Africans in the Boer War

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In 1486 the first white man landed on the Cape, a “Portuguese navigator Bartholomew Diaz”[[1]](#footnote-1) but the Portuguese had no interest in settling there so “South Africa was left to the Dutch, who came in 1652”[[2]](#footnote-2). Shortly after the Dutch arrived, “under the Dutch East Indian Company, began the colonization of South Africa”[[3]](#footnote-3) with the British arriving later and claiming all of South Africa as theirs. By the start of the Boer war “there were approximately one million whites in South Africa compared to four million Africans”[[4]](#footnote-4) and a “Coloured population of almost 500, 000, most of whom lived in the Cape, and an Asian community of 100, 000, most of whom lived in Natal”[[5]](#footnote-5). With all these differing ethnicities “the formation of the attitudes that would lead to the Boer war”[[6]](#footnote-6).

The vast diversity and social order of South Africa was a large factor of the war with the whites claiming authority over everyone and the English, white minority, ruling over the Afrikaners, white majority. In the Boer War of 1899-1902 the blacks played a major role on both sides and in particular to the winning side, the British. At the time the blacks contributions were heavily down played for a wide range of reasons. It was said from the beginning to be a ‘white man’s war’. This meant the plan was to not arm the Africans, as that would backfire on the whites, however that did not end up being the case, and in the end the blacks were still treated well below whites in the social hierarchy.

The initial plan of the war was to keep it a ‘white man’s war’. It was viewed by the British and the Boers, “that the participation of black people in white wars was something to be avoided at all costs”[[7]](#footnote-7). This is because if they both became dependent on the Africans for military collaborations the Africans “might even assume the role or arbiters in disputes between the white communities“[[8]](#footnote-8). The blacks, Coloureds and Asians, including Indians[[9]](#footnote-9) were to be kept out of the war due to the social relations at the time. The whites wanted to keep the Africans below them in the social order and they thought getting them to help participate with them in the war effort whites would allow the African to feel more equality between the two races.

The British and the Boers did not formally state “that they would not employ black people as combatants during the war”[[10]](#footnote-10), however they agreed it “would be a white man’s war’”[[11]](#footnote-11). The British believed that they wouldn’t even need the Africans to help them as there were “confident that Britain’s regular army and white volunteers would be easily able to overrun the Boer republics”[[12]](#footnote-12). African assistance was thought to not be a major factor of winning the war[[13]](#footnote-13) and was even decided by the British “that the use of black soldiers in wars between white communities was to be avoided at all costs”[[14]](#footnote-14). The Boer’s also had the same idea but decided, “that it would not have been contrary to the rules of international law to have employed ‘civilised’ blacks under white officers in the conflict”[[15]](#footnote-15). However, the Boers were also unwilling “to provide Africans with modern firearms in large quantities as it could increase the possibility of resistance to white control”[[16]](#footnote-16) which again would allow the blacks to view themselves to be more equal to the whites. To keep this plan in tact the Africans were “instructed by magistrates to remain within the borders of their locations and not to be involved with military operations, though they would be entitled to defend themselves”[[17]](#footnote-17).

Even though both the British and the Boers agreed it was a ‘white man’s war’ the Africans were still, from the beginning, used in noncombatant roles. The British had “at least 14, 000 black transport drivers in [their] military employment at any one time”[[18]](#footnote-18). These employees were used as labourers for “constructing fortifications, for loading and off-loading supply trains, for portering duties for sanitary work and other labour duties in the military camps”[[19]](#footnote-19). As well as labour they were also heavily depended on “for scouting and intelligence work”[[20]](#footnote-20) even “groups of black scouts… came to be attached to all the British columns”[[21]](#footnote-21) where they became indispensible. A indirect way the British used Africans to help, was in “restricting the area over which the republican forces could operate and enabling the British army to concentrate its manpower elsewhere”[[22]](#footnote-22). The Boer’s used their African employees or conscripted men “to preform ancillary duties”[[23]](#footnote-23), “to dig trenches, drive wagons, attend to horses and to perform other labour duties”[[24]](#footnote-24) as well as unarmed intelligence scouts[[25]](#footnote-25). “Both the British and the Boers depended upon black workers”[[26]](#footnote-26) to complete labour tasks that the whites did not want to do. The benefit of employing black labour was that a “large number of white military personnel to serve actively in the field”[[27]](#footnote-27) allowing the whites to fight and the blacks to help them in every other way.

In following the ‘white man’s war’ idea, and to make a clear distinction between combatants and non-combatants, in the first year of the war the British army was under strict instructions from the British government “that on no account were blacks to be furnished with weapons”[[28]](#footnote-28). Yet this ‘white man’s war’ the “number of casualties among unarmed black workers began to reach worrying proportions”[[29]](#footnote-29) on both sides. With this increasing number “pressure were beginning to mount military commanders to relax official orders”[[30]](#footnote-30) and allow African members of the army to carry weapons [[31]](#footnote-31). However it was difficult for them men in charge of the army “to draw a distinction between self-defense, in which blacks might participate, and aggression, in which they might not”[[32]](#footnote-32) and it was debated. On the side of the British there was a temptation to “use the great numbers of idle Bantu and Coloureds”[[33]](#footnote-33) as free soldiers “on blockhouse duty”[[34]](#footnote-34) which was given the name “the Black Watch”[[35]](#footnote-35).

During the duration of the war “the Boers consistently denied employing blacks as combatants in military operations”[[36]](#footnote-36). Even though later in the war they were given permission “to utilize native subject races in defence of the country, in no instance did the Boer avail themselves”[[37]](#footnote-37) according to the Boers. Yet they used Botha’s “Swazi Police”[[38]](#footnote-38) to watch the English and their movement and while the blacks may not always have been armed they were used “both in offensive and defensive operations at Mafeking”[[39]](#footnote-39). This was at first profusely denied for a while until the British had strong evidence against them; at that point they verified that they did use blacks at Mafeking[[40]](#footnote-40). The Boers did insist that, “the British had extensively employed armed Kaffirs in the field”[[41]](#footnote-41). An example the British used to defend themselves was that when the British army used Africans as drivers of their naval guns once the first shot was fired they would flee “as the white man said, their war”[[42]](#footnote-42). From Boer reports the British did distribute arms “among both Khama’s tribe and the Bakathla”[[43]](#footnote-43) and “once in possession of weapons, and cartridges, the natives were only too willing to engage”[[44]](#footnote-44). The constant blaming by each side for using armed blacks on their side was useless as both sides had evidence against each other that armed blacks were used to help them.

The supposed ‘white man’s war’ was not what occurred as “the black people were far more than either spectators to, or passive victims of, a white man’s quarrel”[[45]](#footnote-45). In the white armies of this war “over 100, 000 [blacks] became directly involved in the struggle as, scouts, spies, guards, servants, messengers, and in a wide range of other occupations”[[46]](#footnote-46). As combatants as high as “30, 000 blacks were fighting with the British army”[[47]](#footnote-47) by 1902. Even some of the black communities not employed by the British decided or were asked, “to resist Boer invasions of the Cape and Natal”[[48]](#footnote-48) where “they effectively closed hundred of square miles of the annexed states”[[49]](#footnote-49). Most of the whites of South Africa thought that the black workers “were attracted to the army simply by the availability of high wages[[50]](#footnote-50). This may have been another reason, on top of defending their lands and wanting more equality. The wages that some would have received as “skilled workers, such as transport drivers, exceeded those earned by agricultural labourers in Britain”[[51]](#footnote-51).

The use of black workers could be seen in each state of South Africa on both sides[[52]](#footnote-52). While both sides did arm blacks during the war both sides repeatedly and “persistently accused each other of having abandoned the tacit agreement that blacks would not be permitted to participate actively in military operations”[[53]](#footnote-53). Many of the British got this information from “black workers deserting form the Boers to the British army”[[54]](#footnote-54). Their tasks would include fighting “alongside whited in the republican forces… during the siege of Ladysmith [and] in their outposts at night”[[55]](#footnote-55).

In 1901 the blaming stopped due to a change in a Boer policy. The change was if the Boers found “any Africans of Coloureds employed by the British army, whether armed or unarmed would be executed if they fell into Boer hands”[[56]](#footnote-56). Upon hearing of this new policy the British felt that it would be unfair to their black workers to not be allowed to carry arms, as they should be able to defend themselves against the Boers[[57]](#footnote-57). With the British army now openly supplying arms to their black workers the British government was keen “to obtain reliable information from [the army] on exactly how many blacks had been provided with weapons”[[58]](#footnote-58). The answer given to the government was not well received, as the answer was it is “impossible to obtain such information”[[59]](#footnote-59). Later, however, the British military admits “to having provided firearms to 2496 Africans and 2939 Coloureds in the Cape, and 4618 Africans in Natal, Orange River Colony, and Transvaal, [totaling] 100 53 in all”[[60]](#footnote-60); this did not including Africans who used their own weapons.

On the Boer side some “blacks were conscripted to work on farms in attempt to maintain agricultural output in the absence of many farmers and servants”[[61]](#footnote-61) as the men were away fighting. In the western Transvaal the relations between the Boers and the Kgatla were heated as the Kgatla’s land “had been largely divided up for white farms in the mid 1860’s… and [the bitterness] extended throughout the war”[[62]](#footnote-62). The already bitter emotions of bitterness were made worse with the added labour demands on the Africans[[63]](#footnote-63). During the siege of Mafeking about “300 armed blacks took part in the Boer force surrounding Mafeking”[[64]](#footnote-64). A Boer general “Joubert had won most of his [battles] with the Bantu by surrounding his enemies and then waiting for them to surrender”[[65]](#footnote-65). However this tactic did not work at Mafeking and was a turning point for the British.

In the British army, besides their white troops, “additional militia units were also created”[[66]](#footnote-66) at Mafeking, which was composed of “a Coloured contingents of sixty-seven men… and a small unit raised from the local Mfengu community”[[67]](#footnote-67); all were armed with rifles[[68]](#footnote-68). Similarly composed, African, guerilla units, were used in the final few months in the siege at Mafeking who, with British approval, “harassed surrounding Boer forces, raid livestock and in some instances to ransack and burn neighbouring with farmhouses”[[69]](#footnote-69). Members of the Tshidi “played a decisive role in capturing Eloff’s party who invaded and set fire to Mafeking… [the Tshidi] cut off Eloff’s line of retreat and who ‘bore the brunt of the fighting and saved the day”[[70]](#footnote-70) for the British. Black work parties every day during the siege were used to dig trenches around Mafeking and to construct defenses “sometimes under heavy fire from the Boers”[[71]](#footnote-71). Besides labourers the British also significantly relied on the intelligence provided by African scouts but if the reported “information turned out to be inaccurate [they] were severely punished, and any black spy suspected of duplicity face death”[[72]](#footnote-72). The siege of Mafekeing would not have been a success without the African’s assistance but “the press censor [of Mafeking] would not allow the publication of an account of the important role played by the [Africans] in resisting the final offensive”[[73]](#footnote-73). Along with no recognition by the press about the Africans support in the siege they also received hardly any compensation for their effort or their “lost property, cattle, and their firearms”[[74]](#footnote-74) or even lives lost. The only positive aspect that came out of this siege for them was they “were able to liberate themselves from the control of the local Boer farming community”[[75]](#footnote-75).

The fighting impacted many of the surrounding areas, such as Zululand, Natal, Swaziland and Kimberley. The area of Zululand and Natal “was the scene of some of the most intense fighting”[[76]](#footnote-76). In both of these areas during the war famine was a large issue because so many of the workers from the mines were returning home. This meant that there were so many more people to feed on top of the threat of being cut off from outside food supply[[77]](#footnote-77). Many “armed Zulu’s were freely employed by the Boers and actually did receive “grateful acknowledgment of their services”[[78]](#footnote-78). Swaziland was neutral during the war and “at the beginning of the war the British and Transvaal governments agreed that both sides would evacuate Swaziland”[[79]](#footnote-79). For this reason during the war “Swaziland remained much less affected by the war than many other regions, and the Swazi were much more reluctant to become embroiled in the conflict than most other African peoples”[[80]](#footnote-80). When the siege of Kimberley was starting Rhodes “employed nearly 10, 000 Bantu on public works, including scavenging, tree planting, and the building of roads and bomb shelters”[[81]](#footnote-81). During the siege of Kimberley the casualties were “134 armed defenders, only 21 citizens had been killed by the 8, 500 shells the Boers had thrown into the town, but some 1, 500 people, mostly Bantu and Coloureds, died of disease”[[82]](#footnote-82). There were few white casualties because they were able to use the dugouts, which the Africans would have dug, to stay safe as the shells were being fired, resulting in only four deaths[[83]](#footnote-83). According to the British the Bantu “did not make shelters for themselves”[[84]](#footnote-84) but they also likely did not know that trenches were a good idea to make for themselves, which resulted in 329 killed[[85]](#footnote-85). Kimberley is just and example of how the black employees were used by the British but not really valued.

In general the whites oppressed blacks and in the years right before the war it was no different. There was unrest due to “unequal distribution of health and resources”[[86]](#footnote-86) between the blacks and whites. Including Africans thrown out of work with “the loss of wages from the Transvaal mines… estimated to total 300, 000 pounds”[[87]](#footnote-87). With a large amount of black labourers out of a job migrating to towns trying to find work and then war breaking out the towns became overpopulated[[88]](#footnote-88). This overpopulation only added to the hard times felt by all of South Africa in particular hunger and criminal activity.

The British adopted “the scorch earth tactics”[[89]](#footnote-89) in the Boer states, which aided them in winning the war but harmed in feeding all South Africans. This “destroyed the livelihoods of many black peasants in the former Boer States”[[90]](#footnote-90). However it also lead to many of the British and their supporters being confined to towns, which would eventually lead to hunger and disease. One of the tribes, the Barolong, survived because they had “cattle and gardens of their own”[[91]](#footnote-91). However the Bantu who were coming “from the Rand had no food and no money to buy any”[[92]](#footnote-92) had to scrounge to survive leading to five Bantu being “executed during the siege”[[93]](#footnote-93). It wasn’t just the Bantu people who had trouble with surviving the Boers had trouble too. The Boers even ended up raiding the “Bantu kraals, and this led to retaliatory attacks”[[94]](#footnote-94). The war progressed, and the Bantu could see that the Boers were losing and their attacks became more fearless “and they became bolder”[[95]](#footnote-95) in their attacks. Which just added to the conflict in the cities.

The shortage of food was due to the overpopulation, which led to rationing in the cities under siege, which tended not to take into account the number of dependent in the household[[96]](#footnote-96), in particular black households. When the Boer’s realized they were likely not have enough food the black rations were the first to be cut back as well as prices raised along with the animals[[97]](#footnote-97). Later some of the black people were even cut off from receiving rations as they “were not needed for military duties”[[98]](#footnote-98). The new rationing scheme was devastating and many tried to escape, with low chances of success. The added tensions between the British and the Africans were also a factor in the blacks wanting to leave[[99]](#footnote-99). With the unemployed workers leaving the mines and heading into towns criminal activities increased in their desperation. The criminal activity in Johannesburg “spurred the government into introducing special legislation to control the blacks”[[100]](#footnote-100). The special legislation was “a curfew… on the Rand from 7 p.m. to 5 a.m. (9 p.m. to 5 a.m. for whites)”[[101]](#footnote-101). On top of the curfew blacks were no longer to have gatherings “whether in the streets or on private property”[[102]](#footnote-102). To enforce both of these policies the local “police activity was stepped up considerably”[[103]](#footnote-103).

The conditions of both groups never got better and some Africans ended up going into concentration camps [[104]](#footnote-104), more form the Boer side. The Boers and the Africans were in separate concentration camps but “little is known and reliable statics are scarce”[[105]](#footnote-105). It is known that by the end of the war “115, 700 Africans had also been settled temporarily in sixty-six refugee camps: 60, 004 in the Orange River Colony, and 55, 969 in the Transvaal”[[106]](#footnote-106). The British who were in charge of these camps rarely “paid attention to the black refugee problem and the suffering”[[107]](#footnote-107)and out almost 116, 000 Africans “14, 154 black refugees are recorded as having lost their lives in the camps”[[108]](#footnote-108).

During the war leading military and government men thought, “that the time had arrived once and for all to put an end to the oppressive treatment of black people”[[109]](#footnote-109) when the end of the war came. Soon it became expected that if the British were victorious that it “would bring about an extension of political, educational and commercial opportunities for black people”[[110]](#footnote-110) of South Africa. However a few black elite did not support this and even some British elite doubted whether overthrow of the Boers would “benefit the blacks unless there were great changes in the British policy”[[111]](#footnote-111). Regardless of the elite of the British and Africans, many Africans thought the British victory would allow them “a future in which their interests would be safeguarded, and in which their status and influence”[[112]](#footnote-112) would have more meaning. This was far from what ended up happening.

After the war the British were looking to take over the gold-mining profits of the Boer states “not the engineering of social change in the interests of South Africa’s black population”[[113]](#footnote-113). This economic outlook of the British after the war was also seen when a major concern was the whites getting cheap labour to rebuild their farms but had trouble doing so because the blacks felt empowered as the whites had feared when the issue first came up with arming the Africans[[114]](#footnote-114). Many members of the black elite had looked forward to with optimism as the British moved towards war during 1899 and ending in 1902. In particular the Cape franchise spreading to the black people in the Boer states, “was effectively precluded by the terms of the peace agreement”[[115]](#footnote-115) (Warwick, 5). This did not happen, in fact the opposite; the Cape franchise eventually gone, “the wages of black mine workers were reduced and labour more closely regulated and controlled”. This unwelcome change to the Africans work lead to “unrest, worker resistance and profound criticism of British policy by black political leaders”[[116]](#footnote-116). Today the impacts of these events are still trying to be solved as in the eight years after war laid “the foundations of modern South Africa”[[117]](#footnote-117).

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