

THE ANGLO-BOER WAR 1899–1902: WHITE MAN’S WAR, BLACK MAN’S WAR, TRAUMATIC WAR

André Wessels

Bloemfontein: SUN PRESS

2011, 213 pages

Appendix, maps, photographs, endnotes, source list

ISBN 978-1-920383-27-5 (Paperback)

R215,00 + postage

The Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902: White man’s war, black man’s war, traumatic war is the latest work from the pen of established Anglo-Boer War historian André Wessels, following hot on the heels of his previous book *A century of postgraduate Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) studies* (Bloemfontein, Sun Press, 2010).

In this concise history of the Anglo-Boer War, Wessels brings together some of his earlier research published mostly in Afrikaans previously, in a single English-language volume. The book comprises three parts. Part I, “The main military events of the war” (pp. 19–80), is an expansion of his booklet *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899–1902: ’n Oorsig van die militêre verloop van die stryd* (Bloemfontein, 1991). It provides a summary of the opposing forces and their war plans, the Boer offensive at the beginning of the war, the two subsequent British offensives, and the guerrilla phase of the war, covering all major battles and sieges. Part II, “The military role of black, coloured and Asian people in the Anglo-Boer War” (pp. 99–134), is a slight expansion of another earlier Afrikaans publication by Wessels, *Die militêre rol van swart mense, bruin mense en Indiërs tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899–1902)* (Bloemfontein, 1998). As this part deals specifically with the military roles of blacks, so-called “coloureds” and Asians on the opposing sides, Wessels pays virtually no attention to the plight of “non-white” civilians.

<p><i>Scientia Militaria, South African Journal of Military Studies,</i> Vol 40, Nr 2, 2012, pp. 171-173 doi: 10.5787/40-2-1003</p>

Part III, “Conflict and collateral damage in the twentieth century” (pp. 137–162) is based mainly on a conference paper (Toronto, Canada, May 2004) entitled “Conflict and collateral damage in twentieth-century South

Africa: the traumatic legacy of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 to 1902". In this part, which in my opinion is the most important contribution of this book to the Anglo-Boer War literature, Wessels explores the long-term consequences and legacies of the Anglo-Boer War for all South Africans.

The war, in his view, "cause[d] immense damage, disruption and trauma and set in motion a train of events which to a large extent determined the course that twentieth-century South African history would take" (p. 161). Wessels emphasises the split between Boer and Briton, between Afrikaners and English-speaking South Africans, between Afrikaner and Afrikaner, and between black and white South Africans, caused by the legacy of the internment camps,¹ the "joiners and hand-uppers", and the participation of "non-whites" in the war and the subsequent denial of their political rights by the Peace Treaty of Vereeniging in 1902. He links these traumatic experiences *inter alia* to the emergence of the black liberation struggle after the unification of South Africa, the Afrikaner rebellion of 1914, the implementation of the National Party's apartheid policy, the Sharpeville tragedy (1960), the 1976 Soweto uprisings and the political violence of the 1980s and the 1990s. Part III is followed by an appendix (pp. 163–169) outlining the various phases of the Anglo-Boer War and listing the main battles (with dates) during each phase.

Wessels succeeds in providing a brief yet comprehensive and accurate analysis of the Anglo-Boer War that should, as his aim is, appeal to both the academic fraternity and the general reader. Summarising not only the main military events and issues of the war, but also exploring the involvement of South Africans from all racial groups in this traumatic conflict, and the lingering impact of the war on the whole of South African society to the present day, this work indeed stands out in the impressive historiography of the ever-green Anglo-Boer War as an unequalled concise history of the war. Save for illustrations, it is a significant improvement on the other recent concise history of the war, Gregory Fremont-Barnes's *The Boer War 1899–1902* (Oxford: Osprey, 2003). Fremont-Barnes does not address the involvement of black, Asian and so-called "coloured" people in the war,² and generally offers a less comprehensive, interpretive and coherent overview of the war than Wessels.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Wessels deviates from the customary term “concentration camps” to “make it clear that *no* comparison is being made between the British camps for Boers ... and the Nazi concentration/extermination camps during World War II” (p. 78).
- ² See Grundlingh, A. “Review of Fremont-Barnes, Gregory, *The Boer War, 1899–1902*”. *H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews*. June 2004. <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9509>> Accessed on 23 July 2012.