

**THE MYTH OF THE WHITE MAN'S WAR: AN  
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE  
CONCENTRATION CAMPS FOR BLACKS  
DURING THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR OF 1899  
TO 1902**

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## INTRODUCTION

The South African War of October 1899 to May 1902 represents the most intense conflict in sub-Saharan Africa during the colonial era. Lasting for more or less two and a half years, the war became a costly and bloody struggle. However, the war has thus far been mostly interpreted by historians exclusively as a 'white man's war', in which only the interests and actions of the white communities and the Imperial power, Britain, who were the parties directly involved in the war, have been researched in depth.<sup>1</sup> Through the pages of numerous accounts of the conflict from the earliest accounts of military operations published in 1900 to the most recent Afrikaans and English monographs, the response of blacks to the conflict, their participation and the impact of the war on the black community, have been passed over almost completely.<sup>2</sup>

The various names given to the South African War, such as the English War, the Boer War, die Engelse Oorlog, the Second War of Independence and the Anglo-Boer War, depict the variety of attitudes of historians who write about it. These divergent attitudes, however, inspired me to conduct research on the South African War from a new angle, that is the perspective of a black South African. The topic I have selected deals with the experience of black people in the war, and particularly those blacks who were detained by the British in the concentration camps in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, which was after the British occupation known as the Orange River Colony. By looking at this aspect of the war, which has thus far received only scant attention, I hope to make a modest contribution to the historiography of the South African War.

Although an impression has been perpetuated in the different historical writings that the war was simply a British and Afrikaner affair, thus a white

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<sup>1</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War*, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> D. Denoon, "Participation in the Boer War: people's war, peoples non-war or non-people's war?", B.A. Ogot, (ed.) *War and Society in Africa*, pp.109-13.

man's war, this dissertation strongly maintains that it was rather a South African War. It was fought on South African soil and affected all South African population groups, though to different degrees of intensity. It is for this reason that the research seeks to throw some light on how the black community participated in the war.

Background information on the distribution of racial groups prior to the outbreak of the war and the causes of the war will be provided in chapter one. With substantial evidence, the following chapter disputes that the South African War was a white man's war. Chapters three and four, which constitute the core of the dissertation, trace the origin of the black concentration camps, their importance in terms of labour and administration, their termination, as well as the compensation of their occupants. An analysis of the impact of the South African War on the black population will be made. In conclusion, a critical summary of the experience of blacks and the effects of the war on the black community at large, will be provided.

It must be pointed out that although sources, both primary and secondary, dealing with the South African War are in abundance, there is indeed very little information on the involvement of blacks during the war. As a result, the task of researching such a topic became almost impossible to be achieved. Only a few sources which deal with the subject at length, are available.

The primary sources were consulted in the State Archives in Pretoria and Bloemfontein. These two archives depots seem to hold the only remaining official records of the camps for blacks. Enquiries by other researchers at the Public Record Office in London, where British government documents are kept, failed to identify any materials specifically related to the camps. The recordings and transcripts of the Oral History Project of the Institute for Advanced Social Research at the University of Witwatersrand, which preserve interviews of those blacks who were involved in the war and their descendants, were also used. Lastly, in terms of primary sources, the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein was also visited. Enquiries

were made at the Cory Library, Rhodes University, the James Stuart Archives, University of Natal, and the Military Museum, Johannesburg, but without success.

The primary sources have been supplemented by secondary materials provided by mainly English and Afrikaner writers. Only a few sources used were written by black writers on the subject.

The nature of literature used, the motives and bias of the writers have been carefully taken into account, as will be explained in the survey of the historiography of the war in chapter 2.

# CHAPTER ONE

## BACKGROUND TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR, 1899-1902

### 1.1 THE WHITE PERSPECTIVE: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BRITISH AND THE BOERS PRIOR TO THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR

The struggle between Briton and Boer is one of the major themes of 19th and early 20th century South African history. After the cession of the Cape of Good Hope to England the Boers, the Dutch-speaking frontier farmers, disliked the new government, especially its "friendly" policy towards the natives. Their material losses as a result of the abolition of slavery further alienated the Boers from the colonial government.<sup>1</sup>

Dissatisfaction of the Boers caused many of them to move away to the largely unexplored interior areas in the hope of finding a place where they could live without interference. This epic, which became known as the Great Trek, started in 1835 and continued over twenty years. When attempting to settle on the land beyond the Orange River and Natal, the British followed them and annexed Trans-Orangia in 1848. Angered by this turn of events, some Boers crossed the Vaal River in the north and in 1852, by the terms of the Sand River Convention, were given the right to govern themselves in what was called the South African Republic or Transvaal. Weary of the native wars in the Orange River Territory, between the Orange and Vaal Rivers, the British gave the Boers of that area independence. It became known as the Orange Free State.<sup>2</sup>

The British Cabinet resolved to withdraw altogether from the interior and left the Boers and the natives to fight their quarrels without further interference.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Pampallis, *Foundations of the new South Africa*, pp. 40-2.

<sup>2</sup> T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: a modern history*, 4th edition, pp. 72-4, 99.

But from the 1860s the situation in southern Africa became more complex due to the mineral revolution which drastically affected the British policy. The discovery of vast deposits of diamonds and gold in the interior set in motion a process of industrialisation in South Africa which transformed its economy as well as its social and political life within a few decades. This process coincided with the scramble for Africa, the rapid colonisation of the continent by major European powers, and led to an intensification of British efforts to gain political and economic control of southern Africa. In this age of imperialism British capitalists saw South African mines and secondary industries as important areas for the investment of their capital. They were determined that South Africa should not be conquered by other countries, especially Germany.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand Afrikaner nationalism, which started emerging after the Great Trek, grew stronger in the 1870s and 1880s. It developed a strong anti-British character as British aggressive attempts to extend its influence in South Africa threatened Boer power and the independence of the Boer republics.<sup>4</sup>

It was a combination of many factors which led to the outbreak of the South African War in 1899.<sup>5</sup> However, there is no doubt that the British policy of imperialism and expansionism in southern Africa was the major contributory factor. The expansion of gold mining heightened the tension between the Transvaal Boers and Britain. The Transvaal's new-found wealth made it easier to resist British influence over its affairs, but at the same time made Britain more interested in extending its power over the Transvaal.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> F.A. van Jaarsveld, *The awakening of Afrikaner nationalism 1868-1881*, pp.1-3.

<sup>5</sup> In a recently published book, *The origins of the South African War 1899-1902*, I.R. Smith deals comprehensively with the causes of the war and historiographical theories related to it.

<sup>6</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, pp.14-15.

Most of the capital invested in the gold mining industry and other business concerns on the Witwatersrand came from Britain. Paul Kruger, the Transvaal President, tried to dilute the preponderance of British capital by attracting investment from other European countries, especially Germany. But Kruger's ulterior motive of ending Britain's paramount position in southern Africa was difficult to achieve. Kruger demonstrated his objectives by blocking a federation in South Africa, by building up powerful armaments and by approaching European powers for assistance.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, it was the obligation of the British government to protect her subjects in the Transvaal (called "Uitlanders" by the Boers), who were denied elementary rights by Kruger's government. The British public were later told that the war was being fought to protect these British immigrants. However, the chief British aim of the war was to establish British power and supremacy in southern Africa in a federal state dominated by Britain.<sup>8</sup>

Peter Warwick argues that the British motive of attempting to annex the Transvaal was more of an economic rather than a political nature. He claims that the shift northward of economic activity in South Africa, from the Cape Colony to the Transvaal, was perceived as a threat to Britain's pre-eminent imperial influence in the subcontinent. Furthermore, the German commercial and political penetration of the Transvaal was a matter of great concern to Britain.<sup>9</sup>

The successful long-term development of a profitable gold-mining industry in the Transvaal became an important element of the British economy. Between 60 and 80 per cent of foreign capital in the industry was British. During the latter part of the 19th century gold came to underpin and facilitate much of the world's expanding volume of international commerce and by 1890 London had become the financial capital of the world trade. A continuing increase in the world's stock of gold was essential to the stable growth of international

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<sup>7</sup> T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: a modern history*, 4th edition, pp. 183-5.

<sup>8</sup> G.H.L. le May, *British supremacy in South Africa 1899-1907*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.1.

transactions and the Bank of England was especially keen to continue to strengthen its gold reserves, which doubled in value between 1890 and 1896.<sup>10</sup>

The contention of the Boers was that the Pretoria Convention of 1881, by which the British had secured certain rights, called suzerainty, was set aside by the London Convention of 1884. In accordance with this convention, the British gave up the right to march troops through the Transvaal and the right to any control over the treatment of the black people. On the contrary, England contended that the convention of 1881 had never been abolished. The British government insisted upon certain changes in the domestic government of the Transvaal concerning the franchise, education and parliamentary representation, which denied the British any say in the affairs of the Transvaal.<sup>11</sup>

Kruger's denial of full civil rights to the Uitlanders was not in itself a cause of the South African War, but it presented the British with the moral justification for pushing the Transvaal to the brink of hostilities. The Uitlanders were presented to the British public and world opinion as a worthy and unjustly persecuted group. The public was thus prepared for a war to free them.<sup>12</sup>

In May 1899 Sir Alfred Milner, British High Commissioner for South Africa, and Paul Kruger met in Bloemfontein to try and negotiate a settlement of the Uitlander problem. Although Kruger made some concessions, Milner considered them to be inadequate and the conference failed.<sup>13</sup>

As early as June 1899 Joseph Chamberlain, British Colonial Secretary, and Milner discussed the question of troop reinforcements and in August there were further warlike preparations. By the beginning of October there were nearly 20 000 Imperial troops in the Cape and Natal. When the war broke out there were 70 000 British soldiers either in South Africa or on the high seas

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<sup>10</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> B. Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War*, pp.20-21.

<sup>12</sup> T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: a modern history*, 4th edition, p.191.

<sup>13</sup> J.S. Marais, *The fall of Kruger's Republic*, pp.3-4.

being transported to the country. The British government completed their diplomatic campaign by manoeuvring the Transvaal into issuing a warlike ultimatum on 9 October 1899. The ultimatum demanded the withdrawal of all British troops on the Transvaal's frontiers and that those on their way to South Africa should be sent back. The British government rejected the Transvaal's ultimatum. The Free State rallied to Kruger's side and the South African War began on 12 October 1899.<sup>14</sup>

## **1.2 THE BLACK PERSPECTIVE: SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL POSITION OF BLACKS ON THE EVE OF AND DURING THE EARLY PHASES OF THE WAR**

Although the armed struggle of 1899 to 1902 was regarded as primarily a war between the British and the Boers, it also unavoidably affected other population groups in South Africa and particularly the blacks who constituted the majority of the population of the two Boer republics. According to Ram and Thomson, military attaches of the Netherlands with the Boers, there were 289 000 whites and 755 000 blacks in the ZAR and 78 000 whites against 130 000 blacks in the Free State.<sup>15</sup>

The 19th century represented an era of transition and trauma for most black societies in southern Africa. This era was marked by what became known as the Mfecane or Difaqane, when the Zulu state under the leadership of Shaka started to expand by conquest of neighbouring tribes.<sup>16</sup> Then followed the consolidation and reconstruction of African states as well as their penetration by white missionaries, traders, concessionaires and colonists. Subsequently, the mineral revolution stimulated a process of peasantisation and proletarianisation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> B. Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War*, pp. 51-2.

<sup>15</sup> Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), Pretoria, Leydsargief, vol. 1, ref. 781: Rapport, Ram en Thomson (vertaling), undated, p.28.

<sup>16</sup> J. Pampallis, *Foundations of the new South Africa*, pp.3-4.

<sup>17</sup> L. Callinicos, *Working life 1886-1940: a people's history of South Africa*, vol. 2, p.47.

The 19th century witnessed a period of the subjugation of the black tribes by whites. Britain annexed Basotholand in 1869 and in 1885 extended a protectorate over Bechuanaland. Zululand was incorporated into Natal in 1897. With the Swaziland Conventions of 1890 and 1894, the administration of Swaziland was entrusted to the ZAR (South African Republic). In the ZAR itself the Pedi chief, Sekhukhune, was subjugated in 1879. Ultimately, the Venda under Mphephu was colonised in 1898.<sup>18</sup>

It would be a mistake to view white encroachment in these years as a development in which powerful European colonies or republics expanded remorselessly at the expense of helpless black victims. The forms of interaction between black and white that occurred must be viewed against the internal political backgrounds of both parties. The Transvaal Republic, for instance, was for much of this period a highly vulnerable territory. It was lacking a sound economic base and suffering from internal divisions among its black inhabitants. In these circumstances the boer communities could fulfil their quest for more land by exploiting divisions among the blacks. They manipulated these internal divisions to their own ends and in 1852 they gained the independence of the area. The black population groups surrendered their economic independence. Large rural farming areas were taken over for white settlement.<sup>19</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the mineral revolution led to increased mining and industrial activities in the Transvaal. A system of migrant labour emerged in which the whites became dependent on black labour and the blacks in turn, dependent on the capital economy and industries of the whites. The migrant labour system was devised to constantly supply the rapidly growing mines and industries with a ready-made and cheap labour force.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> F. Pretorius, *1899-1902: Die Angloboere-oorlog*, p.74.

<sup>19</sup> P. Maylam, *A history of the African people of South Africa: from the early Iron-Age to the 1970s*, p.132.

<sup>20</sup> J. Pampallis, *Foundations of the new South Africa*, pp.23-4.

Within 20 years a string of mining towns marked out the gold-bearing Reef, running some 60 kilometers from Springs in the east to Krugersdorp in the west. These towns included among others, Heidelberg, Brakpan, Benoni, Boksburg, Germiston, Roodepoort and Randfontein. Thousands of black people were attracted to the Rand. Their number rose from 70 000 in 1897 to 97 000 in 1899. The black miners resided in compounds next to the mines.<sup>21</sup>

Under the migrant labour system labourers worked on the mines for a contract period of three to twelve months and then returned home to their families in the rural areas. While the men were away, the families continued working on the land, growing crops and raising livestock.<sup>22</sup>

One big difference between black mine workers and other urban workers was that most of the latter were not confined to compounds. They lived in shanty towns and slumyards in and around the cities. In Johannesburg, for example, black locations such as Sophiatown, Nancefield (later renamed Orlando), Alexandra and Pimville sprang up. In Sophiatown and Alexandra blacks could buy plots on freehold tenure. It was interesting that blacks from all parts of southern Africa lived side by side in peace. Their ethnic loyalties weakened as a higher degree of class consciousness developed. This was particularly the case for those who ceased to be migrants by permanently settling in urban areas.<sup>23</sup>

Technological advances and expanding investments in service businesses crushed the small-scale efforts of the self-employed blacks aiming to earn an independent living. Among others, brickmakers, transport riders, washermen and women were swallowed up by larger firms or factories. This was because these factories had the capital to invest in technology such as washing machines which speeded up production, or vans and buses which transported goods and people more efficiently and quickly. Therefore,

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<sup>21</sup> L. Callinicos, *Working life 1886-1940: a people's history of South Africa*, vol. 2, p.38.

<sup>22</sup> J.M. Smalberger, "I.D.B. and the mining compound system in the 1880s", *South African Journal of Economics*, vol.42, no.4, 1974, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> N. Ragan, *African settlements in the Johannesburg area, 1903-1923* (unpublished MA dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1978), pp.42-5.

capitalist expansion and a number of other factors, such as drought and racial segregation in towns, worked against the self-employed blacks. As they were no longer able to continue as producers, they were forced into wage labour.<sup>24</sup>

It has been demonstrated that the gold-mining industry not only stimulated the introduction of a fully fledged capitalist system, but also facilitated a process of industrialisation, detribalisation, urbanisation and the transformation of the black community into wage labourers and members of the proletariat.<sup>25</sup>

Political consciousness and participation among blacks in the British colonies and Boer republics in South Africa was still at a very low level by the end of the nineteenth century. The earliest black participation in parliamentary politics was in the Cape Colony. A small group of Christian, mission-educated blacks became voters. In the early 1880s they formed the first three modern political organisations. The first of these was Imbumba Yama Africa, or the South African Aborigines Association. The Native Educational Association, founded by Elijah Makwane, a Presbyterian minister, was the second one. Lastly there was the Native Electoral Association led by John Tengo Jabavu. Although these organisations were confined mainly to Xhosa-speaking people, they were non-tribal in composition and reflected a growth of black national consciousness.<sup>26</sup>

What were the political views of blacks - both workers and self-employed persons - on the eve of and during the early phases of the South African War? When hostilities broke out in October 1899, politically conscious blacks generally supported Britain against the Boers in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. They hoped that a British victory would result in the extension of idealised British non-racial policies over the Afrikaner republics.

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<sup>24</sup> S. Marks and R. Rathbone (eds), *Industrialisation and social change in South Africa*, pp.82-4.

<sup>25</sup> J. Grobler, *A decisive clash? A short history of black protest politics in South Africa, 1875-1976*, p.6.

<sup>26</sup> T.R.H. Davenport, *South Africa: a modern history*, 4th edition, pp.97-8.

Expressing the black attitude a meeting in Cape Town in October 1899, chaired by Alfred Mangena, a prominent leader of black politics, pledged the support of blacks to Britain.<sup>27</sup>

"Sir, we are willing at all times to do duty for the Queen. Our great multitudes of waggons and beasts are already moving Lord Kitchener into battle against the Boer pestilence. I have several good waggons and loyal drivers to assist the soldiers in this war. Please accept our humble services. We are free and strong Native subjects, who will do the business of carrying and fetching today, tomorrow and many long days afterwards, until the British flag rules over all."<sup>28</sup> These were the words of Paul Mahlangu, a petty-transport contractor to the Queenstown Remount Depot. His comments crystallised the mood and spirit of the majority of blacks, including those in the Transvaal.

Black workers in the industrial region of the Transvaal hoped that the overthrow of the Pretoria regime would bring about a substantial improvement in their conditions of work.<sup>29</sup> When Roberts's troops arrived on the Rand in 1900 crowds of blacks jubilantly burned their passes, expecting that these documents would not be needed under the British administration.<sup>30</sup>

Pro-British blacks argued that the high expectations of blacks were given rise by the British condemnation of the ill-treatment of blacks in the Boer republics. There is no doubt that the pronouncements of imperial officials before and during the war gave rise to such hope. This was demonstrated by the declaration of the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, that "the treatment of the natives in the Transvaal has been disgraceful, it has been brutal, it has been unworthy of a civilised power."<sup>31</sup> A few months later the British Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, said that there must be no doubt that

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<sup>27</sup> A. Odendaal, *Vukani bantu! The beginning of black protest politics in South Africa to 1912*, pp.30-1.

<sup>28</sup> TAD, Colonial Office (CO), vol. 1, ref. 98: letter, P. Mahlangu/Lt. B.F. Fletcher, 22 August 1900.

<sup>29</sup> S.M. Molema, *Bantu past and present: an ethnographical and historical study of the native races of South Africa*, pp.283-97.

<sup>30</sup> *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 15 October 1902, pp.12-3.

<sup>31</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, pp. 63-4.

following victory, "due precaution will be taken for the philanthropic and kindly and improving treatment of these countless indigenous races of whose destiny I fear we have been too forgetful."<sup>32</sup> The British High Commissioner in South Africa, Lord Milner, similarly assured a coloured deputation that it was not race or colour but civilisation which was the test of a man's capacity for political rights. Milner, in fact used the ill-treatment of blacks in the Transvaal as one of the reasons for intervening in the affairs of the Transvaal.<sup>33</sup>

These examples of black attitudes towards the South African War illustrate that blacks were not apathetic. If nothing else they had a vital interest in the outcome of the war. Therefore it would not give a full picture to view the war exclusively from a white perspective. The interaction of the various groups who participated in or were affected by the war, including the black communities, should be reflected in order to see the war in its proper context.

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<sup>32</sup> TAD, Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA), vol. 1/8, ref. 25A: Circular minute no. 59, 21 September 1899.

<sup>33</sup> TAD, CO, vol. 266, ref. 2724: letter, Milner/Chamberlain, 9 January 1900.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MYTH OF THE WHITE MAN'S WAR

Leonard Thompson defines a political myth as a tale told about the past to legitimise certain political views and policies.<sup>1</sup> He explains how a political mythology was built up round certain events in the history of the Afrikaner, such as Slagtersnek and the Covenant that preceded the battle of Blood River, in order to justify the apartheid system.<sup>2</sup> Afrikaans historians such as F.A. van Jaarsveld<sup>3</sup> and B.J. Liebenberg<sup>4</sup> affirm that some of the beliefs regarding the Blood River Covenant are indeed myths.

Has the South African War of 1899-1902 been mythologised in the same manner? My contention in this dissertation is that the interpretation that the South African War of 1899 to 1902 was a white man's war is a political myth and has distorted the history of that war. This white-centred, one-sided, biased view must be totally condemned and rejected as it clearly demonstrates that Europeans have, for too long, falsified the history of the black race as a way of justifying their invasion and domination of South Africa. It should be categorically stated that the perception that only the British and the Boers participated in the war, is not at all true.<sup>5</sup>

#### 2.1 THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR AS A WHITE MAN'S WAR

The South African War is a remarkably well-documented historical event. André Wessels points out that more than 4 000 publications (including books,

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<sup>1</sup> L. Thompson, *The political mythology of apartheid*, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> L. Thompson, *The political mythology of apartheid*, p. 234.

<sup>3</sup> F.A. van Jaarsveld, *The awakening of Afrikaner nationalism 1868-1881*.

<sup>4</sup> B.J. Liebenberg, "Mites rondom Bloedrivier en die Gelofte", *Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Joernaal*, no. 20, 1988, pp. 17-32.

<sup>5</sup> R.H. du Pre, *The making of racial conflict in South Africa: a historical perspective*, p.vii.

articles and pamphlets) plus more than a hundred theses and dissertations dealing with the war have been published.<sup>6</sup>

Until recently all the books on the 1899-1902 war depicted the conflict as almost exclusively a white man's war. During and shortly after the war the first generation of histories of the war were published, including Amery's series<sup>7</sup>, an official German version<sup>8</sup> and popular histories by Doyle<sup>9</sup>, Cassell<sup>10</sup>, Cunliffe<sup>11</sup>, Creswicke<sup>12</sup>, Wilson<sup>13</sup>, Davitt<sup>14</sup>, Cook<sup>15</sup>, De Wet<sup>16</sup>, Penning<sup>17</sup>, Vallentin<sup>18</sup>, Van Everdingen<sup>19</sup>, Reitz<sup>20</sup> and Fuller<sup>21</sup> were published. In this first generation of books dealing with the war the English writers referred to it as the Boer War and the Dutch writers called it the English War.

From the 1950s a second generation of monographs dealing with the South African War started being published. English titles included the books of Gibbs<sup>22</sup>, Holt<sup>23</sup>, Kruger<sup>24</sup>, Marais<sup>25</sup>, Selby<sup>26</sup>, Barbary<sup>27</sup>, Martin<sup>28</sup>, Belfield<sup>29</sup>,

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<sup>6</sup> A. Wessels, "Veel navorsing moet nog oor dié vryheidsoorlog gedoen word", *Beeld*, 24 Oktober 1996.

<sup>7</sup> L.S. Amery (ed.), *The Times history of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902* (7 vols, 1900-1909).

<sup>8</sup> *The war in South Africa* (2 vols, English translation 1904/1906).

<sup>9</sup> A.C. Doyle, *The great Boer War* (1900, further editions 1901/1902).

<sup>10</sup> *Cassell's history of the Boer War 1899-1902* (2 vols, 1903).

<sup>11</sup> F.H.E. Cunliffe, *The history of the Boer War* (2 vols, 1901/1904).

<sup>12</sup> L. Creswicke, *South Africa and the Transvaal War* (8 vols, s.a.).

<sup>13</sup> H.W. Wilson, *With the flag to Pretoria: a history of the Boer War of 1899-1902* (2 vols, 1900/1902) and *After Pretoria: the guerrilla war* (2 vols, 1902).

<sup>14</sup> M. Davitt, *The Boer fight for freedom: from the beginning of hostilities to the Peace of Pretoria* (1902).

<sup>15</sup> E.T. Cook, *The rights and wrongs of the Transvaal war* (1902).

<sup>16</sup> C.R. De Wet, *De strijd tusschen Boer en Brit* (1902).

<sup>17</sup> L. Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika: de strijd tusschen Engeland en de verbonden Boeren-republieken Transvaal en Oranje-Vrijstaat in zijn verloop geschetst* (3 vols, 1899/1901/s.a.).

<sup>18</sup> W. Vallentin, *Der Burenkrieg* (1903).

<sup>19</sup> W. Van Everdingen, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* (3 vols, 1902-1915).

<sup>20</sup> D. Reitz, *Commando: a Boer journal of the Boer War* (1929).

<sup>21</sup> J.F.C. Fuller, *The last of the gentlemen's wars* (1937).

<sup>22</sup> P. Gibbs, *Death of the last republic: the story of the Anglo-Boer War* (1957).

<sup>23</sup> E. Holt, *The Boer War* (1958).

<sup>24</sup> R. Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray: a history of the Boer War* (1959).

<sup>25</sup> J.S. Marais, *The fall of Kruger's republic* (1961).

<sup>26</sup> J. Selby, *The Boer War: a study in cowardice and courage* (1969).

<sup>27</sup> J. Barbary, *The Boer War* (1969).

<sup>28</sup> C. Martin, *The Boer War* (1969).

<sup>29</sup> E. Belfield, *The Boer War* (1975).

Judd<sup>30</sup>, Spies<sup>31</sup>, Farwell<sup>32</sup>, Pakenham<sup>33</sup>, Warwick<sup>34</sup> and Cammack<sup>35</sup>. Afrikaans monographs dealing with the war were published by Scholtz<sup>36</sup>, Gronum<sup>37</sup> and Pretorius<sup>38</sup>. Because of the time that had elapsed since the war, the availability of primary sources and the fact that the authors were mostly professional academics using scientific methods of history writing, these publications were in most cases more objective and analytical than the earlier ones. This second generation of monographs on the war called it the Anglo-Boer War. Some Afrikaans historians preferred "Tweede Vryheidsoorlog" (Second War of Liberation - the First War of Liberation being the 1877-1881 British-Transvaal clash) to emphasise that it was a conflict in which the Boers fought for their freedom from British Imperialism.

Most of the above-mentioned books contained very little or no information on black participation in the war. Rayne Kruger in his celebrated account, *Goodbye Dolly Gray*, maintains for example, that although blacks constituted the majority of the South African population, they were mere spectators during the war.<sup>39</sup>

The important question in the context of this dissertation is: Why was the role of blacks in the South African War ignored for such a long time?

There are several possible answers to this question. Firstly the "silence" regarding black participation in the war is owing to a lack of written sources. This is partly due to the illiteracy of the vast majority of blacks who experienced the war. Furthermore, whites did not take much trouble to fill this

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<sup>30</sup> D. Judd, *The Boer War* (1977).

<sup>31</sup> S.B. Spies, *Methods of barbarism: Roberts and Kitchener and civilians in the Boer republics January 1900 - May 1902* (1977).

<sup>32</sup> B. Farwell, *The great Boer War* (1977).

<sup>33</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War* (1979).

<sup>34</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902* (1980).

<sup>35</sup> D. Cammack, *The Rand at war 1899-1902* (1990).

<sup>36</sup> G.D. Scholtz, *Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902* (1960).

<sup>37</sup> M.A. Gronum, *Die Engelse Oorlog 1899-1902: die gevegsmetodes waarmee die Boere-republieke verower is* (1972).

<sup>38</sup> F. Pretorius, *1899-1902: Die Anglo-Boereoorlog* (1985) and *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902* (1991).

<sup>39</sup> R. Kruger, *Goodbye Dolly Gray: a history of the Boer War*, p.241.

gap by recording black participation. This may be ascribed to the prevailing racist attitudes of the time - blacks were regarded as inferior and their history not worth recording.<sup>40</sup>

Another possible explanation is that the role of blacks was ignored on purpose, because it did not fit in with the agendas of the white historians who wrote about the war.

According to Irving Hexham<sup>41</sup> Afrikaans historians used their accounts of the South African War to stimulate Afrikaner nationalism, which is a sense of national identity of Afrikaners. They emphasised the hardship their people suffered during the war as a result of British imperialism. Their primary objective was to popularise the injustices of British imperialism and the ever present threat of anglicisation to the Afrikaner community.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, recording black history of the war was not important to them. They wanted to rally and mobilise the demoralised Afrikaner nation against British domination.

British historians were also not inclined to record black participation in the war, and especially not details about black concentration camps during the war. Firstly Britain wanted to justify her policy of imperialism in South Africa in terms of protecting her citizens against Afrikaner tyranny.<sup>43</sup> Secondly the British were ashamed of the brutal results of the atrocities of the scorched-earth policy implemented by Kitchener during the war, of which the concentration camps formed a part and which could blemish Britain's international image. Pro-British writers were therefore unwilling to publicise

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<sup>40</sup> Most contemporary primary sources, both on the British and Boer side, reflect the racist attitudes of whites by the turn of the 19th century. Referring to blacks terms such as *natives*, *kaffirs* and *boys*, which today are regarded as derogatory, were in general use by whites. Blacks were clearly not regarded as complete and capable human beings worth of taking part in the war.

<sup>41</sup> I. Hexham, *The irony of apartheid*, p. 3. See also J.W. Smillen, *The development of Calvinistic political theory in the Netherlands* (unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, Duke University, 1973), p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, p.386.

<sup>43</sup> J.A. Schampeter, *Imperialism and social classes*, p.17.

this aspect of the war. Devitt says that the silence over the deaths of thousands of blacks in the concentration camps was a deliberate effort by the British to keep the evils of their military strategy unknown.<sup>44</sup> It is alleged that British military commanders such as Kitchener deliberately destroyed war documents which contained evidence of atrocities by the British forces.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.2 RECOGNITION BY HISTORIANS OF BLACK PARTICIPATION IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR

Important historical events are continually being reinterpreted. As political views change and new evidence comes to light, new versions revise traditional historiographical views.

The South African War is no exception. Although the history of the war was for many years distorted and presented in a paternalistic way, it would be naive to think that the truth could be hidden for ever. As new evidence about black involvement surfaced, it urged writers to rediscover the true facts.

A factor which facilitated a new interpretation of the war was the political changes which occurred in South Africa since the 1960s. Due to aversion to apartheid and the re-emergence of a powerful black nationalism spearheaded by the African National Congress, there was, especially after the publication of the *Oxford History of South Africa* new interest in black history which had been blatantly ignored by early racist writers. This was also reflected in the historiography of the South African War.

Though not focussing exclusively on the involvement of blacks in the war, D. Judd<sup>46</sup>, J.H. Breytenbach<sup>47</sup>, T. Pakenham<sup>48</sup> and I.R. Smith<sup>49</sup> are some of the writers who acknowledged that blacks were active participants in the war.

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<sup>44</sup> N. Devitt, *The concentration camps in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902*, p.21.

<sup>45</sup> F.J. Jacobs, interview with B.E. Mongalo, Bloemfontein, 16 May 1996.

<sup>46</sup> D. Judd, *The Boer War*.

<sup>47</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, 5 vols.

<sup>48</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*.

<sup>49</sup> I.R. Smith, *The origins of the South African War 1899-1902*.

Thomas Pakenham argues that generalisations such as the 'white man's war' and a 'gentleman's war' are misleading. After conducting interviews with war veterans and studying the War Office files, he came to the conclusion that blacks played a significant role in the South African War.<sup>50</sup> Although Iain Smith agrees that the British and the Boers were the main antagonists in the war, he however maintains that terms such as The Boer War, The English War or The Anglo-Boer War are a gross simplification as they imply that only the Briton and the Boer were involved in the war. Smith rejects the notion that the war was confined to whites only.<sup>51</sup> Interviews conducted by the Institute for Advanced Social Research at Wits University with blacks who experienced the war and their descendants also revealed that the war involved blacks and impacted to such an extent upon them that it formed an indelible part of their historical memory.

Devoting more attention to the theme of black participation are historians such as P. Warwick, S.B. Spies, F. Pretorius and B. Nasson. Most of them prefer to call the war the South African War.

Peter Warwick's book, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, published in 1983, remains the standard work on black participation in the war. With 9 chapters in his book of 226 pages, Warwick produced the most comprehensive secondary work to date on this aspect in the historiography of the South African War. Not only did he dispute the myth of the white man's war by examining the involvement of blacks in the war, but he also revealed the hardships endured by the black community both in the concentration camps and in the black locations during and after the war.

Together with Burrige Spies he also contributed a chapter on black participation in the book edited by them, *The South African War*, published in 1980. Spies had earlier, in 1977, published *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts*

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<sup>50</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p.xvii.

<sup>51</sup> I.R. Smith, *The origins of the South African War 1899-1902*, p. 6.

and Kitchener and civilians in the Boer republics January 1900-May 1902 in which he, inter alia, referred to black concentration camps.

Fransjohan Pretorius devoted a large section of chapter 8 of his book, *1899-1902: Die Angloboere-oorlog*, to depict that blacks were not mere spectators during the war and became the first Afrikaans historian to focus attention on this aspect of the war in a published work. H.J. Botha had earlier (in 1965) completed a dissertation in Afrikaans on "non-whites" in war service.<sup>52</sup>

Out of 9 chapters of *Abraham Esau's War: A black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902*, Bill Nasson devoted 6 chapters to demonstrate that blacks and coloureds were active participants in the war.

### **2.3 OVERVIEW OF BLACK PARTICIPATION IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR**

It soon becomes evident once one begins to seriously question the popular image of the war being confined to white participants that black people played an indispensable part in the military operations. This is borne out not only by information in the above-mentioned secondary sources, but also by primary archival material on the war being researched at the moment not only by myself, but also by Stowell Kessler. A vast amount of research in this regard still needs to be done.

In a region where the white people made up only a fifth of the total population, it was unlikely that the blacks who were in the majority, could have been passive during the war. Compared to four million blacks, there were only one million whites in South Africa at the time of the war. According to Peter Warwick, whites in the Cape Colony were outnumbered by blacks by 3:1, in Natal by almost 10:1 while the ratio in the Boer republics were 4:1 in the Transvaal and 2:1 in the Orange Free State.<sup>53</sup> These ratios correspond to the ones mentioned in a much earlier work by J.A. Hobson. According to

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<sup>52</sup> H.J. Botha, *Die moord op Derdepoort, 25 November 1899: nie-blankes in oorlogsdien* (unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Pretoria, 1965).

<sup>53</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.4.

Hobson blacks were about three times as numerous as whites in the Cape Colony and the Transvaal, twice as numerous in the Free State and ten times as numerous in Natal.<sup>54</sup>

Officially both the Transvaal and British governments were opposed to arming blacks. According to Peter Warwick there was a genuine fear among both the British and the Boers that once war began, the blacks could seize the opportunity to advance their own interests and possibly even attempt to overthrow white rule altogether. The fear was based on the fact that the British broke the independence of the Zulus and the Pedis only 20 years before. Also only in 1898 did the British finally overcome the Venda power.<sup>55</sup> The fear was also based on the fact that to provide blacks with large numbers of firearms would increase the possibility of black resistance to white control. Neither the British nor the Boers at the outset of the war committed all their resources to battle with one another, mainly because of the fear of black rebellion. Both sides took precautions to ensure that troops were held in reserve to prepare to counter any black disturbances.

Against the background of the views which then prevailed, that blacks were inferior to whites, one can deduce that blacks were not to be involved in the war because they were regarded as uncivilised.<sup>56</sup> It was commonly believed that the military methods of blacks were unacceptably brutal and white women and children would not be shown mercy by black soldiers.<sup>57</sup>

The most detailed pre-war statement of the attitude of the Boers to black participation in a war was made by J.C. Smuts, State Attorney of the Transvaal, in May 1898. He strongly argued that it would be contrary to the

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<sup>54</sup> J.A. Hobson, *The war in South Africa: its causes and effects*, p.279.

<sup>55</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.18.

<sup>56</sup> Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), Pretoria, Leydsargief, vol. 1, ref. 781: Rapport, Ram en Thomson (vertaling), undated, p.28.

<sup>57</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, p. 194.

rules of international law to employ uncivilised blacks under white officers during war and this was unthinkable to the Boer community.<sup>58</sup>

In October 1899, Prime Minister W.P. Schreiner of the Cape Colony appealed to blacks to remain calm and assured them that hostilities would not become serious enough to force their involvement.<sup>59</sup> Schreiner's successor, Sir Gordon Sprigg, who served from 1900 to 1904, also reinforced this fact when he advised Milner in December 1900 that his administration was not dependent on the support of the native community to win the war.<sup>60</sup> The War Office was confident that Britain's regular army and white volunteers would easily be able to overrun the Boer republics.

The War Office in London regarded the use of non-white troops, including blacks, in a white South African War as unacceptable. A secret War Office memorandum of February 1901 confirms that almost all officials concurred in the belief that stability and legitimacy of British imperial interests in southern Africa was best served by entrusting war service duties to white soldiers only.<sup>61</sup>

Thus the official line of both the British and Boer leadership before and during the war was that the war should as far as possible be kept a purely white conflict. Leonard Thompson points out that the tacit agreement between the British and the Boers not to involve blacks in the war, except as unarmed servants, scouts and guards, was maintained throughout the war.<sup>62</sup> In principle, there was an agreement between the British and the Boers not to arm blacks during the war in order to maintain the struggle as a gentlemen's war. This was reflected in Chamberlain's word of August 1901: "There seems

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<sup>58</sup> W.K. Hancock and J. van der Poel (eds), *Selections from the Smuts Papers*, vol. 1: letter, Smuts/W.J. Steal, 4 January 1902, p. 484.

<sup>59</sup> E.A. Walker, *W.P. Schreiner: A South African*, p. 203.

<sup>60</sup> Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), War Office (WO), vol. 117/3, Sprigg Papers: letter Sprigg/Milner, 31 December 1900.

<sup>61</sup> D. Killingway, "The idea of British imperial African army", *Journal of African History*, no. 2, 20 March 1979, p.27.

<sup>62</sup> M. Wilson and L. Thompson (eds), *The Oxford history of South Africa*, vol. 2, p.326.

to be an opinion ... that we have come to some sort of agreement with the Boers that natives are not to be employed in the war."<sup>63</sup>

Although in terms of official policy on both sides the struggle was supposed to be an exclusively white man's war, throughout the campaign allegations were persistently made by both parties against each other, regarding the involvement of armed blacks. For example, General Cronjé, the Boer commander, complained to the British officer in charge of the troops during the siege of Mafikeng, General R.S.S. Baden-Powell, about arming blacks in a letter written on 29 October 1899: "It is understood that you have armed Bastards, Fingos and Barolongs against us - in this you have committed an enormous act of wickedness ... reconsider the matter, even if it cost you the loss of Mafekeng ... disarm your blacks and thereby act the part of a white man in a white man's war."<sup>64</sup>

The Boer commander, General J.C.G. Kemp, also protested to Kitchener that the war was being fought contrary to civilised warfare on account of it being carried on in a great measure with "kaffirs".<sup>65</sup>

On the other hand General Sir Redvers Buller was also informed that Boer forces were enlisting blacks to fight on their side.<sup>66</sup> There is no doubt that from the beginning of the war, both sides depended on the indigenous inhabitants of the Transvaal, Orange Free State, Natal, Cape Colony, Bechuanaland, Basotholand, Swaziland and Rhodesia in not only non-combatant but also combatant capacities.<sup>67</sup>

Initially, both the British and the Boer authorities armed blacks with the sole aim of protecting their territories' borders, rather than to set blacks against

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<sup>63</sup> K.L. Nelson, "The black horror on the Rhine: race as a factor in post-World War I diplomacy", *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1970, pp. 606-10.

<sup>64</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p.396.

<sup>65</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 32, ref. 8048: letter, Kemp/Kitchener, 15 July 1901.

<sup>66</sup> TAD, Colonial Office (CO), vol. 179, ref. 210/8629: statement, Lieutenant Lambton, 12 February 1900.

<sup>67</sup> S. Marks and S. Trapido, "Lord Milner and the South African State", P. Bonner (ed.), *Working papers in southern African studies*, vol. 2, pp. 54-6.

whites. The Boer commandos for example, armed blacks who were living along the Crocodile River in the Waterberg district in November 1899 as well as others near Dundee in Natal. On the other hand, the British supplied arms and ammunition to the Ngwato of chief Kgama. The main aim was to protect the frontier of the Bechuanaland Protectorate as well as the Mafikeng-Bulawayo railway line. In the south, some 4 000 Mfengu and Mthembu were organised into armed levies to counter any Boer invasion and suppress a possible Afrikaner rising. The Zululand Native Police, already in existence at the outbreak of the war, were armed with rifles and mounted against the Boer forces.<sup>68</sup>

The arming of the Kgatla by the British had unfortunate consequences in the Marico district of the Transvaal in that it led to an armed battle between them and Boer forces. At least 15 Kgatla died in the attack while 17 were wounded by the Boer forces. Many Boer families, fearing further attacks, formed laagers or fled to Rustenburg for safety.<sup>69</sup>

During the first year of the war, at the request of the British government, Roberts issued strict orders that blacks were on no account to be armed for active service against the Boers. Even blacks employed by the British army were threatened with severe punishment if they wore military uniform. However, Kitchener's attitude to the use of blacks in the war was far more flexible than Roberts's. When he assumed command towards the end of 1900, there had already been suggestions that blacks employed by the British army should be armed for the purpose of self-defence against the Boers.<sup>70</sup>

Consequently, during the latter half of 1901, both the British government and army conceded that blacks should be armed to guard the blockhouses and blockhouse lines, due to the British shortage of manpower. Severe criticism of

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<sup>68</sup> TAD, CO, vol. 1/4/7, R.M. Estcourt.

<sup>69</sup> F Pretorius, *1899-1902: Die Angloboere-oorlog*, p.76.

<sup>70</sup> B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's war: a black South African war in the Cape, 1899-1902*, p. 22.

this policy came in particular from the Liberal opposition in Britain. As a result, Kitchener evaded the War Office's periodic questions regarding the exact numbers of blacks armed in the British army. With a lot of pressure on him from the War Office in April 1902 Kitchener finally admitted that arms had been supplied to 2 496 blacks in the Cape Colony and 4 696 blacks in Natal, the Free State and the Transvaal. He maintained that a total of 10 053 blacks and coloureds were armed. But in March 1902 Lloyd George asserted in the House of Commons that there were as many as 30 000 armed blacks in British employment even though it was unclear on what basis he had arrived at this figure. Although precise statistics were unavailable, it seems likely, according to Peter Warwick, that as many as 100 000 blacks were employed in various capacities on the British side during the war.<sup>71</sup> These blacks, whether armed or unarmed, played an increasingly important role towards the end of the war when the numbers of the Boer commandos were dwindling.

During the guerrilla stage of the war, the British army became more dependent on active involvement of blacks and blacks became more deeply involved and active in military operations on the side of the British army. For instance, blacks were used throughout the Boer republics to round up the cattle. They brought these cattle into the garrison towns in return for a share of the destruction of farmsteads and crops. As a further measure to button up the movements of the guerrilla Boer units and deny them access to supplies, a large number of blacks collaborated with the army of British occupation to resist the encroachment of Boer commandos into their localities. Thereby, they assisted in restricting the area over which the republican forces could operate and enabling the British army to concentrate its manpower elsewhere.<sup>72</sup> For example, following the withdrawal of burghers from Pedi territory in June 1900, the remaining Boer officers were driven from the district, and during the guerrilla war no commando dared to move into the region between the Olifants and Steelpoort rivers controlled by the

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<sup>71</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, pp.24-5.

<sup>72</sup> E. Hobhouse, *The brunt of the war and where it fell*, pp.46-7.

Sekhukhune regiments. Throughout areas of the northern and western Transvaal, Boer land was seized and occupied by blacks.<sup>73</sup>

More importantly, blacks assisted in bringing the Boer civilians into the concentration camp system. This aspect will be thoroughly discussed in the next chapter.

Despite the republican policy which disapproved of the arming of blacks, there were cases where blacks were reported to have been fighting on the Boer side. For example, General P.A. Cronjé armed blacks during the siege of Mafikeng in February 1900. In Natal, black labourers who absconded to the British camps from Boer laagers repeatedly claimed that armed blacks were accompanying the commandos. During the siege of Ladysmith the Boers allegedly regularly employed armed blacks in their outposts at night.<sup>74</sup> According to estimates at least 10 000 blacks and coloureds accompanied the Boer commandos.<sup>75</sup>

Both British and Boers also employed blacks in non-combatant roles. In the British army transport riding, for example, was done mostly by blacks. Over 5 000 blacks, mostly drivers, were employed by Roberts's columns during the long haul to Bloemfontein in February-March 1900. Seven thousand blacks took part in General French's march to Machadodorp in the Transvaal later in the same year. The British army also depended on black workers for carrying dispatches, proclamations and messages, for constructing fortifications, supervising horses in the remount and veterinary departments as well as for sanitary work and other labour duties in the military camps.<sup>76</sup>

The British army was largely composed of soldiers who did not have first hand experience of the South African environment. They needed scouts who

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<sup>73</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.5.

<sup>74</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, pp. 29-31.

<sup>75</sup> B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's war: a black South African war in the Cape, 1899-1902*, p. 94.

<sup>76</sup> B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's war: a black South African war in the Cape, 1899-1902*, pp. 66-7.

knew the countryside and often used the local black population for this purpose. Some blacks acted as scouting and intelligence aid and in Natal the Zululand Native Scouts were an established force. In an IASR interview Motshubelwe Miloko mentioned that blacks were trained as soldiers and spied for the English military camps.<sup>77</sup> Breytenbach confirms that black spies were used by the British.<sup>78</sup>

Like the British army, the Boers also enlisted the assistance of blacks in many ways. At the beginning of the war they conscripted the blacks to work on farms in an attempt to maintain agricultural output in the absence of many Boer farmers. During the guerrilla phase, cattle and military supplies were sometimes left with blacks for safe-keeping until they were needed by the commandos.<sup>79</sup>

The Boers also conscripted blacks and coloureds to dig trenches, drive wagons, collect firewood, attend to horses and to perform other duties related to their campaign. It is indeed hard to believe that the war was between the British and the Afrikaners only. This was suggested by Sol P'laattie's description in his Mafikeng diary entry for 9 December 1899 of how the Barolong herdboys guarding their stock during the British siege picked up the fragments of shells which burst nearby. Yet the role of blacks was by no means as passive or as immune as this description suggested.<sup>80</sup>

Blacks and coloureds became involved in military employment for a variety of reasons. Labour enlisted by the Boers was largely unpaid. On the other hand, some categories of work performed by blacks were well paid by the British side. Those who enrolled at the De Aar labour depot in the northern Cape were paid 60 shillings a month. This was about 10 shillings more than the

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<sup>77</sup> M. Moloko, interview, Institute for Advanced Social Research (IASR), Wits, Oral History Project (OHP), 20 November 1979, tape 150/a.

<sup>78</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, vol. I, p.213.

<sup>79</sup> T.C. Caldwell, *The Anglo-Boer War: Why was it fought? Who was responsible?*, p.68.

<sup>80</sup> J.H. Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, vol. III, p.415.

comparable rate on the gold mines before the outbreak of the war. Drivers and leaders could earn up to 90 shillings a month. Other black workers, however, received as little as 30 shillings. The usual rate of pay for a worker seems to have been between 40 and 50 shillings a month.<sup>81</sup>

Wessels concludes that the South African War affected civilians of all communities (white, black, coloured and Asian) and had far-reaching economic, social and political consequences for all inhabitants of South Africa and for intergroup relations.<sup>82</sup>

From the above information the vital role played by blacks during the South African War becomes clear. The accumulation of such evidence has demolished the myth of the white man's war.

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<sup>81</sup> E. Hobhouse, *The Boer War*, p.117.

<sup>82</sup> A. Wessels, "Veel navorsing moet nog oor dié vryheidsoorlog gedoen word", *Beeld*, 24 Oktober 1996.

## CHAPTER THREE

# ESTABLISHMENT, FUNCTIONS AND OPERATION OF BLACK CONCENTRATION CAMPS

### 3.1 REFUGEE CAMPS OR CONCENTRATION CAMPS?

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, refugee camps are for refugees or defenceless and vulnerable persons seeking protection during times of war or political upheaval.<sup>1</sup> They are used for humanitarian purposes, as a way of helping innocent civilians rather than capturing them.

Concentration camps are used as a military measure to concentrate the civilian population in order to prevent them from providing aid to enemy forces. They may also be used as a means of hastening the end of the war by terrorising the enemy into submission. Confinement is solely for the period of hostilities.<sup>2</sup>

What is interesting is that the camps which were built for both white and black civilians during the South African War of 1899 to 1902, reflect the characteristics of both refugee and concentration camps. The camps for blacks during the South African War have been alternatively called "refugee camps" in official British sources and "concentration camps" by many historians. Which of the two is the better term? This can only be ascertained by investigating the establishment and functions of these camps.

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<sup>1</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition (1984), Macropaedia, Volume VIII, pp. 71-2.

<sup>2</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition (1984), Macropaedia, Volume III, p. 252. See also *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. II, pp. 52-3.

### 3.2 ESTABLISHMENT OF CAMPS FOR BLACKS

To put the establishment of camps for blacks during the South African War in its proper context it must be viewed against the background of the British military strategy. The historiography on the various phases in which the war developed and the evolving military strategies employed by the British and the Boers are analysed by Wessels.<sup>3</sup> He identifies four main phases of the war: the limited Boer offensive on British territory (11-31 October 1899); the Buller phase or unsuccessful initial British counteroffensive (31 October 1899-10 February 1900); the Roberts phase during which the British forces relentlessly advanced on three fronts into the Boer Republics (11 February-29 November 1900); and the Kitchener phase during which the Boers resorted to guerrilla warfare (31 March 1900-31 May 1902). It was during this last phase that black civilians became increasingly involved in the war and thus on which this dissertation focusses.

The guerrilla tactics employed by the Boer forces lasted for more or less two years. The emphasis of the Boer campaign was on a war of movement, where authority was decentralised and vested in local commandos operating in areas familiar to them. Small groups of the commandos returned to the Cape Colony to extend further the British army's area of operations and to inspire a second Afrikaner rebellion in the colony.<sup>4</sup>

Guerrilla warfare was more ruthless and brutal than the phase of conventional warfare preceding it. The Boer fighting forces came to consist of widely dispersed, at times isolated and small commandos. They formed small, mobile military units which were able to continue to harass the imperial army by capturing supplies, disorganising the military communication system and sometimes inflicting quite startling casualties on the British army of occupation. By regrouping their forces in small guerrilla units operating in

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<sup>3</sup> A. Wessels, "Die fases van die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899-1902): 'n Funkisionele indeling", *Acta Academica*, vol. 23, no. 2, May 1991, pp. 52-79.

<sup>4</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, pp.120-4.

familiar country, the Boers were able to achieve remarkable successes. The Boers were elusive and very disciplined. As they were based on the farms, they were able to prolong hostilities indefinitely.<sup>5</sup>

The British high command was totally unprepared for this type of warfare. The army's intelligence gathering and scouting was weak and far too few mounted men were available to combat the new Boer tactics effectively.<sup>6</sup> The success of the Boer guerrilla tactics elicited draconian methods of reprisal from the British side. Methods which began during the final period of Roberts's command, were intensified by his successor Kitchener.<sup>7</sup> It was largely under the direction of Kitchener as the Commander-in-Chief at the end of November 1900 that a coherent response to the Boer guerrilla methods was devised in the form of the scorched earth policy which implied sweeping the veld of every living organism that could be of help to the Boers.<sup>8</sup>

Already before Roberts's departure, farm burnings and the destruction of crops and livestock had been instituted in some districts. These were initially introduced as reprisals against Boer attacks on communications, but soon were used as a means of denying the commandos access to shelter, food and draught animals. In this way the British army sought to restrict the areas in which the guerrillas could operate. The suffering heaped upon the dependants of commando fighters by these brutal methods was also intended as an inducement to encourage soldiers to surrender.<sup>9</sup>

It was under Kitchener's guidance during 1901 that the British forces were divided into more but smaller columns. Each of these columns relied on accurate intelligence, often provided by black scouts, to track down the elusive commandos.<sup>10</sup> Kitchener's methods were twofold: first, netting and driving the enemy precisely like game and second, striking at their means of

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<sup>5</sup> L.S. Amery (ed.), *The Times history of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902*, vol. 5, p.ix.

<sup>6</sup> C.R. de Wet, *Three years war*, pp.65-9.

<sup>7</sup> *Cape Times* (weekly), 25 December 1900.

<sup>8</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War 1899-1902*, pp.97-100.

<sup>9</sup> G.H.L. le May, *British supremacy in South Africa 1899-1907*, p. 99.

<sup>10</sup> F. Pretorius, *1899-1902: Die Anglo-Boere-oorlog*, p. 78.

subsistence. Thus, he adopted the blockhouse system and a scorched earth policy against the orders of Chamberlain and Milner. This was a policy of clearing the country of supplies and civilians, which aimed at burning farms, destroying crops and livestock and removing Boer women and children from the land and bringing them into concentration camps.<sup>11</sup>

A vast network of blockhouses connected by barbed-wire barricades was built, equipped with telegraphs, telephones and a variety of traps and alarms. Until the last days of the war, this system gradually spread in grid pattern over the war zone. This was at first intended to simply defend the railways, but was later extended to divide the republics into large squares to be systematically cleared of supplies and the guerrilla groups within them.<sup>12</sup> By the end of the war 8 000 blockhouses and 3 700 miles of barbed-wire barricades had been constructed.

About 30 000 farmsteads were destroyed during the course of operations. The policy of scorched earth meant that livestock, horses, farms and all property of the Boers were either destroyed or confiscated by the British army. Many Boers, especially women and children, were left poverty-stricken and homeless. The idea of concentration camps for these people was seen as a solution by the British soldiers.<sup>13</sup> Civilians, both white and black, were removed from the devastated countryside and placed in concentration camps where a dreadful loss of life occurred.<sup>14</sup>

Brigadier-General E.Y. Brabant introduced the idea of erecting the concentration camps as early as May 1900. Later, the concentration camp system was inaugurated by Roberts and Kitchener and further developed, to form part of the military strategy to end Boer resistance. It was believed that

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<sup>11</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, pp.97-8.

<sup>12</sup> Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), Pretoria, Colonial Office (CO), vol. 417/325, ref. 21159: letter, Kitchener/Chamberlain, 19 June 1901.

<sup>13</sup> N. Devitt, *The concentration camps in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902*, pp.21-2.

<sup>14</sup> TAD, Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA), vol. 1/4/6, ref. C155: circular minutes no. 59, 21 September 1899.

the republican soldiers would be demoralised by being separated from their families. There was hope that the Boer soldiers would realise that the only means of seeing their families would be to surrender. The British claimed that the concentration camps were established to provide surrendered burghers with a guarantee that they would be safe from being compelled to fight again by their compatriots.<sup>15</sup>

The first camp was established in July 1900 in Mafikeng. By the time Roberts left South Africa in September 1900 at least nine such camps were in existence. In December 1900 Kitchener extended the system by emphasising that people on farms should be removed from certain districts persistently occupied by commandos. Thousands of civilians were swept from farms into the concentration camps. By the end of the war, there were more than forty camps for whites with more than 116 000 inmates. These included three for the families of the National Scouts. The camps were situated on the railway lines for transport, communication and labour convenience.<sup>16</sup>

Thus the results of the response of the British army to the guerrilla warfare by the Boers necessitated the establishment of concentration camps. The ordeal of the concentration camps was not restricted to Boer civilians. Thousands of black men, women and children also underwent similar trials.

Although at first, black civilians were lodged on sites adjoining the Boer concentration camps, from January 1901 such camps were separately built for blacks. During the first six months of 1901 a small number of completely separate camps for blacks started to be established. Sometimes, this was in the belief that the concentration of blacks in too close proximity to the white camps adversely affected sanitary conditions. Often, however, they sprang up

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<sup>15</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, pp.167-8.

<sup>16</sup> TAD, War Office (WO), vol. 30, ref. 57, Kitchener Papers: letter Kitchener/Brodrik, 13 April 1902.

simply as a result of the grouping of black refugees in the neighbourhood of the garrison towns.<sup>17</sup>

In the Orange River Colony 12 043 black refugees had been concentrated in eight separate camps by the end of April 1901. By the beginning of June this number had risen to 20 590. The largest camps in the territory were situated at Brandfort, Vredefort Road, Heilbron, Kroonstad and Edenburg.<sup>18</sup> By July 1901 there were nearly 38 000 blacks in the camps, over 30 000 of them were women and children.<sup>19</sup>

Little is known about the number of black refugees in the Transvaal prior to the end of June 1901. According to official statistics there were 32 006 blacks in 20 concentration camps in October 1901. About 6 032 were men, 8 165 were women while 17 809 were children. The population of these camps ranged from 501 at Brugspruit to 3708 at Klerksdorp.<sup>20</sup>

Civilians were sent to the camps right up to the end of the war. Consequently, their numbers in the camps increased steadily while, on the other hand, the white concentration camps gradually declined in population. By May 1902 no fewer than 29 black concentration camps fell under the control of the Orange River Colony administration, while more than 37 camps were under the Transvaal administration. Therefore, at least 66 black concentration camps, housing 115 000 inmates, existed by the end of the war.<sup>21</sup>

A report completed in May 1902 for black camps in the Orange River Colony reflects that there were 60 004 registered blacks in the camps of which

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<sup>17</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.148; TAD, Military Governor Pretoria (MGP), vol. 54, ref. 7891/00: telegram, District Commissioner Heidelberg/Military Governor Pretoria, 21 December 1900.

<sup>18</sup> TAD, SNA, vol. 73, ref. 2500/02: letter, G.F. de Lotbinière/Sir G. Lagden, 7 November 1902.

<sup>19</sup> C. Saunders (ed.), *Reader's Digest illustrated history of South Africa: the real story*, p.256.

<sup>20</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902, statistical table: Native refugee camps, Transvaal, October 1901.

<sup>21</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p. 145.

11 084 or 18,5 per cent were men, 18 071 or 30 per cent were women and 30 849 or 51,5 per cent were children.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.3 THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE BLACK CONCENTRATION CAMPS

During the first half of 1901, black concentration camps were controlled by the superintendents of the white camps. It was alleged that black servants were living together with their masters in the white concentration camps. For example, Emily Hobhouse found a black maid servant living together with a white woman and her five children at Bloemfontein camp. She also observed that black maid servants were sometimes sharing the same tents with white men as their mistresses in the white camps.<sup>23</sup>

In June 1901 the Native Refugee Department was established and took over the administration of black concentration camps in the Transvaal. The department was headed by a Canadian, Major G.F. de Lotbinière, who was later promoted to colonel. On 1 August 1901, his responsibility was extended to black camps in the Orange River Colony.<sup>24</sup>

The Head Office of the Native Refugee Department was in Johannesburg. The original idea in selecting the staff was to employ men who proposed to settle in the country. D. Gerraud was De Lotbinière's assistant, Major Eyre was the Chief Inspector of native refugee camps, H.A.A. Williamson was the Chief Accountant of the department and A.S. Williamson the Chief Storekeeper. In addition, there were a chief clerk, assistant accountant, assistant storekeeper and two travelling paymasters. There were four district inspectors, one for each railway system, namely Eastern, Western, South-Eastern and Vereeniging lines. There was also a Camp Superintendent and an Assistant Camp Superintendent for each camp. These officials had control

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<sup>22</sup> Free State Archives Depot (FAD), Bloemfontein, Colonial Office (CO), vol. 88, ref. 2991/02: Report on Native Refugee Camps in the ORC, June 1902.

<sup>23</sup> E. Hobhouse, *The brunt of the war and where it fell*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>24</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p. 149.

of the camps situated in their respective areas. A numbered system of administration was set up for the camps.<sup>25</sup>

Two major reasons lay behind the establishment of the Native Refugee Department. One was the realisation that only a separate department would be able to counteract long-standing neglect of the black camps. Therefore, the department was to address the inadequate administration of these camps. Secondly and more importantly, a full-time department was required to recruit black labourers in the camps.<sup>26</sup> This theme will be dealt with in the following section of this chapter.

Regarding the administrative system it seems as if the indirect rule approach which came to apply in British colonial policy towards African people, and in which the traditional authority structures of African communities was integrated into British rule, was already introduced in the black camps. Where feasible these camps were organised according to ethnicity, thus the issue of language was also given attention as people speaking the same language were automatically grouped together. Blacks in the camps had to choose their leader from the ranks of their chiefs or headmen. The question of leadership created problems in certain instances.<sup>27</sup>

For protection of the black camps against raids by Boer commandos at night, armed black groups were organised to patrol crops and livestock. Despite this three successful raids were carried out by Boer commandos during the early months of 1901. At one camp near Potchefstroom a total of 258 head of cattle and 400 sheep were stolen and one black was killed.<sup>28</sup> The most spectacular incident occurred at the Taaibosch camp in the Orange River Colony on 29 December 1901. An eight-strong commando under Commandant Piet

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<sup>25</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.149.

<sup>27</sup> FAD, CO, vol. 48, ref. 4353/01: Report of the resident magistrate's office on the Orange River Colony camps, November 1901, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> TAD, MGP, vol. 86, ref. 3885/01: letter, Major H.P. Sykes (DC Potchefstroom)/Military Governor Pretoria, 13 April 1901.

Lombard, led by a coloured guide, quietly made its way into the settlement under the cover of darkness and looted money and clothing before being driven off by the forty pickets at the camp. The incident persuaded the department to increase the force of pickets to 100 men. A month later a second, less successful, attack was made on the Taaibosch camp.<sup>29</sup>

This last incident brought about a reassessment of the role of pickets. The instructions were issued that when they were obliged to escort livestock they should be accompanied by a white person, hence they were armed. Their task of collecting firewood was withdrawn. By the end of the war there were 850 pickets engaged in guarding the black concentration camps, 600 in the Orange River Colony and 250 in the Transvaal. The system of arming blacks to protect their camps was eventually discontinued by the British, as it was claimed that it seemed to be inviting more Boer raids.<sup>30</sup>

### **3.4 FUNCTIONS OF THE CAMPS FOR BLACKS**

#### **3.4.1 Accommodation of refugees**

Officially the British military command referred to the camps for blacks as refugee camps. With rare exceptions all British wartime correspondence used this term. The department responsible for these camps was called the Native Refugee Department. The British forces claimed to be fighting for the liberation of the black community, especially in the Transvaal, from cruelty of an Afrikaner regime.<sup>31</sup>

According to the British version the camps for blacks were intended to protect black civilians. Following the British annexation of the Transvaal and Orange River Colony and the beginning of the guerrilla phase, the military administration was faced with two immediate problems concerning black refugees. The first one was to alleviate hardships and destitution among those blacks whose livelihood had been destroyed by military operations.

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<sup>29</sup> FAD, WO, vol. 93, ref. 704/02: letter, F. W. Fox/H.F. Wilson, 10 March 1902.

<sup>30</sup> FAD, WO, vol. 93, ref. 704/02: circular letter, Lt. Court/H.F. Wilson, 11 March 1902.

<sup>31</sup> S. Sibanyone, interview, Institute for Advanced Social Research (IASR), University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Oral History Project (OHP), 4 September 1979, Tape 149/A/B.

Secondly, it was to give protection to black communities in danger of suffering at the hands of the Boer commandos for the assistance they had given to the imperial forces.<sup>32</sup>

To some extent this function of providing refuge was indeed fulfilled by the camps. By July 1900 many blacks, mostly women and children, had begun fleeing their tribal areas to seek protection from the British authorities. The black refugee problem became one of great magnitude. An exodus of farm tenants and squatters into municipal and government locations and even beyond the frontiers of the annexed colonies took place. In the Orange River Colony, for example, approximately 10 000 blacks settled in the locations at Thaba Nchu, Bloemfontein and Kroonstad.<sup>33</sup>

Through the Deputy Administrator of the Orange River Colony, Major H.J. Gould-Adams's initiative, some blacks settled in Basotholand as from March 1901. Certain conditions, such as being in small numbers and carrying passes were observed. By the end of the war between 12 000 and 15 000 blacks had settled temporarily in Basotholand. A movement of blacks between the Orange River Colony and the Transvaal and into Natal was evident. Over 6 000 blacks with their livestock were permitted by the Natal government to settle on farms, locations and reserves along the foot of the Drakensberg from Witzie's Hoek to Botha's Pass. The Natal government appointed a Superintendent of Refugees, Arthur Leslie, who worked in close collaboration with magistrates and farmers in the border divisions who required temporary labour.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of 1900, the need for a coherent policy towards black refugees had become apparent to the British military command. Simply to turn them away from the British areas of occupation might alienate them. Interviews with blacks who experienced the war and their descendants affirm that fear of the

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<sup>32</sup> *Bechuanaland News*, 15 December 1900.

<sup>33</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902.

<sup>34</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, pp. 157-8.

Boers existed among some blacks and urged them to seek refuge in British camps.<sup>35</sup> Another factor which must have made the camps preferable to staying in the countryside was the availability of food for starving civilians.

According to Kessler the camps were deliberately portrayed as refugee camps because the British did not want their human rights violations during the war to be known.<sup>36</sup> The impression created by British official records that blacks were voluntarily flocking to the camps, is certainly not entirely true.

### **3.4.2 Concentration and control of black population**

Although this was not openly admitted by the British military command the camps for blacks, in terms of military strategy, served primarily as concentration camps. Therefore the name "concentration camps" rather than "refugee camps" will be used in this dissertation.

Being unable to defeat the Boers during the guerrilla warfare, Kitchener found it necessary to deny the commandos supplies and support by inter alia interning the rural civilian population, whites as well as blacks, in different camps.<sup>37</sup>

When Kitchener issued orders on 21 December 1900 that all districts were to be cleared of inhabitants, he ruled that his columns were to bring in only those blacks who were living on Boer farms.<sup>38</sup> But at the start of Kitchener's intensive drives in January 1901, blacks were removed not only from Boer farms but from their kraals, villages and even mission stations.<sup>39</sup> During the scorched earth phase of the war huge sweeps of the countryside were made by the British forces in order to clear it of all inhabitants, black and white.

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<sup>35</sup> Various IASR interviews reflect this. It must be stated, however, that these interviews were conducted more than 70 years after the war and that the memories of the interviewees regarding the war were evidently vague.

<sup>36</sup> S.V. Kessler, interview with B.E. Mongalo, War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, 16 May 1996.

<sup>37</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.145.

<sup>38</sup> S.B. Spies, *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and civilians in the Boer republics January 1900 - May 1902*, pp.227-8.

<sup>39</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, p. 204.

Those rounded up during these sweeps were transported to the camps where they were interned for the remainder of the war.

Already in March 1901 there were complaints by blacks that British troops were setting their huts on fire. By October 1901 the burning of kraals by British columns was a standard practice.<sup>40</sup>

These camps accommodated both people who were seeking protection and those who were forcefully removed from their homes. The establishment of concentration camps for blacks served as a symbol of the hardship endured by the black community during the war even though it was not recorded.

S.B. Spies maintains that the term "concentration camps" is more appropriate than "refugee camps" to depict the real nature of the British camps.<sup>41</sup> Though Spies refers to the Boer camps, the same can be said about black camps because they also accommodated black refugees as well as those blacks who were uprooted from the farms and locations and transferred to these camps. For example, the Klip River camp in the Orange River Colony was established as a result of a deliberate decision to uproot blacks in Thaba Nchu and place them in such a camp.<sup>42</sup>

Stowell Kessler<sup>43</sup>, as well as Col. Frik Jacobs, Director of the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein<sup>44</sup>, argues that many blacks were forcefully removed and concentrated in the camps in terms of British military strategy mainly for three reasons:

- **Prevention of assistance to Boer commandos**

The first purpose of concentrating black civilians in camps was to control them. It is interesting to note that both the Boer and black concentration camps were established as a military strategy by the British. The main goal

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<sup>40</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, pp. 149-50.

<sup>41</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, p.167.

<sup>42</sup> FAD, WO, vol. 30, ref. 217: letter, Wilson/Fox, 12 May 1901.

<sup>43</sup> S.V. Kessler, interview, 16 May 1996.

<sup>44</sup> Col. F.J. Jacobs, interview with Prof. J.A. du Pisani, Bloemfontein, 23 September 1996.

was to make the veld an unfavourable environment in which the Boer commandos could not carry out their military activities against the British army. This was to be achieved by removing every living person, animal and sustenance giving plant from the veld. Both the Boer and black families were prevented from giving aid or valuable information to the Boer commandos. The Boer families were being held hostage to force the Boer soldiers to surrender, while the black families were confined to prevent them from giving the Boer army cattle, foodstuffs or any other aid.<sup>45</sup>

- **Food supply**

The second purpose of the camps for blacks was to cultivate crops for the people in the camps and for the British army.<sup>46</sup> Self-sufficiency was the rule in the black camps and everything was done to help the black inhabitants to be self-sufficient.<sup>47</sup>

In August 1901 Kitchener approved a scheme to allow inmates to cultivate crops for their own consumption, partially as an economic measure. Large areas were set aside for cultivation and black camps were moved closer to the railway lines for transport, communication and security purposes.<sup>48</sup> Deserted farms were frequently also utilised for cultivation, which was a task left to women and children and those men considered unfit for army labour.

Women and children in the camps were compelled to grow crops for their own use, with the surplus being sold to the military at a fixed "kaffir price", which was much lower than the market price.<sup>49</sup> Potatoes, pumpkins and fodder crops were produced to supplement British army supplies while maize and sorghum were grown for black consumption. Nearly a third (32 per cent)

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<sup>45</sup> TAD, MGP, vol. 57, ref. 8270/00: letter, Captain J. Vaughan/P. Marshall, 3 July 1900.

<sup>46</sup> S.V. Kessler, interview, 16 May 1996.

<sup>47</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p. 153.

<sup>48</sup> C. Saunders (ed.), *Reader's digest illustrated history of South Africa: the real story*, p.256.

<sup>49</sup> N. Kanhema, "How Boer War historians tore out the page on blacks", *Saturday Star*, 14 September 1996, p. 13.

of the yield of the black camps was supplied to the army and the rest was consumed in the camps.<sup>50</sup>

Thaba Nchu was an example of an area planned by the British military as an extensive farm for the production of grain and potatoes. The project was a success and many peasant families prospered. The Native Refugee Department estimated in January 1902 that crops produced would be sufficient to feed all blacks for a year with two bags per head for the population. The surplus was to be used to supply black concentration camps and to be sold to other military departments. The revenue derived from the sale of oats and potatoes was sufficient to pay a considerable portion of the expenses incurred, including the staff. However, the protection given to the Thaba Nchu communities did not prove to be adequate. In February 1902 a Boer raiding party stole 590 head of cattle, 32 horses and 6 625 sheep and goats.<sup>51</sup>

Before harvest, needy blacks in the camps were able to draw free rations of mielie-meal. Women and children without husbands and fathers were rationed free.<sup>52</sup> Those who were employed or assisted by men had to buy their food. They could sometimes afford war-time luxuries such as sugar, tea, coffee, syrup and tobacco. Salt was supplied free of charge, while milk was provided at the recommendation of the doctors who periodically visited the black camps.<sup>53</sup>

- **Labour supply**

Thirdly the function of the camps for blacks was to have a pool of labour available to supply in the labour needs of the British war effort and in the event of the possible reopening of the Rand gold mines. Kessler maintains

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<sup>50</sup> E. Hobhouse, *The brunt of the war and where it fell*, pp.201-3.

<sup>51</sup> Free State Archives Depot (FAD), War Office (WO), vol. 32/859, ref. 5363: Instructions for Camp Superintendent, 19 December 1902.

<sup>52</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902.

<sup>53</sup> F. Pretorius, *1899-1902: Die Angloboereoorlog*, pp.80-1.

that black men in the camps were channelled into paid labour for the British army.<sup>54</sup>

When the British troops occupied Johannesburg in June 1900, there were 15 000 blacks employed in the gold mines, which were temporarily closed. As employment had to be found for them, 4 000 blacks were either absorbed into the Directorate of Railways or loaned to the Army Department.<sup>55</sup> This was done on the understanding that as soon as the mines were allowed to resume work, black mine labourers would be returned to their legitimate employment. By the end of April 1901 over 13 000 blacks were found working for the British military in both the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, the main aim for the establishment of the Native Refugee Department was to recruit labourers in the black camps in order for the miners who were engaged in military service to be released to mines as initially agreed by the authorities. Consequently, on Kitchener's instructions, these labourers were discharged from the army in June 1901 in order that gold production on the Witwatersrand might be resumed. As a result, black concentration camps became a source of labour for various jobs.<sup>57</sup>

Above all, the Native Refugee Department considered the supply of black labour to the British army as the first priority. There is no doubt that the department was extremely successful in supplying labour for the British army. This was confirmed by De Lotbinière in January 1902 when he wrote that supplying black workers to the army formed the basis on which the system of black concentration camps was founded.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> S.V. Kessler, interview, 16 May 1996.

<sup>55</sup> TAD, WO, Lieutenant Governor of the Transvaal Colony 1902-1907, vol. 142, ref. 115/31: letter, Kitchener/Chamberlain, 23 August 1901.

<sup>56</sup> F. Pretorius, *1899-1902: Die Angloboere-oorlog*, p. 78.

<sup>57</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902, p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 108/16, ref. 580: letter, De Lotbinière/Military secretary to commander-in-chief, 4 June 1902.

According to statistics of the Transvaal Native Refugee Department the number of black refugees in employment reached its highest level in the first half of 1902. The highest figure for the Transvaal camps was 10 052 black refugees (8 207 men, 955 women and 890 children) in employment during May 1902, which constitutes 18 per cent of the total camp population of 55 696 at that stage. Of these 6 703 were in the employment of the British government outside the camps, 2 214 were in private employment and 1 135 were employed in the camps.<sup>59</sup>

A wage of one shilling a day plus rations was paid to those who accepted military employment. Workers were enlisted for three months to enable them to return to their families in the camps at intervals.<sup>60</sup>

Poverty was perhaps the most critical factor that propelled blacks to accept work with the British army. For many black families the war had disastrous material consequences. The disruption of the migrant labour system at the outbreak of the war temporarily deprived many blacks of an income. Therefore, they could not afford to buy grain and pay their taxes and rent. The return to the rural areas of thousands of men normally absent at work increased the pressure on food resources.<sup>61</sup>

In the already overpopulated districts of Natal, Zululand and the Transkei where the war was accompanied by especially meagre harvest yields, famine rapidly spread. For starving blacks the war was a blessing in disguise. In order to alleviate the destitute circumstances of their families many men enrolled as military workers with the British army. In the Bathurst district of the Cape Colony, where crop yields in 1900 were especially poor, 72 per cent of the adult male population enlisted with the military.<sup>62</sup> The initial recruitment to the De Aar labour depot was concentrated largely in the King William's

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<sup>59</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902.

<sup>60</sup> F. Pretorius, *1899-1902: Die Angloboereoorlog*, p.80.

<sup>61</sup> S.V. Kessler, interview, 16 May 1996.

<sup>62</sup> F. Pretorius, *1899-1902: Die Angloboereoorlog*, p.75.

Town district. As a result of harvest failures King William's Town witnessed over 3 000 blacks joining the army.<sup>63</sup>

Black labour from the concentration camps was not supplied only to the army. Black men, women and children were also supplied to private employers in the neighbourhood of the camps.

For example, in Johannesburg an agency was opened to employ black children in domestic work and 276 boys and 133 girls found work in this way.<sup>64</sup> Black girls were needed as servants in Johannesburg to work in places such as the Caledonian Hotel. As a result, black girls from different camps were drawn in under very strict conditions. Only healthy girls were accepted. The District Inspector had to arrange with the railway authorities for the transportation of these girls. No girls were transported on Saturdays and Sundays. The Camp Superintendent had to make sure that every girl was in possession of her camp registration ticket bearing the number of her family. They were to be accompanied by a black policeman, who was especially selected for the duty, or an assistant superintendent. On arrival at the depot, girls were registered in a register kept by Mrs Wirth, who was in charge of their dispatch, and who had to give the black policeman or assistant superintendent a written acknowledgement of the arrival of all girls. A list of girls' names and their camp register numbers had to be made and a copy was sent to the NRD Head Office for record purposes. On completion of their services, they were erased from the register and the Head Office had to be notified again. The same procedure, in terms of transport, as when they were brought to the depot, was followed.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> TAD, SNA, vol. 44, ref. 1411/02: Report of Native Refugee Camps from August to December 1901.

<sup>64</sup> FAD, CO, vol. 154, ref. 326/02: Report of Superintendent on the ORC native camps, 3 February 1902, p. 29.

<sup>65</sup> FAD, Director of Orange River Colony Government Relief Depot (GRD), vol. 5, ref. RC 1399: letter, F.W. Fox/Lt. Court, 20 April 1901.

Those blacks in the camps whose labour was not needed by the military, were provided with jobs such as sanitary workers, cultivators, watchmen or messengers by individuals or groups of business people.<sup>66</sup>

### **3.5 CONDITIONS IN THE BLACK CONCENTRATION CAMPS**

Apart from the occasional reports on conditions in the camps by camp inspectors and health reports by visiting doctors, almost no records on the daily routine or conditions in the camps for blacks exist.

The experiences of Boer women in concentration camps during the South African War are documented fairly well, because many of them kept diaries or later recorded their memories regarding camp life. This is not the case with camps for blacks, because almost all their inhabitants were illiterate. It was only through the work of academic research institutions that some vague and very generalised memories, mostly not even first-hand, could be recorded during interviews many decades after the war. These interviews by institutions such as the Institute for Advanced Social Research at the Witwatersrand University did not focus specifically on the war experiences of blacks. Thus, because of a lack of sources, it is almost impossible to reconstruct life in these camps or the impact it had on black communities. At most a few isolated observations can be made from the few existing records.

The official reports by the inspectors of the Native Refugee Department focussed mainly on the discipline in the camps for blacks. It seems as if these inspectors were mainly concerned that good order should be maintained in the camps and that incidents which might jeopardise order should be avoided. The impression is created in these reports that blacks in the camps were content and well cared for. Blacks were seemingly grateful for the protection afforded them in the camps against starvation and Boer assaults. Captain F. Wilson Fox, who was the Superintendent of Native Refugees in

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<sup>66</sup> TAD, CO, vol. 74, ref. 4282/01: telegrams and letters, Field Marshall Lord Roberts/Maxwell, April to December 1900.

the ORC, claimed that blacks wanted to stay in the camps for as long as they were permitted, after a tour of inspection in February 1902.<sup>67</sup>

Missionaries who visited the black camps, and viewed them from a humanitarian rather than a military point of view, did not arrive at the same happy conclusion. For instance, Reverend W.H.R. Brown who visited the black camps at Dryharts in the northern Cape had this to say: "They are in great poverty and misery and our visit was a comfort to them. Many are dying from day to day - what is to become of the survivors I cannot think. Between the Dutch and the English they have lost everything, and there being no political party interested in their destiny, 'they go to the wall' as the weakest are bound to do."<sup>68</sup>

What was daily life in the camps like? During an interview Masike Mokgong disclosed that the daily routine of blacks in the camps was to wake up early in the morning and go to work for their masters. They built houses with clay mixed with dung. They had to dig up clay, mix it by letting the cattle trample on it while they were mixing it with water. From this mixture, they made bricks and built houses. According to M. Moloko, men were made to load wagons with stones from the mountains. They then had to build fences around the camps of the Boers for security purposes. In terms of transport, they had to pull the loaded wagons like horses or cattle.<sup>69</sup> Black women often did cleaning and washing jobs in Boer camps.<sup>70</sup>

These interviews and other information seem to indicate that the life of the black people in the camps was the typical life of a manual labourer in the case of men and either a domestic servant or a crop cultivator in the case of women. In all probability the camp authorities were instructed to see to it that the camp inmates did not become idle, as this might lead to restlessness.

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<sup>67</sup> FAD, CO, vol. 81, ref. 71/02: letter, Fox/Wilson, 3 February 1902.

<sup>68</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p. 156.

<sup>69</sup> M.P. Mokgong, interview, IASR, Wits, OHP, 24 February 1980, tape 150A.

<sup>70</sup> M. Moloko, interview, IASR, Wits, OHP, 20 November 1979, tape 165B.

Otherwise the normal cycle of life - birth, marriage, death - continued in the camps. The situation regarding births and deaths is reflected better than most other aspects of camp life in occasional health reports.

The main causes of death in black concentration camps were derived from the appalling conditions of life in these overcrowded camps. Huts and tents, often rigged up out of grain sacks, were not only too close to each other but were hopelessly inadequate at affording protection against wind and weather. Materials for roofing were scarce and fuel scanty. The camps were hastily put up, which frequently resulted in insanitary conditions causing many deaths. Water, often scarce, was at times also polluted and there was a shortage of firewood.<sup>71</sup>

The diet of blacks, who were usually in a terrible physical condition when they arrived, lacked fresh vegetables and milk. Rations in the black camps were both poorer and smaller than those issued in white camps, since blacks were forced to be self-supporting. Early in 1902 in the Orange River Colony the average daily ration of a white camp inmate cost 8.5 pence while the equivalent cost for a black was only 4.5 pence.<sup>72</sup>

In the early stages of the existence of the Native Refugee Department medical services were almost non-existent. Military doctors visited the black camps twice a week. Sometimes, however, medical visits were much more infrequent. In February 1902, for example, it was reported that blacks had not been visited by a doctor for over a month at Rooiwal in the Orange River Colony.<sup>73</sup> According to Kessler, medical care was given to blacks when doctors in the white camps had time and were paid extra for their service in the black concentration camps.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> C. Saunders (ed.), *Reader's Digest illustrated history of South Africa: the real story*, pp.256-7.

<sup>72</sup> FAD, CO, vol. 48, ref. 275/02: Report of resident magistrate's office on ORC camps, November 1901.

<sup>73</sup> FAD, CO, vol.54, ref. 326/02: Report, Superintendent Native Refugee Department (ORC)/Major De Lotbinière on camps in the Transvaal and ORC, 3 February 1902.

<sup>74</sup> N. Kanhema, "How Boer War historians tore out the page on blacks", *Saturday Star*, 14 September 1996, p.13.

Although deaths occurred as early as the inception of the black camps, the statistics available are not reliable. As in the white camps, the mortality rate in the black camps rose alarmingly in the latter half of 1901. Whereas mortality in white camps fell after October 1901, half of the deaths in the black camps occurred in the three months between November 1901 and January 1902 alone. December 1901 was the worst month with a recorded 2 831 black deaths. This represented a mortality rate of 372 per 1 000 per year, exceeding the highest figure for white deaths recorded in October 1901 at 344 per 1 000 per year. As was the case with whites, the majority of victims, 81 per cent, were children. Though official figures are incomplete, they indicate that at least 14 154 blacks died in the concentration camps compared to a figure of 27 927 deaths in white camps.<sup>75</sup>

The general insanitary condition of the country that resulted from the devastating nature of the war, together with exceptionally severe epidemics of chicken pox, pneumonia, measles, dysentery and other diseases, were no doubt contributory causes of many of these deaths.<sup>76</sup> This is reflected in the official death lists of the black camps in which the causes of death of the deceased are stated.

Because of the alarming death rate of blacks, the Native Refugee Department was forced to improve the conditions of the camps during the final months of the war. The largest black camps were broken up and black settlements dispersed over a wider area. Greater attention was also paid to improving the diet of blacks in the camps. The system of free rationing was extended in order to regularly supply blacks with fresh milk. More nutrients were introduced into the diet through the issue of tinned milk, bovril and cornflour. Stores were opened to supply the so-called "luxuries" such as flour, sugar, tea, coffee, syrup, clothing and blankets. These were found to be of benefit not only in helping to bring down the number of deaths, but also in acting as

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<sup>75</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, pp.151-2.

<sup>76</sup> TAD, CO, vol. 417/293, ref. 27171: Minutes by Ardagh's confidential memorandum, 25 December 1900, p. 9.

an incentive to labour. By April 1902 the alarming death rate had been brought under control.<sup>77</sup>

At this stage, greater emphasis was placed on the need for blacks to cultivate land in the immediate neighbourhood of their camp. Arrangements had already been made before the death rate manifestly got out of hand in the black camps. Originally, this had simply been in keeping with the department's principle of self-sufficiency and the intention to provide blacks with food. The splitting up of the settlements was, therefore, designed not only to improve sanitary conditions and prevent the unmanageable spread of diseases, but also to provide sufficient cultivable land in protected zones close to the railway system.<sup>78</sup>

The NRD report regarding the Orange River Colony for the month of May 1902 show that 233 deaths occurred in black camps. The majority of this number, 142, were children, while 52 were women and 32 were men. In the same month 82 children were born in the camps.<sup>79</sup> These figures show the disproportion in the number of births and deaths due to the war and also that mainly children were the victims of disease.

Education and religion received some attention in the camps. In correspondence regarding the transfer of a certain Reverend Gel from the Middelburg camp to the one in Belfast mention is made of teaching blacks English and religion. Workshops for different tasks such as carpentry and shoemaking were said to have been established and run in black camps.<sup>80</sup>

Prior to April 1902 black men and women in the camps could not legally marry each other as there was no marriage officer to solemnise such marriages. It was only after William Nathaniel Somngesi, an ordained minister

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<sup>77</sup> S.B. Spies, *Methods of barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and civilians in the Boer republics January 1900 - May 1902*, pp.228-30.

<sup>78</sup> E. Hobhouse, *The brunt of the war and where it fell*, pp.201-3.

<sup>79</sup> FAD, CO, vol. 99: Chief Superintendent of Refugee Camps in the ORC, weekly death roll, November 1902.

<sup>80</sup> FAD, CO, vol. 29, ref. 2611/01: Report, Chief Superintendent, Refugee Camps, ORC/Secretary, ORC Administration, 15 July 1901.

of the Methodist church and resident in the black camp at Eersgevonden, had applied for permission to do so, that the matter started to receive the necessary attention. Thereupon the secretary of the Native Refugee Department in the Orange River Colony, H.F. Wilson, recommended that the district inspectors of black camps in the colony be appointed as marriage officers.<sup>81</sup>

Although Somngesi's application was not successful, it helped to draw the attention of the department to the matter. It is likely that Somngesi could not be appointed because he was a black person. Unfortunately no further information on how marriages were handled in black camps is available.

Without any doubt, the concentration camps for both whites and blacks remain a tragic component of the historiography of the South African War of 1899 to 1902. Although a memorial to the dead of the white concentration camps was erected at Bloemfontein in 1913, there is no such memorial to the blacks who perished in black concentration camps. Appeals for the establishment of monuments dedicated to those blacks who died in the concentration camps have been made by Kessler. Indeed, their voices cry out from death for being entirely unknown to the nation and the whole world.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> FAD, CO, vol. 62, ref. 935/02: Necessity of the appointment of marriage officers for Native Refugee Camps, 2 April 1902.

<sup>82</sup> N. Kanhema, "How Boer War historians tore out the page on blacks", *Saturday Star*, 14 September 1996, p.13.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# END OF THE WAR: DISMANTLING THE CONCENTRATION CAMP SYSTEM

### 4.1 REPATRIATION OF BLACKS

One of the main issues which preoccupied the administration concerning black camp inmates after the declaration of peace, was their repatriation. Repatriation was to be carried out under the Civil Administration, as the Native Refugee Department ceased to function as soon as peace was declared. The Civil Administration had a task of repatriating the more than 115 000 blacks in the camps in the shortest possible space of time.

In order that the theme of repatriation should be clearly understood, the following background information is essential. Before the outbreak of the war white farmers were allowed to have five black families on the farm for labour purposes. Many white families evaded the law by having as many black families as they wished. Practically speaking, the majority of black people in the concentration camps had been farm labourers.<sup>1</sup>

One of the primary objectives of the Native Refugee Department in creating black camps was to treat the black labourers as an asset of the farming industry and to preserve them as far as possible for this industry. It hoped to achieve this goal by encouraging the black labourers to return to the farming industry instead of going to any other employment and to town locations at the end of the war.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D.J.N. Denoon, "Participation in the Boer War: people's non-war or non-people's war?", B.A. Ogot (ed.), *War and society in Africa*, pp. 115-6.

<sup>2</sup> Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), Pretoria, War Office (WO), vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902.

However, there were mixed feelings among black labourers on the question of going back to where they belonged before the war. Some were readily willing to go back to their former employers. But a considerable number were frightened because of their assistance to the British forces during the war. Others did not want to go back because the former Boer employers had treated them badly in the past. There were also a few who hoped that the British government would restore to them their old black reserves which the Boers had turned into land for white settlement.<sup>3</sup>

A general feeling prevailed among many blacks that the British government ought to grant them independence. Unfortunately, these aspirations were not realised. Only limited options were opened to them. They either had to go back to their former employers or find other employers or allow the administrators to make arrangements for them to get new employers under the Land Settlement Department. Nevertheless, arrangements were made for an exodus of blacks from the camps on a large scale.<sup>4</sup>

From the first days of the Native Refugee Department's existence, plans had been prepared for the rapid repatriation of blacks to white farms so that the agricultural recovery of the annexed republics could be achieved in the shortest possible time. Rehabilitation of white agriculture was given first priority in the programme of rural reconstruction. For example, in the Transvaal £1 183 594 was spent by the Repatriation Department to supply seeds, implements, livestock and transport to Boer farmers, while only £16 194 was spent on black resettlement.<sup>5</sup>

When repatriation started the British administrators had to rebuild the kraals of blacks and prepare land for their cultivation before the coming of the rain season. Very little transport was available and there was an insufficient

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<sup>3</sup> Free State Archives Depot (FAD), Colonial Office (CO), vol. 82, ref. 71/02: letter, Captain F. Wilson/F.W. Fox, 15 May 1902.

<sup>4</sup> FAD, War Office (WO), vol. 35, ref. 52/02: telegram, Lt. Court/Wilson, 23 February 1901.

<sup>5</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902.

supply of food before the next season's crop could be harvested. The administrators had to take immediate initiatives to avoid the exhaustion of the Imperial Fund by the helpless blacks.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, farmers were obliged to apply directly to the black camps for labour, but this process was speeded up by allowing blacks to make their own arrangements with employers. In many cases farmers assisted by sending wagons for the transportation of their employees. In addition to the grain grown by blacks in the camps, they were permitted to buy up to three months supply of grain at 7s 6d per bag. Owing to the very limited transport available to their new places of settlement, blacks had insufficient food to last until the next season's crops could be ready. However, provision was made in the form of the creation of grain depots even though rates were later increased from 7s 6d per bag to £1 per bag due to the high demand for grain.<sup>7</sup>

A factor which initially presented itself as a problem was the fact that a large number of blacks were employed by the army when hostilities were ceased. This meant that it was impossible to withdraw them without giving the army sufficient time to dispense with their services. The army was, however, able to demobilise their vast supply departments and set free black labourers in a very short time. Ironically, this resulted immediately in a temporary increase in the number of blacks in the camps. In June 1902 the population of black camps in the Orange River Colony rose to 60 604 and in the Transvaal to 55 910.<sup>8</sup>

After the end of the war, there was, however, fairly rapid progress in terms of the repatriation of blacks in the Orange River Colony. In July 1902 there were 57 800 blacks in the camps, but by the end of August there were only 47 934.

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<sup>6</sup> D.J.N. Denoon, "Participation in the Boer War: people's war, people's non-war or non-people's war?", B.A. Ogot (ed.), *War and Society in Africa*, pp.115-6.

<sup>7</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902, pp. 7-8; P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.159.

This amounted to a decrease of approximately 10 000 blacks in one month.<sup>9</sup> The pace of repatriation was kept up. According to the report of September 1902 there were 23 black camps accommodating 36 569 blacks. This marked a further decline of 7 black camps and 11 385 blacks within a month. There was thus rapid progress in the Orange River Colony.<sup>10</sup> The repatriation of blacks in the Orange River Colony was ultimately completed in January 1903.

In the Transvaal, over half of the blacks in the camps had been repatriated by the end of August 1902 and by November only 3 000 remained to be resettled.<sup>11</sup>

Greater difficulties were experienced by the Refugee Department in Natal. During the war blacks who came from the Orange River Colony were allowed to occupy the deserted farms, black locations and reserves along the foot of the Drakensberg mountains by the authorities in the Natal area. Although they received no rations from the Natal government, they succeeded in feeding themselves as many of them had cattle.<sup>12</sup> Because blacks were denied the opportunity to make their own arrangements with employers, the repatriation of blacks from Natal proceeded more slowly than in the Orange River Colony and Transvaal. Unlike most of the black camps in the former republics, those in Natal had sometimes been able to cultivate land on their own initiative. Many blacks refused to return until all their crops had been harvested. In order to avoid an unmanageable movement of blacks from Natal into the Orange River Colony, the administration insisted that blacks must make applications directly to the Civil Administration.<sup>13</sup> At the end of 1902 1 149 blacks in Natal camps still remained to be resettled and the

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<sup>9</sup> FAD, CO, vol. 105, ref. 4316/02: letter, F.W. Fox/Lieutenant Governor, ORC, 7 October 1902.

<sup>10</sup> FAD, CO, vol. 114, ref. 5079/02: letter, F.W. Fox/Lieutenant Governor, ORC, 7 November 1902.

<sup>11</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> FAD, CO, vol. 90, ref. 3177/02: letter, De Lotbinière/Lieutenant Governor, ORC, 5 September 1902.

<sup>13</sup> FAD, WO, vol. 30, ref. 333A: telegram, Court/Wilson, 17 September 1900.

complete repatriation was only achieved almost a year later. A certain number of them appeared to have settled permanently in Natal.<sup>14</sup>

## 4.2 COMPENSATION FOR LOSSES

Dissillusionment with the British policy appeared to have deeply affected many blacks. Some blacks refused to leave until they had been compensated in full for the grain and livestock commandeered by the army. Indeed, the question of compensation for black losses during the war was fraught with difficulties. One of the problems was that unscrupulous legal agents took the largest share of the money owed to blacks. As a result, the Native Refugee Department organised a system which enabled blacks who held receipts to be paid directly. Military officers were appointed to forward all military receipts to the district payment offices at Pretoria and Bloemfontein. In each district one day during the month was fixed when blacks could claim their compensation and bring in additional receipts. In November 1902 £2 million was granted by the British government to supplement compensation. Of this £300 000 was especially apportioned for the compensation of blacks.<sup>15</sup>

However, this amount was hardly sufficient. In the Transvaal alone compensation of blacks was officially assessed at £661 106, while in the Orange River Colony it was estimated at £171 000. £15 000 was used for blacks in the southeastern districts of the South African Republic that were ceded to Natal after the war. In some regions the payment of compensation to blacks proceeded so slowly that as late as June 1905 some blacks had not received payment as yet.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 2, ref. 113, Journal of the Principal Events, viii, pp. 24-25: letter, Kitchener/Milner, 24 January 1901.

<sup>15</sup> TAD, Military Governor Pretoria (MGP), vol. 260: Army Order no. 245.

<sup>16</sup> D.J.N. Denoon, "Participation in the Boer War: people's war, people's non-war or non-people's war?", B.A. Ogot (ed.), *War and Society in Africa*, p.116.

### 4.3 AFTERMATH OF WAR: BLACK HOPE TURNS TO DISILLUSIONMENT

The South African War not only had an influence on the white population, but also had a negative impact on the daily lives of the black population. Their economic system was seriously disrupted by the war. Urban blacks in the Boer Republics were affected first. Black migrant labourers had to leave the Witwatersrand area because of the closure of the mines. The disruption of the migrant labour system at the outbreak of the war temporarily deprived them of an income upon which they depended to buy grain, pay taxes and rent. As a result, it was difficult for these blacks to remain self-sufficient.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the mine workers managed to find other employment. Out of 15 000 blacks who had worked on the mines in the ZAR, between 8 000 and 10 000 were enlisted by the British forces. More or less 6 000 blacks were recruited to work for the Imperial Military Railways after the British had gained control of the railway system.<sup>18</sup>

Many of the rural blacks later uprooted during the guerrilla/scorched earth phase of the war were not as fortunate. Being uprooted from the Boer farms, black locations and mission stations and interned into the camps, blacks had to adapt to a new mode of economic life, where they were dependent upon the Native Refugee Department for sustenance.

Unfortunately, the cessation of military operations did not alleviate the plight of many of these blacks. Although the dismantling of the camps and the repatriation of their inmates took place with great haste, a large number of blacks missed the opportunity to cultivate land for their needs during the season ahead. The shortage of seeds, draught animals and even the most basic implements such as picks and hoes, added to the difficulties of those

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<sup>17</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, p.203; P. Maylam, *A history of the African people of South Africa: from the early Iron Age to the 1970s*, pp. 138-9.

<sup>18</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902, p. 5.

leaving the camps. Blacks whose livestock and grain had been confiscated by the army in many cases received only minimal compensation, since military receipts had been carelessly and haphazardly issued.<sup>19</sup>

In the regions of the former republics where activities of the British army had been concentrated, evidence of black hardship after the war was overwhelming. It was reported that in the neighbourhood of Amsterdam in the Transvaal, blacks had no alternative except to eat roots and rats in order to survive.<sup>20</sup> Reverend C. Poulsen wrote from Volksrust that blacks were starving from hunger.<sup>21</sup> Even De Lotbinière conceded that the Piet Retief, Wakkerstroom, Standerton, Ermelo, Bethal, Carolina and Heidelberg districts were suffering from famine six months after the end of the war. Because of the droughts of 1902 and 1903, conditions did not rapidly improve, especially for blacks who had been interned in the concentration camps. Consequently, large numbers of them failed to become self-supporting and had little alternative but to continue to sell their labour in order to raise money to buy food.<sup>22</sup>

It is clear that the implications of the scorched earth campaign extended beyond the temporary impoverishment of many blacks and uprooted them from their land. The destitute conditions in which many blacks found themselves at the end of the war, the shortage of seeds, implements and draught animals, the inadequacy of military compensation and the difficulties of the drought of 1902 (1903 was also a year of drought) made it impossible for the black population to withstand the pressure to sell their labour in order to raise cash for taxes, rents and food.<sup>23</sup>

For the black people, a new era had indeed begun with the end of the war and the beginning of resettlement and reconstruction. But it was an era

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<sup>19</sup> F. Pretorius, *1899-1902: Die Angloboere-oorlog*, pp. 80-1.

<sup>20</sup> TAD, CO, vol. 16, ref. 2369/02: letter, Milner/Kitchener, 13 October 1902.

<sup>21</sup> TAD, Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA), vol. 64, ref. 2217/02: letter, Rev. Poulsen/Resident Magistrate Volksrust, 30 September 1902.

<sup>22</sup> TAD, SNA, vol. 73, ref. 2500/02: letter De Lotbinière/Sir G. Lagden 7 November 1902.

<sup>23</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 482: telegram, Kitchener/De Lotbinière, 27 February 1901.

whose character was rather different from that anticipated by most members of the black elite and by many other blacks in South Africa at the onset of the war. Perhaps the greatest disappointment of all was experienced by members of the middle class. They had hoped that Britain's ultimate victory would usher in a new period of liberty and enlightenment in South African affairs.<sup>24</sup>

Blacks in the Transvaal had hoped that the defeat of the Boers would signal the return to them of much of the land colonised by white settlers since the Great Trek. Accordingly, some families had moved on to deserted farms during the war, planting crops and grazing livestock and building new homes for themselves. Once war ended, however, Boer families were assisted by the British soldiers and members of the South African Constabulary to reoccupy their land. As a result, black families were evicted and their crops were taken by the Boers.<sup>25</sup>

Although the war provided opportunities for chiefs to enhance their positions within traditional politics, only a few were able to extend their influence within South African society at large. Those chiefs who rendered valuable assistance to the British forces received few favours in return. For example, Sekhukhune II, who had ousted the Boers from the neighbourhood of his principal settlements and collaborated with the British columns in the eastern Transvaal, aspired to have restored to him a meaningful measure of domestic autonomy in Pedi affairs. He also hoped that the Pedi locations would be substantially extended because of serious overcrowding. After the war, however, both these wishes remained unfulfilled. Lentswe, the Kgatla chief, was also unable to persuade the British government to create an enlarged Kgatla reserve. With his plan, he hoped to unite the Kgatla people in the former republic with those in the Bechuanaland Protectorate. In spite of the

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<sup>24</sup> TAD, Military Governor Pretoria (MGP), vol. 63, ref. 679/01: Report, Lt. E.A. Wood/Commissioner of Police Pretoria, 14 January 1901.

<sup>25</sup> TAD, WO, vol. 86, ref. 358/02, Transvaal Administration reports for 1902: Final report of the work performed by the Native Refugee Department of the Transvaal from June 1901 to December 1902, p. 7.

considerable assistance provided by the Zulus to the British army, the Natal government was persuaded to alienate large parts of Zululand for white settlement after the war.<sup>26</sup>

Black workers in the industrial region of the Transvaal who had hoped that the overthrow of the Pretoria regime would bring about a substantial improvement in their position were also disillusioned. Labour conditions, in fact, worsened rather than improved. Black wages in the gold mining industry were reduced and a much more sophisticated network of control over the black work force was devised. Prosecutions for desertion and breach of contract increased. Conditions in the labour compounds deteriorated. The dissatisfaction of workers led to a spate of strikes and mass walk-outs on the gold reef in May and June 1902.<sup>27</sup>

Without any doubt the Treaty of Vereeniging came as a rude shock to the black community. Their hopes were dashed especially by clause eight of the peace agreement between the Briton and Boer. It stated that the question of granting the franchise to natives would not be decided until after the introduction of self-government.<sup>28</sup>

Thus it was made clear to blacks that the continuity of political life in the defeated republics would not be disrupted by the advent of British rule. The political colour-bar was retained and the position of blacks remained fundamentally the same. Measures such as the republican pass laws continued to be applied and neither the franchise, which many desired, nor the widely envisaged transfer of Afrikaner lands to blacks or better economic opportunities, materialised. Blacks were soon brought to the realisation that no major changes would be effected.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 February 1903.

<sup>27</sup> S.M. Molema, *The bantu past and present: an ethnographical and historical study of the native races of South Africa*, pp.283-5.

<sup>28</sup> TAD, CO, vol. 36/68: Draft Agreement as to the terms of surrender of the Boer forces in the field approved by His Majesty's Government, 31 May 1902.

<sup>29</sup> J. Pampalis, *Foundations of the new South Africa*, p. 47.

It was against the background of hope and disillusionment that blacks sought a network of political organisations and newspapers stretching throughout the country in order to mobilise and unite the black people against the injustices of the white government. These organisations and newspapers were used as platforms by blacks to express their anger and dissatisfaction with the results of the South African War.<sup>30</sup>

Within a few years of the turn of the century, therefore, political organisations such as the South African Native Congress in the Cape, the Transkei Native Vigilance Association, the Orange River Colony Native Vigilance Association, the Natal Native Congress, the Transvaal Native Congress, the Transvaal Native Vigilance Association, the Transvaal Basotho Committee and the Iliso Lomzi Lo Notenga, also in the Transvaal, were established.<sup>31</sup>

Although the circulation of black newspapers was never high, their impact was wide. These include among others, the *Imvo Zabantsundu* or Native Opinion by John Tengo Jabavu, the *Izwi Labantu* or the Voice of the People in the Eastern Cape, the *South African Spectator* in Cape Town, *Koranta ya Batswana*, *Naledi ya Lesotho*, *Iphepha lo Hlanga* and *Ilanga lase Natal* and *Leihlo la Babatsho* in the Transvaal. The influence of these newspapers extended to the most remote black locations all over the country.<sup>32</sup>

Condemning clause eight of the peace treaty through *Imvo Zabantsundu*, in October 1902, Jabavu maintained that blacks, as much as the British and the Boers, were entitled to equal rights in South Africa.<sup>33</sup> Clearly, in the first five years after the end of the war, a new broad pattern of black political response to the results of the South African War was established throughout the

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<sup>30</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.163.

<sup>31</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.175; J. Grobler, *A decisive clash? A short history of black protest politics in South Africa, 1875-1976*, pp. 19-24.

<sup>32</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, pp.189-90; J. Grobler, *A decisive clash? A short history of black protest politics in South Africa, 1875-1976*, pp. 19-24.

<sup>33</sup> *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 15 October 1902.

country. Therefore, the war served as a stimulus towards the rise of black nationalism as black criticism of the British policy intensified.

## CONCLUSION

In the introduction I stated my aim of refuting the myth that the South African War was exclusively a white man's war. I have tried to do this in the four chapters of this mini-dissertation.

In chapter 1, dealing with the background to the war, I pointed out that at the outset of the war blacks were not merely disinterested onlookers, but had a vital interest in the outcome of the war, which would directly influence their future prospects in South Africa.

In chapter 2 I explained how and why the myth of the South African War as a white man's war was created and perpetuated, and how it has been successfully challenged recently.

In reviewing the various forms of participation in the war by blacks I indicated that black people became an integral factor in the South African War. At least 10 000 and possibly as many as 30 000 blacks were fighting with the British army as armed combatants by the end of the war. In the course of the war the British army employed as many as 100 000 blacks in different capacities. Blacks supplied the British army with invaluable intelligence and took action to resist the Boer invasions of the Cape Colony and Natal. Armed black communities closed hundreds of square miles of the annexed states to commando penetration during the guerrilla warfare. Boer forces also armed blacks on various occasions and at least 10 000 blacks accompanied the Boer commandos. Indeed, blacks were not merely the victims of the war, but were directly involved in the armed struggle as scouts, spies, servants, messengers and in a wide range of other occupations with the white armies.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p.4.

Evidence which is being systematically unearthed by the new generation of historians clearly confirms the significant involvement of blacks in the South African War. The warring parties were by no means unaware of the significance of black attitudes and actions. On both sides the spectre of a "native uprising" was entertained. The fear of ending colonialism or white rule was not unfounded and prevailed from the beginning of the war. It was one of the reasons which led towards both parties declaring the war a white man's affair. The concern of the Cape ministers at the arming of blacks by the military authorities indicated that the "native threat" was never far from the surface in colonial thinking.<sup>2</sup>

The threat posed by blacks was a major consideration in the decision by the republican representatives to surrender. In stating the reasons for their surrender in the discussions that preceded the Treaty of Vereeniging in May 1902, the Boer leaders gave, as the third reason, the fact that "Kaffir tribes" inside and outside the republics had almost all been armed and were fighting against them. Before the Boers surrendered, General L. Botha declared that the "Kaffir question was becoming daily more serious".<sup>3</sup> A deduction can be made that the Boers were afraid that should the armed blacks defeat the Boers, they could go further to challenge the British with the purpose of overthrowing white rule in South Africa.

Chapter 3, the central chapter of the dissertation, deals with the black concentration camps. Their establishment as a result of the scorched earth policy of Kitchener is discussed. The functions of these camps, both as refugee camps and concentration camps, are analysed. They served to some extent as places of refuge for the destitute black population, but mainly as a military measure to concentrate and control the black population within the war zone. In this regard the black population had, in terms of British military strategy, firstly to be prevented from giving assistance in any form to the Boer

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<sup>2</sup> Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD), Pretoria, Colonial Office (CO), vol. 879, ref. 45/1902: letter, W.H. Addington/assistant censor, 9 November 1902.

<sup>3</sup> TAD, CO, vol. 37, Arming of Natives: letter, Kitchener/Milner, 22 September 1901.

commandos, secondly to supply themselves and the British forces with food, and thirdly to be readily available as a supply of labour for the British government and the private sector, especially the gold mines. Although very little detailed information is available, the conditions in the camps and the hardship suffered by the black camp population are looked at in this chapter.

Chapter 4 deals with the dismantling of the camps and the compensation and repatriation of blacks in the camps. The conclusion is reached that the war furthered colonialist aims and further deprived the black population of the possibility of self-sufficiency. Robbed of an independent livelihood in the camps, most of the refugees found it impossible in the aftermath of the war to avoid being swallowed up in the migrant labour system. The peace treaty and the system which came into existence after the war was a bitter disillusionment for blacks who had hoped that a British victory would lead to a liberalisation of racial policies. In the end the black population, even more than the defeated Afrikaners, had to bear the brunt of the war. It stimulated the first signs of the rising of an African nationalism, which would inaugurate a long struggle of black resistance to white domination in South Africa.

With more than 14 000 fatalities, their political and economic aspirations being unfulfilled, unsatisfactory compensation payments and massive impoverishment, blacks paid a heavy price in a "white man's war".<sup>4</sup> The very fact of their suffering as a result of the war further refutes the claim that it was exclusively a white man's war. That historians have for many years ignored the appalling circumstances of the black concentration camps, where over 14 000 black people died, is indicative of racial prejudice that prevailed at the time. Generations of white historians neglected the reality that blacks were active participants in the South African War.

The focus of my research has been to make a modest contribution to the growing body of history writing which examines the role of the black population in the history of our country from a black perspective. By looking

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<sup>4</sup> T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, pp. xiv, xvii, 573.

afresh at the war as a socio-economic, military and political phenomenon and, in particular, by examining the ways in which it affected the lives of black people, the preceding chapters have sought to shed new light in order to adequately dispute the myth of the South African War as a white man's war.

It is impossible for any researcher to divorce himself completely from his own subjectivity when at work. However, the historian should avoid one-sidedness, narrow-mindedness and prejudice as they rob the public of a complete truth. What researchers should do is to display their academic integrity by resisting any racially biased interpretation of events. Blacks must be urged to start writing their own history and stop blaming other historians for not objectively recording their past.

## APPENDIX 1

PHOTOGRAPHS ILLUSTRATING THE PARTICIPATION OF  
BLACKS IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR

British forces depended heavily on African and coloured transport drivers. A number of drivers are shown here with their waggons after crossing the Orange River on 27 August 1900.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, p. 195. Source: Cape Archives Depot.

African dispatch runners were an essential part of the system of field communications. Here British soldiers conceal messages in the garments of a runner bound for Ladysmith.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>2</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, p. 195. Source: *Illustrated London News*.

Many Boer commandos were accompanied by coloured or African servants known as *agterryers* (after-riders). They formed an integral component of the Boer military system, as this scene from the veld suggests.<sup>3</sup>



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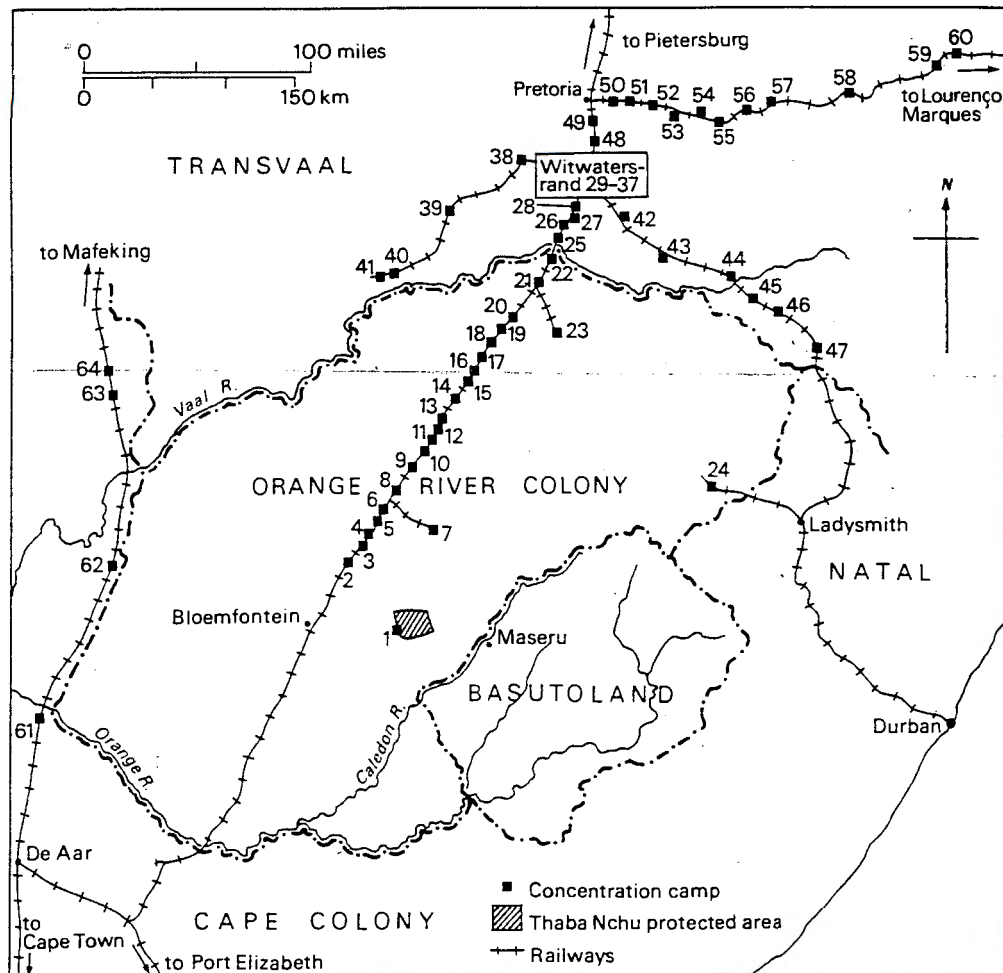
<sup>3</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies, *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, p. 197. Source: Transvaal Archives Depot.

Captured Boer shells and rifles in the charge of a British Magazine Officer and his African staff. Africans were permitted to handle weapons, but not to use them.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, p. 197. Source: Cape Archives Depot.

## APPENDIX 2

MAP INDICATING THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE MAIN BLACK CONCENTRATION CAMPS, 1901-2<sup>1</sup>

## Key

## Orange River Colony

- 1 Thaba Nchu
- 2 Allemans Siding
- 3 Houtenbeck
- 4 Eensgevonden
- 5 Vet River
- 6 Smaldeel
- 7 Winburg
- 8 Welgelegen
- 9 Virginia
- 10 Rietspruit
- 11 Ventersburg Road
- 12 Holfontein
- 13 Geneva
- 14 Boschrand
- 15 America Siding
- 16 Honingspruit
- 17 Serfontein
- 18 Rooiwal
- 19 Koppies
- 20 Vredefort Road
- 21 Wolvehoek

- 22 Taaibosch
- 23 Heilbron
- 24 Harrismith

Cape Colony  
(administered by ORC)

- 61 Orange River
  - 62 Kimberley
  - 63 Taungs
  - 64 Dryharts
- Transvaal**
- 25 Vereeniging
  - 26 Meyerton
  - 27 Witkop
  - 28 Klip River
  - 29 Klipriviersberg
  - 30 Natal Spruit
  - 31 Bezuidenhout Valley
  - 32 Boksburg
  - 33 Rietfontein West
  - 34 Bantjes
  - 35 Brakpan
  - 36 Springs

- 37 Nigel
- 38 Krugersdorp
- 39 Frederikstad
- 40 Koekemoer
- 41 Klerksdorp
- 42 Heidelberg
- 43 Greylingstad
- 44 Standerton
- 45 Platrand
- 46 Paardekop
- 47 Volksrust
- 48 Olifantsfontein
- 49 Irene
- 50 Van Der Merwe Station
- 51 Elandsriver
- 52 Bronkhorstspruit
- 53 Wilge River
- 54 Balmoral
- 55 Brugspruit
- 56 Groot Olifants River
- 57 Middelburg
- 58 Belfast
- 59 Elandshoek
- 60 Nelspruit

<sup>1</sup> P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899-1902*, p. 154.

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## ABSTRACT

Many details about concentration camps for Boer women and children during the South African War, 1899-1902, have been published in publications from an Afrikaans nationalist and liberal historiographical perspective. Although a large number of camps also existed for blacks during the same war, and thousands of black people died in those camps, very little is known about them.

The image of this war was previously one of a white man's war waged almost exclusively between Boer and Briton. Therefore it used to be called the (Second) Anglo-Boer War. Only in the last fifteen years has this image changed, as researchers started investigating the participation of blacks in the war. Recent publications, such as *The South African War: the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (1980) by P. Warwick, *1899-1902: Die Anglo-Boereoorlog* (1985) by F. Pretorius and *The origins of the South African War 1899-1902* (1996) by I.R. Smith, also discuss the role of blacks in the war. Currently the name South African War is favoured because it reflects the impact that the war had on all South Africans.

However, the perception of the war as a white man's war is still very strong. Research on black participation is only slowly gaining momentum. At this stage it is mainly centered on the work of one researcher, Stowell V. Kessler, who is using the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein as his base. No scientific publication by a black author on this topic has been published to date. This fact encouraged me to focus my research for my MA dissertation on black participation in the South African War, and particularly the black concentration camps.

The main thrust of my research has been to show that (1) blacks (also those in the camps) played a significant role in British military strategy during the war and (2) that blacks also suffered greatly in the war, in order to further refute the myth of the white man's war. My dissertation inter alia focusses on the place of the concentration camps in the British war effort (mainly in terms of the scorched earth policy and labour supply), the control and administration of the camps, and the experience of blacks in the camps and after the closure of the camps.