

Kent gij dat volk: The Anglo-Boer War and Afrikaner identity in postmodern perspective

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Professional historians have proved resistant to the claims of postmodernism, which they see as highly theoretical, rather theatrical and decidedly threatening. As a result, the debate has become polarised, with proponents of postmodernism dismissing traditional historians as “positivist troglodytes”,¹ while reconstructionist and constructionist historians speak in “historicidal” terms of deconstructionism.²

To complicate matters, postmodernism is, in the words of one of its critics, “an amorphous concept and a syncretism of different but related theories, theses and claims that have tended to be included under this one heading”,³ variously applied to art, architecture, literature, geography, philosophy and history. Yet a general perspective can be discerned in which modernism with its totalising, system-building and social-engineering focus is rejected in favour of complexity, diversity and relativity. It is held that an epochal shift took place when modernism, which prevailed from about 1850 to about 1950, lost its credibility in our fragmented, flexible, uncertain but exciting contemporary world.⁴

Whether or not an epochal shift of this nature can be discerned in the world at large, South Africa certainly finds itself in the throes of transition which has swept away old certainties and which challenges historians to find new ways of theorising and practising their craft. This was foreseen by the South African historian F.A. van Jaarsveld when he speculated in 1989 about a plurality of histories that would emerge in South Africa in the future.⁵ However, he could not move beyond the suggestion of “own” as opposed to “general” history, making use of the then fashionable categories associated with P.W. Botha’s tricameral political dispensation (with the implied power relations). Since then, events have overtaken debate, and the need to produce history texts for school use (reflecting changed power relations) has foregrounded the pressing reality of a plurality of contending interpretations.

It is in this situation of historical perplexity that some insights of postmodernism are here applied to the Anglo-Boer War, which, as a key element of a nationalist paradigm, is part of the bedrock of Afrikaner self-identity. Postmodernism is variegated

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1. L. Stone, “History and Postmodernism”, in K. Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (Routledge, London, 1997), p 256.
2. E.A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004), pp 25–26.
3. P. Zagorin, “History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now”, *History and Theory*, 38, 1, February 1999, p 5.
4. N. Kirk, “History, Language, Ideas and Postmodernism: A Materialist View”, in Jenkins (ed.), *Postmodern History Reader*, p 316.
5. F.A. van Jaarsveld, “Hervertolking in die Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedskrywing: Veranderende Historiese Bewussyn en Nuwe Beeldvormings van die Verlede”, Paper delivered at the Potchefstroom Study Group of the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, 25 May 1989, and incorporated in his *Afrikanergeskiedskrywing: Verlede, Hede en Toekoms* (Lex Patria, Johannesburg, 1992).

and it is not necessary to pursue every blind alley in using its anti-totalising approach to dismantle the hold that Afrikaner nationalism has exercised on Anglo-Boer War historiography.

National defeat, ignominy and trauma encourage the construction of a dominant societal perspective that assuages individual discomfiture. An important aspect of the aftermath of any war is the “aftermyth”, by means of which complexities and ambiguities are smoothed over by the imposition of coherence, continuity and closure for ideological purposes.⁶ Paradigmatic of this process is the myth of French national resistance in the Second World War, which raised the morale of a dispirited people and discouraged the probing of discreditable aspects of their past.⁷

In the wake of the Anglo-Boer War, a group of elite women collected testimonies of concentration camp inmates. Cultural entrepreneurs contextualised these testimonies politically in a historiography of aggrievedness, pioneered by W.J. Leyds’s *De Eerste Annexatie van de Transvaal* (1906) which proposed “to provide the Afrikaner people with a vademecum, with a collection of documentary items that have reference to the way in which the English have always acted towards the Boers”.⁸ This is not to say, of course, that this victim discourse was somehow extraneous to the experience of ordinary people. On the contrary, its strong purchase derived from its resonance with their traumatised condition.⁹ Political myths are harmonisations of the past, not falsifications.

Religious leaders interpreted the trauma suffered in the concentration camps in sacrificial terms. The primordial meaning of sacrifice is well encapsulated in the Latin formula *do ut des*, I give in order that you may give. In other words, human beings operate with a subliminal perception that sacrifice merits reward. So the religious term evoked powerful feelings at a mythological level to achieve a political purpose that bestowed a sense of entitlement.¹⁰ Clergymen also used biblical parallels of suffering and restoration to hold out the promise of ultimate victory over adversity.

This theological perspective contributed a strong teleological strand to Afrikaner historical consciousness. The war was not a disaster after all, but God’s saving means of building Afrikaner national unity with a view to the ultimate realisation of sovereign independent statehood and rule over all the people of the country.¹¹

The sense of a national calling and destiny presupposes homogeneity. It was the achievement of male culture brokers such as Gustav Preller, J.H.H. de Waal and C.J. Langenhoven in the succeeding decades to create the illusion that a people who had always displayed fissiparous tendencies had in fact always been united and goal-directed. This was accomplished by propagating a selective memory of the past in which a small nation intent on the highest ideals of peace, egalitarianism and freedom had been

6. Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, p 86.

7. R.N. Lebow, W. Kasteiner and C. Fugo (eds), *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Duke University Press, Durham, 2006), pp 26–27.

8. W.J. Leyds in a letter to H.C. Bredell, 7 September 1906, quoted in K. Smith, *The Changing Past: Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Southern, Johannesburg, 1988), p 63.

9. See N. Gregor, ‘Living with Loss; Dealing with Shame’, *History Today*, 55, 5, May 2005, p 33.

10. J. Snyman, ‘Die Politiek van Herinnering: Spore van Trauma’, in G. Verhoef (ed.), *Die Anglo-Boeroorlog: Herdenkingslesings aan die Randse Afrikaanse Universiteit, 1999* (RAU, Johannesburg, 1999), p 25.

11. J.H. Breytenbach, *Die Betekenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog: Vyftig Jaar, 11 Okt. 1899–11 Okt. 1949* (FAK., Johannesburg, 1949), p 69.

hounded almost to death by the British empire but had survived and was now in the process of triumphantly rising from the ashes in response to its vocation and in order to achieve its divinely preordained destiny.

The development of Afrikaans as a literary language and its official recognition in 1925 was crucial to the production of popular historiography, by means of which this national identity was constituted. Dutch had become a foreign language and the advance of Afrikaner nationalism was retarded until Afrikaans was embraced as the ideal vehicle of its self-articulation. In the three decades after the war only nine books were published based on reminiscences of the war; by contrast, the thirties and forties brought a multitude of books, glorifying the leaders and those who fought to the bitter end.¹² In Afrikaans fictional works such as Van Bruggen's *Bittereinders* (1935) and T.C. Pienaar's *'n Merk van die Eene* (1939) burgeoning Afrikaner nationalism expressed itself in virulently anti-British rehearsals of historical grievances.¹³ Side by side with the exploits of heroes, accounts of ordinary people's experiences, published in the popular periodicals *Die Brandwag* and *Die Huisgenoot*, were avidly read. Afrikaans historical scholarship was deflected by the pressure to conform to the national paradigm and, as Bill Nasson puts it, a gloss on the war became its historical truth,¹⁴ an assessment that accords well with Ankersmit's formulation that historians are in danger of forgetting historical reality and mistaking their encoding of the past for the past itself.¹⁵

Not only was the Afrikaner national paradigm carried over into academic historiography; certain tendencies of emergent scholarship also meshed conveniently with popular consciousness. Ranke's "scientific historiography" was not only ethnocentric but was also imbued with the unscientific concept of the nation immanently realising its destiny; it focused on great leaders and tended to favour the preservation of the status quo. As a result of this overlap, the ideal of *volksgeskiedenis* (people's history) gained a foothold. The universities came to play an important role in ethnic mobilisation,¹⁶ and in 1946, G.D. Scholtz could assert that in general, Afrikaans historians realised that they also had a task to fulfil in respect of the culture of their people.¹⁷

As Michel Foucault pointed out, history is used as a mechanism for exercising power in a society.¹⁸ It maintains a system of authority by legitimating it as true to the past or it challenges such a system of authority as contrary to traditional values. It is functional in including or excluding people from a particular group. By conforming to the socially determined parameters of the story, historians establish their authority in their society, while reinforcing that society's self-identity.¹⁹

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12. A. Grundlingh, "The Bitter Legacy of the Boer War", *History Today*, 49, 2, 1999, p 22.
 13. M. Rice, *From Dolly Gray to Sarie Marais: The Boer War in Popular Memory* (Fischer Press, Cape Town, 2004), p 20.
 14. B. Nasson, "The War One Hundred Years On", Paper presented at the Unisa Library conference, Rethinking the South African War, Pretoria, August 1998, p 5.
 15. Quoted in Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, p 101.
 16. A. Grundlingh, "War, Wordsmiths and the 'Volk': Afrikaans Historical Writing on the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 and the War in Afrikaner Nationalist Consciousness, 1902–1990", in E. Lehmann and E. Reckwitz (eds), *Mfecane to Boer War: Versions of South African History*, Papers presented at a symposium at the University of Essen, 25–27 April 1980 (Die Blauwe Eule, Essen 1992), p 49.
 17. Quoted in A. Grundlingh, "Sosiale Geskiedenis en Afrikaanse Geskiedskrywing", *Suid-Afrikaanse Historiese Joernaal*, 19, 1987, p 41.
 18. A. Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (Routledge, London, 1997), pp 12–13.
 19. Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, p 14.

The ideological use of history in the exercise and distribution of power was very evident after the election victory of D.F. Malan's National Party in 1948. Malan saw his party as a vehicle for bringing together those who belonged together, an exclusive aim to which Piet Meyer, a gatekeeper to Afrikanerdom, gave the following comment: "To Afrikanerdom belong only those who by virtue of blood, soil, culture, tradition, belief, calling form an organic unitary society."²⁰ In practical terms, an Afrikaner came to be self-identified by the dominant in-group as a white person who spoke Afrikaans; was a member of one of the three "sister churches" (i.e. churches in the Dutch Reformed tradition); subscribed to rural, patriarchal values; was constrained by his history to nurse grievances against the British and against blacks; was committed to the restoration of national independence and the maintenance of white supremacy; and *ipso facto* voted for the National Party.²¹ Knowledge of Afrikaners' proneness to schism produced a prescriptive rather than descriptive approach to the question of national identity and an overwhelming sense of imminent danger encouraged acceptance of conformity as necessary to survival.

The national unity achieved with great difficulty by the National Party was then projected back onto the Boer past and the Anglo-Boer War was represented as demonstrating a united national resolve. Like all harmonisations, this version of the past had all the air of verisimilitude.

From the perspective of the fractured present, the reality of a fractured Boer society is more readily discernible. Most Boers lived in the Orange Free State or the Transvaal, two independent states, and they did not always see eye to eye. Others lived in the Cape Colony or Natal, two British colonies, and the majority of them were perfectly content to do so. In the early days of the war, President Steyn of the Free State was moved to say, "It is your [the Transvaal's] war. We are merely coming to your aid",²² a sentiment shared by many of his people. Later the Free Staters resented the Transvalers' lack of resolve in pursuing the war, and quarrels between the allied prisoners of war on St Helena necessitated their being accommodated in separate camps.²³ Notwithstanding S.F. Malan's *Politieke Strominge onder die Afrikaners van die Vrystaatse Republiek*,²⁴ which firmly posits the existence of a pan-republican nationalism that motivated the Boers, the evidence points to an intensely domestic people with strong local attachments who, in the absence of an overarching ideology, were characterised by their individualism and pragmatism.

This individualism was evident in their ad hoc approach to going on commando – and staying on commando. During the first phase of the war the men were conscripts, compelled by law to go on commando, but as the American observer Howard Hillegas points out, they were not compelled by law to fight;²⁵ so it was common for burghers to lie around in the *laagers* (encampments) when they were needed at the front. The

20. Quoted in A. Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa* (Heinemann, London, 1990), p 168.

21. J. Louw-Potgieter, *Afrikaner Dissidents: A Social Psychological Study of Identity and Dissent* (Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, Avon, 1988), pp 50, 112.

22. National Archives, Pretoria (hereafter NAP), Archives of the Commandant-General (hereafter KG): 716, p 22. Quoted in telegram from P.G.W. Grobler, deputy state secretary of the ZAR. to Commandant-General Joubert, 13 October 1899.

23. B. Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War* (Norton, New York, 1976), p 421.

24. S.F. Malan, *Politieke Strominge onder die Afrikaners van die Vrystaatse Republiek* (Butterworth, Durban, 1982).

25. H. Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces* (Methuen, London, 1900), p 100.

notorious military indiscipline of the Boers was commented on by many observers, such as the foreign military attachés Reichmann, Ram, Gurko and Allum, as well as by O. van Oostrum, a Dutch schoolmaster who went on commando, and Georges de Villebois-Mareuil, the French count who became a Boer general.²⁶ Yet the Boers' characteristic behaviour in this regard derived not so much from indiscipline per se as from a combat culture of indiscipline that asserted the elective nature of their involvement.²⁷

An unequal distribution of wealth also contributed to the heterogeneity of the Boer people. Boer society was not characterised by egalitarianism and unanimity. The premium placed on wealth is evident from the property qualification that limited high civil and military office to the more prosperous. For election to the Free State Volksraad, unmortgaged land ownership to the value of at least £500 was a prerequisite, and commandants and field cornets had to own property to the value of £200.²⁸ Although egalitarianism was the official ideology, elected officials came largely from the ranks of the large landowners.²⁹ In addition to the fact that the members of the Volksraad constituted a wealthy elite, to a large extent those who elected them did so too. In the Free State Republic, newcomers who wished to acquire citizenship could qualify after a year (amended in 1898 to three years) if they owned fixed property to the value of at least £150,³⁰ and the propertied and generally better educated were more likely to be enfranchised. The capitalisation of agriculture in the wake of the mineral revolution, which concentrated landholding; the practice of subdividing farms among a numerous progeny, which resulted in unviable units; as well as the vagaries of climate, pests and diseases led to increasing landlessness. The class interests of bywoners and land barons did not coincide and even if explanation in terms of a class struggle is eschewed, sheer poverty clearly influenced individual attitudes and actions.

By ignoring the heterogeneity of the Boers on the outbreak of the war, one misses the point that those in the Republics who identified themselves as Afrikaners were in fact a minority associated with educated town dwellers. This was the distinction as it was explained to Oskar Hintrager, a German fighting on the side of the Boers. As he put it, a Boer is a country dweller of Dutch, German or French descent; an Afrikaner is an educated townsman who is very conscious of his identity in contradistinction to the *Uitlander* or foreigner.³¹

For another commentator on Boer society, a further characterisation was added: that of *'takhaar'* (backvelder or hillbilly). Howard Hillegas relates this anecdote:

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26. F. Pretorius, *Life on Commando during the Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1999), p 191; M.C.C. van Schoor (red.), "Die Dépeches van die Russiese Attaché, Kol Stakhonitch en Lt.-kol. Gurko", *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 3, 1975, p 184; C. de Jong (ed.), "Julius Allum's Anglo-Boer War Observations", *African Historical Review*, 9, 1, 1977, p 49; O. van Oostrum, *Bestendige Onbestendigheid: My Suid-Afrikaanse Ervaringe* (Van Schaik, Pretoria, 1943), p 28; G.H.A.V. De Villebois-Mareuil, *Oorlogsdagboek van Veggeneraal de Villebois-Mareuil* (Protea Boekhuis, Pretoria, 2000), p 132.
 27. B. Nasson, *The South African War 1899–1902* (Arnold, London, 1999), pp 65, 156.
 28. Constitution of the Orange Free State, 1879, Section 7; Constitution of 1854, Section 56; and Constitution of 1866, Section 55, in G.D. Scholtz, *Die Konstitusie en die Staatsinstellings van die Oranje-Vrystaat* (NV Swets & Zeitlinger, Amsterdam, 1937), pp 201, 192, 199; M.C.E van Schoor en J.J. van Rooyen, *Republieke en Republikeine* (Nasionale Boekhandel, Kaapstad, 1960), p 113.
 29. H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2003), p 180.
 30. Van Schoor en Van Rooyen, *Republieke en Republikeine*, p 111; J. Bryce, *Studies in History and Jurisprudence* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1901), I, p 436.
 31. J.J. Oberholster (ed.), "Dagboek van Oskar Hintrager: Saam met Christiaan de Wet, Mei tot September 1900", *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 2, 1973, 7 Junie 1900, p 28.

One of the Hussar officers [captured at Dundee] asked for the name of the regiment he had been fighting against. A fun-loving Boer replied that the Boers had no regiments; that their men were divided into three brigades – the Afrikanders, the Boers and the Takhaars – a distinction which carried with it but a slight difference. “The Afrikander brigade”, the Boer explained, “is fighting now. They fight like demons. When they are killed, then the Boers take the field. The Boers fight about twice as well and hard as the Afrikanders. As soon as all the Boers are killed, then come the takhaars, and they would rather fight than eat.”³²

Of course, Hillegas had it the wrong way round because the coterie of mostly old, cautious and ill-educated generals who initially took the field could more aptly be described as the *takhaars* and they, rather than fighting, frittered away their opportunities. By contrast, the younger generation of leaders who succeeded them, were educated men (education being closely correlated with generation),³³ or progressive farmers, who identified themselves as Afrikaners, and *they* were the ones who were relentless in pursuing the struggle to the bitter end. It was around them and their ideals that a vigorous sense of ethnic identity came to be forged.

In Foucault’s view, the ideological embeddedness of historians is inevitable as scholars cannot divest themselves of their time and cultural context.³⁴ Such perspectivity is generally recognised,³⁵ as is the implication that history needs to be rewritten by successive generations who put different questions to the past. However, for Foucault this hermeneutic of scepticism extends beyond the narrative itself to the sources, on the basis of which the narrative is constructed, for these too come to us as interpretations, whether as discourses or as silences. The traditional *quellenkritik* is as important as ever, but it does not go far enough. Remembering and forgetting is never fortuitous and if the archive is silent then, in contrast to Ranke, who held that there is no history without documents, deconstruction is necessary in order to read texts “against the grain”. Deconstruction has important implications for Anglo-Boer War historiography. This can be illustrated with reference to individual concepts, discourses and silences.

Used by the British for such tasks as conducting Boer women to the camps, previously subservient black men were able to assert themselves, so that on every side the “insolence” of previously docile blacks was remarked upon.³⁶ “Insolence” is a common trope of colonialist discourse. It can be deconstructed as self-assurance and indeed the Nederlands-Afrikaans word *astrant* derives from an earlier form, *assurant*, meaning assured. Self-assured black scouts treated white women with disdain in the presence of British officers and were allowed to take loot as remuneration. They shook off

32. Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces*, p 297.

33. A point that Denoon makes with reference to the Transvalers, but true, although to a lesser degree, of the Free Staters as well. See D.J.N. Denoon, “Participation in the Boer War: People’s War, People’s Non-War or Non-People’s War”, in B.A. Ogot (ed.), *War and Society in Africa: Ten Studies* (Frank Cass, London, 1972), p 119.

34. Denoon, “Participation in the Boer War”, p 123.

35. See, for example, G. Himmelfarb, “Telling it as You Like it: Postmodernist History and the Flight from Fact”, in Jenkins (ed.), *Postmodern History Reader*, p 159.

36. For example, E. Hobhouse, *War without Glamour: Women’s War Experiences Written by Themselves, 1899–1902* (Nasionale Pers, Bloemfontein, 1924), p 51; L. Marquard (ed.), *Letters from a Boer Parsonage: Letters of Margaret Marquard during the Boer War* (Purnell, Cape Town, 1967), p 109; P. Lewsen (ed.), *Selections from the Correspondence of John X. Merriman 1899–1905*, III (Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 1966), Merriman to J. Bryce, 21 July 1902, p 354.

subservience and gloried in the dignity, assurance and self-importance of independent men, uniformed and under arms and associated with the winning side.³⁷ This sense of empowerment is illustrated by the black looter who said to Martha Susanna Venter of Ficksburg that he was just as much in charge as the English.³⁸ Ironically but unsurprisingly, once blacks were disarmed, it was reported that they were “quite civil again”.³⁹

The testimonies of women on their experiences in the concentration camps are an example of sources that are discursively embedded in ideology. Liz Stanley and Helen Dampier have shown how the provenance of these contemporary, near contemporary or pseudo-contemporary⁴⁰ documents, the proto-nationalist circumstances in which they were compiled, collected and disseminated, compromises their integrity.⁴¹ Furthermore, there are virtually no records of camp life deriving from the substantial male population of the camps,⁴² nor from women who were well disposed to the British. Indeed, the existence of such a group has been airbrushed out of the picture to such an extent that it comes as a surprise to learn that the British authorities at Winburg contemplated creating a separate camp to accommodate 1 000 “loyalists”,⁴³ nearly a third of that camp’s population.

With regard to silences in the record, the occurrence of cowardice is concealed in historiographies conceptualised in terms of both imperial and republican masculinity. A national army is a total institution⁴⁴ in which socialisation into conformity is reinforced by coercion. However frightened a soldier may be, the option of cowardly conduct is unlikely to arise. When it does, the matter is expeditiously dealt with and deliberately forgotten. On 11 November 2008, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, in honouring the war dead, recalled that 600 French soldiers had been executed for cowardice during the First World War, saying:

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37. See B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau’s War: A Black South African War in the Cape 1899–1902* (Cambridge University Press, Cape Town, 1991), p 61.
38. Free State Provincial Archives, Bloemfontein (hereafter FSA), Accession 69, N.C. Havenga Collection.
39. Cited in J. Krikler, “‘A Class Destroyed, a Class Restored’: The Relationship of Agrarian Class Struggle to the Destruction of the Boer Landowning Class during the South African War and its Reconstruction thereafter”, Paper delivered at an African Seminar, Economics Department, UCT, 13 August 1986, p 29.
40. See L. Stanley and H. Dampier, “Simulacrum Diaries: Time, the ‘Moment of Writing’, and the Diaries of Johanna Brandt-Van Warmelo”, *Life Writing*, 3, 2, 2006, pp 34–35.
41. L. Stanley and H. Dampier, “Cultural Entrepreneurs, Proto-Nationalism and Women’s Testimony Writing: From the South African War to 1940”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33, 3, September 2007, pp 501–513. See also L. Stanley, *Mourning Becomes ...: Post/Memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2006), pp 101–121.
42. Apart from A.D.L. (A.D. Lückhoff), *Woman’s Endurance*, annotated by F. Pretorius (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2006) which is an extremely brief text on the Bethulie camp, a very significant privately-owned diary kept by J.G. Kirchner in the Winburg camp has recently come to light.
43. FSA, Archives of the Superintendent of Refugee Camps, SRC 23.8308 and 8424.
44. Erving Goffman defines a total institution – one of his key concepts – as an institution that encompasses one’s whole being and imposes a regimented pattern disregarding individuality. See “Characteristics of Total Institutions”, at <http://www.diligio.com/goffman.htm> (accessed 2 August 2008).

I think of these men of whom too much was asked, who were too exposed, who were sometimes sent to be massacred through mistakes by their commanders, of those men who, one day, no longer had the strength to fight⁴⁵

From the news report covering this event we also learn that in 2006 the British queen posthumously pardoned 306 psychologically traumatised soldiers who were shot by their own side for desertion or cowardice during the same war. The Boers, however, were members of a citizen's army and individualists, and therefore in greater danger of showing "unmanly" fear. This was noted by a Dutch observer, Rein Rijkens, who remarked that in his view, in any nation that lacked a permanent army, courage was uncommon.⁴⁶

In the face of social disapproval, some burghers evaded the call to arms. Aletta Gertruida Smith of Trompsburg said of her adopted son, Frans Nienaber, "This child [he was twenty], although having been commandeered by the former Government, refused to take up arms on account of being too timid to face war".⁴⁷ In the Winburg district, Abraham le Roux of Blesbokfontein was never on commando because he was, his father said, "very delicate and unable to put up with any excitement".⁴⁸

Easily confused with cowardice is a principled objection to all warfare. As in other wars, ambulance service provided an alternative to military service. Anton Michael Heyns and his wife Rachel Maria of Senekal availed themselves of this alternative.⁴⁹ Willem Gerhardus Pienaar of Winburg articulated this fundamental motivation as follows:

When the war started I went to the Cape Colony ... because I did not want to fight ... I left my property knowing that it was all liable to confiscation for going away and leaving the country I went on the rumour that Burghers would be commandeered and, being unwilling to fight at all, I went away I was afraid of fighting and thought that if I sold my property, I would not be able to get away⁵⁰

In a striking demonstration of the shared nature of the Boer and British perspective on Victorian masculinity, Pienaar's claim for compensation was rejected by the British, not because he did not wish to fight against them, which from the British point of view would perhaps have been commendable, but because he was unwilling to fight at all. Another example of this shared perspective is provided by the case of Christiaan Jacobus Wheeler, a schoolmaster of Witlaagte in the Winburg district, who avoided going on commando by feigning illness. When he subsequently went over to the British, his lack of courage was contemptuously alluded to in the comment: "He is now in the Farmers' Guard at Glen – fighting from a blockhouse seems to be to his liking."⁵¹

45. 'Sokorzy Honours Deserters', *The Times* (Johannesburg), 12 November 2008, p 8.

46. R. Rijkens, *Brieven uit de Boerenoorlog: Indrukken van Reintho Rijkens, Arts, over zijn Verblijf in Zuid-Afrika van Juli 1899 tot Juli 1900 en over zijn Werkzaamheden* (Nederlands-Zuidafrikaanse Vereniging, Den Haag, 1988), 18 Mei 1900, p 82.

47. NAP, Archives of the Staff Officer Prisoners of War, SO/POW 18, PR A1498.

48. NAP, Archives of the Central Judicial Commission (hereafter CJC), 1693.724.

49. NAP, CJC 1703.1262.

50. NAP, CJC 1679.213.

51. NAP, CJC 1684.405.

The Russian nurse Sophia Izedinova was struck by how many “strong and healthy burghers avoided their obligations on various pretexts”.⁵² Francois Conradie too, remarked on the able-bodied burghers malingering in Potchefstroom at a time when they were most needed on commando.⁵³ A number of sources testify to a general reluctance among the Boers to go into battle. J.F. Naudé reported that when the Rustenburg commando was called to arms, only 100 out of 2 000 responded; Max Weber recalled how Boers were “swallowed up by the surrounding bushes” at Moedwil; and Frits Rothmann wrote of the disintegration of the Lydenburg commando in the face of danger.⁵⁴ So too, when General Philip Botha ordered 1 000 men to check the British right flank at Tabaksberg, only 66 obeyed. At the height of the battle, the general went after a burgher who had absconded; whereupon the rest abandoned their positions.⁵⁵

A failure of nerve in the thick of battle could be ingeniously argued away. When General Jan Kemp found a group of burghers holding a prayer meeting during the battle of Nootgedacht, they could argue (with reference to Exodus 17:12) for the importance of the support role they were providing.⁵⁶ During a skirmish at the Modder River, the Winburg Commandant Kootjie Jordaan could do nothing to prevent Andries Jacobus Botes of Tochgekregen from absconding on the pretext that he was going to fetch reinforcements.⁵⁷ In the prisoner-of-war camp at Green Point, Botes’s jumpiness made him the butt of his countrymen’s indulgent jokes.⁵⁸ This is typical of the tolerant response that burghers generally showed to the occurrence of *bangsjekke* (“scared sickness”).⁵⁹

Understandably, burghers distancing themselves from the Boer cause and, in some cases, defecting to the enemy, was for a long time a taboo topic in Afrikaner historiography. In the mid-seventies the South African state helped to draw a veil of secrecy over collaboration by extending until 2000 the embargo on archival resources that listed Boers who had fought on the British side.⁶⁰ While historians avoided the theme, the perceptive writer, Herman Charles Bosman, who was very interested in human motivation and not at all in national solidarity, teased it out in four of his short stories, “Mafeking Road”; “Peaches Ripening in the Sun”; “The Traitor’s Wife”; and “The Affair at Ysterspruit”.⁶¹ Eventually, however, historians must also challenge the myth and confront the fact that, for whatever reason, thousands of burghers sabotaged

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52. S. Izedinova, *A Few Months with the Boers: The War Reminiscences of a Russian Nursing Sister*, C. Moody tr. and ed. (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1977), p 180.
53. F.D. Conradie, *Met Cronjé aan die Wesfront (1899–1900) en Waarom het die Boere die Oorlog Verloor?* (Nasionale Pers, Kaapstad, 1943), p 33.
54. J.F. Naudé, *Vechten en Vluchten van Beyers en Kemp “bókant” De Wet* (Nijgh & Van Ditmar, Amsterdam, 1903), p 249; M. Weber, *Eighteen Months under General De la Rey: Being a Diary of the Swiss Geologist Max Weber who Fought for the Boers in the Western Transvaal during the Anglo-Boer War* (Benedell, Pretoria, 1999), p 109; and M.E.R. (red.), *Oorlogsdagboek van ’n Transvaalse Burger te Veld* (Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 1976), 15 April 1901, p 166.
55. NAP, A 230/2: “J.C. Pretorius, ’n Vrystater op Kommando”, p 11.
56. Pretorius, *Life on Commando*, p 185.
57. M.C.E. van Schoor (red.), “Dagboek van Hugo H. van Niekerk”, *Christiaan de Wet-Annale*, 1, 1972, 16 Februarie 1900, p 19.
58. Van Schoor (red.), “Dagboek van Hugo H. van Niekerk”, 18 April 1900, p 61.
59. J.C. de Villiers, *Healers, Helpers and Hospitals: A History of Military Medicine in the Anglo-Boer War* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2008), II, pp 178–179.
60. A. Grundlingh, Foreword to the second edition, *Die “Hendsoppers” en “Joiners”* (Protea Boekhuis, Pretoria, 1999).
61. H.C. Bosman, *The Collected Works of Herman Charles Bosman*, 2 volumes (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg, 1981), I, pp 51–55, 178–182, 197–201, 224–228.

their countries' war effort. It is as the German historian Michael Stürmer has said in a different context:

From its very beginning, history has had to counter legend, myth and partisan distortion. That remains its dilemma: It is spurred by collective, largely unconscious needs for the endowment of higher meaning, but it must rid itself of such notions in its scholarly methods.⁶²

The phenomenon of disloyalty to the Boer cause was explored in depth in a groundbreaking study by Albert Grundlingh,⁶³ translated into English as *The Dynamics of Treason*,⁶⁴ and is pursued in the academic thesis on which the present article is based.⁶⁵ A recent work, *Boereverraaier*,⁶⁶ deals more specifically with the execution of collaborators, a theme even more repugnant to national sentiment.

According to Ankersmit, historical narration is simply “a proposal to look at the past from a certain point of view”.⁶⁷ The suggestion that there is not one final and definitive history *wie es eigentlich gewesen* has led to exaggerated charges that this means that “anything goes” and that the doors are thrown open to Holocaust denialism.⁶⁸ History has always been vulnerable to the limitations of the record on which it draws, the selectivity inherent in writing it and the subjectivity of historians, who can only look at the past from the perspective of their time and culture. This does not mean that all perspectives are equally appropriate nor that all accounts are equally plausible.

A plurality of possible texts may be illustrated with reference to some interpretations of black participation in the Anglo-Boer War. A conservative approach seeks to retain a paradigm of Boer victimhood while co-opting blacks as fellow victims of British imperialism. In the first flush of “rainbow nation” euphoria, there was a marked desire for inclusivity that prompted Archbishop Desmond Tutu to describe the war as one in which Afrikaners and blacks had “stood together against imperialism”.⁶⁹ This ad-hoc expedient formed the basis for the ANC government's official participation in centenary commemorations.⁷⁰ At the time, there was a fear in some quarters of blacks hijacking the war;⁷¹ what proved a greater danger was whites hijacking black suffering in the war to suit their political purposes. This is exemplified by Owen Coetzer's journalistic

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62. M. Stürmer, Letter to the editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 August 1986, quoted in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust* (Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1993), p 61.
63. A.M. Grundlingh, “Die Vrystaatse en Transvaalse Burgers wat die Republikeinse Oorlogspoging vanaf 1900 versaa het”, MA dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1976; published as *Die “Hendsoppers” en “Joiners”: Die Rasionaal en Verskynsel van Verraad* (HAUM, Pretoria, 1979).
64. A. Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason: Boer Collaboration in the South African War of 1899–1902* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2006).
65. J.G. Boje, “Winburg's War: An Appraisal of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1903 as it was Experienced by the People of a Free State District”, DPhil thesis, University of Pretoria, 2009.
66. A. Blake, *Boereverraaier: Teregstellings tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog* (Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 2010).
67. Quoted in Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, p 28.
68. Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, p 23.
69. Desmond Tutu, quoted in L. Witz, G. Minkley and C. Rassool, “No End of a [History] Lesson”, *South African Historical Journal*, 41, 1999, p 375.
70. See G. Cuthbertson and A. Jeeves, “The Many-sided Struggle for Southern Africa, 1899–1902”, *South African Historical Journal*, 41, 1999, p 7.
71. E. van Heyningen, “Costly Mythologies: The Concentration Camps of the South African War in Afrikaner Historiography”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34, 3, September 2008, p 512.

Fire in the Sky.⁷² However, Boers and blacks as fellow victims of imperialism was never a convincing interpretation of a war that was essentially a contest between the British and the Boers for control of the land and its resources, which, in the view of both sides, included the labour of the indigenous population – a war which, from this perspective too, is appropriately identified by means of the exclusive name of Anglo-Boer War. For this reason, the attempt at making common cause was angrily repudiated by Gabriel Setiloane. For the past century, he wrote, the history of South Africa amounted to “a ruthless drive by the Boers to dispossess the black man in this country, reaching its climax with the rise of the National Party and its apartheid policy”. Yet when the centenary of the war approached, Setiloane said, these same people displayed astonishing amnesia in expecting an ANC government to join in commemorating the war. “By all means, let the Boers commemorate the war and gloss it and dress it up as they choose. But please, let it not be with our communal public funds.”⁷³

A liberal paradigm, which may serve as a cloak for paternalism, focuses on the exploitation of blacks, thus reducing them to passive victimhood.⁷⁴ Adherents of such an approach are likely to say little about blacks seizing new opportunities, asserting themselves in relation to whites or seeking to reoccupy land, but will concentrate instead on blacks as victims, with the consequent danger of what Grundlingh called “an almost tawdry spectacle of the Olympics of suffering”.⁷⁵ The reality is, however, that the trauma of the twentieth century all but obliterated the Anglo-Boer War in the collective memory of black people⁷⁶ and the death of Hector Pieterson on 16 June 1976 in the course of the liberation struggle has more symbolic significance for them than the thousands of meaningless deaths in someone else’s war.

Typical of revisionism would be an overemphasis on the active role of blacks in resisting Boer oppression. It is a commonplace of South African history that labour resistance can be discerned from the time when whites first appeared on the scene, manifesting itself in “laziness”, the damaging of implements, “insolence” and absconding. But these were individual actions before the formation of organisations that made communal action possible. The early emergence of the African Methodist Episcopal Church provided such a vehicle. By the time the war broke out, this church had congregations in at least eight Free State towns.⁷⁷ In point of fact, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in common with other Pentecostal churches, was apolitical in the narrower sense of the word, but it offered a vision of hope and restored human dignity by providing opportunities for leadership, independent action, social reintegration and upward mobility in a structured community free of white control. And such a vision is profoundly political. Jeremy Krikler has shown that fear of Ethiopianism was a greater danger to whites than the movement itself.⁷⁸ Random killing of whites during the war

72. See O. Coetzer, *Fire in the Sky: The Destruction of the Orange Free State 1899–1902* (Covos-Day, Weltevreden Park, 2000), p viii.

73. G. Setiloane, in M. van Bart and L. Scholtz (reds.), *Vir Vryheid en vir Reg: Anglo-Boereoorlog Gedenkboek* (Tafelberg, Kaapstad, 2003), p 172. Quotations translated from the Afrikaans.

74. See S. Marks and R. Rathbone (eds), *Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness 1870–1930* (Longman, Harlow, 1982), p 7.

75. A. Grundlingh, “Reframing Remembrance: The Politics of the Centenary Commemoration of the South African War of 1899–1902”, in H.E. Stolten (ed.), *History Making and Present Day Politics: The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 2007), p 205.

76. Van Heynigen, “Costly Mythologies”, p 496.

77. The towns were Bloemfontein, Ladybrand, Parys, Senekal, Ventersburg, Vredefort, Viljoensdrif and Winburg.

78. J. Krikler, “Social Neurosis and Hysterical Pre-cognition: A Case-Study and Reflections”, *Journal of Social History*, 28, 3, Spring 1995, pp 491–520.

also instilled fear, but it is impossible to disentangle acts of war from personal retaliation or mere criminality, so to classify all such incidents under the rubric of liberation may amount to the creation of “a fashionable new myth”.⁷⁹

National identity is dependent on collective memory, to which individual identity stands in reciprocal relationship. Collective memory is not simply an aggregate of individual memories, for in return for the security of belonging to a group or nation,⁸⁰ the individual unconsciously accommodates his or her experiences of the past to the prevailing meaning system.⁸¹ Historiography is a vital resource for the organisation of collective memory and at times of identity crisis, groups self-consciously turn to the past for the confirmation of their preferred present and future identity options.⁸² A reappraisal of the Anglo-Boer War uncovers neglected aspects of the war that invite rehabilitation.

The biggest challenge to Afrikaner identity today is to give substance to the renunciation of racism by political leaders in the nineties. This is aided by the de facto loss of power and the constitutional provision for plurality; it is hampered by the extent of the damage done in the years of Afrikaner triumphalism. The racist attitudes which prevailed among the Boers, which were typical, in varying degree, of other white nations, developed in time into a unique brand of South African racism that earned the opprobrium of the world community. But to conflate the two is to overlook the crucial difference that while the harshness of the former could be mitigated by experiences of co-humanity, the latter operated on the basis of deliberate segregation aimed at removing all points of meaningful personal contact. This physical distancing brought estrangement that in the words of Couze Venn, “removed the Other from the sphere of one’s concern or ethical responsibility”.⁸³ To complete the process, emotional commonality was counteracted by means of a culture of moral intransigence. Concern for the Other was stigmatised as “nauseating humanitarianism” or “half-baked humanism”⁸⁴ and humanism, liberalism and communism were paraded as the epitome of evil.

There are those who balk at the challenge “to reinscribe remorse on a landscape”,⁸⁵ and hold the blacks of the Boer republics responsible for the evolution of apartheid as Marthinus van Bart does when he announces, but does not demonstrate, that the imperialism that armed blacks against the Boers and the raping of Boer women by blacks thus empowered, lies at the root of Afrikaners’ racial antagonism and of apartheid.⁸⁶ Such a relativisation of the apartheid era represents a harmonisation of the past for the sake of a chimeral national self-confidence and as such, is no more than an attempt to escape the moral dimension of our own *vergangenheitsbewältigung*.⁸⁷

79. T. Pakenham, “Africans in the Boer War”, *Journal of African History*, 27, 3, 1986, p 575.

80. J. de Reuck, “A Politics of Blood: The ‘White Tribe’ of Africa and the Recombinant Nationalism of a Colonizing Indigene”, *Critical Arts*, 10, 2, January 1996, p 144.

81. P. Antze and M. Lambek, *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (Routledge, New York, 1996), p xxi.

82. D. Levy, “The Future of the Past: Historiographical Disputes and Competing Memories in Germany and Israel”, *History and Theory*, 38, 1, February 1999, 51–52.

83. C. Venn, *The Post-Colonial Challenge: Towards Alternative Worlds* (Sage Publications, London, 2006), p 26.

84. G.J. Hugo, “Die Kleurling in Suid-Afrika: Kerklik-Godsdienstig”, in Afrikaanse Studentebond, *Die Kleurling in Suid-Afrika*, p 1; and A.P. Grové, cited in J. Snyman, “To Reinscribe Remorse on a Landscape”, *Literature and Theology*, 13, 4, December 1999, p 285.

85. Snyman “To Reinscribe Remorse on a Landscape”, pp 284–298.

86. Van Bart en Scholtz (reds.), *Vir Vryheid en vir Reg*, p 39.

87. See P. Duvenhage, “The Politics of Memory and Forgetting after Auschwitz and Apartheid”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 25, 3, 1 May 1999.

Political power was lost very suddenly and Afrikaners have had to adapt to being a minority in a multicultural environment. This represents something of a *restitutio ad integrum*, because the Trekkers' hold on the land they occupied was often tenuous, there was no overarching state authority during the republican period and the Union was premised on English-Afrikaner cooperation. After a brief exercise of exclusive Afrikaner power from 1948 to the mid-sixties, there was a shift from an ethnic to a territorial conception of nationhood and Afrikaner nationalism was forced to begin seeking new alliances in a wider community of people with legitimate claims on the state.⁸⁸ From that time onwards, authority structures have weakened and there has been a resurgence of the individualism that was such a marked characteristic of the republican Boer. Young "alternative Afrikaners" see themselves as individualists,⁸⁹ and although Afrikaans has lost its privileged position, Afrikaans culture has been revitalised with novels of great depth as well as cultural festivals which attract large numbers of people.⁹⁰

Because of their individualism, the Boers' conduct was not always heroic, noble or irreproachable and this led to a suppressed history of the war. The elimination of "grand narratives" replaces stereotypes with real human beings.⁹¹ Although a consensual South African history remains an elusive ideal, a necessary first step must be particularist histories stripped of ideological gloss, in which people's motivation is represented in human rather than heroic terms.

In the heyday of Afrikaner nationalism, the historian J.H. Breytenbach represented the history of the Afrikaner as a continuum stretching from the first hankering for freedom on the part of the free burghers (Eric Stockenström locates his "myth of origin" in the Netherlands' struggle for independence from Spain)⁹² to the time in the future when freedom would be attained and the Afrikaner would rule over the whole country.⁹³ Democratisation has radically disrupted the continuum, liberating South African historiography once and for all from its teleological straitjacket. History is open and its agents have the moral responsibility of freedom in shaping their communal future.

To reappraise the Anglo-Boer War in a postmodern perspective is to promote this objective.

Abstract

This article, based on a thesis on the Anglo-Boer War as it was experienced by the people of the Winburg district, demonstrates how postmodern insights, which have excited much discomfort among practising historians, can contribute to an understanding of the Anglo-Boer War that is relevant to Afrikaner identity in a democratic, pluralistic South Africa. The traditional Afrikaner nationalist paradigm is invalidated by an anti-totalising

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88. H. Giliomee, "Broedertwis: Intra-Afrikaner Conflicts in the Transition from Apartheid", *African Affairs*, 91, 1992, pp 346–347.
89. M. Vestergaard, "Who's got the Map? The Negotiation of Afrikaner Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa", *Daedalus*, 91, 2001, p 35.
90. Vestergaard, "Who's got the Map", p 27.
91. P.A. Erasmus, "Antropologiese Spel met Identiteit: Selfrefleksie op die Afrikaner", *Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe*, 45, 2, 2005, p 239.
92. E. Stockenström, *Die Vron in die Geskiedenis van die Hollands-Afrikaanse Volk: 'n Bekenpte Oorsig van die Rol wat die Vron Gespeel het in die 350 Jaar tussen 1568 en 1918*, (s.n., s.l., 1918?), p 13.
93. Breytenbach, *Die Betekenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*, p 69.

approach and its ideological use of history for the exercise of power is unmasked. On the other hand, deconstruction brings to light aspects of the past that may usefully be recuperated.

Key words: Anglo-Boer War; South African War; postmodernism; historiography; Afrikaner identity.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel, wat gebaseer is op 'n proefskrif oor die Anglo-Boereoorlog soos dit deur die bevolking van die Winburg-distrik ervaar is, demonstreer hoedat postmoderne insigte wat professionele historici erg verontrus het, kan bydra tot 'n siening van die oorlog wat relevant is met betrekking tot Afrikaner-identiteit in 'n demokratiese, pluralistiese Suid-Afrika. Die tradisionele, Afrikaner-nasionalistiese paradigma word ontvrag deur 'n anti-totaliserende benadering en die ideologiese gebruik van die geskiedenis vir magsuitoefening word aan die kaak gestel. Aan die ander kant kan dekonstruksie daartoe bydra om aspekte van die verlede na vore te bring wat met voordeel opnuut aandag kan geniet.

Sleutelwoorde: Anglo-Boereoorlog; Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog; postmodernisme; historiografie; Afrikaner-identiteit