

BOOK REVIEW:

A CENTURY IS A SHORT TIME – NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE ANGLO-BOER WAR BY INA SNYMAN, IAN LIEBENBERG, GERT VAN DER WESTHUIZEN, MARIAAN ROOS (EDS.)

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The editors claim that this book attempts to further stimulate debate on the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902. Therefore, they included contributions from different disciplines, but with the main emphasis still on historical writing. They strived to continue the tradition to regard all historical debate as temporary and within the expression by the Dutch historian, Pieter Geyl, that history is a debate without end. From that point of view, the publication is timely and has the potential to enhance our comprehension of one of the events that had a profound influence on the history of South Africa. Because of the divergent approaches of the different authors, the different contributions are briefly analysed before a value judgement on the publication as a whole is made.

The first essay is by M.B. Ramose with the title *The philosophy of the Anglo-Boer War*. The core of the author's argument is that both the British and the Boers deemed it correct during the 19th century to conquer the land from the indigenous people of South Africa and robbed them of their sovereignty, which was only partially restored in 1994. He argues that the political dispensation of 1994 did not go far enough to restore to the indigenous people that which had been taken from them. His point of view is that democracy and non-racialism cannot replace the exigencies of justice in the form of restoration and restitution nor provide a basis for historical justice.

This essay underpins the argument that the decision in 1994 to make 1913 the cut off point in terms of land claims, does not go back far enough in history. On the one hand, the author's perspective leaves one – from a personal point of view, of course – with a feeling of unease. On the other hand, it contributes to the multiplicity of historical views on the meaning of the war. This is, of course, not entirely new, as F.A. van Jaarsveld, in his 1984 publication *Omstrede Suid-Afrikaanse Verlede – Geskiedenisideologie en die historiese skuldvraagstuk (Controversial South African Past – historical ideology and the historical guilt issue)* already analysed this. Ramose's essay provides perhaps more detail on how a certain black, nationalist point of view understands the meaning of the war.

The next essay *Windows 1900; and other Office packages we inherited*, also falls more within the realm of philosophy than within history. Charl-Pierre Naudé uses Blumenberg's arguments that a history of the world is a succession of epochs, macro-eras that stretched over centuries. This author emphasizes the notion that an historical event passes on ideas to the coming generations that changes with time. His postulation is that too much emphasis was placed on the Afrikaner experience of the war and too little on the South African experience.

He also examines the role of the so-called historical rebels, who opposed the establishment and changed history, or succeeded so partially, to the detriment of their people. Therefore, to his mind, the real Afrikaner heroes of the 20th century should have been other than the traditional ones. He cites as example, Piet de Wet (brother of the Boer hero Christiaan that committed high treason by joining the British forces and fought against his own countrymen) and Smuts, after he saw the light and realised that Afrikaners were better off as citizens of the British Empire. In the contemporary era, his focus is on Van Zyl Slabbert, Bram Fischer, Breyten Breytenbach and Beyers Naude, whose warnings were not heeded, and with catastrophic consequences.

One gets the impression that the author is concerned that Afrikaners flocking to cultural festivities during the first few years of the 21st century will lead to a revival of Afrikaner nationalism, or the "volks" rebellion. According to him, that made them participate in the Great Trek, the wars against British Imperialism and the conflict with the world during the latter half of the 20th century. The core of his argument is repeated in the last paragraphs where he condemns the continued tendency – as he perceives it – of Afrikaners to split off from the rest of society and the unwillingness to realise the advantages of being assimilated into a

larger culture. According to him, the Anglo-Boer War was used during the 20th century to sustain this point of view.

As a historian it was difficult to judge the next essay by Petrus de Kock, *Who do the Boers think they are?* Reading the book, *Op soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz*, a few years ago I enjoyed it as a novel as, to my mind, it is well written. However, as an historian I have a problem with the presentation of the “events”. For example, the author’s warning that the Boer could not be replaced by the Afrikaner, while “animals” like the main character, Mentz and his men were still around. This argument creates the impression that the events in the book actually occurred, which for the most part is not true. It is also very illogical to create characters whose motive is survival and not nationalism, but their cruelty creates the opposite impression; using psychological warfare in order to force the Boer prisoners of war to rejoin the commandos.

The late Rocky Williams’ comparative study of the guerrilla campaigns of the war under analysis and the struggle of the liberation movements against Apartheid, strives to contribute to the forming of a new military culture, as it should be embodied in the South African National Defence Force. His analysis of the origins of Boer military thinking (as they never had a recognised doctrine) originating in the wars against different black nations within the borders of the two republics and manifested in the Anglo Boer War, contributes substantially to our knowledge of the war. This was long overdue. His recommendation that the SANDF should also reconsider the decision not to train its soldiers in guerrilla warfare is a valid argument too, as it might come in handy in future.

Ian Liebenberg draws a painting of J.C. Smuts like an artist depicting aspects of the life of a man that was an enigma in itself. Smuts experienced the war initially as a civil servant, then became an officer in the Boer Army and played a major role during the guerrilla phase. This knowledge and experience came in handy when he crushed the Afrikaner rebellion in 1914, commanded the Allied forces in East Africa during the First World War and again crushed two rebellions, the Bondelswarts uprising in South West Africa and the Rand strike of 1922.

Liebenberg bravely attempts to understand a man who was a complex human being and was able to play different roles as statesman, nature lover and soldier. In this process, the Anglo-Boer War was the central experience that formed his ideas. However, his analysis of Smuts’ background is incomplete. Smuts did not depend on experience only, as he made a thorough study of the

history of warfare before the war. Even more importantly, Smuts was above all a jurist, studied at Cambridge and his ideas were articulated by the logical process that enable people in this profession to calculate clinically and make judgements based on a careful analysis of facts. Was the decision to execute Jopie Fourie based on the fear that neglect to do so would lead to further guerrilla actions against the Union government, or on legal arguments? Perhaps, both influenced his decision, but Liebenberg chose to ignore Smuts' legal background, to the detriment of the essay.

Smuts also revealed an insight into the realms of strategy as indicated by his campaign plan before the war and his role as military advisor to the British in two world wars. Liebenberg's essay does not provide a complete understanding of the influence of the Anglo-Boer War on the military ideas of Smuts. One should also read: *Waarom die Boere die Oorlog verloor het*, (*Why the Boers have lost the war*) by Leopold Scholtz, to achieve this.

Marian Roos and Ian Liebenberg analysed the influence of the war on animals, especially that of horses. This is very applicable as this war was the last war in which horses played such a decisive role as combat instruments and in a logistic role. Their horsemanship gave the Boers a distinctive advantage over their British counterparts and determined to a large extent the tactical results. However, *Rights or no rights* depicts the suffering of animals in this war and paints a more complete picture of the ravages of war and its negative impact on society.

De Villiers described the role of the Red Cross during the war, filling an existing gap in historical writing in this regard. The difficulties experienced by this international organisation helped to prevent the repetition of mistakes during the conflicts of the 20th century. Unfortunately, his research covers the conventional phase of the war mainly. Thus, the role of the guerrilla phase in this regard must still be written.

Maphalala attempted to understand the Anglo-Boer War through the experience of black people. Much has been written on this aspect of the war. Two aspects must however be mentioned. On p. 185 the statement is made that the author is of the opinion that the British, through their agents, might have masterminded the assassination of Shaka, king of the Zulus. This is far-fetched and unsubstantiated. Neither in the Western tradition of archival research, nor in the African oral tradition was this mentioned. On p. 187 his depiction of life in Africa as one of complete peaceful co-existence with virtually no war before the

advent of the Western colonial era is simply not true. Snow's book in the UNESCO series, *Africa in the Nineteenth Century until the 1880s*, indicates several interstate wars. In Southern African the Lifaqane/Difacane/Mfecane, with the rise of powerful black kingdoms and the waging of war in large parts in the subcontinent is also proof that the said contention is not based on facts. His essay on the impact of the war and later consequences contributes substantially more to the historiography of the war in explaining how the events in especially Natal and Zululand eventually culminated in the Zulu Rebellion of 1906, one of the most important events in South African history.

Louis Changuion continues in his tradition of contributing substantially to the history of the Limpopo province in a field where much research still needs to be conducted, namely the guerrilla war. One finds an honest appreciation of the factors that bred discontent between different population groups in this region before the war and how this played a role in the British counter-guerrilla strategy.

The next essay, *Gold, imperialism and racism*, by B.M. Magubane, was written within the category of the Marxist interpretation of South African history. For Magubane, the evils of the past originated in Western imperial capitalism as started by the British, perpetuated by the Boers and eventually sustained by the United States of America. There is merit in some of his argument, but several statements are based on historical interpretations that have by now gone out of fashion. It makes interesting reading, but Iain Smith in his *The origins of the South African War*, argues, on the basis of meticulous archival research that capitalism per se was not the main driving force that led to the war and the actions thereafter.

In the essay, *Pretoria: A tale of cities and a century is a short time*, Grossberg and Liebenberg placed Pretoria and its historical development in perspective. They described how different population groups settled in its vicinity and they provide a perspective on how complex the historical claim to the city's name, or change of name is. The problem is that the authors analysed the history of the city within the South African context and from time to time got so carried away that they deviated from the original purpose of the essay. There is also a lack of accuracy in terms of chronology and dates. For example, the battle of Majuba occurred on 27 February 1881, not in 1880.

Gert van der Westhuizen wrote a long essay on the impact of the war on Ireland and the role of the Irish in the war and later in South African history. This is an important contribution to the better understanding of the war as he

demonstrates that for some unknown reason this aspect had been severely neglected in South African historiography.

Shubin and Shubin wrote an essay that can be described as the official Soviet view of South Africa, even if it is a more than a decade after the demise of the Soviet Union. My overall impression is that it is an apologetic exposition of the view from Moscow on South African before 1994 and the perceived negative role of Western countries in the region. The quality of research and objectivity in the chapter by Davidson and Filatova on the same topic is remarkably better and can be read as additional information to their previously outstanding publication, *The Russians and the Anglo-Boer War*.

Vernon February provides a useful perspective on the relations between the Netherlands and Afrikaners before, during and after the war. He explains how events during the 20th century drove a wedge between two people that had very close ties at the start of that age. However, certain controversial statements should have been substantiated by archival rather than secondary sources, such as a claimed statement by D.F. Malan at a political meeting that he was a communist! February also do not understand the finer detail of Afrikaner politics during the Second World War. There were no cordial relations between Malan's HNP and the Ossewa Brandwag and the Nuwe Orde, as he contends. It is also very difficult to comprehend the relationship between the dop-stelsel and the abuse of alcohol by some of the Boers during the Anglo-Boer War. Furthermore, he got the name of the Boer general at Talana wrong. It was Maroela Erasmus, not Brits and there is no proof that his drinking habits had any influence on his decision making during the battle.

Gert van der Westhuizen shows his mettle as a sport journalist in describing the role of sport and especially rugby as a conciliatory and a divisive factor in South African history. I am however of the opinion that the perceived rivalry between the Afrikaans and English language groups in rugby are exaggerated. One has to be careful not take the opinions of a few individuals as representative of a whole group. Also, the booing of Percy Montgomery at Loftus Versveld was not because he is English-speaking but because of constant poor performances during the season and a particular lacklustre effort on that specific day. To describe the crowd at this stadium as "50 000 boorish Boers" leaves a bad taste in an essay that otherwise provides a good contribution.

Ina Snyman ends off the book with short essays on the causes of the war, how especially woman and children experienced the ravages of the event and the significance of the war in terms of world history. Her approach to intermingle fiction and historical research is interesting, but as a historian, I find it frustrating to turn to every endnote to determine whether she is using the atmosphere created by fiction or historical facts.

A Century is a Short Time is a typical example of the postmodernist approach in history. According to Neuman (*Research Methodology*) the main focus of this approach is on the demystifying of the social world with the aim to deconstruct or tear apart surface appearances to reveal internal hidden structures. One should, however, be careful not to take this to the extreme. For example, two of the contributors (pp.39 and 453) imply that history as an academic discipline cannot claim any scientific basis and that it is just another form of literary writing. After all, Tosh (*The Pursuit of History*) rightfully states that historians can never be fully objective, but self-criticism and the comprehension of the actions of people within the context of the time in which they lived, are still vital for proper research in the discipline.

Finally, although somewhat 'fashionable', this book is good reading and brings a certain liveliness to the debate on the Anglo-Boer War. Moreover, in good academic tradition, the editors invite people to disagree strongly with their arguments and as such stimulate academic debate on the focus areas and issues under review. As such, it makes a contribution to a better understanding of the events and their impact on society.

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