

Book review

A Russian on commando: The Boer War experience of Yevgeny Avgustus

Boris Gorelik

South Africa: Jonathan Ball Publishers
2022, 270 pages
ISBN 978-1-7761-9136-9 (Softcover)

The book *A Russian on commando: The Boer War experience of Yevgeny Avgustus*⁵⁹⁷ is a war memoir that details the experiences of Yevgeny Avgustus as a foreign (*uitlander*) volunteer in the South African War of 1899 to 1902. It is a fascinating read, which provides a behind-the-scenes look at the events that took place during this war. The book was edited by Boris Gorelik who engages the reader vividly in what Avgustus had recorded in his memoir. Since Avgustus was from Russia, the memoir was originally written in Russian and was translated into English by Lucas Venter.

The book is well organised, and the chapters are arranged according to their relevance. The titles of the respective chapters are clear in terms of the details presented in each chapter. Gorelik starts by acknowledging one of the most debated topics regarding the involvement of other nationals in the South African War. The war was previously known as the Second Anglo-Boer War but later became known as the South African War, taking into account that people other than South Africans were involved in this war as well. It is commonly known that other nations assisted either the British or the Boers in the war, but we seldom find information that delves deeper into these ‘other’ or *uitlander* volunteers in the war. To bridge a part of this gap, the book highlights the experiences of these ‘other’ foreign nationals who came to fight for a foreign cause in a war that was not theirs.

The introductory chapter sets the tone and discusses Russian interest in South Africa and the war, which led to their involvement in and contribution to the war even though in a limited capacity. Before the war, the relationship between Russia and South Africa was insignificant and close to non-existent, which was perhaps due to the geographical distance between the two countries. Russia became interested in South Africa and romanticised Boer campaigns and their lifestyle, i.e. conservatism and religion to the point where Boer generals were commemorated in various ways in Russia. This was despite the fact that, unlike the Germans and the Dutch, Russians had no kinship ties with the Boers. This discussion is thought-provoking and provides new insight into how the war gained international focus by allowing the reader to see how the war became a central focus during this period. Gorelik also introduces us to the main character in the book, Yevgeny Avgustus, a Latvian memoirist and writer, who became part of the Russian

combatants who volunteered in the South African War. Gorelik narrates the biography and historiography of Avgustus from his childhood, throughout his education, which ended in him dropping out of school, up to his adult life as a Russian commando who joined the Boer army as a soldier to fight “for a foreign nation and a foreign cause” (p. 55). The book takes us on Avgustus’ journey from Russia to the Transvaal in South Africa. Background is given on how his fellow men tried to discourage his venture but also on his interactions with various soldiers in restaurants and cafés in Berlin. This is a clear indication of the passion he and his fellow men had for fighting for the Boer cause. Details on his travels provide an overview of the locations to which he had travelled and his experiences at each destination. Gorelik also details the horrors that took place when shots were fired in the commando camps, and that transpired in some of the battles in which Avgustus participated during the South African War, such as the Battle of Spion Kop and the Battle of the Tugela Heights. While reading the book, one’s imagination starts to paint pictures of the events highlighted in the book.

Avgustus shares extensively the events that took place on the journey to Africa by ship. What grabbed my attention most was Avgustus’ constant encounters with black people and their various tribes during the war. The brief descriptions of the type of labour that black people provided for their Boer masters grab the attention (pp. 76–82). We learn, for instance, that black people were used as labourers during the war. It is interesting to note Avgustus’ first-hand experience of the work that black men (and women) did and his feelings towards them, whether negative or positive, because when it comes to the historical narratives of the war, the issue of black participation has been contested over the years. The writer spoke broken Dutch but also learned some isiZulu phrases, such as “hamba lapha”, which means “get out of here” (p. 116).

More details of Avgustus’ encounters with this group of people and other activities in which the black people were involved would have added much value to the book. In Chapter 4, Gorelik details what Avgustus was told of how black men had expectations of being free from the white man after the war and the ritual sacrifices these men had made. This is very interesting because, in my understanding of black people, rituals are usually performed during significant events or periods. The treatment of black men is again mentioned when Gorelik discusses an incident Avgustus experienced where a black man who was considered a spy was bound with a rope to a horse and dragged while being beaten by the Boer generals and ultimately shot after being confirmed a spy. This information in this book is a confirmation of what Pretorius had discussed and depicted in images in the book *Scorched earth* regarding Boer and British brutality against black people during the South African War.⁵⁹⁸

Another key aspect of the book is the issue of food rations during the war. Gorelik details Avgustus’ experiences when he landed in Pretoria and the abundant food provisions that were available for the commandos when they first arrived. Food became scarce when the war intensified. We come to learn that food rations were provided by the British during the South African War, and it was interesting to read how the men sometimes had to source food and occasionally received food from black men in exchange for money.

Foreign nationals came from places such as Germany, France and Russia to participate in the war. In the process, various corps were formed. The writer notes the formation of the Russian corps as an act to correct the “uncoordinated” Boer military systems and techniques that existed at the time (p. 160). The aims of this corps failed due to a leadership crisis. Other men from Germany, France and Ireland, who were working in the gold mines, workshops, butcheries and bakeries, were coerced to join the Boer forces to survive due to stagnation in their businesses (p. 163).

I was particularly glad that Gorelik mentions the significance of the war at the start of the book. The point he makes is that the South African War was not only a South African matter but a global matter that captured the attention of other countries either rooting for or against the British or Boers, two devoted Christian nations who, instead of practising Christian conscience, called on God and prayed for the strength to exterminate each other. Memoirs by foreigners are often overlooked by historians and researchers when conducting research, and Gorelik indicates the relevance of memoirs in research as they offer first-hand war narratives and views from an outside perspective. The memoirs are relevant to avoid biased views of war events.

The images used in the book are a good addition to help depict the characters mentioned and the variety of corps that volunteered in the war. The use of maps could have enhanced the illustrations. Had Gorelik mapped the locations within which Avgustus found himself, it would have provided further information on the locations of battlefields and commando camps.

Towards the end of the book, we learn more about the Russian corps and the poor military tactics employed by the Boers that caused them to lose the war. We also get to understand the real intentions of Avgustus in coming from Russia to South Africa to join the war. Was he prepared to die for a war that was not his? No, he wanted to learn the military tactics of the Boers and the operational systems of the British, as he was convinced that one day war would take place between Russia and the British.

I generally appreciate that Gorelik included some additional notes to clarify certain aspects, especially the discontinuation of the memoir, or rather its sudden ending.

Mpho Manaka (Maripane) 

University of South Africa

Endnotes

⁵⁹⁷ B Gorelik (ed). *A Russian commando: The Boer War experiences of Yevgeny Avgustus*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2022.

⁵⁹⁸ F Pretorius (ed). *Scorched earth*. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2017.

