread, when the explosion occurred. He was only 160 steps from the scene of the crash and could add little else to the account. He did say that it was too dark to see any locomotive, however he could be referring to after the explosion when the smoke around the township began to rise and clouded the area.

⁹ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

¹⁰ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

¹¹ Kerstina Small. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 1.

¹² Christina Nel. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 2.

¹³ Harry Fell. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 5.

Annie Theron, a resident of Fordsburg, lost more than just her house, when the blast occurred, her young child had been killed as well.¹⁴ The only record of a child killed with the surname Theron, was an 8-month-old boy identified as D.I., although the list specified him as being from the Cape Colony.¹⁵ Many Afrikaners had made their way from the Cape to find work on the Rand, and this could have been one of those cases. It can thus be assumed that a person living in the Transvaal would still be identified by their region or country of origin, even those who were possibly born in the Transvaal and even those who were of Dutch decent. Many more children were among the victims of the explosion, and those who survived thought that hell had descended upon them.

Tom Adlam was walking home from school when he felt the ground shake beneath him and a massive dark cloud of smoke shot up in the distance. There was frighteningly loud thundering sound as the dark cloud grew taller and billowed out. The child could not move for a few seconds out of fear, while thinking that this was surely the end of the world. Eventually Tom started to run home, which was in the direction of the great shadowy cloud. Fortunately, when he arrived home, he found his mother and his brothers were unharmed, but in a state of distress. His house was full of dust clouds and glass from the western window frame. There was a large hole in the wall where the window frame used to be, the other windows had simply shattered, and pieces of bricks and mortar covered the floor. Later the family found out that an explosion had occurred at the railway yard, almost two miles away from their house. A few days later they would visit the scenes of the explosion and the damage done to the township.¹⁶

An indulgently depicted account, describes a young boy, named Jacky Hammond, who was digging a ditch, in an attempt to emulate his miner father. He struck his spade into the ground a final time when it began to rumble and shudder, followed by a loud roar in the air. The little boy jumped up, filled both with fear and excitement to tell his mother that he had dug up hell itself.¹⁷ Another child named Jack, identified as a young coloured boy from Bloemfontein, was visiting his mother on the Rand. He was much closer to the explosion than the other two boys, and yet survived. Jack was on the bread seller's wagon, as he did deliveries. He was

¹⁴ Annie Theron. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry, 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 6.

¹⁵ TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

¹⁶ V. Horler: "Gone With the Shining Things", Master's Thesis, University of Cape Town, 2013. pp. 152 -153

¹⁷ R. Crisp. *The Outlanders: The Men Who Made Johannesburg*.

holding the reigns of the horses, in front of an Indian shop when the trucks crashed, after which he was thrown backwards by the force of the explosion.¹⁸ Miles away at a Marist Brothers School, the intrigue of mathematics and science became overshadowed by the excitement and fearful wonderment of the explosion and its cloud of smoke. The learners who were in class had been covered by glass as their windows shattered, but this did not dull their ability to storm out of the classroom for a better view of what was happening. Their observation was however short lived as they were mustered into the school's chapel – partly for safety and mostly for prayer.¹⁹ A small boy, who was again closer to the action, remembered lying in his bed when he heard the collision after which he was 'asleep' – knocked unconscious. He did not even hear the explosion. When he woke up he was pinned to the bed by iron sheeting and bricks. After a struggle, he managed to free himself, and then attempted to do the same for his mother and father who he found to be badly injured.²⁰

Not all the children on the Rand were as fortunate as the aforementioned. Six girls were playing outside a house when the force of the explosion hit, killing them instantly. It was said that their bodies were lying in a circle when they were found, as they probably played a game of some kind. There were similar cases of people being instantly killed, who were in the open and came into the direct force of the blast. In a different incident, five boys who were bathing in a pond drowned as a result of the explosion.²¹ A Sanitary-Inspector, with some workmen would later search all the wells in the vicinity, as there were reports that some bodies had been blown into them, however no remains were found.²² A man, who had been looking for his friend at one of the makeshift infirmaries, came across a young boy, of perhaps eight years old, who appeared to be sleeping. At a closer inspection the man saw that the boy had a triangular hole near one of his temples, where a piece of iron had pierced his head and gone into his brain. The boy was probably killed instantly and the man never found his friend. There were many dead children at the hospitals, and several were unidentified and unclaimed by any parents.²³

¹⁸ Jack. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 6.

¹⁹ R. Crisp. *The Outlanders: The Men Who Made Johannesburg*.

²⁰ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

²¹ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

²² *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, "Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

²³ *Ibid.*

William Langley the magazine caretaker for Lippert, was logically an eye witness to these events. He was around the dynamite magazines (Auckland Park), assisting with unloading of the dynamite that was finally being delivered, when the explosion took place. The assistant caretaker, Alexander Powell was with Langley and both had their backs turned towards the direction from which the blast would come. Yet Langley saw the massive flash of fire and then found he was lying on the ground. Powell, who was then eight yards from him, had also begun to recover and started to move away. The doors of the magazine had been blown open, while two pieces of iron had penetrated the roof and made their way to the front of the building, fortunately they had not ignited the rest of the dynamite housed there. Afterwards, while Langley was attempting to secure the doors, he saw one of the Order Service wagons approaching in the distance.²⁴

The driver of the wagon was Thomas Bennett who told him that he was at the cemetery during the explosion – the cemetery was a few hundred yards away from the railway yard. They unloaded this wagon and when they had finished they saw another wagon approaching them from the debris. The driver was Swarts, who was only 100 yards from the explosion and somehow survived and made it all the way to the magazines. For some reason Bennett and Swarts continued their responsibilities after the explosion took place. It is unsure why they did this, but one reason could be that they simply wanted to get the dynamite as far away from the scene as possible, to prevent a further explosion.²⁵

It can be seen, that there was a lot of activity around the railway yard before the explosion, with many people going about their business or simply meandering around carelessly. The market side of town lay quiet as stores closed earlier on Wednesday afternoons, only those with more menial or industrial jobs and professions were still at work.²⁶ This refers to the mines, the timber mill, the dynamite magazines, and the railway yard and order service. People towards the centre of the city had different experiences, and found themselves in a world resembling an earthquake rather than that of a fiery hurricane. One man of about 25 years was standing and talking with a friend in Kerk Street, when the buildings around them started to shudder and shake, and the windows shattered into pieces. People ran out into the

²⁴ William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 7-9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Rosenthal, E: *Across the Counter – Down the Years: A History of Stuttafords & Company Ltd. Department Stores of Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban.* (Unpublished).

streets to find out what had happened. The young man ran to the corner of Kerk and Harrison Street towards Braamfontein, where he saw the enormous smoke cloud rising.²⁷ Store owners ran into the street without locking their doors, everyone was overcome by a great desire to know what happened. Several people said that Judge de Korte, who was hearing a case that afternoon, ran out the courtroom into the street, still wearing his robes to find out what was going on.²⁸ A cyclist, and in fact member of the Sanitary Board, was on his way to a meeting when suddenly found himself lying in the street with a dislocated arm.²⁹ A wedding service was underway on the Afternoon of February 19, in the old synagogue, and was near its end when the blast hit the filled building. No one was injured, but the congregation was well shaken and made a rush for the door.³⁰ Churches, whose walls were strong enough to withstand the force of the explosion, instead had their roofs blown off.³¹ Two Germans narrowly escaped the explosion, while they were working at the pumping station, about 100 yards away from the centre of the blast. One was blown twenty yards away and received a few injuries, while the other was stripped of all his clothes while sustaining a severe shock and temporary hearing loss.³²

At first, the basic causes of the explosion were not known to the public or even officials, and many speculated, including newspapers. One report was that two trucks, both containing dynamite, collided, another said that the dynamite magazines at Auckland Park had exploded. There was even a question concerning a possible earthquake.³³ There were also reports for some time that one of the tanks in the gas works had erupted and caused the explosion. This was of course not the case, but the tanks themselves were affected by the blast, with the main tank becoming quite unstable, before being brought under control once more.³⁴ Intelligence given to Pretoria also described that two dynamite wagons had collided, causing a serious explosion with the loss of life in the hundreds.³⁵ Another source said that a locomotive was being moved in to be attached to the trucks, and due to the heat of the past three days, this contact was enough to set off the dynamite. The possibility that the boiler of the locomotive

²⁷ A.J. Hoffman. *Op Die Spoor van die Misdadiger*. 1948.

²⁸ R. Crisp: *The Outlanders: The Men Who Made Johannesburg.*; A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries*.

²⁹ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe", p. 5.

³⁰ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

³¹ TAB – Photograph: 10781. "Ruïme in Fordsburg van Nederduitse Hervormele Kerk na ontploffing, 1896."

³² *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

³³ *The Cape Times*, 27 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe", p. 5.

³⁴ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

³⁵ *The Cape Argus*, 20 February 1896, "Terrible Explosion on the Rand," p. 5.

had burst and led to the blast was also initially considered. However later it was established by eye witnesses that it had been a shunting accident, where the trucks that were being pushed, ‘bumped violently’ into the dynamite trucks.³⁶

The exact numbers of those killed or injured were difficult to fathom on the first few days, with estimations going into the hundreds. Newspapers reported that around 200 were killed with about 300 injured. Corpses and bits of remains were scattered throughout the scene; the carcasses and pieces of mule and horse were also amongst the human remains making matters of recovery and calculation more difficult. Pieces of human remains were initially collected in bags for when they could be identified or buried. The scenes would surely have been gruesome and indescribable for the stunned citizens of the city, who would not have been accustomed to any of this. It would have been even more distressing for those arriving home from the mines or other occupations, to find their homes in ruin and fire. One journalist came across a portion of a face that resembled a mask but it was so badly disfigured that he could not even make out what the race of the man or woman was.³⁷ An eyewitness is said to have seen a set of mules, still attached to their wagon flying through the air by the force of the blast.³⁸ Another witness saw a torn hand with a beautiful diamond ring on the finger.³⁹

Elsewhere a man was nursing his wounded child in his arms, within the ruin of their home. The father, himself injured and distraught with grief, refused to be separated from his child who needed medical treatment, and eventually did receive it. In another house an entire family lay dead – a father, a mother and their three children.⁴⁰ In a different scene a dog waited among the ruin and scattered belongings of its dead mistress, waiting for her to return (see Appendix 7).⁴¹ In an odd occurrence also involving an animal, it was reported in an American newspaper that a large monkey, which survived the explosion, had arrived there by ship a few months later. It was in the company of a passenger who had found it, in one of the partially destroyed houses, along with two toddlers, one of whom was dead. It was said that

³⁶ *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

³⁷ *The Cape Times*, 20 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.

³⁸ ZA HPR A3353-1 – Johannes de Veer, Autobiography. Excerpt: Blumberg, J. G.: “The Great Dynamite Explosion”, Fairmount School, Johannesburg, pp. 5-7.

³⁹ A.J. Hoffman. *Op Die Spoor van die Misdadiger*.

⁴⁰ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.

⁴¹ TAB – Photograph: 3364. ‘Watching His Dead Mistress’s Property, Johannesburg,’ 1896.

the monkey who was very fond of children was nursing the surviving toddler in its arms. Needless to say, the animal caused a great sensation aboard the ship.⁴²

Among the fatalities and serious injuries, there were also a lot of ‘close calls’, where victims had merely been blown over, suffering only from a head ache to a mild concussion.⁴³ Aside from this, people were also found alive beneath the rubble – a day after the explosion, a two year old was found alive and virtual unharmed beneath the ruins.⁴⁴ Similarly a man was discovered five days after the disaster, amongst the debris, who had subsequently been knocked out, and had only sustained a broken rib.⁴⁵ Beside the humans, both alive and dead, and the animal remains around the scene of the explosion, were pieces of iron and wood, bedframes, pianos and other various items scattered around – just some of the basic and even more extravagant household items that were ripped out of homes.⁴⁶ At the temporary mortuaries and hospitals, dozens had to identify the remains of family members, with often the last remaining member being the one to do so.

This section has attempted to show the scope of the immediate effects of the explosion, from different perspectives and literal vantage points. However, it would be impossible to completely recreate the experiences of the explosion, but one can still try to understand them.

Aftercare: Hospitals, Relief and Compensation

The initial reaction of the people of Johannesburg was to assist the injured and collect the dead as promptly as they could – L. J. Carr notes this as being a spontaneous feature of all disasters, that occurs without any organisation but that will be “gradually taken over by institutionalised agencies such as firemen, policemen, soldiers, Red Cross workers and the like,” as time moves on.⁴⁷ He further states that:

⁴² “A Monkey on Shipboard,” *Chicago Eagle*, 27 June 1896, p. 9.

⁴³ A.J. Hoffman. *Op Die Spoor van die Misdadiger*.

⁴⁴ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.

⁴⁵ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

⁴⁶ *The Cape Argus*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.; *The Times* (London, England), 22 February 1896, “The Latest Intelligence – The Johannesburg Explosion,” p. 7.

⁴⁷ L. J. Carr: “Disaster and the sequence-pattern concept of social change,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 1932, p. 212.

“For aiding the injured, feeding and sheltering the homeless, and for protecting property from fire and theft, every community either has institutionalised agencies at hand or is speedily given the benefit of those in nearby communities. But for dealing with the disorganisation of community services caused by disaster no community has any plan or prearranged organisation.”⁴⁸

When President Kruger first heard about the explosion, it was said that he was furious, and directed his anger at the management of the Railway Company – who he vowed would pay – his anger would subsequently be replaced by a solemn state.⁴⁹ The following day (Thursday, 20 February 1896) he arrived by special train from Pretoria, with a small entourage of state officials, including the acting State Secretary, as W. J. Leyds was in London on diplomatic business. The President sent instructions that there be no extravagant welcome for him at Park Station, and this was so. Yet there were over a thousand people to greet to him, in quiet anticipation. He was taken directly to the scene of the explosion, where the details that were known at that point, were explained to him. Afterwards he paid a visit to the Wanderers Sports Grounds “hospital”, where he gradually passed each bed, and offered a few words or a prayer (see Appendix 5). It was said the presence of the dead and wounded children brought the President to tears. Kruger later thanked the entire city of Johannesburg for their fellowship in assisting one another during the crisis and care giving. Theatres and music halls were closed and all comparable entertainment was cancelled in respect of the victims and the disaster at hand.⁵⁰

Throughout the evening of Wednesday the 19th, cabs and wagons commuted to and from the Wanderers, where the hall had been set up as a makeshift hospital and mortuary. They brought the dead, the dying and the injured. This was boosted by the aid of the local St. John’s Ambulance Association who had all the necessary supplies, such as stretchers and bandages, needed for on scene first aid.⁵¹ Cabs were eventually stopped, as they were carrying the dead along with the living to the hospitals and the two had to be distinguished as things moved on – often remains were brought in which were near impossible to tell whether they were human or animal.⁵² At one point it was reported that the Relief Committee

⁴⁸ L. J. Carr: “Disaster and the sequence-pattern concept of social change,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 1932, p. 212.

⁴⁹ H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, p. 128.

⁵⁰ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

⁵¹ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*; *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

ultimately paid over £300 for cab hire, for various tasks, such as the moving of the dead and injured. The usual rate per day was £2,12s however the cab owners charged £3 per day under the circumstances.⁵³ The final report of the Relief Fund would eventually put the total of cab and cart hire at £1403.⁵⁴

The numbers at the hospitals reached the hundreds, with most of the victims there being identified as ‘poor whites’, with the majority being children. Many of the patients had to be placed on the floor as available space was quickly filled.⁵⁵ Police and ordinary citizen searched through the rubble, excavating the living or dead – many of the policemen were themselves injured, but many still fulfilled their duties.⁵⁶ One policeman, who had carried out his duties until his shift was over, had rushed home only to find his entire house destroyed along with his wife and two children.⁵⁷ Another policeman with a bad head wound, was seen carrying a child into one of the hospitals – one of the seven he had brought there on a wagon.⁵⁸ A constable who was 100 yards away from the explosion was blown over, suffering only from a mild headache afterwards.⁵⁹ Hundreds of volunteers formed into search parties and spread out among the debris to locate and rescue any survivors – all around were men in hats and suits, alongside the debris, with the occasional horse drawn cart riding through or stopping to assist (see Appendix 6).⁶⁰ Even businesses closed their doors so that they could assist in the search and rescue.⁶¹

Patients were treated at the Johannesburg hospital, the Wanderers and the Crown Reef works.⁶² The Wanderers was probably used for its space and its close proximity to the real hospital, which was only a few streets away.⁶³ All available doctors, nurses and volunteers had their hands full at these medical centres, with the constant arrivals and lack of immediate

⁵³ *The Cape Argus*, 28 February 1896, “Rand Explosion,” p. 5.

⁵⁴ TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 66.

⁵⁵ *The Cape Argus*, 20 February 1896, “Terrible Explosion on the Rand,” p. 5.; TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

⁵⁶ “The Latest Intelligence – The Johannesburg Explosion,” *The Times* (London, England), 22 February 1896, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Cape Time, 24 Feb, The Rand Catastrophe

⁵⁸ *The Cape Argus*, 20 February 1896, “Terrible Explosion on the Rand,” p. 5.

⁵⁹ A.J. Hoffman. *Op Die Spoor van die Misdadiger*.

⁶⁰ TAB – Photograph: 3362. “The Dynamite Explosion. Search Parties at Work.”; TAB – Photograph: 3363. “The Dynamite Explosion. Extricating Dead and Wounded.”

⁶¹ “The Latest Intelligence – The Johannesburg Explosion,” *The Times* (London, England), 22 February 1896, p. 7.

⁶² *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

⁶³ Plan of Johannesburg and Suburbs, 1897.

space, yet the medical staff was praised for their efforts.⁶⁴ The staff numbered twelve doctors, along with sixteen trained nurses and many volunteer nurse and other assistants.⁶⁵ Local women tore up their dresses to make bandages and offered their assistance as nurses to the overworked doctors and nurses. In the Cape, additional nurses were recruited by Professor Liebmann, who returned there from Krugersdorp, and called for any capable nurses to join his staff – any nurse who wished to help was to contact him at Rondebosch.⁶⁶

About a hundred of the slightly wounded victims were discharged on the same day, following minor treatment, which appreciatively made room for the injured still arriving. The more serious cases would remain, with many only receiving superior medical treatment and examinations the next day. The noise made by the patients in pain and bewilderment was said to be quite distressing with variations based on day or night. Eventually a rule had to be established to maintained quiet, with patients having to bare their pain in silence. Most patients were said to have endured their pain with fortitude with others conveying a cheerful front.⁶⁷ Amputations were commonplace at all the hospitals, as well as the restoration of trepanning, due to the nature of the injuries sustained during the blast, while several deaths occurred during the night.⁶⁸ Most injuries treated were sustained to the head, with multiple being fractured skulls and broken limbs.⁶⁹ Doctors reported that most of the severe injuries had been caused by flying metal and wood, and that the severity of the wounds had initially startled them.⁷⁰ To the advantage of the medical staff, the Medical Committee had been given full authority to order anything they needed and to even beseech for more if needed.⁷¹ At the official hospital both black wards were cleared for victims of the explosion. The patients who were in these wards were moved to tents on the grounds, and those with more serious cases were placed in wards for whites.⁷² It was reported, that very little discrimination was displayed in the efforts to assist the injured however this could merely be exaggerated.⁷³

⁶⁴ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.; *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

⁶⁵ TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

⁶⁶ *The Cape Argus*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

⁶⁷ *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

⁶⁸ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.; *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

⁶⁹ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *The Times* (London, England), 22 February 1896, “The Latest Intelligence – The Johannesburg Explosion,” p. 7.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

The first of several funerals took place the day after the explosion, where 50 bodies were buried, along with 20 coffins containing indiscriminate body parts and fragments. Large crowds attended the service, which was said to be quite impressive, complete with a full brass band. Mourners who had not been able to identify their relatives, gathered around the 20 coffins of mixed remains, and openly expressed their grief.⁷⁴ On the 22nd another funeral took place where 27 victims were buried, and this was again largely attended.⁷⁵ The Cemetery itself was only a few metres away from the site of the explosion.

On the night of the 20th, a meeting was held in the Stock Exchange to plan and organise relief for all the sufferers of the explosion. Out of this meeting came the Relief Committee, presided over by Mr Hancock of the Sanitary Board. A Distribution Committee was also initiated and was active during most of this time. Food, clothing and all essentials were already supplied and more were being prepared – clothing was even assembled in Cape Town. The public was afforded the chance to add the names of men they wished to join the Committee, and a large number were proposed, including two members of the Volksraad.⁷⁶ When the relief fund was established on the evening of the explosion, contributions began streaming in almost immediately, before the relief committee was even formed. It was decided that one relief fund would function better under the control of committee.⁷⁷ President Kruger himself was asked to be the president of the Relief Fund which he accepted.⁷⁸

There were many channels through which subscriptions for the main Relief Fund were collected. The Reuter's Agency in Johannesburg opened a subscription list for which the funds were to be used to set up temporary housing for the hundreds homeless, and subscriptions from the Cape were made possible through the Reuter's Agency in Cape Town.⁷⁹ The news of the event was not even a few hours old yet when the fund reached £40 000, and by the night of the 19th the subscription lists at the Stock Exchange, Eckstein & Co. and Mr Langerman's, surpassed £50 000. Another list was started by the Chamber of Commerce with the President of the Chamber heading the list with a sum of ten guineas. The Argus Printing and Publishing Company subscribed £200 to the main fund, and an additional

⁷⁴ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

⁷⁵ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

⁷⁶ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

⁷⁷ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *The Cape Times*, 20 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

fund was started by the Advertiser's office in Kimberley.⁸⁰ By the 20th, the general relief fund was at £60 000, with donations from E. Lippert and the Dynamite Company, each at £5000.⁸¹ During initial valuations of damages, it was believed that losses for the poorer of the victims amounted to £270 000. Damage to machinery, windows and building was assessed to be over £50 000. Damages to property in and around Fordsburg alone were estimated to be around £60, 000.⁸² At the end of it all, combined damages of everything attributed to the explosion, were estimated to be around £1 000 000.⁸³ When the general manager of African United Insurance Corporation heard about the large loss to property, he ordered that all losses caused by the explosion be paid out. A call was also made for all available mechanics to offer their services, as officials wished to have the process of reconstruction underway promptly. It was reported that the township was likely to take on a more modern look, and that the new cottages would reflect the style of the artisan classes.⁸⁴ These plans were most likely to be directed at Fordsburg and Braamfontein, which contain the white working classes, while the other racial groups in Vrededorp and the other locations were probably not considered in these plans.

As early as 21 February, the Relief Fund had risen to £66 000 and arrangements were being made by the Relief Committee to further aid the sufferers – tents were erected as well as other requirements necessary for the victims were organised, such as clothing and food. By the 25th, one hundred tents had been set up, with more still being prepared.⁸⁵ Free railway passes were made available to sufferers who applied for them, to any station on the Netherlands⁸⁶, Cape or Natal railways – 455 were granted and this represented 1373 people.⁸⁷ Additionally a committee of seven were appointed to assess the damage done to property and possessions, for the purposes of compensation.⁸⁸ In addition to this, a meeting was held by the Mercantile Association and the Chamber of Commerce, where it was decided that a Court should be appointed to further ascertain damages and loss sustained, to pay attention to the

⁸⁰ *The Cape Argus*, 20 February 1896, "Terrible Explosion on the Rand," p. 5.

⁸¹ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.; A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 72.

⁸² *The Cape Times*, 29 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

⁸³ *Argus* (Melbourne), 26 February 1896, "The Johannesburg Explosion," p. 5.

⁸⁴ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

⁸⁵ *The Cape Times*, 26 February 1896, "Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

⁸⁶ The Railway Company operating in the Transvaal - Nederlandsche-Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorweg Maatschappij (Netherlands South African Railway Company).

⁸⁷ *The Cape Times*, 26 February 1896, "Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.; TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

⁸⁸ *The Cape Argus*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Calamity," p. 5.

Commission of Inquiry, and to take necessary steps in the interests of merchants and other victims of the explosion.⁸⁹ One correspondent spoke to a valuator, a Mr Morkel who was an auctioneer from Joubert-street, who also worked as a government appraiser, and had been in contact with several of the families who had property damaged. Morkel saw over 100 houses in Fordsburg and Braamfontein, with these houses being of a higher quality (brick and mortar) than the mostly shanties of the neighbouring locations. The value of the homes ranged between £50 to £1500, with the average loss or damage to them being around £400. The nature of the damage here consisted of broken roofs, cracked walls and brick linings, and in a few cases boarded floors were damaged. As he did not visit or evaluate the shanties, he estimated their value was well below £1500 and that even the “most elaborate” would cost around £100.⁹⁰

A further inquiry was carried out on the 28th, when two justices of the peace sat at Fordsburg to hear declarations from those who had lost property.⁹¹ There was also a report presented by property valuers, who assessed the damages to the houses examined by them, to be over £50 000.⁹² It was also specified that the Railway Company would rebuild churches and would not dispute any reasonable claims.⁹³ The company correspondingly subscribed £10 000.⁹⁴ On the other hand it took the Dynamite Company until July 17 to finally confirm that it would assist with the compensation efforts.⁹⁵ A large gathering of property owners assembled before the hearing took place, illustrating the importance of the hearing and the psychological value of property.⁹⁶ It can be understood that property was important to those who lost it, as many were part of the newly formed Afrikaner working class, who ventured out to the Rand in search of financial opportunities. Most came from an agricultural background, where one’s land was one’s livelihood.⁹⁷ It had been reported that 400 tents had been erected for the homeless and most of the patients at the Wanderers had been moved to hospitals.⁹⁸ The Relief Committee either purchased or borrowed tents, these numbered 278, and were put under the

⁸⁹ *The Cape Times*, 26 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

⁹⁰ *The Cape Times*, 27 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

⁹¹ *The Cape Argus*, 29 February 1896, “The Late Explosion,” p. 5.

⁹² *The Cape Argus*, 2 March 1896, “The Rand Explosion,” p. 5.

⁹³ *The Cape Argus*, 29 February 1896, “The Late Explosion,” p. 5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ TAB – SS – R9407/96. Zuid Afrikaansche Fabriek Van Ontploffbare Stoffen. Re Het Aandeel Dat Zy Zullen Dragen By De Compensatie In De Ontploffing Te Johannesburg

⁹⁶ *The Cape Times*, 29 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

⁹⁷ C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 5

⁹⁸ *The Cape Times*, 29 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

supervision of a Tent Inspector. Later the tents were sold and the funds were added to that of the Relief Fund.⁹⁹

Those who were left homeless were estimated to be between 2000 and 3000. The buildings on the showgrounds of the Agricultural Society housed several hundred of the destitute, on the night of the explosion and more by 20 February, and these numbers increased. Children were originally sheltered at the Baptist Church and the Nazareth Home.¹⁰⁰ Victims at the showgrounds numbered over 600, and were mostly whites, while arrangements and provisions were all well organised, and shelter had been prepared for 1000 people.¹⁰¹ Earlier figures showed that 163 whites were being housed in the stables; 64 whites in the refreshment-room no. 1; and 200 whites and 115 coloureds in the refreshment-room no. 2 – this totalled 542 people, a number that increased significantly.¹⁰² There may have been room for the victims, but there was still great need for mattresses, blankets and clothing.¹⁰³ Requests were also made for clothing and toys for all the children affected.¹⁰⁴

The show grounds became a small village resembling a commune, where people received shelter, food and clothing (see Appendix 8). The Relief Fund identified two categories of residents at this ‘village’: “those who received rations and cooked for themselves,” and “those who were fed in the large dining-room.”¹⁰⁵ Additional sufferers who found shelter with friends, received rations from the relief centre set up in Fordsburg at Kelly’s Home. The scale of all the rations was based on the allowance of British soldiers, with an extra half pound of meat per day. After some time a hospital was set up at the show grounds, and patients from the medical centres were moved here, where they were monitored by a resident surgeon and trained nurses. An investigative team examined all the cases of those who received relief, and once an able bodied man could again support his family, his name would be struck off the list of those requiring relief.¹⁰⁶ This probably also meant that families whose bread winner had not been injured at all, would have not received relief for very long.

⁹⁹ TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

¹⁰⁰ *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

¹⁰¹ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁰² *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁰³ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁰⁵ TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

Remains were still being found by 28 February and promptly taken to the cemetery, the clearing of debris was also continuing. By the 29th of February, the grand total of the Relief Fund was at £123 167, with more subscriptions still coming in. On the same day in Klerksdorp, a gathering was held to organise a relief fund there in aid of the Johannesburg Relief Fund. Here another committee was appointed to canvass the town for donations.¹⁰⁷ President Kruger personally donated £200, while the subscription list entered the hands of the Executive Council, who were to distribute it to all government departments by the 1st of March.¹⁰⁸ The official report of the Relief Fund, put the final amount of subscriptions at £125 935.1s, with an interest of £464.2s, making the total accumulation £126 399.3s.¹⁰⁹

It becomes apparent in this section, that there were many channels for both the provision of contributing aid, and the assessment of damages for loss, compensation or restoration. There were constant exchanges of opinions, often critical among the public and officials. There was no lack of agency in this regard, and even though the disaster was unexpected, the reaction of the town was swift and its apparatus functioned effectively, although at times under pressure. Referring to natural disasters, Schenk states that because of the economic and political consequences of such events, people are compelled to act resulting in a mobilised administration and general public.¹¹⁰ Even though the Braamfontein Explosion was not a natural disaster, these were certainly the circumstances that followed.

The Public and Their Opinions

It will always be difficult to illuminate the feelings and opinions of people that lived over a hundred years ago. Even eye witnesses who document or have their experiences documented tend to forget, or add things to their own account as time moves on. One witness to the Braamfontein Explosion, wrote of his experiences in 1948, 52 years after the event, and compared it to descriptions he had heard of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (1945).¹¹¹ Needless to say this will never be an accurate account of the events of the explosion, nor would it conjure up the same public responses or opinions. There are different descriptions of

¹⁰⁷ *The Cape Argus*, 2 March 1896, "The Rand Explosion," p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 66.

¹¹⁰ G. J. Schenk: "Historical disaster research. State of research, concepts, methods and case studies," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, (32), (3), 2007, p. 10.

¹¹¹ A.J. Hoffman. *Op Die Spoor van die Misdadiger*.

the people that occupied the spaces of the worst hit areas. It is understood, that the Afrikaner working class occupied the suburbs of Fordsburg and Vrededorp. The latter had been specifically assigned in 1893 by the Transvaal, for impoverished Afrikaners who had lost their livelihood in the countryside. Most of the Afrikaners who lived in these suburbs were transport riders, cab drivers or brickmakers, yet these suburbs would remain in poverty.¹¹²

Prior to 1895, there was a reactively small amount of unemployed Afrikaners on the Rand.¹¹³ The Dutch built railways that appeared in the mid-1890s, would play a considerable part in the eventual unemployment of many of the men who live in Vrededorp and Fordsburg, but before that, the railway was involved in the death of their wives and children and the destruction of their homes.¹¹⁴ Early Johannesburg, however, did not have an abundance of working class families, and the town itself was dominated by men, many of who were unsure in the stability and future of life on the Rand. These men were mostly immigrant miners who would have had to stretch their finances to bring their wives and children to the Rand.¹¹⁵ With the many injuries and deaths of women and children caused by the explosion, linked with their Afrikaans surnames, it is clear that a large contingent of Afrikaner men had families on the Rand (see Appendixes 9 and 10 for list of dead and injured). Thus the majority of these families would have lived in Vrededorp and Fordsburg with some in Braamfontein, and were in fact quite large – one family consisted of eight members, a husband, wife and six children.¹¹⁶

In relation to the explosion, Fordsburg lay to the south and south-east of the epicentre, while Braamfontein lay to the east with a fraction north. In between Fordsburg and the railway were two smaller African and Indian location – to the east of these three were the Brickfields, also known as Burgersdorp.¹¹⁷ The Brickfields was home to another group of poor Afrikaners who had left their rural lifestyle to start over on the Rand – in late 1887 they petitioned government to allow them to make bricks from the clay deposits, and by the 1890s the

¹¹² C. van Onselen: *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914. 1 New Babylon*, pp. 145-146.

¹¹³ C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 327.

¹¹⁴ C. van Onselen: *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914. 1 New Babylon*, pp. 145-146.

¹¹⁵ C. van Onselen: *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914. 1 New Babylon*, p. 5.

¹¹⁶ *The Cape Times*, 26 February 1896, "Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

¹¹⁷ Plan of Johannesburg and Suburbs, 1897.

Brickfields had become an enduring feature and an economic haven for the poor Afrikaner.¹¹⁸ To the south-west was Mayfair. In the direct north-west of where the explosion occurred was the large township known as the “Native Location”, which was made up of Vrededorp, the Indian location, the African location and the Malay location. As was mentioned earlier, Fordsburg and the “Native Location” experienced the full brunt of the explosion, because the railway siding was positioned directly in between these two townships or suburbs.¹¹⁹ Therefore the people or social groups that were most affected by the disaster were Africans, Afrikaners, Cape Malays, and Indians. The other occupants of the locations would have been employed in various roles throughout the Rand. Coloured Muslims, also called Malays, had briefly prospered in the early days as cabbies, before their role eventually declined due to the industrialisation of transport.¹²⁰ Africans would have occupied roles as miners, washermen and ‘houseboy’.¹²¹ Again it has to be said that it is unthinkable that an explosives siding was kept in the middle of residential areas, however this can be accounted to then nature of the development of Johannesburg. Thus where the railway line might have been on the edge of the town, it would end up running through the middle as the town simply overlapped it.

There had been many complaints to the Railway Company about the exposed dynamite in the vicinity of the houses and of the further dangers of the delays in offloading.¹²² The same question had been asked of the local authorities, and not too long before the explosion the public had petitioned government as well. All these requests were ignored.¹²³ A survivor of the explosion, said that he had complained about the presence of dynamite, to the Railway Company on the Sunday (16 February 1896) when the explosives had arrived, but that he received a discourteous response.¹²⁴ Following the explosion there were two opinions that were quite damning for the Railway Company. Firstly, the initial blame was being placed solely at its doorstep, with its officials receiving harsh criticism – being described as “novices in railway work” and their conduct being “normally silly and grotesque”.¹²⁵ Arthur Rutherford, chief magazine caretaker and Lippert’s right hand man, placed the blame firmly on the Railway Company’s shunting operation, and denied any responsibility his office might

¹¹⁸ C. van Onselen: *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914. 1 New Babylon*, p. 8.

¹¹⁹ Plan of Johannesburg and Suburbs, 1897.

¹²⁰ C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 173.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹²² *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *The Cape Argus*, 20 February 1896, “Terrible Explosion on the Rand,” p. 5.

have had in the delay.¹²⁶ Secondly, the Railway Company's response to the disaster was criticised, or rather their lack of response. A rumour was circulating, that the employees of the company, from the top to the bottom, had displayed an indecisiveness following the disaster and a disregard for the suffering of the victims – saying that they looked on with their hands in their pockets while others were labouring to help the victims. This was fervently denied by an official of the company, who said that he was grieved by the allegations and that most of his employees were the first on the scene. He went on to explain that of many the employees were themselves injured or dead and several had volunteered to assist at the Wanderers.¹²⁷ A correspondent from *The Star* newspaper later reported that he had passed the railway station about a month before the explosion, and witnessed the disturbing manner in which it was being offloaded. He explained that the cases of dynamite were being flung from the train onto a wagon like sacks of coal, landing with a loud thump.¹²⁸ The correspondent then spoke to the policeman¹²⁹, who was on duty at the crossing, about the circumstances involving the unloading, to which he replied: "I can't prevent it; it is the way they always load the dynamite here."¹³⁰

Where there was disenchantment and frustration with the actions of the Railway Company, there was clear professional contempt towards the products of the Dynamite Company. Not only were consumers angry about the monopoly which forced them to buy dynamite from the Company, many were more than displeased with the quality of the dynamite. The opinion of the chemist and metallurgist of the Jubilee mine, was that the quality of the explosives was vastly inferior, and that the heat of the sun was the deciding factor and not the shunting collision. He held that if the dynamite had been left long enough it would have spontaneously exploded without any contact. He regularly advocated the appointment of an official inspector of explosives, as he felt that because the dynamite was an import there was no guarantee as to its quality or safety. He also suggested there be a public laboratory to test every item of dynamite that was imported.¹³¹ The director of the dynamite factory in Leeuwnfontein admitted that there had been complaints about the dynamite, but only with regard to its packaging, that the paper wrapped around the cartridge was too thin and tore easily. However 14 days prior to the explosion, there had been no further complaints

¹²⁶ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

¹²⁷ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

¹²⁸ *The Cape Argus*, 26 February 1896, "Rand Calamity," p. 5.

¹²⁹ This is the same policeman who was mentioned in Chapter 2.

¹³⁰ *The Cape Argus*, 26 February 1896, "Rand Calamity," p. 5.

¹³¹ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

concerning this matter.¹³² The broader public blamed what they termed ‘the German dynamite’ and made frequent commentaries about this now publically considered foreign product.¹³³

Following the disaster, public criticism was similarly directed at the Sanitary Board, for not conducting the search of remains themselves, especially since the fear of potential disease and pestilence caused by the remains of both humans and animals began to emerge.¹³⁴ The conditions were worsened by the fact that the people who were at risk, were exposed to the varying temperatures as well as not being sufficiently fed and clothed, making them susceptible to illness or worse. The Sanitary Board was criticised for not doing more and for not removing all the remains by the Thursday (20 February), as was considered possible.¹³⁵ Subsequently the Inspector of Mines with a group of prisoners supervised by guards, rummaged through the ruins in search of human remains.¹³⁶ The prisoners numbered 130, and would come across personal effects of value (on one occasion a gold watch and earring) and severed body parts. The remains would be wrapped in linen and sent to the hospital to be officially buried later. The prisoners worked well, and were eager to keep going, as they were often rewarded with the items they found, such as boots or stockings, which they would wear almost immediately. Their labour was from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. and then from 1:55 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.¹³⁷

There was further criticism weighed against the Sanitary Board when it was found that their chairman had gone on holiday in Natal three days after the explosion, and that the Town Engineer had not been recalled by the Board following the catastrophe. The public felt that there was a general lack of urgency among the Board.¹³⁸ The Sanitary Board however was not completely idle. Following the explosion they sent a telegram to the government to request that no more dynamite be allowed within the town, and that a magazine site and siding be built 5 miles to the north. This 5 miles idea was probably based on the fact that

¹³² Friedrich Krieger. Testimony given at the Commission of Inquiry. 11 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 12-13.

¹³³ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 73.

¹³⁴ *The Cape Argus*, 29 February 1896, “The Late Explosion,” p. 5.

¹³⁵ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe”, p. 5.

¹³⁶ *The Cape Argus*, 29 February 1896, “The Late Explosion,” p. 5.

¹³⁷ *The Cape Argus*, 3 March 1896, “The Dynamite Explosion,” p. 5.

¹³⁸ *The Cape Argus*, 29 February 1896, “The Late Explosion,” p. 5.

houses as far as 5 miles sustained damage from the blast.¹³⁹ The Board even sent a special constable to monitor the dynamite magazines, to ensure that no explosives were delivered.¹⁴⁰ The Sanitary Board was also central in the formation of the Relief Committee and the Relief Fund and had initially warned government about the risks of the remains still unrecovered.¹⁴¹ However the public would have probably preferred a more hands on approach. Criticism on the Rand would have been surely been a three way streak, with Uitlanders and Uitlander businesses especially, forming their own opinions and criticisms; the Burghers of the Transvaal having a more pro-government stance; and the officials of the various concessions defending themselves and their interests.

It was widely reported and discussed, that the explosion had brought the people of the Rand together through their joint aid and relief work. It was further said, that the recent turmoil between Dutchman and Englishman was set aside and forgotten during the crisis, and that all races were unified.¹⁴² President Kruger himself in his thanks to the people of the Rand mentioned this unity through crisis.¹⁴³ The validity of this would be quite difficult and pointless to verify, as it would have been an isolated occurrence, as well as a more sentimental view and concept. There were however comments going around that there was a lack of Dutch names on the Dynamite Relief Fund subscription lists, and was potentially further provoked by the fact that most of the victims were of Dutch ancestry.¹⁴⁴

Amidst all the apparent unity through chaos and suffering, crime featured as well. A well-established businessman from the produce firm Shlom & Bloom, went missing on the evening of the 21 February, while observing the scenes of the destruction. According to him, he was brutally attacked by a couple of men, who stole his watch, chain, other belongings and money. He was then thrown into a pit, where one of the search parties found him, and took him to hospital.¹⁴⁵ There were also reports of robberies or attempted robberies taking place around the ruined homes. Some of the victims had kept money in private boxes within their

¹³⁹ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Lent. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 27-28.

¹⁴¹ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

¹⁴² "The Latest Intelligence – The Johannesburg Explosion," *The Times* (London, England), 22 February 1896, p. 7.

¹⁴³ *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, "The Rand Calamity," p. 5.; *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

¹⁴⁴ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, "Mean Hollanders", "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

¹⁴⁵ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

homes, and these were subsequently found to be broken open and emptied.¹⁴⁶ Another illicit incident was the impersonation of a medical doctor. At around 3 p.m. on 24 February, a Sunday afternoon, a man under the name of Edward Bell was given over to a sergeant of the police force, on a charge of “making people believe he was a qualified medical practitioner”.¹⁴⁷ One man was charged with robbing the dead and was promptly imprisoned.¹⁴⁸ It was also suggested that the public itself had made away with vital evidence needed for the ensuing investigation. The site of the explosion was not cordoned off and the public moved around this area freely, taking wood, iron and other items that some believed could be used as evidence.¹⁴⁹ These items were possibly used for the reconstructions of dwellings or shanties.

When the Commission of Inquiry was announced, there were doubts about the effectiveness of it – whether any real outcome or judgement would be established, and that anyone would be subsequently punished. This was further based on public criticism of some of the members appointed to the commission – particularly J. F. De Beer the Railway Commissioner, of which it was discussed that placing someone of his occupation on the Commission of Inquiry already defeats the object, especially since his exact relationship with the Railway Company was unknown but believed to be very close and confidential. Thus he was well linked to one of the parties which were blamed for the explosion. Furthermore, placing a Railway Commissioner who apparently knew nothing about railroads, was just adding ‘insult to injury’.¹⁵⁰ Yet the public was satisfied with the appointment of J. Klimke, the State Mining Engineer, to sit on the commission, who they felt was a capable man.¹⁵¹ What really did add insult to injury was that on the day directly after the explosion, a large wagon of dynamite was being transported through Braamfontein by only one driver, at such a fast pace that one of the cases had begun to fall off, but was stopped and pushed back when the driver saw it.¹⁵² On the Saturday three wagons of explosives passed through Braamfontein, the lead wagon’s dynamite was covered with canvas, while the dynamite cases on the other two were exposed to the sun. Even more alarming was that on the day before the explosion another wagon packed with dynamite, sped through Braamfontein and again under the charge of one man,

¹⁴⁶ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁴⁷ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁴⁸ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁴⁹ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ *The Cape Argus*, 25 February 1896, “Things On The Rand”, p. 5.

¹⁵¹ *The Cape Times*, 26 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁵² *The Cape Argus*, 25 February 1896, “Things On The Rand”, p. 5.

who this time was seated on top of the shipment smoking his pipe.¹⁵³ After the explosion, there were more causes for concern. Firstly, 50 tons of dynamite had been found at the Pretoria railway station, and had been there for a few days without any precautions or supervision.¹⁵⁴ Secondly, there was another, albeit smaller explosion on the Rand, this time at a Krugersdorp mine, where one miner was killed.¹⁵⁵

Superstition was also a feature among the Rand working class families, and after the explosion many started recalling the omens they saw which implied an impending doom. One man whose wife was seriously injured and at hospital, told of how a few days before the explosion, three drops of blood fell from the iron roof onto his wife's hand as she was preparing a meal.¹⁵⁶ His house was made of iron without any wood lining, and the "very real blood" fell directly from the iron sheets. Two day after that, a single drop of 'blood' fell on the man's own hand, just behind his knuckles. He was completely positive that the substance was blood, and the feeling was shared by his neighbours, who corroborated the story. After he and the neighbours had conferred with several more people, they all came to the conclusion that it was an omen of evil.¹⁵⁷ What could possibly have happened, was that due to the summer heat of February and the change in temperature during the day, perspiration might have built up along the iron sheets of the house. Coupled with the natural rust that would have befallen iron exposed to the elements, a drop could have formed over the rust absorbing some of its reddish colour, and thus taken on the look of blood. Braamfontein Station had also begun looking like an 'ill-omened' location, as another accident occurred on the Saturday (21 February). While some workmen were rebuilding the railway shed, the part that was left standing by the blast collapsed injuring two men, and hospitalising one.¹⁵⁸

The elements of superstition are not always a part of some mystical characteristic of the individual, but are also simply one's search for answers, to come to terms with the events at hand. In the case of the Braamfontein Explosion where few rational answers could be given, especially at the early stages, some people simply turned to the supernatural for answers. And when these superstitious assumptions were discussed within likeminded groups, they could

¹⁵³ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe", p. 5.

¹⁵⁴ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *The Cape Times*, 26 February 1896, "Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *The Cape Argus*, 25 February 1896, "Things On The Rand", p. 5.

be supported and reinforced to the point where they could be accepted as fact or truth.¹⁵⁹ Likewise, Schenk notes that (natural) disasters have the ability to conjure up exchanges between people about the religious interpretations thereof.¹⁶⁰ Although it cannot be established how far the above-mentioned assumptions went, it can be said that the original individual fully believed what he had seen and later accepted to be a mystical sign of events to come.¹⁶¹

In retrospect, 1896 had not been a particularly good year for the people of the Rand. The previous year ended with an attempted invasion (Jameson Raid) with the secondary purpose of stirring up an Uitlander uprising, and which spilled over into early 1896, during which Johannesburg was briefly controlled by the Reform Committee.¹⁶² The explosion took place only a few weeks later. A few days after the blast, there was a great fire in the centre of town, around Pritchard Street, with some stores sustaining serious damage, and there was also an on-going water crisis.¹⁶³ The summer of 1895-96, was a particularly hot one, with a severe drought that caused the water supply from the Waterworks Co. to falter. The water supplier attempted to make it rain by firing rockets into the clouds at the Wanderers, this failed and was considered sacrilege by the more God-fearing of the public. Water eventually had to be bought per bucket.¹⁶⁴

External Responses

By the 20th and 21st of February, news of the calamity had broken in the Cape Colony, Natal, Britain, Australia and America, with rather well informed reports and knowledge about events.¹⁶⁵ There was certainly international interest in the Rand due to the gold industry, and it was visible in the wide coverage of the disaster. With the distribution of details pertaining

¹⁵⁹ C. Geertz: "Local knowledge: fact and law in comparative perspective," *Local knowledge: Further essays in interpretive anthropology*, (167), 1983, p. 80.

¹⁶⁰ G. J. Schenk: "Historical disaster research. State of research, concepts, methods and case studies," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, (32), (3), 2007, p. 10.

¹⁶¹ *The Cape Times*, 26 February, 1896, "Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

¹⁶² C. T. Keto: "The aftermath of the Jameson Raid and American decision making in foreign affairs, 1896," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, (70), (8), 1980, p. 10.

¹⁶³ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, "Big Blaze on the Rand", p. 5.

¹⁶⁴ A. H. Smith, (ed): *Pictorial History of Johannesburg*, p. 46.

¹⁶⁵ "Blown Up By Dynamite," *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*, 20 February, 1896.; "The Johannesburg Explosion," *The Times* (London), 20 February 1896, p. 7.; "Disaster In Johannesburg," *The Barrier Miner* (Australia), 21 February, 1896, p. 2.; "The Worst on Record," *The Bryan Daily Eagle*, 21 February 1896, p. 4.

to the explosion and its consequences, the communication of sympathy became common place. The Cape Colony and Natal were among the first external territories to share their condolences with the Transvaal and President Kruger.¹⁶⁶ The Mayor of Durban went as far as to arrange for the opening of a subscriptions list for the relief of sufferers, which were to be left at various stores and banks where the public was invited to contribute for the aid of the victims.¹⁶⁷ The gesture was much appreciated and accepted by the Transvaal, who not only sent its thanks, but also the requested particulars of the many homeless.¹⁶⁸ In other towns around the country many were anxious to find out what the fate of their relatives and friends were who lived near the scene of the disaster, as they had not heard from them since the news broke.¹⁶⁹

In Cape Town, at the meeting of the Town Council on the morning of the 20th, the Mayor of the city informed the council that he had sent two telegrams to the Transvaal – one to President Kruger and the other the Landdrost of Johannesburg – both expressed the sympathy of the city and was met with unanimous approval from the council.¹⁷⁰ During the council, concerns were also expressed of the possibility of a similar disaster happening in Cape Town, specifically at the jetty. One member told of how he'd seen several wagon drivers, with a consignment of dynamite stop at canteens for a drink, with their loads unattended.¹⁷¹ There was a general carelessness when it came to dynamite in South Africa, and many were guilty.

Royal sympathies had also become common for Kruger, and on February 20 he received a cable through the High Commissioner from the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, conveying the sympathies of Queen Victoria, expressing her regret on the disaster and the suffering of the victims and homeless.¹⁷² Kruger would reply with his appreciation for the Queen's words and for her support during the difficult time.¹⁷³ Kaiser Wilhelm II in the same way cabled Kruger to offer his deepest sympathy with the sufferers, condoling with him on the loss of so many citizens.¹⁷⁴ The Queen and Queen Regent of the Netherlands telegraphed

¹⁶⁶ *The Cape Argus*, 20 February 1896, "Terrible Explosion on the Rand," p. 5.

¹⁶⁷ *The Cape Argus*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Calamity," p. 5.

¹⁶⁸ *The Cape Argus*, 24 February 1896, "Rand Calamity," p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, "Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

¹⁷⁰ *The Cape Argus*, 24 February 1896, "Rand Calamity," p. 5.

¹⁷¹ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

¹⁷² *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, "Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

¹⁷³ *The Cape Argus*, 26 February 1896, "Rand Calamity," p. 5.

¹⁷⁴ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

Kruger with the expressions of their compassion, and contributed £100 to the Relief Fund.¹⁷⁵ Remaining with the Netherlands but in a different direction, was the Railway Company, who had been in contact with its head offices in Amsterdam, concerning its response to the disaster and what the company would do in the way of relief.¹⁷⁶ Further overseas funds came from British individuals¹⁷⁷ and businesses¹⁷⁸ through subscriptions opened by London's *Standard and Diggers' News*, the most famous of these being the capitalists Baron Rothschild and Barney Barnato, each giving a sum of 100 guineas. The combined funds were cabled by the London newspaper.¹⁷⁹ Funds were also sent from officials in Bulawayo, then Southern Rhodesia with the amount of £100 being sent through the Reuter's fund.¹⁸⁰

Not all the messages from abroad were of a sympathetic tone. Writing from London, the *Paul Mall Gazette* criticised any future inquiry into the disaster, saying that it doubted that there would be strict inquiry:

“We are not likely to know whether the fault lay with the dynamite in general, with the Dutch railway company, or in the German-Franco-Dutch dynamite monopoly, but it has been notorious for months that this monopoly has supplied a very bad quality of dynamite, and that there have been no ordinary sane regulations as to the carriage of the explosive. This is the worst, but by no means the first, disaster attributable to the lamentable government of the Transvaal, and it is not likely to be the last.”¹⁸¹

This piece was by no means pro-Transvaal government, and represents the stance taken by many of the British press during this time. Many Englishmen had in fact supported Jameson and the so called plight of the Uitlander on the Rand and thus a negative view of the Transvaal would have been expected.¹⁸² The press of the Cape Colony also maintain a critical outlook of the Rand during the circumstances, with another direct swipe being taken at the railway and dynamite concessions and at President Kruger who appointed them.¹⁸³ It is noteworthy that *The Star* newspaper, which was based in Johannesburg, also held a critical

¹⁷⁵ *The Cape Argus*, 27 February 1896, “Royal Sympathy,” p. 5.

¹⁷⁶ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁷⁷ Sir Donald Currie – £100.

¹⁷⁸ Backnall Brothers – £50.

¹⁷⁹ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹⁸² *The Cape Times*, 27 February 1896, “Jameson on Trial – Cheered in Court,” p. 5.

¹⁸³ *The Cape Argus*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

view of the Transvaal authorities. The newspaper was widely read by Uitlanders, and would often personally attack the president's character.¹⁸⁴

It can be seen that on the surface, the various external forces presented themselves in these early stages in either a sympathetic or critical way. For a deeper understanding into this context, one would have to consult the broader evidence of external attitudes towards the Transvaal Republic.

¹⁸⁴ J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, p. 59.

Chapter 4: Inquiries

Phantom Detonators

Any dynamite that was brought to the Rand needed detonators – blasting caps – to be set off or ignited in a controlled manner, this included the blasting gelatine. The dynamite trucks at the siding were suspected to have contained a division of detonator cases, additional to the cases of dynamite on board.¹ The account of the detonators however is a bit hazy. Detonators were another import disguised as a product of the Dynamite Company, and arrived at Port Elizabeth via ship within wooden crates. The crates then travelled by wagon to Leeuwfontein, Pretoria where they were sorted and “put in order”. The importing costs were also paid there.² The detonators were then sent to the Rand by train or to other clients by wagon. Occasionally dynamite and detonators would be transported on the same wagon but this occurred rarely – and they were never to be delivered on the same train truck. Furthermore, a special permit was needed to unload detonators.³

The office of E. Lippert was expecting a shipment of detonators on Monday the 17th of February. Prior to this it was reported, that detonators had been delivered on the 26th of January 1896, with more arriving several days later. William Langley arrived at the magazines around 9:45 a.m., later than usual, because he had to hand in logistical information concerning the detonators at the Revenue Office. He was not told exactly where the detonators were, but he assumed that they arrived with the dynamite, as “explosives were always arriving”. For some reason Langley assumed that there would be 90 cases of detonators, but later he found out that only 40 cases had arrived. He was also unsure whether the detonators had come from the factory. However Langley never received these detonators due to the circumstances surrounding the delivery delay and then the explosion that took place. After the explosion he did receive additional detonators and they were in order. As far as Arthur Rutherford, chief magazine caretaker knew, the dynamite and the detonators were

¹ *The Cape Argus*, 6 March, 1896, “Dynamite Inquiry,” p. 5.

² William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 7-9.; Arthur Rutherford. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 10-12.

³ William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 7-9.

on separate trucks and that only one truck contained detonators, but also that he did not know what happened to these devices.⁴

Two day after the explosion, two locomotive machinists came across three detonators inside a collapsed house. They found the detonators intact and seemingly new as if no fire had touched it. A small crowd had gathered around this scene, but all were afraid to get any closer to the detonators. The two handed over the devices to a police detective who took matters further.⁵ Further such discoveries were made and noted by mining engineer, Max Francken, who found detonators, dynamite and fuses at different places around the debris. He also found out that three detonators were discovered around the Rand Timber Co. mill, but this had been cleared before he could investigate. On the 21th of February, a policeman discovered an unexploded charge of dynamite within a pipe, and noticed glycerine oozing from the charge. Not much further away, a carriage narrowly missed riding over another unexploded charge. It was also thought that there was concealed dynamite underneath the crater that had been buried there by the force of the explosion.⁶ On February 28 Francken was still finding explosive devices – a bag containing different sizes of dynamite and fuses was found lying around. Inside, some of the contents were broken and others still whole. Thirty-nine detonators were initially found, but Francken was concerned about the eleven detonators missing that would make up the one hundred that would be in a box. He received an additional box of detonators from the police barrack; another twelve: five wrapped in a piece of paper and the other seven in another piece of paper; the office of the Mining Commissioner was also in possession of found detonators. However not all the detonators found were believed to have come from the destroyed trucks – several were found whose packaging did not correspond with others that were found.⁷

On the 5th of March more discoveries were made. During the clearing debris, a search party found unexploded detonators and a cartridge of dynamite. It was concluded that because of

⁴ Rutherford & Cape Times 22 Feb Arthur Rutherford. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 10-12.; *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

⁵ Alexander Bennett. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 27.; Fred Schmulcke. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 27.

⁶ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe”, p. 5.

⁷ Max Francken. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 19 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 32.

the position they were found in, the devices must have come from the destroyed dynamite trucks. Further circumstances surrounding the structure where the discovery was made added to the mystery. The roof of the house was iron, and this had been secured by strong beams that ran across. The detonators were found on the roof that had fallen in, but there was no dent upon the iron sheet. This was strange, because the sheet would have landed there by force. Another peculiar circumstance was that the dynamite was only marginally broken and its covering was loose, coupled with the fact that it did not go off further adds questions.

The origin of the detonator on the dynamite trucks can be linked to what took place in Pretoria. What had happened was that a train carrying fifty cases of detonators, had arrived there by mistake – it was meant to go to the Rand. Ten of the cases were already delivered by wagon to the dynamite factory in Leeuwfontein. At the time the secretary of the factory, Gerard Rissik, was returning from business in Pretoria, and could not inform his workers that this delivery was a mistake. When he arrived back at the factory and found out what had happened, he immediately exclaimed that the cases had to be returned to the Rand, and that the ten cases already at the factory would have to stay there. The forty cases that were still on the train trucks were therefore transferred to a truck of the Railway Company – this is why Langley was told to expect forty cases of detonators. The Director of the Dynamite Factory in Leeuwfontein, Friedrich Krieger, maintained his stance that detonators and dynamite were usually not transported together, but that if detonators were sent with the dynamite it was not a mistake, it would have been a conscious decision.⁸ Run by Friedrich Krieger, the chain of command at the factory was as follows: Joseph Buggiella, an Italian, supervised the cartridge department, an Italian woman under him, possibly his wife or relative, inspected the quality of the cartridges. The labour force was predominantly black and these workers were overseen by an old white packer.⁹

The account involving the detonators is confusing, but it can be accepted that there were in fact detonators in a single truck and that these had either travelled with the dynamite or as stated in another account the dynamite trucks were shunted alongside the already present

⁸ Friedrich Krieger. Testimony given at the Commission of Inquiry. 11 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 12-13.

⁹ Friedrich Krieger. Testimony given at the Commission of Inquiry. 11 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 12-13.; Joseph Buggiella, Testimony given at the Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 28.

detonators.¹⁰ Yet those who produced it, worked with it, and subsequently took part in the investigation, did not believe that its presence was related to the cause of the explosion. Krieger elaborated on his opinion of the collision, and said that it was unlikely, that this caused the explosion, that the force of collision would have had to be very powerful to cause an explosion. He also said that a collision involving trucks that contained both dynamite and detonators, would not necessarily be at risk of exploding and that the conditions would also have to be exceptional. One significant thing he did say was that the explosion happened during the unloading of the dynamite and he expressed his knowledge of the way in which the cases were handled by the men who unloaded it. He did not say anymore but it can be assumed from his tone, that the handling of dynamite cases were less than appropriate.¹¹ Furthermore, when Clemm repacked the trucks did the dynamite and the detonators perhaps then land up on the same trucks?

Counting the Costs

“The names of the dead convey no significance to the general public, only to the poorer Transvaal Dutch.”¹²

When the trucks loaded with dynamite exploded, an unknown number of individuals that were in and around the railway yard simply “disappeared”, or were blown to pieces. Some fragments of human remains were found afterwards and some family members could actually identify some of these, as well as pieces of clothing in some cases.¹³ Other families had a lifeless body they could point to, while not all the deaths occurred instantly on the day, many would perish later that day, and the days to follow.¹⁴ The lists of killed and injured persons that were compiled by the Sanitary Board and handed over to the State Secretary and President, stands as a unique source, because it does not include everyone, particularly the List of Injured Persons.¹⁵ It should be noted, that these official lists of dead and injured contained annotation where it is clarified that the lists were not accurate, that deaths occurred that cannot be accounted for, and that some of the injured were not treated at the same place –

¹⁰ “The Latest Intelligence – The Johannesburg Explosion,” *The Times* (London, England), 22 February 1896, p. 7.

¹¹ Friedrich Krieger. Testimony given at the Commission of Inquiry. 11 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 12-13.r

¹² *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*; *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

¹⁵ TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

some were treated at private homes.¹⁶ Many of the milder injuries were discharged on the same day, and others in the days following, so when would the names of these people have been recorded? This becomes clear when the names of the injured at hospitals were released to the press on February 20, and while several of these names appears on the list of the Sanitary Board, there are many that do not, and several that the list has in addition.¹⁷

Two lists were initially released by the press, one under the heading “Injured” (was released at noon on 20 February) and another under the heading “The Injured at Hospital” (late edition, 20 February), and both lists have names that the official list does not.¹⁸ It is unknown when the official lists were written (see Appendixes 9 and 10), but it can be assumed that it was after the press release, and that the names that appear on both lists were of longer term injuries, and the ones that do not appear on the official list, but in the press release, were shorter term injuries. When the two lists of the press release are added together they give a combined total of 138 injuries, and what is strange is the total of the official list is also 138 injuries. When the names that appear on both the press release and the official list are omitted from the former, the total is 117. Adding this to the total of the official list equals 255 injured individuals. This is by no means the precise amount of people injured but it is roughly the numbers that the media and officials believed it to be. Newspapers initially reported that around 200 people were killed, with about 300 injured.¹⁹

On the evening of February 22 (Saturday) the Sanitary Board had the number of dead at 62 with four boxes of mixed remains.²⁰ By noon on Sunday this number had risen to 88 dead, as more bodies were discovered.²¹ The official list put the final total at 84, which similarly to the total amount of wounded is redundant, because there were cases where individuals had to be buried before they were identified, and as mentioned before, cases where people were blown to pieces.²² Deaths that can be acknowledged, but are not mentioned in the lists were that of Clemm the foreman who was in charge of the wagon drivers and the delivery of the explosives, who would have been present at the unloading; Hendrik Dirk de Bruyn a young

¹⁶ TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.: TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

¹⁷ *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *The Cape Times*, 20 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.

²⁰ *The Cape Argus*, 24 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

²¹ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

²² *Ibid.*; *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

railway worker who was assisting with the unloading; and the unnamed labourer who was instructed to sit on the front of the shunting train. All three were never seen again, although a family member of de Bruyn's, claimed to have recognized a piece of his remains.²³ There were certainly several cases like this where people were believed to have been killed but not acknowledge on paper. The lists do not mention missing persons as among dead, probably because there was no way to prove that many of them were dead, as well as no way to prove that they were living. The families of the missing would of course remember, as was seen in the grief of those gathered around the coffins of mixed remains.²⁴ The monument in memory of the victims, that will be discussed later, only speaks of 75 white and coloured deaths, possibly with the omission of the black victims. Yet according to the official list, eleven black people perished, and when this number is subtracted from both the press released and official list, the totals are 77 and 71 respectively.²⁵ These totals include the partial white bodies found.²⁶ It is possible that 75 was simply rounding up to the nearest five.

Months after the event, when the Dynamite Relief Fund issued its report, it stated that 245 people had been treated at the Johannesburg Hospital and the Wanderers. Of these 245, 63 died at these centres, however it was reiterated that many who were admitted were brought in dying. With this information one can estimate that there were around 21 or 25 people (depending on which list you use) who were killed instantly – and of course these were bodies that had been recovered.²⁷ This is done by subtracting the 63 who died at the hospitals from the overall total given to have been killed.

A correspondent for *The Cape Argus* reported that many white people had been killed and injured by the explosion, but that this was a small number when compared to the native victims.²⁸ When consulting the official lists, black victims, only numbered eight injured and eleven killed. This is significantly less than whites who were listed as killed or injured.

²³ Bastiaan Janson. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 13 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 24-25.; Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2-3.; *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

²⁴ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.

²⁵ *The Cape Argus*, 21 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.: Kleurlingen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

²⁶ Braamfontein Dynamite Explosion, Monument. 1896.

²⁷ TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

²⁸ *The Cape Argus*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Calamity,” p. 5.

Needless to say that numerous people were blown to pieces, making it impossible to find or identified them afterwards, and this would have included black and white people. However given the political situation of the Transvaal and the social status afforded to Africans, one could come to the conclusion that the exact number of dead or injured blacks was simply of no concern to the officials. Therefore many more could have been killed than specified in the lists – but then why mention those few at all? Clearly the rationale on this subject was neither here nor there.

According to which list is consulted, the names of victims were occasionally spelt differently or misspelt, and this created the problem of there being an additional person, when really it was the same person. Four occurrences such as these posed an issue for this research – among the dead listed in the Cape Times was a J. Mahin, a nine year old male. The only name that was comparable on the official lists was a J. Mehem, who was 69 years old and of an unknown nationality, it is possible that they are they are same person however the age factor, unless erroneous, comes into play.²⁹ Another case, although the spelling differs dramatically was of a sixteen year old male named W. Risy in the press released list, and the only link to the official list was a W. Hoy also sixteen years and a short surname that ends with a “y”. Two other cases however seem more likely than the formerly stated.³⁰ W. Swanepoel was mentioned among the dead in the newspapers, but a S. Swanepoel was mentioned in the list, both were 20 years old and male, and could very likely be the same person. Another instance was that of Ellen Viljoen, 27 years old, and the only other Viljoen on the official list was Elsie Viljoen, a female of an unknown nationality, and no age was specified. Whether or not these eight people are related in anyway, does not really matter, because the number of casualties in the case of this disaster can never be accurate.³¹ What is important, is that one can arguably see the flaws in the process of identifying the dead. There were also discrepancies with the age of certain victims, for example the press release said a victim was 31 years of age, while the official list said 41 years.³² Mistakes such as these do not pose a large problem, but they do show further inconsistencies in the gathering of data by officials.

²⁹ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ “Johannesburg’s Explosion,” *The Evening Bulletin*, 21 February 1896, p. 4.

³² *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

For the purposes of this thesis, the statistic drawn up by the Sanitary Board, which is known to be inaccurate, will be used to present the demographics of those killed and injured. Four tables had been written, two for white victims, and two for non-white victims, one for the dead and one for the injured of both classifications. The white names were subcategorised into those who were citizens of the Transvaal, the Orange Free State, the Cape Colony, England and unknown nationalities, the latter only being necessary in the case of the dead. It did occur, that one or two individuals who were killed or injured were from an additional country, and these were just noted and added in the final tallying. Non-white lists contain the names of Malays, Cape Coloureds (Cape Colony), Africans and Chinese, with the addition of two Arabs who were killed. The injured lists were the most complete, with name, ages and gender given, and of course it was easier to collect this information when the victims were alive to give it. The lists of dead on the other hand were not as informative, there were instances of only a surname being given and several ages were omitted, gender on the other had been mostly specified.

Of the injured persons³³:

- 22 were between the ages of 3 months³⁴ and 10 years;
- 26 were between the ages of 11 and 20 years;
- 20 were between the ages of 21 and 30 years;
- 40 were between the ages of 31 and 50 years;
- 11 were over 50;
- 19 were of unspecified ages.

Of those who were killed³⁵:

- 15 were between the ages of 2 months³⁶ and 10 years;
- 7 were between the ages of 11 and 20 years;
- 4 were between the ages of 21 and 30;
- 3 were between the ages of 31 and 50;

³³ TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 Febr 1896. and TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

³⁴ Note that the youngest age was used.

³⁵ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

³⁶ Note that the youngest age was used.

- 6 were over 50;
- 47 ages were unknown, rendering a thorough analysis impossible.

Amid the dead around 29 were female (children and adults), while around 39 were specified as male (children and adults), 14 were unstated genders, however it can be assumed that these individuals were male because of their names, race and proximity of the unnamed with these. Thus the total males killed would be around 52. The injured consisted of 68 females and 70 males. In both the cases of age and gender the reports were generally incorrect, where they said that the victims were mostly women and children. A lot of women and children were killed, injured, displaced and affected in ways that cannot be quantified, but many of the injured and dead were above 21 years of age and were mostly male, but not by no means a large margin. The presence of men who were of the working age and who were at home during the day, was not a strange manifestation on the Rand as many men were unemployed. In one case many former Afrikaner transport riders had found their livelihoods taken with the railway revolution of 1895, rendering thousands of them permanently unemployed. Several hundreds of these would move into the working class areas of Fordsburg and Vrededorp.³⁷ Therefore the presence of men during the explosion would have anticipated. Also to be noted is that the youngest person injured was three months old and the oldest person was 78 years old, whereas the youngest death was two months and the oldest was 71 years.

The subtotals were subcategorised into following nationalities and races:³⁸

Injuries:	Deaths:
- Transvaal Burghers: 26 male; 26 female; Total: 52	- Transvaal Burghers: 21 male; 16 female; Total: 37
- Cape Colony: 12 male; 18 female; Total: 30	- Cape Colony: 5 male; 6 female; Total: 11
- Orange Free State: 3 male; 3 female; Total: 6	- Orange Free State: 1 male;
- English: 9 male; 4 female;	- English: 1 male

³⁷ C. van Onselen: *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914. 1 New Babylon*. pp. 22-22.

³⁸ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, "Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

Total: 13	- German: 1 female
- German: 1 male; 1 female; Total: 2	- Portuguese: 1 male
- Russian: 1 male;	- Greek: 1 male
- American: 1 male	- Unknown Nationalities: 5 male; 5 female; Total: 10
- Malay: 6 male; 5 female; Total: 11	- Africans: 9 male, 2 partial bodies Total: 11
- Cape Colony: 4 male; 5 female; Total: 9	- Cape Coloured: 2 male; 1 female; Total: 3
- Africans: 4 male; 4 female; Total: 8	- Malay: 1 male;
- Chinese: 3 male;	Chinese: 2 males
- St. Helena: 1 female;	Arabian: 2 male
	2 partial bodies

The presence of other nationalities on the lists such as American, German, Russian, Chinese, St. Helenian, Portuguese, Greek and Arabian adds another perspective into their presence on the Rand, and therefore their proximity to the poorer districts that were most affected by the explosion. The total population of Johannesburg was around 102 078 people in 1896.³⁹ Thus in broader terms the percentage of the total population that were injured (based on the official list) would have only been 0.24%. The dead would have been about 0.08% of the population. Ultimately the deaths were of no real significance against the large and growing population of Johannesburg. In terms of the horrific way by which these people were killed it can be put forward that the psychology of the town was profoundly affected.⁴⁰ In terms of infrastructure as well, the damage was far greater than the loss of life with final estimates being around one million pounds in damages.⁴¹

³⁹ Plan of Johannesburg and Suburbs, 1897.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.; TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

⁴¹ “The Johannesburg Explosion,” *Argus* (Melbourne), 26 February 1896, p. 5.

The Inquirers

Calculations were made to determine the size of the aerial wave caused by the explosion. The approximate width appeared to have been 1500 yards (1.372 km), with 300 yards to the north of the point of the explosion, and 1200 yards to the south. The wave moved in a south-easterly direction and eventually narrowed out at a point. The greatest force was said to have moved laterally, in the direction of north and south, and therefore a large portion of the Location and West Fordsburg were destroyed or badly damaged.⁴² It was explained that because of the geography of the area, many houses to the east were spared:

“The depression of the valley in the eastward sweep off the stream of force (which was, of course, undulatory⁴³) lessened the impact and thus it was that houses to the east and within the same radius as the Location (for instance) did not suffer so much”⁴⁴

The sound of the explosion travelled at 1.110 feet per second and was accelerated by the voluntary of the dynamic force created. The sound was heard to the east in Boksburg in mere seconds, as well as to the west at the Randfontein Estates and Krugersdorp. Windows even rattled as far as Pretoria.⁴⁵ It was surmised by experts that the aerial displacement must have been ‘tremendous’.⁴⁶ The damage to houses was consistent with that which would have been caused by the force of an air wave rather than that of an earthquake which would have affected the ground. This was because the walls of the houses fell inward rather than outward which at the time was a rule among valuers that indicated that damage was most likely not caused by an earthquake.⁴⁷

Among the first things President Kruger did upon being informed about the explosion, was to command that there be a formal investigation. This culminated into the Commission of Inquiry, which was appointed by government on the morning of February 21, and which had its first private assembly on February 26, 1896.⁴⁸ The first order of business was to acquire

⁴² *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, “Scientific Details,” p. 5.

⁴³ Wave like patterns of movement.

⁴⁴ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, “Scientific Details,” p. 5.

⁴⁵ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.; *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, “Scientific Details,” p. 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *The Cape Times*, 27 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

⁴⁸ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.; TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 1.

three cases of dynamite to examine, while proceedings were adjourned until March 4th, when the first witnesses were to be questioned in the Circuit Court.⁴⁹ Eventually seven cases that were part of the shipment that exploded but had been delivered to the magazines just as the disaster took place, were secured for the purposes of expert examinations. The Committee went about planning their approach and programme with regard to collecting evidence and visiting the scene of the incident, and it was expected that the Commission would see over twenty witnesses and or more if so required.⁵⁰ As stated earlier, public opinion was not completely convinced about how effective the Commission would actually be, and were disappointed with the selection of Railway Commissioner to the committee, but pleased with the appointment of Klimke.⁵¹ The first sitting was overseen by J. Smit as chairman along with J. L. van der Merwe (Mining Commissioner), J. F. de Beer (Railway Governing Commissioner), J. Klimke (State Mining Engineer), and F. C. Bouguenon as secretary. The Lawyers present at the hearings, represented the major players involved, namely the Railway Company (Proc. Lingbeek), the Dynamite Company (Adv. De Villiers and Proc. Hudson), E. Lippert (Proc. Hofmeyer), the Railway Order Service (Proc. Mullins) and the Johannesburg public itself (Proc. Morkel).⁵²

The morning session of March 4th, began with the two minor testimonies of C. Nel and a Kerstin Small. Their input was minimal yet both had witnessed the explosion from reasonably close, had been injured and suffered extensive property damage.⁵³ Their real contribution was the identification of hearing the train's crash. A third witness, Alex Bennett, stated that there was probably a case of mistaken identity with his summons to testify; as he had not been in Braamfontein at the time of the explosion and that there was another Bennett living in the town. He was questioned about detonators, but this further confirmed that the Commission was looking for the other Bennett, as he, also an Alex Bennett, had found three detonators a few days after the explosion.⁵⁴ The first really significant witness of the morning was Joseph Williams, the previously discussed shunter of the Railway Company, who was at the railway yard during the explosion.⁵⁵ It is clear that witnesses were treated differently

⁴⁹ *The Cape Argus*, 3 March 1896, "The Dynamite Explosion",

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *The Cape Argus*, 25 February 1896, "Things On The Rand", p. 5.

⁵² TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 1-2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1-2, 27.

⁵⁵ Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2-3.

according to race – based on the circumstance that coloured witnesses were warned or threatened to tell the truth, while their white counterparts had to swear an oath to tell the truth. This was the case with most of the wagon drivers, who were coloured.⁵⁶ Language was also a barrier as was in the case of Joseph Williams, which was the only indication of an interpreter, and surely it could not have been the only case, as Oxer claimed he did not understand the language of the railway signs and rules.⁵⁷

The Commission examined 57 witnesses (see Appendix 12), which included average eye witnesses who contributed their brief experiences but ultimately nothing towards finding the causes of the disaster. The most crucial witnesses were of course the employees and management staff of the Railway Company, the Dynamite Company and the Order Service. There were also expert witnesses who carried out supplementary examinations on the explosives and the related articles. J. R. Williams, a Johannesburg based chemist, carried out examinations on the quantity patterns of the blasting gelatine, as well as the packaging of the explosives.⁵⁸ Julius Loevy, another Johannesburg based chemist, carried out additional tests for the purpose of re-examination.⁵⁹ Robert Tatlock, a Public Analyst and Gas Examiner for the city of Glasgow was on business in Johannesburg during the Inquiry and was asked to examine the secured blasting gelatine from the consignment that exploded.⁶⁰ During the course of the inquiry evidence collected ranged from hand sketched maps, dynamite, cases, technical reports and copies of various related documents such as receipts and telegrams.⁶¹ One such item was the existing instructions from the Dynamite Company, on how to safely use its explosive products (see Appendix 11).⁶² The Commission sat from March 4 to March 20, with the final meeting of the committee taking place on April 2 1896.⁶³

⁵⁶ Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2-3.

⁵⁷ Sydney Oxer. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 29-30.

⁵⁸ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – “Technisch Rapport van den Scheikundige J. R. Williams, Johannesburg, Marshall Straat, betreffende zekere hoeveelheden patronen van spring-gelatine, verpakking van de kisten en wat verder de aandacht verdient.” Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 40.

⁵⁹ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 36.

⁶⁰ D.T. Burns, “Robert Rattray Tatlock (1837-1934), Public Analyst for Glasgow”, *Journal of the Association of Public Analysts (Online)* 2011 39, p. 40.; TAB – SS – R1771/96, Report on the Condition and Quality of 120 Cases of Blasting Gelatine lying at No. 2 Magazine, Braamfontein.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² TAB – SS – R1771/96, Rapport van de Commissie Tot Onderzoek der Dynamiet Ontploffing, pp. 129-130.

⁶³ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, pp. 1-38.

The final report of the Commission of Inquiry was given in twelve points. After the administrative and legal elaborations of the first two points, the Commission laid forth the findings of its examination.⁶⁴ It began, that on the February 19 of 1896, there was an explosion at an emplacement of the Railway Company in Braamfontein, where 2214 cases of dynamite (blasting gelatine), weighing 50 lbs. each exploded with dire ‘consequences’. It was explained, that through the research and analysis of the various facts, circumstances and testimonies demonstrated that the witnesses had failed to show what the direct cause of the explosion was. However it did specify that: “All the facts and testimonies indicate that the blast occurred through the negligence – be it jointly of severally – by the parties involved.” And that if the parties involved should be considered they were: a) the Railway Company, b) the Order Service and c) the Dynamite Company.⁶⁵ They began with the Railway Company, and immediately identified the existence of its negligence, particularly the monitoring and securing of the railway switch and the line connecting to the dynamite siding. The Commission determined that all the witnesses agreed that the shunting train, going at regulation speed and on the wrong track due to the incorrectly set railway switch, crashed into the dynamite trucks while the explosives were being unloading and at the moment of the collision the explosion took place. All of this was blamed on the neglect and indifference of the Railway Company’s officials, and led the Commission to recommend that dynamite grounds be immediately moved to a place of greater safety. This made up the fourth point of the Commission’s report.⁶⁶

The fifth point dealt with the instructions given to subordinates of the Railway Company concerning the handling and treatment of hazardous and explosive substances, of which the Commission found to be completely unsatisfactory. The notification of transfer of explosives by the Company to recipients in Johannesburg and vice versa was also criticised for being unsatisfactory. The Company’s official in charge of the delivery of dynamite came under personal criticism for not having exercised significant control over his subordinates and his testimony was in no way found to be acceptable. It was reported that at an earlier stage detonators had been transported on the same wagons as the dynamite and that repeatedly there were instances where the cases would fall on the ground during offloading. The reports

⁶⁴ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – “Rapport van die Commissie tot Onderzoek der dynamite-ontploffing”, Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 46.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

were not disputed and the Commission cautioned that there should not be a repetition of the practice.⁶⁷

The sixth point centred on the Order Service and their activities. The Commission admitted that the weight of the evidence and probability was on the side of the Order Service, and came to the conclusion that no one was present to receive the dynamite. It was further discussed that the occurrence whereby the dynamite had to be returned to the station, was not the first time it had happened, as two other incidences were identified by the testimonies.⁶⁸ Emphasis was then placed on the employee of E. Lippert, certainly William Langley, who was considered to have not only made a costly mistake, but further compromised the conflict. As well as the differences in testimonies concerning the alleged time the magazine caretakers were meant to be at their posts. However the Commission had no doubt that was it not for the unnecessary delay on the part of the Order Service, the explosion would never have happened. As stated it was therefore very regrettable that the Order Service stopped transport until the Wednesday, for the small sum of £3 and although the dispute was settled, the damage was done.⁶⁹

In the seventh point, the Commission shifted more attention to the office of the Selling Agent of the Dynamite Company – E. Lippert. The Commission believed that the combined actions of the Agent's office, in no small measure contributed to the explosion. As it was known by the office that dynamite had arrived on the 17th of February and had to be unloaded and stored it should have been prepared for this purpose and taken more action. Yet the caretakers finally admitted they closed the warehouses and were not present during a certain period. Additionally the comments and attitude of Rutherford, the chief caretaker and representative of Lippert at the proceedings, where he stated that receiving a delivery before half past nine or on public holidays, was not convenient to him, were corroborated by other and were not contradicted. Other goods sellers were always prepared to receive deliveries from six o'clock in the morning until five in the afternoon. Since it took about two to three days to deliver a regular train load of dynamite, the conduct of the Selling Agent within the circumstances was deemed to be careless and indifferent to the highest degree. Furthermore it was shown that the office of the Selling Agent cared little for what happened to the dynamite as long as it did

⁶⁷ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – “Rapport van die Commissie tot Onderzoek der dynamite-ontploffing”, Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 46.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

not have to pay the difference in freight cost (the £3). The Committee thus took it as being obvious that the office of Lippert did not take public safety into consideration but that its employees preferred to care for their own convenience.⁷⁰

In point eight the Commission discussed the findings of its expert witnesses with regard to the packaging of the dynamite. Through their findings it was established that the wooded cases were in fact 'safe enough' and it was felt that this was proven by the fact that several cases had fallen off trolleys and broke without exploding. Yet it was stated that there was still room for structural improvement, with a specific emphasis on nails. It was acknowledged that during the closing of one of the cases, which involved the nailing of the wooden lids, a nail had been hammered at an incorrect angle and penetrated one of the dynamite bags. While this was considered to be of minimal risk, the lack of care was considered negligent, particularly since explosives were involved. As it was impossible to check the condition of the cases of the exploded dynamite, it had to be assumed that its structural integrity was of the same quality as the aforementioned. There had also been questions about the smudges on the inner walls of the cases, and this found to not be of nitro-glycerine but from gelatine, possibly from the hands of packers. While this was considered to not endanger the explosives, it was urged that better care be taken in the future to avoid these smudges. Although the conditions of the cases were not believed to have necessarily been detrimental to the explosives within them, the wood itself did not adhere to the regulations in Article 13 of Act. No. 16 of 1892, specifically the thickness of the wood and the lids of the cases. Inside the cases, the bags were tightly packed which prevented unnecessary movement, but there was no sawdust in between the bags as was specified in Article 12 of the above mentioned law. It was believed that if the slight defects discovered on the cases that did not explode were also present on those that did, then there was a possibility that they could have cause the explosion. Yet again the behaviour of the Dynamite Company was pointed, with regard to their lack of full compliance with the law concerning explosives.⁷¹

The ninth point briefly mentioned the fact that most of the Dynamite Company's products were imports from Europe, including the wood for the cases. The tenth point was another short explanation, this time of the Commission's response to the allegations of malice and

⁷⁰ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – “Rapport van die Commissie tot Onderzoek der dynamite-ontploffing”, Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 47.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48.

bribery that presenting itself during the inquiry. In short, the Commission acknowledged the existence of the allegations and probability of the misconduct, but that there was insufficient evidence to prove any of it.⁷² Thus the allegation of bribery against William Langley was disregarded.

The penultimate point presented by the Commission of Inquiry summarised the experiments and results of the expert witnesses, with regard to the condition of the dynamite. The experiments performed by the examiners and which were singled out (but do not include all) were ‘the heat test’, the ‘exudation test’ and the ‘liquid test’, as was prescribed in the English Law of 5 August 1875 (see Appendix 13 for Tatlock’s full report). The results were that the blasting gelatine was acid free, and the experts were in agreement that its composition was normal consisting 92.70% nitro-glycerine, 7.20% collodion wool and 0.10% humidity, making up the 100% consistency of blasting gelatine. The explosives passed all the required stability tests and it was thus concluded by the Commission that the blasting gelatine in question met all the requisites to be considered a good product.⁷³

In closing the Commission drew attention once more to the statement of Tatlock following his investigation, which found the blasting gelatine to be salt-free. And it expressed that it was impossible that the explosives exploded due to the shock of the accident. Unless there was a mistake ‘here or there’ or a ‘secret flaw’ that allowed the collision to be the cause. Moving on, it reiterated the fact that there were several careless testimonies that revealed the indifferent behaviours that that could have led to the explosion. Still the Commission recognised that it failed to discover the direct cause. Adding that the reckless manner, under which the loading and unloading of the explosives was carried out, was another possible cause but that this was impossible to establish as all of the people who would have done the loading in question and would have witnessed it ‘disappeared’.⁷⁴ As seen in the Commission, there were many small yet significant occurrences and suggestions that could possibly have led to a more direct conclusion had more evidence and witnesses survived. On the other hand more witnesses could have potentially complicated an already fickle collection of testimonies. Thus what they had was not enough and what was lost was potentially crucial.

⁷² TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – “Rapport van die Commissie tot Onderzoek der dynamite-ontploffing”, Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 48.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Causes Revisited

It can be argued that there was not one cause for the explosion, but a combination of mistakes and follies – 1) on arrival the dynamite could not be immediately offloaded and delivered as was regulation; it was then moved to the Braamfontein Station siding. 2) An attempt was made to deliver the dynamite but there was no one to receive it at the magazines. 3) Further delivery was strained and halted by conflict over the payment of the delay – £3. 3) The dynamite remained in the trucks for three and half days during February, which is known for its high temperatures, and it was said to be a very hot week; additionally no one can know for sure if this could have degraded it, even though blasting gelatine is one the safest explosives to handle. Could the constant transport back and forth also have led to its degrading? 4) When the dynamite was repacked after the failed delivery, was it packed correctly and safely? 5) The presence of detonators on the train, although on a separate truck complicates matters as well, especially when one considers the repacking and whether or not the dynamite or the detonators landed up on the same truck then. 6) Eventually an agreement was reached and the offloading and delivery of the dynamite commenced. The routine of the packing of the dynamite was also criticised for being reckless and thus dangerous. 7) The incorrectly set railway switch that lead to the collision of the truck beings shunted and the dynamite trucks, was ultimately the final nail in the coffin as directly after this the explosion occurred. The accident occurred during the offloading of the dynamite. 8) Following the blast, various explosive articles were found, such as unexploded dynamite, detonators and fuses. One article of dynamite was noted to be oozing gelatine. There were also several claims that the dynamite was of a poor quality. 9) Following the investigation, the blasting gelatine was found to be of a sound quality, unless an extraordinary flaw was present or there was a crucial with the dynamite that exploded and hence could not be identified.

Earlier, the theory of Hedley Chilvers was discussed where he linked the causes of the explosion to the Jameson Raid and the Reform Committee, whereby the dynamite that arrived had nowhere to go as there was no sufficient packing space, due to the loss of both Hosken's favour and magazines.⁷⁵ However by consulting the notes on the Commission of Inquiry, it becomes clear that the reasons for the explosion may have been far more simplistic and avoidable than a link to the Jameson Raid. While Chilvers's argument makes sense, it is shown through the testimonies of the management of both the Railway Company and the

⁷⁵ H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, p. 127-128.

office of Lippert that this was not the first delay in the delivery of dynamite, as there had been miscommunication or quarrels between the two offices prior to the Jameson Raid.⁷⁶ Therefore dynamite that had been standing at railway stations for any amount of time was not new. Although the loss of the use of Hosken's magazines would have caused some logistics issues for Lippert, the fact that his office insisted that the dynamite be delivered after the initial delay of delivery on February 17th, implies that they indeed wanted the dynamite and had space for it.⁷⁷ However the office of Lippert was not beyond lying or manipulation, and could have made these claims to save face, as was the case with one of its employees who was accused of bribery.⁷⁸ It is also possible that during the 17th and 18th of February, dynamite was distributed from the magazines to clients and thus space was quietly made available.

A very short opinion piece in *The Cape Argus*, places the blame firmly on the Railway Company, calling their conduct that of a “gross carelessness and ignorance”, and “silly and grotesque, while causing a serious waste of time and power”.⁷⁹ Further opinions were given whereby the qualifications of the Railway Commissioner were criticised, saying that the only reason he got the job was because he knew absolutely nothing about the railway.⁸⁰ It was recounted that President Kruger's anger was also initially directed at the Railway Company.⁸¹ This was the most logical answer, as the disaster happened within the grounds of the Company, and it was also their negligence that led to the accident. The Railway Company employees, who were involved with the shunting, themselves did not know who was at fault for the accident and therefore explosion. There was however minor finger pointing between Oxer and Williams (foreman-shunter and shunter respectively), as to responsibilities and ability. Oxer specified that he placed Williams near the front of the train so that the responsibility of lookout was off of him, yet he said that if he was in that position he would

⁷⁶ Edward Jacobs. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 18-20.

⁷⁷ William Langley. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896.; TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 7-9.; Arthur Rutherford. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 10-12.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*; Fortuin. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 & 5 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 5.

⁷⁹ “Terrible Explosion on the Rand,” *The Cape Argus*, 20 February 1896, p. 5.

⁸⁰ “Things On The Rand,” *The Cape Argus*, 25 February 1896, p. 5.

⁸¹ H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, p. 128.

have seen the error immediately. Williams on the other hand stated that ultimately it was Oxe's responsibility as head shunter to inspect and secure the switch.⁸²

Earlier it was mentioned that Friedrich Krieger, Director of the dynamite factory at Leeuwfontein, had commented about the way in which men unloaded dynamite and it was assumed that this was carried out in hazardous and inappropriate fashion. In addition to this it was revealed that many of the workers who offloaded the dynamite had no experience in this task. One young man, Hendrik Dirk de Bruyn, was twenty years old, and had been working for the Railway Company for only three months when the explosion took place. His sister told newspapers that he had little or no experience with explosives and would not have fully understood its dangers. The young man was said to be quite strong, with interest and experience in weightlifting, so he would definitely have been able to lift a heavy case of dynamite. It was stated that he had at work from 6 a.m. on the 19th, with the explosion taking place at around 3:15 p.m. – a combination of inexperience and fatigue could have played a part here in negligence, however impossible to take further.⁸³ Referring again to the eye witness account of the actually unloading methods employed by the railway workers, where cases of dynamite were thrown from the train onto the wagons, the negligence of the Railway Company, in combination with its Order Service wing becomes further apparent.⁸⁴ Yet the Railway Company was not the only guilty party. The Dynamite Company was lapse in its regulations and care of its product and the public. With the understanding that dynamite is a dangerous product and a potentially volatile one, the Company should have to be more careful in its activities and attitudes. In the mines accidents involving explosives occurred due to the same reasons – negligence and carelessness – however many miners who used the dynamite were untrained, thus who was really to blame, the miner or the officials who were responsible for training them in the correct and safe way to handle explosives.⁸⁵

It cannot be denied that the final known act before the explosion was the shunting accident. Anything that happened during the offloading of the dynamite cannot be known. One can guess and speculate in relation with the various opinions and possibilities that are based on

⁸² Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2-3.

⁸³ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, "The Rand Catastrophe," p. 5.

⁸⁴ *The Cape Argus*, 26 February 1896, "Rand Calamity," p. 5.

⁸⁵ E. N. Katz: "Revisiting the Origins of the Industrial Colour Bar in the Witwatersrand Gold Mining Industry, 1891-1899," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, (25), (1), March 1999, p. 86.

facts, but there is no tangible evidence that proves that something happened there. Thus as this thesis cannot prove one singular cause, other than providing speculation and theory, the causes of the explosion exist as preconditions rather, a set of events that with each step made the explosion further possible. If the dynamite was of a poor and unstable quality then that would be one of the first links in the chain, but then the dynamite concession cannot be ignored. As a monopoly no other manufacturer was allowed to produce or sell explosives on the Rand. Therefore the market competitiveness that would have existed, had there been no monopoly would have not only created competitive prices, but also possibly a higher quality of product, as competitors would have naturally endeavoured to out sell each other.

The sphere of transportation and handling would be the next step. There were no regulations on the transportation of explosives, and this fact showed. Often wagon loads of dynamite would speed through town, with only one driver to supervise it, while he would be smoking and his knowledge of dynamite, though unknown, would have minimal or non-existent. There were also observations of pipe smoking around dynamite cases, however if this occurred during the offloading of the dynamite in question cannot be proven either.⁸⁶ As said, several times the careless nature of the handling of dynamite was also a potential aspect for disaster. Skipping over the rest of the ‘preconditions’ that have similarly already been discussed, one comes again to the shunting accident, the final act of incompetence, and it will be left as such until more can be proven about the direct cause of the Braamfontein Explosion. However there is doubt about that ever happening.

⁸⁶ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe”, p. 5.

Chapter 5: Consequences

Immediate Repercussions

Apart from vast destruction and pointless deaths of numerous people, there were other immediate repercussions following the explosion. One of the first tasks undertaken by the officials of Johannesburg, namely the Sanitary Board, was to request that all dynamite be removed from the town and that a magazine site and dynamite siding be built 5 miles to the north.¹ The immediate and temporary solution was that all dynamite be removed from the town, and that companies who required dynamite were to order and receive delivery from the Modderfontein factory – this would have been transported via ox wagon as there was no railroad between the towns at that point.² However Kruger's initial reaction was to prohibit all dynamite from entering the Rand, but very soon had to withdraw this decision due to the significant effect it would have had on the mining industry.³ The day after the explosion, government instructed all firms with dynamite stores in the district of Braamfontein, to have it removed within four hours. It cannot be certain whether the firms fully complied with the time limit given, but by the following Tuesday (25 February), all dynamite had been removed to the farm of Rietfontein, which had been set aside for this very purpose.⁴

It was revealed during the Commission of Inquiry, that around 78 men had been killed in 1895 due to accidents involving explosions, while 113 were said to have been injured. The predominant cause of these accidents was carelessness during the placing of explosive charges or failing to remove unexploded cartridges. Ironically the Dynamite Company itself had a complaint about explosives, after it had frequently found cartridges of still whole dynamite in its supplied coal. Following the disaster, it was announced that stricter regulations were going to be implemented relating to the handling of explosives. The regulations would not be as stringent as later laws would be and the mines themselves had much to learn about safety precautions. Yet there was a visible improvement of the previously careless attitude towards dynamite albeit be it now fear. Along with the new found

¹ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

² *The Cape Argus*, 24 February 1896, "The Rand Calamity," p. 5.; Robert Bell. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 12 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 18-20.

Testimonies given at the Commission of Inquiry.

³ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 72.

⁴ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, "The Dynamite Catastrophe," p. 5.

fear came criticism by the people of Johannesburg, who believed that the German dynamite was to blame for the disaster and they were vocal about this opinion.⁵ However before the people of the Rand had settled into a quieter condemnation there was real anxiety – and with the fires that occurred in the days after the explosion, their nerves were pushed to their limits.⁶ One scenario involved a fire at the ill-fated goods station, where the site of the smoke alone alarmed the town who rushed to the site. The fire brigade were also promptly on the scene, but it was the disturbed words of a junior railway official that completely frightened everyone. He pointed to the nearby trucks and explained anxiously that they contained dynamite. When the firemen directed their hoses towards the trucks, the crowd that had gathered realized what this precaution was for and quickly bolted in all directions. After some time the firemen turned off their hoses and went to inspect the trucks, to find nothing but empty bags that had previously contained coal.⁷

Whereas most people were nervous about their surroundings, others found business opportunities within the setting of death and destruction. Among the many window casualties was the large front window of the Stuttafords department store in Johannesburg, and like many of the other windows, replacing it was a challenge. Among the quests of rescue and recovery, the task of replacing glass was not an immediate priority.⁸ Herbert Evans, a house decorator originally from Natal, saw an opportunity for decorating houses. He telegraphed every establishment that traded in glass panes and acquired all of it. He therefore effectively held the monopoly of window repairs throughout Johannesburg, and was eager to make the best of the situation.⁹ Thus a small concession would even come out this account of a disaster influenced by concessions.

It was assumed by the press that the rebuilt suburbs would take on a modern look, emphasising the architecture of the working class.¹⁰ Due to the funds collected by the Relief Committee in aid of the victims, many would have their previous living environments

⁵ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*, p. 74.

⁶ *The Cape Times*, 25 February 1896, “Big Blaze on the Rand”, p. 5.

⁷ H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, pp. 129-130.

⁸ E. Rosenthal: *Across the Counter – Down the Years: A History of Stuttafords & Company Ltd. Department Stores of Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban*. (Unpublished).

⁹ J. Hyslop: "A Ragged Trousered Philanthropist and the Empire: Robert Tressell in South Africa," *History Workshop Journal*, 2001, (51), (2001), p. 74.

¹⁰ *The Cape Times*, 22 February 1896, “The Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

upgraded from iron sheets to brick walls.¹¹ Thus being a part of broader Johannesburg's evolution from iron dwellings to brick buildings, which all started with the canvas tents of the early mining camp.¹² Once the Relief Committee had time to consider the funds that had been collected, it decided that it would go about the rehousing of the victims. In accordance with the Committee's intentions of practically assisting the victims with the funds rather than simply presenting them with money, came the situation where they actually selected the types of homes to be built.¹³ After requests for tenders, the plans of the houses were decided upon and three classes were chosen to be built by the construction firm, Munro & Co.:¹⁴

- Class 1 contained two rooms and a kitchen, a stone foundation and necessary accessories; of which 51 were built, costing £150.12s each.
- Class 2 had three bedrooms and a kitchen, along with the previously mentioned foundation and accessories; 42 were built, costing £172.15s each.
- Class 3 had four rooms and a kitchen, with foundation and accessories; 22 were built, costing £186.15s.¹⁵

All house classes were complete with wood and iron ceilings. Three 'special houses' were also built to the cost of £247.66s each, more than the other three, and one expected that these were probably more advanced. Funds were also allocated to the rebuilding of Churches and Homes of all denominations, this amounted to £7195.18s.¹⁶ This thesis does not go further into the expenses of the building of these houses or the labour used, however it will say that the total of all of this, including furniture, came to £63 215.13s.¹⁷

The other expenses of the Relief Committee were amassed as follows:

- Funerals: £702.13s
- Medical fees: £1560.8s
- Medical stores: £528.1s
- Cab and cart hire: £1403.1s
- Temporary hire of rooms, and sundry purchases including livestock: £2597

¹¹ TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

¹² C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 2.; TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

¹³ Newspaper source and TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

¹⁴ TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

- Relief Depot Expenditure:
 - Wanderers: £3187.19s
 - Show Yard: £8775.12s
 - Fordsburg: £5787.7s
 - Central Office: £2314.19s
- Office expenses: £696.3s
- Office furniture: £74.8s
- Claim investigation expenses: £516.5s
- Legal expenses: £215.14s

Total expenses came to £93 847.3s, with cash in the bank and in hand being £32 556, making up the £126 399.3s that was collected.¹⁸

Remembrance

A monument in the memory of the white and coloured victims of the explosion was erected by the Relief Fund Committee, at the Braamfontein Cemetery, (today the Enoch Sontonga Memorial Park¹⁹). The over two metre high traditional phalanx was inscribed with the following:

“This monument is erected by the subscribers to the Dynamite Disaster Relief Fund To the memory of all those who lost their lives from the Dynamite Explosion at Braamfontein Station on February 19th 1896. The number who met their sad death from this cause, both whites and coloured was 75.”

“Requiescant in pacem”

At a time there was another monument to the explosion – a massive wheel from either a truck or locomotive was launched over Vrededorp by the force of the blast, and landed a mile away in the Agricultural Showground, where it pierced into the ground, concealing half of its body. This site was enclosed by a fence erected by the railway officials, and a small tablet placed on

¹⁸ TAB – SS – R13782/96, Dynamite Relief Fund, p. 65.

¹⁹ Enoch Sontonga, composer of *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, was buried at Braamfontein Cemetery.

the wheel, that conveyed the details of the explosion. Unfortunately this small memorial was removed by vandals during the Anglo-Boer War.²⁰

There is a record of Doctor Breyer, the Director of the State Museum in 1896, inquiring as to what would be done with the scrap caused by the explosion, possibly for a museum collection he wished to start.²¹ In 2012, Johannesburg based artist Eduardo Cachucho, exhibited his collection *Looking Glass – Johannesburg 2012 and 1886-1896*, and among the pieces was a worked entitled *Explosion, 1896*. The piece uses various photographs of the Braamfontein Explosion and superimposes them onto a 3D representation of the large crater left by the explosion.²² The artwork is a testament to the fact that this distinctive event still stirs a unique and sparing interest.

A few metres south of the three sidings of Braamfontein Station, was the train line to Krugersdorp which ran west – here the line bent slightly south before turning west again (See Appendix 1).²³ Today the line still curves around this point, although the entire railway system is much larger, and more than one line now runs to Krugersdorp (See Appendix 14). The apex of this Krugersdorp bend is the closest point one can use to approximate the location of the Braamfontein Explosion today.²⁴

It would be curious to ask when this disaster became known as the Braamfontein Explosion, because as has been seen, the explosion affected more of Fordsburg and Vrededorp and newspapers referred to it as the explosion or disaster at Johannesburg. Furthermore, as was alluded to earlier in this thesis, a survey would most likely have to be carried out to determine the real statistics surrounding public knowledge about the Braamfontein Explosion. The suspicion is that many South Africans have never heard of the explosion, this includes the younger and older of population. Further historiographical research can similarly be done on the reasons why the explosion is rarely mentioned within the pantheon of Witwatersrand

²⁰ H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, p. 128.

²¹ TAB – OD - OR3235/96. Dr. Breyer, directeur staatsmuseum. Vraagt wat te doen met oud yzer voor de dinamiet ontloffing.

²² <http://eduardocachucho.com/?portfolio=explosion-1896>

²³ TAB – SS – R1771/96, Sketch-card – Rapport van de Commissie Tot Onderzoek der Dynamiet Ontploffing, p. 234.

²⁴ TAB – SS – R1771/96, Sketch-card – Rapport van de Commissie Tot Onderzoek der Dynamiet Ontploffing, p. 234.; Plan of Johannesburg and Suburbs, 1897.; S. Christ: (Aerial Map of Contemporary Johannesburg – Affected Area), 2016.

history.²⁵ Earlier, Schenk's reflections on 'historical disaster research' were briefly discussed, and in his closing he mentions that perhaps the memory of disasters and the way in which they are forgotten is another crucial component to the field that should be addressed.²⁶ This fits in with the concept of the forgotten-ness of the explosion, and supports the need to ask why.

Albert Grundlingh discusses how milestone years such as centenaries, can be appealing for historians to reflect on certain events and their significance, as well as to present the level of existing historical work on specific topics.²⁷ As 2016 marks the 120 year anniversary of the explosion, it has indeed become necessary for scholars to reflect on the significance of this event, or the lack thereof. With the designation as the "worst explosives accident in the history of South Africa", and as "one of the most devastating and catastrophic accidents to have impacted" Johannesburg and its people, one can surely sense a significance.²⁸ Yet to take this event and zoom out to include the organic nature of Johannesburg, would offer the most valuable historical work.

²⁵ J. Davenport, "The Great Dynamite Explosion that Devastated a Fledgling Joburg", *Creamer Media's Mining Weekly* (11 October 2016).

²⁶ G. J. Schenk: "Historical disaster research. State of Research, Concepts, Methods and Case Studies," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, (32), (3), 2007, p. 22.

²⁷ A. Grundlingh, *War and Society*, p. 1.

²⁸ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*. p. 70.; Davenport, "The Great Dynamite Explosion that Devastated a Fledgling Joburg," *Creamer Media's Mining Weekly* (11 October 2016).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

For argument sake, one can consider the following facts. The Rand under the Transvaal government had granted concessions to various businesses, many of Dutch and German origin, chief among these monopolies were the Railway Company and the Dynamite Company.¹ It went so far that the wood, of which the cases that held the explosives were made, was imported.² Uitlander businessmen despised these establishments, as they were biased and imbalanced practices that led to higher prices for them and which they saw as a violation of the London Convention. The grievances of the Uitlanders were many, and would eventually come into contact with the interests of the British government. However before this, the Uitlanders organised amongst themselves and formed the Transvaal National Union in 1892, to present and advance the interests of the Uitlanders, who were predominantly British, to the Transvaal government of Kruger. By this point the Randlords were still content with their dealings with the Volksraad, by bribing officials and backing favourable candidates, however this was not to last.³ The Transvaal National Union had the question of franchise for the Uitlander at the top of their list, a proposal which Kruger viewed as the doom of the Transvaal. The National Union would be a precursor of the Johannesburg Reform Committee founded in 1895, having in its ranks some of the wealthiest businessmen on the Rand. The Committee supported the ill-fated Jameson Raid of 1895/1896, during which they took control of the ‘peace and security’ of Johannesburg for a very brief time before handing it back to the Transvaal. After the Raid many of the committee members were arrested and tried, and some were executed for high treason.⁴ The failure of the Jameson Raid must have surely frustrated and humiliated the Reform Committee and the British officials who quietly backed it.

Turning once again to the theory of Hedley Chivers concerning the Jameson Raid and the fully occupied magazines, where he holds that if there had been no raid there would have been no explosion; that, coupled with the three days of heat and the attempted push from the shunter would have been enough to set the whole thing off. Note that Chivers believes that

¹ C. T. Keto: "The aftermath of the Jameson Raid and American decision making in foreign affairs, 1896." *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, (70), (8), 1980, p. 10.

² TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – “Rapport van die Commissie tot Onderzoek der dynamite-ontploffing”, Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896. p. 46.

³ C. T. Keto: "The aftermath of the Jameson Raid and American decision making in foreign affairs, 1896." *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, (70), (8), 1980, p. 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*

the shunter train had intended to couple with the dynamite trucks and therefore he did not know that the collision rather, was an accident. Chivers's theory is unique in that it links the Jameson Raid with the explosion; however it is flawed because Lippert's magazines did have space, as was expressed by dynamite company employees. Yet can more be made of a potential link with the Raid, or more specifically the National Union and the Reform Committee? Could members of the Committee have conspired to cause the explosion? Also, would they have used Uitlanders who had occupations within the concession companies?

The policy of concessions was introduced by the Kruger regime shortly after 1881, and the concessions to follow were affectively monopolies, with their stated purpose being the "promotion of industrial development in the Transvaal".⁵ In these early stages, Burghers and foreigners with influence could easily obtain these contracts from government, and their positions were later strengthened by the endorsement of the Volksraad. The early concessionaires were typically investors who intended to almost immediately sell their rights to others. It was only after the discovery of gold that Uitlanders began complaining about the concessions, in light of the new economic prospects at hand and their lack of participation in these now increasingly profitable concessions. In 1895 the Volksraad designated a committee to investigate and report on the manufacturing concessions, and it was found that most of the concessions from 1881 had failed with the exception of the dynamite, iron, liquor, leather, brick and paper manufacturers. The most controversial concessions were that of the dynamite, railways and liquor. The latter was criticized more for its noticeable effects on African miners than its monopoly, while the other two were known for their expensive prices of service and product.⁶ After the Jameson Raid, conditions remained much the same for the mines and bordered on worse. Around half of the 45 producing mines on the Rand were operating at a loss. The three hardest hitting punches for the mines were still the expensive rates of the Railway Company, especially for the transportation of coal, the high cost of dynamite, and the "scarcity and expensiveness of African labour."⁷

The National Union was initially made up of ordinary Uitlanders, many of whom were born in South Africa, and simply wanted to be full citizens. It however became more difficult to determine what portion of the Uitlanders were born in South Africa, as more foreign born

⁵ J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, p. 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

immigrants entered the Transvaal. The founding members and leaders of the National Union were of these South African born Uitlanders, and their desires were to secure their political rights – they had no intention of staging an armed revolution, but rather used politics and process to agitate the government. The exact numbers of the Union were never disclosed, but it was understood that it had little money and was virtually ignored by the mining and financial industries, who themselves were Uitlanders. Yet this was to change in 1895, as the whole dynamic of the Uitlander movement shifted.⁸ Earlier in 1894, it was found that the gold mines had a longer life expectancy that was originally known or assumed. This, along with the discoveries of profitable coal and iron deposits, changed the attitudes of the mining magnates, and they realized that they had a future on the Rand and in the Transvaal.⁹ The claims and grievances of the Uitlanders gained a stronger punch as the ‘capitalists’ joined and soon led the National Union. Gone were the use of politics and due process and entered the realm of “revolutionary conspiracy”. The change of heart of the “capitalist” Uitlanders was based purely on financial gain, and they in fact cared little for politics and political rights. Their grievances were the policies of Kruger, that cost them money and reduced their profits – and they were determined to transform this. The policies are the previously mentioned dynamite monopoly, railway concession, and the sphere of African labour, which they felt government did little about. The mine owners found these conditions to be unsatisfactory and it made it near impossible for them to operate the lower grade gold mine and to establish new ones. They felt that most of what Kruger did, with regard to them, was to at every corner increase the cost of their operations and thus reduce their profits which would have otherwise been significant. It was with this in mind that they decided that it was time for Kruger to go.¹⁰

When the dynamite arrived on Sunday, the 16th of February 1896 at Braamfontein, it was open topped and simply covered with sails, thus enduring the journey from Leeuwfontein like this. Additionally it was reported that there had been complaints about the dynamite around this time, saying that the paper around the dynamite was too thin and that it tore easily.¹¹ That aside, the dynamite arrived either on the evening or the night at Park Station, but there was no one to collect it, probably because it was Sunday. The trucks were then moved to the siding at Braamfontein Station. On the Monday there was an attempt to deliver the dynamite to the

⁸ J. van der Poel: *The Jameson Raid*, p. 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

¹¹ Friedrich Krieger. Testimony given at the Commission of Inquiry. 11 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 12-13.

magazines of the Lippert, by the Order Service of the Railway Company. However when the first mule wagons arrived, there was no one present to receive the delivery. The wagons eventually returned to the Station siding and the dynamite was repacked under the instructions of the foreman in charge of the delivery wagons and drivers, without any officials of the railway present. The dynamite would then endure the heat of February for three days. Later the office of Lippert queried about the dynamite and was told that the dynamite was delivered, but that no one was there to collect it and that it was returned to the trucks. Lippert's people insisted that there was someone at the magazines. Either way the situation became embroiled in a debate over the payment of the delivery delay, an amount of £3. The Order Service and the Railway Company maintained that it was the responsibility of Lippert to pay for the delay as there should have been someone to receive the dynamite. The office of Lippert maintained that there was someone there and that they would not pay a cent. Eventually the deadlock was broken by the Railway Company and the dynamite was promised to be delivered – this was on Wednesday the 19th. One should ask, where William Langley was, the caretaker who was supposedly absent and also present during the initial delivery of the dynamite.

On the same day, 31 empty trucks were being shunted at the Braamfontein railway yard, from the goods station to one of the sidings. Joseph Williams, a shunter, was tasked with inspecting the railway switch, the mechanism that steers trains from one track onto another. Williams found this in order on his initial inspection and on his way to the trucks he noted a labourer cleaning the switch. Williams was told to be near the front of the train to act as lookout, as the locomotive pushed the trucks from behind. During the movement he was on the fourth truck from the front, and he instructed the labourer, who had cleaned the switch, to be on the first truck. Williams gave the signal to cross the switch and after crossing he immediately saw that the train was on the wrong siding – they were thus on the siding with the dynamite trucks. He gave a signal to stop, but the crew on the locomotive could not see or hear him at this point.¹² Eventually the driver did notice the error and instructed the stoker to turn on the brake, but it was too late and the train crashed into the dynamite truck.¹³ One witness saw the trucks being overturned during the collision, after which the dynamite

¹² Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 2-3.

¹³ Jacob Bloom. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 4-5.

exploded and the damage was done.¹⁴ After the collision, Williams fell off the train and further saw nothing of the explosion, the labourer on the other hand was never seen again. Yet why was Williams not on the front truck as he was instructed – why did he delegate this task to someone else? Furthermore could Williams not have seen that the switch was incorrectly set when he gave the signal to cross – the foreman shunter said that he would have noticed the error immediately if he was near the front of the train.¹⁵

Both Langley and Williams can be seen to represent a fault within the Dynamite Company and the Railway Company respectively. The Order Service had a similar employee who committed an ultimately costly error – the delivery foreman, known only as Clemm, who was responsible for the delivery of the dynamite, should have waited until someone at the magazines showed up. Moreover, he should not have reloaded the dynamite onto the train himself, without the supervision of a railway official who would have had more experience in this matter, especially since dynamite in all its forms is an extremely dangerous cargo. Clemm, unlike the other two, was believed to have died in the explosion, as he was busy with the offloading, and would have been inches away from the epicentre. In addition to the mistakes of individuals, there were also broader mistakes committed. The dynamite trucks at the siding, contained a division of detonators, additional to the cases of dynamite on board.¹⁶ There was also mention of missing detonators. This should not have been allowed as it created a potential risk during transportation. Secondly, the dynamite siding should never have been in the location it was, given its very close proximity to residential areas and locations – Braamfontein, Vrededorp, Fordsburg, the Brickfields and the various locations within these – the Indian, African, and Malay locations.¹⁷ There had been petitions to have these sidings moved along with the dynamite magazines, and these continued after the explosion, with the suggestion to move both to at least five miles from the town.¹⁸ Ironically there was another explosion in Krugersdorp, this time on the third level of the south reef, where only one person was killed. More alarmingly on the following morning, fifty tons of dynamite was found at a railway station in Pretoria, and had been there for several days.

¹⁴ John Forth. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 13 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 25.

¹⁵ Sydney Oser. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 18 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 29-30.

¹⁶ Arthur Rutherford. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 5 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 10-12.

¹⁷ Map of Braamfontein, c. 1896.

¹⁸ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, “Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg,” p. 5.

Precautions were not taken to guard the dynamite and it was unknown how the dynamite got there.¹⁹

Could the frustrations of some Uitlanders, have led them to conspire to cause this explosion? The explosion discredits both the Railway Company and the Dynamite Company, who were both intimately involved in the events that led up to the event, who both bore most of the blame following the Commission of Investigation, and who both had state backed monopolies that were detested by the Uitlanders. There are coincidences within the case of the explosion that almost point to a broader conspiracy, but they end at the door of the two companies, because an insider would surely have to be involved, making such a conspiracy possible. What adds suspicion to Langley is the accusation of attempted bribery against him, by one of the Order Service drivers. However there was confusion and no supporting evidence for this. Williams on the other hand altered his task when he put someone else in front of the train, instead of himself. When he fell off the train he fell into a ditch and was mostly shielded from the blast. While testifying, he said that it was Oxe's (the foreman shunter) responsibility to ensure the correction of the switch, and not his.²⁰ Both of the cases of Langley and Williams could just be coincidences.

The dynamite on board the trucks was an import from Germany, and was not regular dynamite, but blasting gelatine, which was considered safer than normal dynamite. Blasting gelatine requires a detonator to be set off, and it can endure intense heat without exploding.²¹ There were also other instances of accidents involving a crash with trucks carrying blasting gelatine, where the crates fell out and broke, but still there was no detonation.²² Furthermore, blasting gelatine that was removed from the trucks before the explosion was tested by an esteemed Scottish engineer who was visiting the Transvaal on business, and found to be of a high quality and was in a very good condition.²³ This definitely asks the question of how the blasting gelatine exploded. Remains of detonators were found after the explosion and if there were in fact cases of detonators on the trucks, how would they have ignited the dynamite? If

¹⁹ *The Cape Times*, 21 February 1896, "Frightful Catastrophe at Johannesburg," p. 5.

²⁰ Joseph Williams. Testimony given at Commission of Inquiry. 4 March 1896. TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 2-3.

²¹ TAB – SS – R1771/96, Report on the Condition and Quality of 120 Cases of Blasting Gelatine lying at No. 2 Magazine, Braamfontein.

²² Friedrich Krieger. Testimony given at the Commission of Inquiry. 11 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, pp. 12-13.

²³ TAB – SS – R1771/96, Report on the Condition and Quality of 120 Cases of Blasting Gelatine lying at No. 2 Magazine, Braamfontein.

for example there are two cases, one contains dynamite and the other contains detonators, they fall and break open; would their proximity and possible contact be enough to cause a detonation? Experts and those with experience believe this not to be the case.²⁴

The dynamite was meant to be delivered on the Monday – it was taken, not received and returned. The Railway switch was meant to be set correctly, it was said to be right and then it was ultimately not. The shunting train was said to be going at only two miles an hour, yet its crash was significant enough to overturn the trucks. Blasting gelatine can endure heat and it can also endure a fair amount of movement, even falling without exploding yet it exploded following the collision. There were missing detonators. There was negligence and potential bribery. There were insinuations that the labourer who cleaned the railway switch might have accidentally changed it. There are things that were not meant to happen that did and one has to ask how. The conclusions of the Commission of Inquiry, include that the witnesses did not show the direct cause of the explosion, and thus the direct cause was unknown, and rightfully so. The minutes did state that the “facts and testimonies indicate the blast occurred through the negligence – be it jointly or severally – by the parties involved”.²⁵

If one says that the explosion was a conspiracy, then that would be saying that the conspirators were willing to kill hundreds and possibly thousands to make their point. But let us then consider the specifics of the location. As was said earlier, the railway yard was among various residential areas, but were the residents of any significance to the possible conspirators? The residents were Africans, poor Afrikaners, Indians and Malays, with no large contingent of Uitlanders. It can be assumed that these people were not really a concern for the conspirators. The explosion took place in the day when most of the men were at work, thus most of the labour force from this area was maintained. The willingness to kill people offers the biggest obstacle to the theory of a conspiracy because how can one prove that? The Reform Committee was prepared to back a forceful takeover of the Rand by supporting the Jameson Raid, and men would surely have died if a prolonged conflict erupted from that. But is that enough to argue this point? The British Empire at that time had had its fair share of colonial conquest and violence, so what would a little more have mattered? War would come later and the concessions were considered one of the major causes of the conflict. Although

²⁴ Friedrich Krieger. Testimony given at the Commission of Inquiry. 11 March 1896, TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, p. 12-13.

²⁵ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – “Rapport van die Commissie tot Onderzoek der dynamite-ontploffing”, Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896. p. 48.

the British government did sent telegrams of sympathy and condolences, and inquired about the amount of possible Britons killed – usual diplomatic protocols?²⁶

It all comes down to how far the Uitlanders or rather ‘capitalist’ Uitlanders would have gone for what they wanted, which was the removal of Kruger. The same question can be posed at British intentions. However, Jean van der Poel shows us that the “capitalist” Uitlanders merely wanted to use the threat of force to bluff their way around Kruger, and muscle him in to their agenda. The ‘capitalists’ had too much to lose via an armed conflict, thus they wanted to create the situation of potential revolution that would both intimidate the Kruger government, and give the British government a tangible reason to intervene in the Transvaal under these circumstances.²⁷ The British government was content with regional hegemony during the early 1890s, as well as the territory they had. Although the idea of a Federation of South Africa appealed to some, for the most part as long as they had influence over the Transvaal, specifically with regard to its foreign policy and relations, all was well.²⁸ It can also be seen that both the Transvaal and British governments were prepared to protect what they had. It was thus the influence of certain politicians and more so businessmen that lead to the Jameson Raid. Although the full story of the pre-Raid are too lengthy to discuss here, what can be restated are the issues of the dynamite and railway monopolies and their role in broadening the grievances of the Uitlander movement.

The very real violence and destruction of the explosion would have gone against the idea of creating a “threat”. The risk of detonating explosives in Johannesburg would have proved too much for any of the involved parties, especially the mining houses who had the most to lose. Thus it is unlikely that the explosion was a conspiracy. At the very least one can consider that the cause or causes of the explosion were suspicious, and in fact when looking at some of the above mentioned information, it is still very much up for discussion. Moreover, if the Braamfontein Explosion was a plot to discredit the Railway Company and the Dynamite Company, it did initially succeed, but ultimately failed. Both would recover following the disaster, until the Anglo-Boer War that is. The German dynamite however was not trusted by the public again. There was also an increase in general caution concerning dynamite and

²⁶ *The Cape Times*, 24 February 1896, “Rand Catastrophe,” p. 5.

²⁷ J. van der Poel: *The Jameson Raid*, p. 9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

proposals of more regulations.²⁹ The events that led up to the moment the dynamite exploded are strange, coupled with the fact that the exact cause of the detonation is unknown adds intrigues to what can be perceived as a mystery.

The Braamfontein Explosion, though unique and vastly destructive in character, ultimately means nothing towards the overall climate of the pre-war Rand. The lack of academic literature further strengthens the fact that this disaster was forgotten, possibly because of the absence of more enticing consequences. The working class families and labour force felt the personal affects, as in these pockets were felt the loss of property and close family members. However to those who really ran the Rand, the explosion meant little, only a few precarious days when their dynamite supply was slowed and in question. Any regulation change too would have mattered little as the administration would dramatically change after the British marched into Pretoria four years later. Even though the explosion made way for an improvement in working class housing from congregated iron to bricks, this feature was already part of the mining town's character – moving from tents to shacks to brick abodes in just twenty years.³⁰ The situation on the Rand was prone for a dynamite disaster. There was a general carelessness with regards to explosives at the time of the explosion and it became clear that safety in some cases took a backseat to profit and convenience. These combined attitudes would eventually pay the price, but then again it seemed that the city of gold could afford it.

To briefly recap the role of the concessions in all of this, the conclusion will turn one last time to the Jameson Raid. If the Raid was not indirectly responsible for the explosion as Chilvers suggested, then it is possible that the concessions were – in two ways.³¹ The first, being that both the Dynamite and the Railway Companies had no competitors – it was only them on their respective fields. Had there been other available services, the explosion might never have happened. Those who criticise monopolies usually bring forth its harm for the consumer, both in cost and quality. In short, not only were the costs of their services expensive, the quality and consciousness of both companies were lacking. The quality of the product however was scrutinized and found to be more than adequate. Secondly, if the

²⁹ A. P. Cartwright: *The Dynamite Company: The Story of African Explosives and Chemical Industries Limited*. p. 73.

³⁰ C. van Onselen: *New Babylon, New Nineveh: Everyday Life on the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914*, p. 2.

³¹ H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, pp. 127-128.

explosion was an Uitlander conspiracy, then its cause and purpose would have been an assault on the concessions and the policies of the Kruger government. These are the same underlining currents that played a major part in the causes of the Anglo-Boer War, only three years later.³² However an Uitlander conspiracy is not being endorsed here as it would have gone against their reasoning.

Anna H. Smith, puts the concept of a cause in a concise yet inconclusive prose: “Because of some complications due to concessions and political undercurrents, some trucks of dynamite had been left in the open under a blazing sun for three days.”³³ The only debatable thing about Smith’s reasoning is the three days in the sun concept. It was proved that the blasting gelatine could withstand the heat of the sun and even hotter temperatures.³⁴ But ‘concessions’ and ‘political undercurrents’ forms the basis for the right questions and direction. The Concessions did not ignite the dynamite, but they did lay the foundations for the environment within which the explosion took place. However these ideas need not stop at the top of their echelons, for the common man within each plays more of a part than the director or concession hunter.

Kruger who tried to defend his state from the encroachment of Uitlanders and a British dominated Transvaal, handed over much of his country’s commerce to other Uitlanders, in the form of the concessions.³⁵ The Dutch railroad built under the Kruger awarded concession, harmed the same vulnerable Afrikaners that the President attempted to help by giving them land on the Rand. Many had their livelihoods taken away with the introduction of the railway.³⁶ Using the Braamfontein Explosion as another example, it can be stated that the concessions did more harm to the Transvaal and its people than good, and at the end of the day was a prelude to war. What the explosion did, was prove the incompetence of two of the most controversial concessions on the Rand, and effectively changed nothing.

³² C. T. Keto: "The aftermath of the Jameson Raid and American decision making in foreign affairs, 1896." *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, (70), (8), 1980, p. 10.

³³ A. H. Smith, (ed.): *Pictorial History of Johannesburg*. No. 3. Juta & Company, for the Africana Museum, p. 47.

³⁴ *Ibid.*; TAB – SS – R1771/96, Report on the Condition and Quality of 120 Cases of Blasting Gelatine lying at No. 2 Magazine, Braamfontein.

³⁵ J. S. Marais: *The Fall of Kruger's Republic*, p. 23.

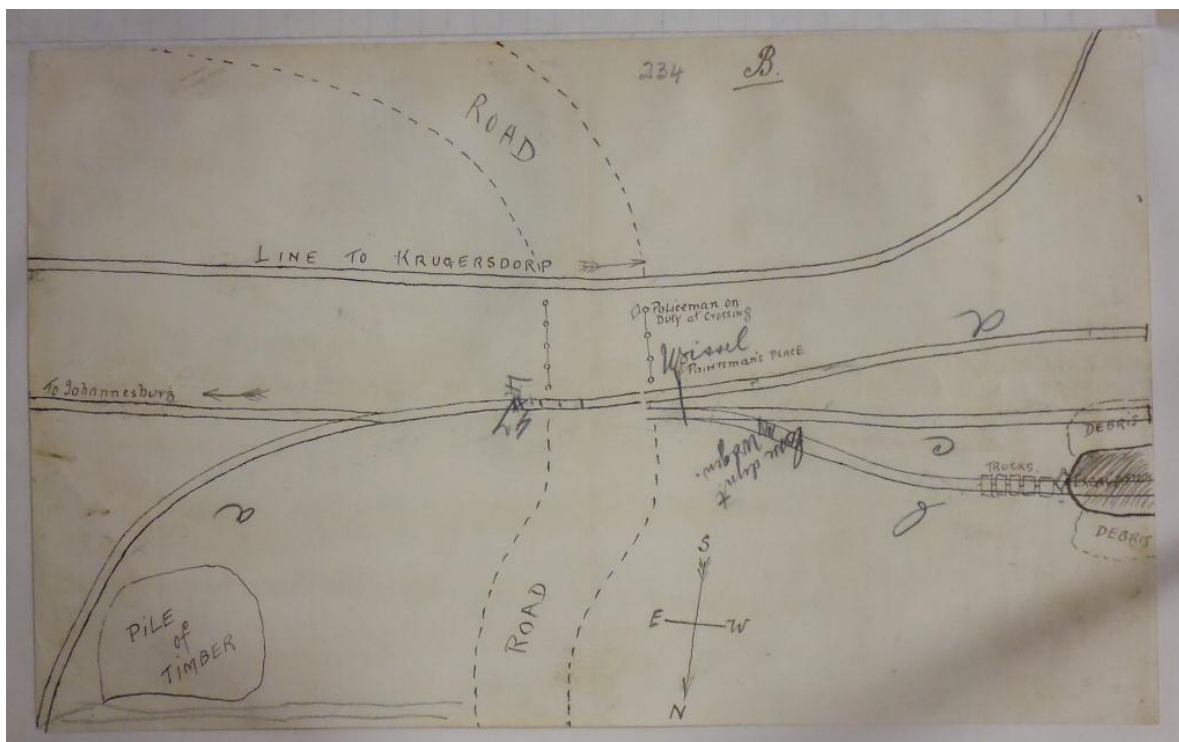
³⁶ C. van Onselen: *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914. 1 New Babylon*. pp. 145-146.

The unfortunate series of events that probably led to the explosion, could have been avoided, it was just a simple case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The word “probably” is used here, because it can never be ascertained whether there was something wrong with the dynamite that exploded, adding to that, the dynamite that survived the explosion was examined and found to be in a sound condition. Therefore the Commission of Inquiry’s conclusions that the “facts and testimonies indicate the blast occurred through the negligence – be jointly or severely – by the parties involved...” substantiate that the exact cause of the explosion can never be known.³⁷ One could come up with alternative theories as to what caused the explosion, because it is a rich area however as historians the sources we find give us the primary facts we need to construct and present our finding, no matter how tempting a conspiracy or two may be. It was a tumultuous time in the history of the Witwatersrand, but when has there ever not been since the discovery of gold there.

³⁷ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – “Rapport van die Commissie tot Onderzoek der dynamite-ontploffing”, Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896, p. 48.

Appendix 1

Sketch-card from Commission of Investigation¹

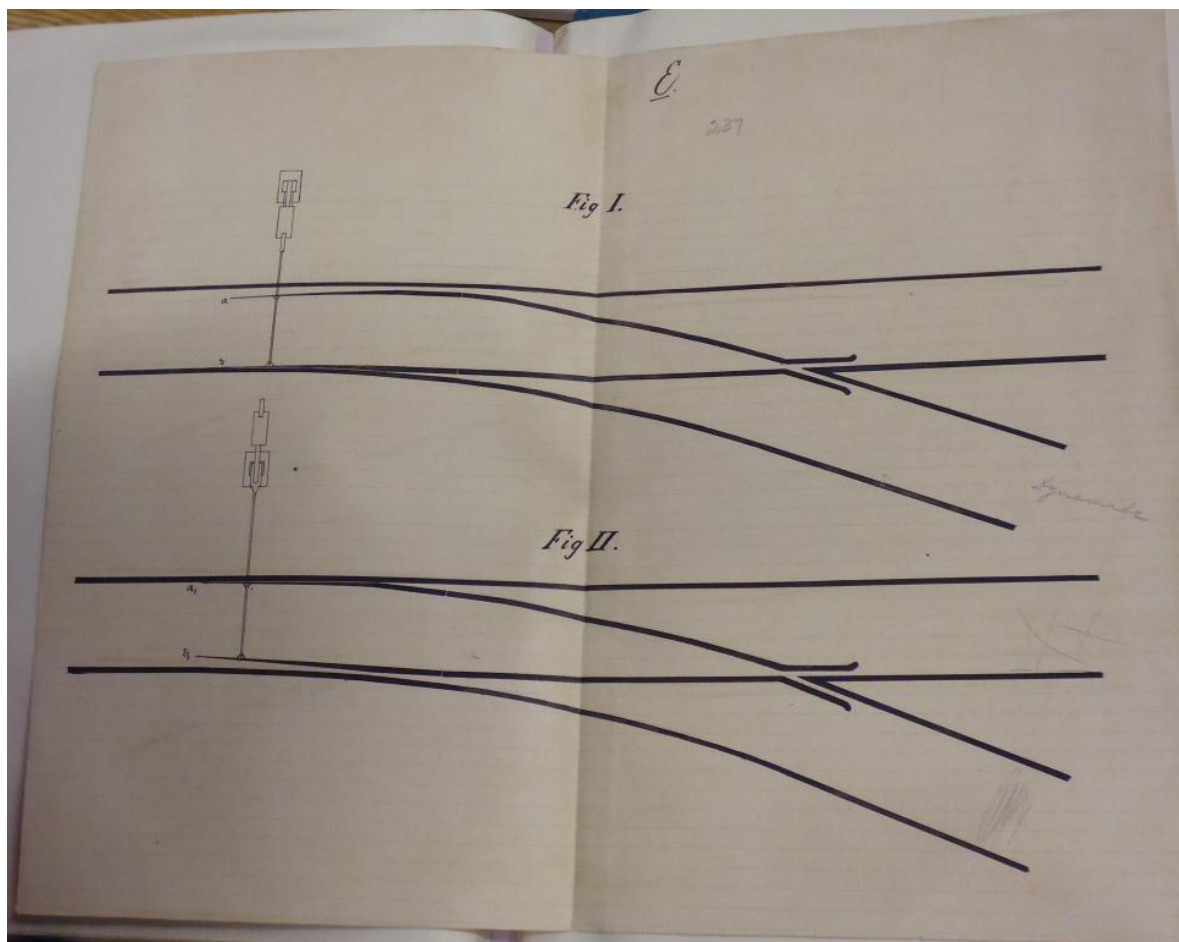


¹ TAB – SS – R1771/96, Rapport van de Commissie Tot Onderzoek der Dynamiet Ontploffing. p. 234.

² Note north and south, the sketch is drawn facing south.

Appendix 2

Sketch of Railway Switch Mechanism³



³ TAB – SS – R1771/96, Rapport van de Commissie Tot Onderzoek der Dynamiet Ontploffing, p. 237.

⁴ Figure 1 shows the correct setting and Figure 2 shows the incorrect setting.

Appendix 3

Cloud of smoke, from a few kilometres away⁵



⁵ www.labuschagne.info/the-braamfontein-explosion.htm#.WKM4WDXMh68 (11 October 2016).



SMOKE CLOUD SPREADING SKYWARD AFTER THE
DYNAMITE EXPLOSION AT BRAAMFONTEIN,
FEBRUARY 19, 1896

6

⁶ H. A. Chilvers: *Out of the Crucible*, p. 126 - b.

Appendix 4

The crater made by the explosion⁷



⁷ TAB – Photograph: 3359. “The pit caused by explosion,” 1896.

Appendix 5

President Paul Kruger Walking through the Wanderers Hall⁸



⁸ TAB – Photograph: 18788. “Die Dinamiet-ontploffing. Pres Kruger besoek die Wanderers Hospitaal.”

Appendix 6

*Search parties among the debris*⁹



⁹ TAB – Photograph: 3362. “The Dynamite Explosion. Search Parties at Work.”

Appendix 7

“Watching His Dead Mistress’s Property”¹⁰



¹⁰ TAB – Photograph: 3364. ‘Watching His Dead Mistress’s Property, Johannesburg,’ 1896.

Appendix 8

Homeless and Wounded Sheltered at the Agricultural Show-yard¹¹



¹¹ www.ebay.ie/itm/SOUTH-AFRICA-Wounded-from-the-Dynamite-Explosion-at-Johannesburg-old-Print-1896-/182363753278?hash=item2a75ba0b3e:g:Iu0AAOSwB09YNcFB (17 January 2016). Sketch drawn by Milton Prior.

Appendix 9

Lists of Killed as given to the office of the State Secretary¹²

Transvaal:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age¹³</u>
1	A. P. M. Strydon	male	12 years
2	W. G. van der Walt	male	//
3	H. H. K. van der Walt	male	//
4	Mrs van der Walt	female	61 years
5	Al. Joh Roestorif	female	//
6	Piet Overholger	male	//
7	Maria W. de Beer	female	//
8	Kate A. de Beer	female	4 years
9	N. le Roux	male	//
10	Aletta Swarts	female	//
11	W. A. van Deventer	male	//
12	S. F. du Preez	female	//
13	Mrs Ryan	female	//
14	“Child of Mrs Ryan”	female	//
15	A. S. du Preez	Female	//
16	F. Kruger	female	13 years
17	A. Dixon	female	//
18	K. A. de Beer	female	//
19	Steph. Smith	male	//
20	Mrs Holder	female	42 years
21	H. van der Walt	male	60 years
22	S. Naude	male	12 years
23	F. Short	male	21 years
24	de Beer	male	10 years
25	Naude	female	11 years
26	S. Swanepoel	male	20 years
27	M. Marais	female	4 years
28	F. Elskie	male	25 years
29	I. R. Bezhuidenhout	male	10 years
30	Isaac Powell	male	55 years
31	G. Roustoff	female	38 years
32	Stoffel le Roux	male	71 years
33	John J. Meintjies	male	4 years
34	M. J. de Beer	male	5 months
35	H. Moss	male	21 years

¹² TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.;

TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gedood by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

¹³ “//” – Indicates no age given.

36	S. le Roux	male	15 years
37	Naude	male	1 year

Cape Colony:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	W. Wilson	male	//
2	O. E. Mac Casley	female	9 months
3	D. I. Theron	male	8 months
4	G. C. Ley	male	//
5	P. F. Krugel	female	//
6	Mrs Fray	female	//
7	Mrs du Plessis	female	//
8	M. C. Baker	female	//
9	Carly Lewis	female	//
10	J. Mehem	male	69 years
11	J. Baker	male	6 years

Unknown Nationality:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	J. W. Smith	male	//
2	H. A. Baker	male	6 months
3	Unidentified Woman	female	35 years
4	W. Hoy	male	16 years
5	J. Hare	male	2 months
6	E. Brown	female	1 year
7	1 Baby	male	//
8	1 Girl	female	//
9	//	female	3 years
10	Elsie Viljoen	female	//

Other Nationalities:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	J. H. Smith (Orange Free State)	male	//
2	H. R. Moss (English)	male	22 years
3	Blaukenberg (German)	female	"child"
4	C. Duarde (Portuguese)	male	//
5	Francis Joseph (Greek)	male	52 years

Africans:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	Stephanus	male	//
2	Bockey	//	//
3	Wander	//	//
4	Manuel Mackesse	//	//
5	Unknown	//	//
6	Unknown	//	//

7	Unknown	//	//
8	Unknown	//	//
9	Unknown	//	//
10	1 Partial Body	//	//
11	1 Partial Body	//	//

Cape Coloured:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	Abraham	male	//
2	Sarah Williams	female	//
3	Bockie	male	//

Malay:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	Achmet Orlell	male	//

Chinese:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	Livaal	//	//
2	Unknown	//	//

Arabian:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	Ibrahim	//	//
2	Bothker	//	//

Appendix 10

Lists of Wounded as given to the office of the State Secretary¹⁴

Transvaal Citizens:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age¹⁵</u>
1	E. J. van Jaarsveld	Female	3 years
2	de Beer	Male	5 months
3	A. Jacobs	Female	21 years
4	A. de Rocstoff	Female	10 years
5	J. J. van Jaarsveld	Male	5 years
6	C. M. van Jaarsveld	Female	25 years
7	A. Jordaan	Female	22 years
8	A. Meintjies	Female	12 years
9	Labuschagne	Female	41 years
10	J. Strydom	Female	53 years
11	B. van der Walt	Female	13 years
12	M. Powell	Female	46 years
13	Mrs Mulder	Female	60 years
14	K. Britz	Female	18 years
15	A. Britz	Female	13 years
16	P. Meintjies	Male	4 years
17	J. J. Bezhuidenhout	Male	12 years
18	D. Waldeck	Male	27 years
19	P. Powell	Female	11 years
20	B. van der Heever	Male	62 years
21	C. de Witl	Male	33 years
22	C. Rocstoff	Male	38 years
23	C. Volschenk	Male	15 years
24	van der Berg	Male	19 years
25	P. Vermaak	Female	10 years
26	W. A. du Plessis	Female	//
27	L. Elske	Female	4 years
28	B. Vermaak	Female	6 years
29	M. Kruger	Female	19 years
30	K. Grey	Female	42 years
31	W. Vermaak	Male	14 years
32	W. Ryan	Male	8 years
33	L. Roberts	Female	14 years
34	N. Meyer	Male	78 years
35	N. J. Brett	Male	23 years
36	L. Kaiser	Female	4 years

¹⁴ TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Blanke personen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.;

TAB – SSA 1896: 339, Kleurlingen gewondt by het ongeluk. Dynamite ontploffing 19 February 1896.

¹⁵ “//” – Indicates no age given.

37	T. Naude	Male	3 years
38	J. Blaukenburg	Female	23 years
39	A. van der Merve	Female	47 years
40	R. Waldeck	Female	17 years
41	D. Kaiser	Male	10 years
42	P. Kaiser	Male	41 years
43	J. Baker	Male	15 years
44	N. Vermaak	Male	61 years
45	A. Nortje	Male	25 years
46	A. Fell	Male	7 years
47	M. Kaiser	Female	11 years
48	H. van der Walt	Male	70 years
49	V. D. Mathey	Male	17 years
50	J. J. Waldeck	Male	26 years
51	A. Powell	Male	14 years
52	F. Meelden	Male	61 years

Cape Colony:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	P.N. Carstens	male	40 years
2	R. Johnston	male	35 years
3	A. Moll	female	?
4	H. Forskik	male	13 years
5	T. Lunt	female	17 years
6	M. P	female	16 years
7	Elgie Moss	female	25 years
8	C. E. Pannymore	female	62 years
9	M. van Niekerk	female	14 years
10	E. J. Mathews	female	29 years
11	P. Elske	female	22 years
12	A. Bezuidenhout	female	31 years
13	A. Baker	male	21 years
14	W. Calde	male	21 years
15	P. Gilling	male	23 years
16	D. de Wet	female	36 years
17	H. Welsh	male	41 years
18	F. Jooste	male	64 years
19	R. J. Ferreira	female	64 years
20	P. Potgieter	female	25 years
21	M. Lewis	female	9 years
22	C. Cloete	female	35 years
23	E. Joves	female	36 years
24	A. Kruger	female	18 years
25	J. Dixon	male	5 years
26	C. Fell	female	50 years
27	R. Kruger	female	43 years
28	H. Fell	male	40 years
29	G. Baker	male	39 years

30	A. Venter	male	10 years
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Orange Free State:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	A. Butler	male	24 years
2	M. Ferreira	female	20 years
3	A. Cloete	male	35 years
4	J. Marais	male	21 years
5	M. Marais	female	35 years
6	M. Nevenhuys	female	50 years
7	E. Le Roux	female	37 years

English Citizens:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	A. Welsh	male	44 years
2	C. W. Dixon	male	6 years
3	H. Primerlee	female	36 years
4	H. Primerlee	male	14 years
5	C. Perryware	male	13 years
6	D. Tucker	male	2 years
7	P. Tucker	female	4 months
8	A. Moss	male	16 years
9	M. Berg	female	34 years
10	G. F. Chapman	male	40 years
11	J. Ellis	male	37 years
12	L. E. Dunston	female	3 months
13	A. Sharp	male	40 years

Other Nationalities:

1	W. Ludwig (Dutch)	female	40 years
2	E. Ludwig (Dutch)	male	46 years
3	A. Pand (Russian)	male	57 years
4	J. Lewis (American)	male	45 years

Malay:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	Japadine	male	32 years
2	Gamite Cillie	male	26 years
3	C. Donatie	male	5 years
4	Nanie Dolley	female	50 years
5	M. Rasdine	female	//
6	G. Harding	female	23 years
7	A. van der Pehaff	male	35 years
8	Aysa David	male	35 years
9	Alema	female	//

10	Pibatein	female	//
11	Mahomet Hartley	male	

Cape Colony:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	C. Williams	male	4 years
2	M. Mayman	female	33 years
3	P. Fortuin	female	18 years
4	E. Duartes	female	37 years
5	John	male	//
6	D. Barns	Male	36 years
7	Leach	female	21 years
8	C. Dwart	male	//
9	P. Smit	Female	//

Africans:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	Petrus	male	//
2	John	male	//
3	Ramle	Female	40 years
4	Katrina	female	//
5	Keegan	female	//
6	Nelly	female	//
7	Whiten	male	//
8	Kleinboy	male	//

Chinese:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	Long Fong	male	//
2	Fong Long	male	//
3	Fortuin	male	//

Other Nationalities:

<u>Nr.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Age</u>
1	G. Walker (St. Helena)	female	35 years

Appendix 11

Pamphlet from Dynamite Company concerning the use of explosives¹⁶

129 L.



DE ZUID-AFRIKAANSCH E FABRIEKEN

VOOR

Ontploffbare Stoffen, Beperkt.

(SOUTH AFRICAN EXPLOSIVES Co., LTD.)

HEAD OFFICE: PRETORIA, S. A. R.

Instructions for using the Company's
Dynamite and Gelatine Explosives.

FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.



FIG. 3.



Cut a piece of gutta percha fuse of suitable length with a sharp knife, insert it into a detonator until it reaches the fulminate, and squeeze the upper part of the detonator with a pair of nippers near the mouth of the tube.

Open the end of a cartridge, make a small hole in the explosive with a piece of wood, insert the detonator (with the fuse attached as above described), leaving about one-third of the detonator projecting out of the explosive, and tie the cartridge paper firmly round the neck of the detonator, the cord lying well into the hollow made by the nippers. The paper thus shields the explosive from sparks of the fuse.

Place the necessary number of cartridges into the bore hole, pressing one after the other gently but firmly with a wooden rammer.

Place on the top of this charge the primer-cartridge (with detonator and fuse as above), without pressing it, and fill up with sand. Water tamping may be used for gelatines. All is then ready for firing.

¹⁶ TAB – SS – R1771/96, De Zuid-Afrikaansche Fabrieken voor Ontploffbare Stoffen, Beperkt. *Instructions for Using the Company's Dynamite and Gelatine Explosives*. Rapport van de Commissie Tot Onderzoek der Dynamiet Ontploffing. pp. 129-130.

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IMPORTANT CAUTIONS.

Never use a metal rammer; it may cause explosion.

Squeeze only the upper part of the detonator. If you squeeze the fulminate an explosion may occur.

Do not insert the detonator fully in the cartridge, or unpleasant fumes will result, as the explosive may burn before exploding.

If you use water tamping, or if the charge is to be fired under water, make the detonator watertight by means of tallow, tar, &c.

In the event of a miss-fire, never attempt to draw the tamping. If water tamping has been used, put a fresh cartridge and detonator into the hole on the top of the charge. The explosion of the top cartridge will set off the whole charge.

If other than water tamping has been used, make a fresh bore hole; but care must be taken to make it at a safe distance from the former hole, and in such a position or direction that the boring tool cannot come in contact with explosive in, or escaping from, the hole that has missed fire.

In all cases after a blast the material brought down, or blown out, ought to be carefully examined, lest any cartridges or pieces of cartridge should remain unexploded.

Never use hard or frozen explosives. These must be thawed by proper means before using. Never attempt to place explosives near fires, stoves, or any highly heated metal. Never put explosives directly into warm water. Put them into a water-tight tin can, and place this in a vessel of hot water, taking care that no water enters the tin can.

Do not expose dynamite or gelatine explosives to the direct rays of a hot sun.

NOTES ON GELATINE EXPLOSIVES.

GELIGNITE, being stronger than Dynamite, is highly recommended, especially for wet work, where Dynamite would be affected by water.

DYNAMITE 1A is about one third stronger than Dynamite, and a very superior Explosive for heavier work and wet places.

BLASTING-GELATINE is fully half as strong again as Dynamite, and is the highest practical working Explosive known; also quite unaffected by water.

DETONATORS.—Gelatine Explosives, being less sensible to shock than Dynamite, require a more powerful Detonator. Not less than a sextuple detonator should be used for all gelatine explosives. We recommend 6D detonators to insure a perfect explosion.



NOTICE.—The Company supplies Detonators, Fuse, etc. of the best quality.

Sole General Agent for the Sale of the Company's Manufactures:

ED. LIPPERT.

JOHANNESBURG: P. O. Box 977. — TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS: "Lippert."

Appendix 12

List of Witnesses who testified at the Commission of Inquiry¹⁷

Christina Johanna C. Nel (eye witness)	Dirk Soeterik (station chief, Johannesburg Station)
Kerstina Small (eye witness)	Johannes Kloek (assistant chief of movement)
Alexander Bennett (mistaken identity)	Jacobus Koenraad Pfennig (clerk – Railway Company)
Joseph Williams (shunter)	Wihelmus Hendrik Vermeulen (chief of railway barracks)
James Hudson (cart driver)	Bastiaan Willem Janson (chief of commercial affairs, Railway Company)
Jacob Bloom (locomotive driver)	John Thomas Forth (foremen, Rand Timber Co.)
Harry Fell (eye witness)	Thomas Baile (magazine master)
Matthijs Michielsen Pienaar (stoker)	Janus Eduard Simpson (wagon-driver)
Swarts (kleuriling) (wagon-driver)	John Watters (transport driver)
Fortuin (kleuriling) (wagon-driver)	Willem Sharply (transport driver)
Annie Theron (eye witness)	John Watt (Rand Timber Co.)
Adriaan Buitendag (eye witness)	Fred Schmulcke (locomotive driver)
Jack (kleine jonge kleuriling)	Alexander Bennet (Found three detonators)
Karel (kleuriling) (wagon-driver)	Thomas Lent (special constable for the Sanitary Board)
Scotty (kleuriling) (wagon-driver)	Karl Wolf (dynamite selling agent)
Willem (kleuriling) (wagon-driver)	Joseph Buggiella (chief of department for dynamite cartridges)
William Langley (magazine caretaker)	Sydney Oxer (foreman-hunter)
Alexander Powell (magazine caretaker)	John Edward McAstin (former locomotive driver)
Arthur Rutherford (repetitive of E. Lippert and chief magazine caretaker)	Henry Clement Wellbeloved (clerk in Lippert's office)
Hendrik Johannes Vermeulen (shunter)	Gerard Rissik (secretary, Dynamite Factory, Leeuwfontein)
Friedrich Krieger (director of Dynamite Factory, Leeuwfontein)	George Schmidt Dumont (mine inspector)
Andreas Hendrik Koomans (Railway Company official)	Max Julius Hermann Francken (mine engineer)
Robert Bell (inspector – Dynamite Factory,	John Richard Williams (metallurgist and

¹⁷ TAB – Z.A.R. 107 – Notulen van de Commissie van Onderzoek in Zake de Dynamiet-Ontploffing te Johannesburg, 1896. pp. 1-38.

Modderfontein)	chemical engineer)
Edward Jacobs (director – Railway Company)	Corneille Louis Plate (official, Railway Company)
Louis Wilson (official – Railway Order Service)	John Alec Doyle (detective)
Isaak Benjamin Heinemann (Railway Order Service)	Franz Hoenigh (director of Dynamite Factory, Modderfontein)
Thomas Bennett wagon-driver)	Julius Loevy (chemist)
Gerrit Adriaan Arnold Middleberg (director – Railway Company)	Robert Rattray Tatlock (chemist and Public Analyst and Gas Examiner for the city of Glasgow)
Johannes Willem Schuitemaker (loading master, Railway Company)	

Appendix 13

*R.R. Tatlock's Technical Report on Condition of Blasting Gelatine*¹⁸

“Report on the Condition and Quality of 120 Cases of Blasting Gelatine lying at No. 2 Magazine, Braamfontein.

In accordance with written instructions dated 2nd, March, 1896, received from Messrs, Rooth & Wessels, Pretoria, acting for the Zuid Afrikaansche Fabrieken voor Ontploffbare Stoffen, I have made an inspection of the above name Blasting Gelatine, and have taken representative samples, and have subjected the same to the recognised chemical tests, as regards their safety in transit, storage and use; and have now to report as follows:

On Friday, 6th. inst. at 3 p.m. I visited the No. 2 Magazine, Braamfontein, in order to inspect and otherwise examine the said 120 cases of B/Gelatine, which, as I had been previously informed by Mr Klimke, State Mining Engineer, were part of the consignment, the bulk of which exploded on the railway siding on the afternoon of the 19th, and also to take representative samples, and to test the same as to the condition of the material and its safety for transit, storage and use. The following gentlemen were also present by arrangement: Mr Klimke, State Mining Engineer, Detective Doyle, Dr Loevy, Mr Williams, Dr Kleiner, Mr Franke, Mr Schimtz-Dumont, and two gentlemen representing the Magazine owners.

On entering the Magazine it was at once seen that the floor and walls were perfectly dry and free from nitro-glycerine, proving that no trace of that liquid had escaped. The temperature of the magazine at the time was 75° F (equal to 24° C).

A general examination of 101 cases piled in one stack showed that these were quite dry, and that there had been no escape of any n/glycerine from them. They were perfectly good condition, and it was not considered necessary to open them or to examine them farther.

Precisely the same remarks apply to 12 cases which were stacked in another part of the Magazine.

The only B/Gelatine in the Magazine was 7 cases which had been placed by themselves, and which, the State Mining Engineer informed me, were those which had been selected, at random, by the chief detective, as representative of the said 120 cases, for the purposes of the Authorities. These seven cases were secured with cord, and sealed with two seals: (1) “MijnComissaris, Johannesburg, Z.A.R.” and (2) “F.H.C.” (monogram). They were numbered respectively: 376, 427, 469, 474, 610, 614, 621. The cases numbered respectively 427, 474, and 610 had been broken, as if by a blow, and it was explained that this had been caused by these three having been knocked off a trolley by the explosion. None of the contents had been lost, however the lid of the case numbered 614 had also been broken, but it was explained that this arose from its having been purposely opened by Mr Langley, before it was taken possession of along with the other six by the Detective Department. All the cases were dove-tailed, and were farther secured by some brass nails, with occasionally an iron nail. The

¹⁸ TAB – SS – R1771/96, Report on the Condition and Quality of 120 Cases of Blasting Gelatine lying at No. 2 Magazine, Braamfontein.

lids were fastened on with iron wire “driving screw” nails. All the cases were then opened, and each was found to contain a printed copy of the Rules and Regulations issued by the Coy. to be complied with in order to ensure safety in use. Each case contained five bags made of stout varnished calico (which was water proof), filled with the cartridges, of which one bag, typical of the others, contained 73, so that on the same footing each case would contain 365 cartridges. All the bags were taken out of the cases, and the wood of the latter examined thoroughly both outside and inside, but no traces of n/glycerine could be detected, so that none could possibly have exuded from the cartridges. The individual cartridges themselves also showed no sign whatever of exudation or “sweating” of n/glycerine, and were perfectly dry and sound. I can say with certainty that I never saw a lot of B/Gelatine in better condition or more sound looking. I then took samples, consisting of a cartridge from each bag, or five from each case making 35 in all.

Of these 35 cartridges I selected one from each box, or 7 in all, for chemical examination and testing, which I have now carried out in Dr Loevy’s laboratory, here.

The tests applied were:

1. The Heat or Vapour Test.
2. The Exudation and Softening Test.
3. The Water Exudation Test.
4. Acidity.
5. Physical Examination.

All of these tests were applied to each of the seven cartridges.

1. The Heat or Vapour Test. This is the principal test described by the Home Office in England, B/Gelatine, Dynamite and all other N/Glycerine preparation. It consists in heating up 50 grains of the B/Gelatine ground up with 100 grains of French Chalk in a test tube at 160° F (equal to 71° C) for ten minutes, at the end of which time if no brown or blue coloration is produced on a piece of Iodide of Potassium and Starch paper suspended in the tube, the conditions of the test are complied with. All the cartridges passed the test easily, none of them giving any trace of colour even at the end of 20 minutes, which is double the time specified for the duration of the test.

2. The Exudation and Softening Test. This consists in heating sections of the cartridges to 90° F (equal to 32.2° C) for three successive days leaving them to cool to normal temperature during the night. At the end of this period the sections should retain their form, should not shrink more than 25 per cent in length, and should not exude any n/glycerine. All the cartridges complied with this requirement in every particular, although No. 469 was rather softer than is desirable, but still, in my opinion, quite good and safe. This softness arises from the difficulty of obtaining absolute uniform cotton on all occasions, for making the gun-cotton which is contained in B/Gelatine to the extent of 7 per cent, the remaining 93 per cent consisting of N/Glycerine. Cotton, being a natural product, varies somewhat in quality, whereas glycerine being an artificial product, can be purified to any required degree; and the tests show that the N/glycerine has been “thoroughly purified”.

3. The Water Exudation Test. This consists in placing sections of the cartridges in water for 24 hours, when no exudation of n/glycerine should take place, showing that no risk is incurred by the B/Gelatine getting wet, or even by its lying under water. In this respect B/Gelatine differs from Dynamite, for while contact with water expels all the n/glycerine

from the latter, the former is not deteriorated in anyway. All the samples stood this test with ease, not a drop of n/glycerine escaping.

4. Acidity. All the cartridges were tested, with delicate Red and Blue Litmus Paper, for acidity, but there was no trace of acidity in any of them. On the contrary they were rather slightly alkaline, which is due to traces of carbonate of soda remaining in the n/glycerine, the latter having been agitated with a solution of that substance in order to ensure perfect freedom from acid.

5. Physical Appearance. Examination by a high power lens showed that the B/Gelatine was uniform in character, thoroughly gelatinised; and that it contained no free cotton or gun-cotton fibre.

Remarks

As the result of my examination and tests of this B/Gelatine, I have no hesitation in saying that it is of good quality, perfectly safe to carry, handle, store or use, under, of course, the usual precautions, which must always apply to every explosive, even of the highest quality, and that there is nothing about it, either chemical or physical which could produce, or tend to produce any accidental explosion. Farther, I may say that I have not seen any lot of B/Gelatine in better condition, and that it is not probable that any better or safer article will be produced.

(sgd) R.R. Tatlock, F.R.S.M., F.J.C., F.C.S
Public Analyst and Gas Examiner
for the city of Glasgow.

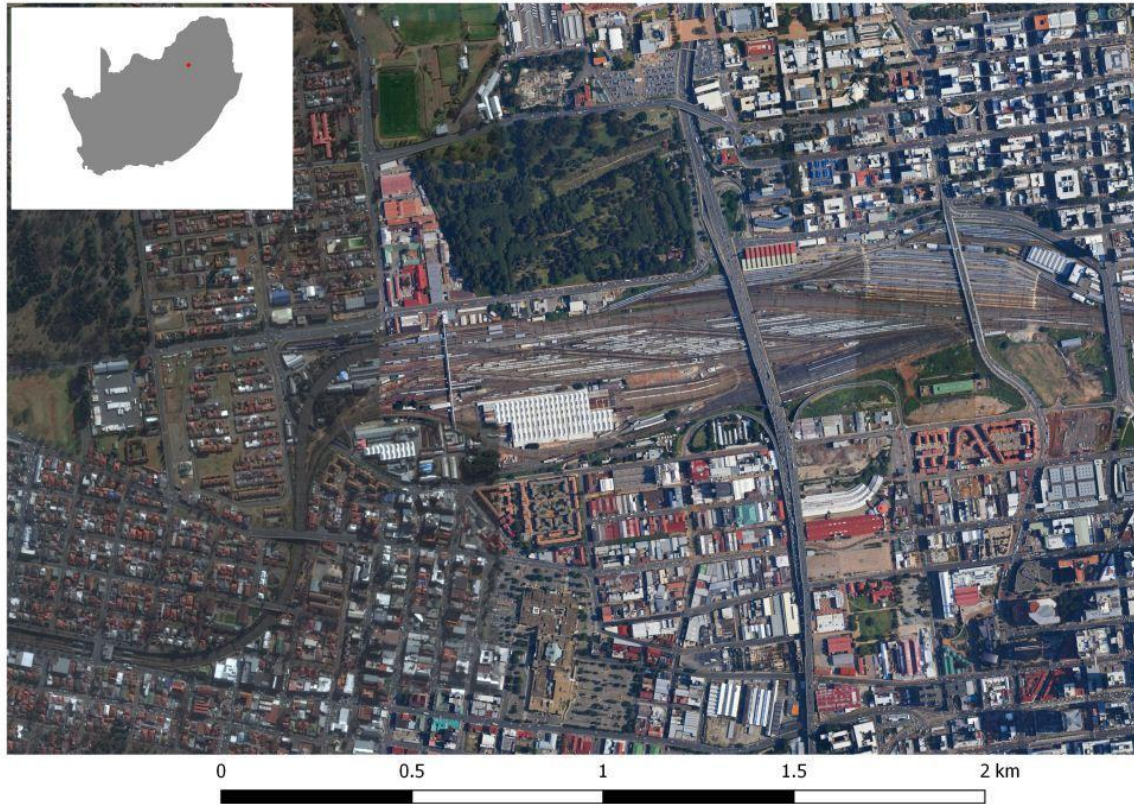
Johannesburg, 12th. March, 1896.

The magazine did not contain any Dynamite and the 120 cases about referred to consisted entirely of B/Gelatine.

(sgd) R.R.T.”

Appendix 14

*Aerial Map of Contemporary Johannesburg – Affected Area*¹⁹



2016 "Map data: Google, CNES/ Astrium/Spot Image, DigitalGlobe"

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¹⁹ S. Christ: (Aerial Map of Contemporary Johannesburg – Affected Area), 2016.

²⁰ Note the large bend in the railway line.

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TAB – Photograph: 3359. “The pit caused by explosion,” 1896.

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