BBC Radio retrospective on the Anglo-Boer war, 1899-1902

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29 September 1999

This October marks 100 years since the outbreak of the second South African War, better known as the Boer War. Over the next three years the centenary will be celebrated in South Africa with a variety of anniversaries and memorials. A number of books are planned for release and a spate of broadcasts will mark the occasion.

One such programme was aired on BBC Radio 4 during two weeks in mid-September. Entitled *The Boer War*, it was narrated by the historian Denis Judd, author of *Empire: The British Imperial Experience, from 1765 to the Present*, and sought to examine new perspectives on the war. The first part looked at the claim that it was merely a “white man's war”, whilst the second considered the use of concentration camps by the British, and the claim that they had a deliberate policy of genocide toward the Boers.

The programme made use of aural archives and interviewed a number of leading historians. It also employed actors to speak the words of historical accounts of the day, and in one instance interviewed a 109 year-old woman who remembers the war as a nine-year-old girl. It made for an absorbing programme.

Part One opened with a visit to Mafeking, ancestral home of the Tswana-speaking Baralong people, and scene of the most famous siege of the Boer War. The Baralong feel affronted at the events of 100 years ago. They are considering suing the British government for compensation over the help they gave the British during the war, which was denied by Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, the commanding officer at Mafeking.

Professor Shula Marks, of the London School of Oriental & African Studies, believes that “Imperial historiography took for granted that it was a white man's war, and simply didn't see blacks as participants in the war, or indeed as active agents in history at all.” Since the end of apartheid in South Africa this is being reconsidered, and many, including white conservatives, can see the need for rewriting black people back into history.

The programme considered the discovery of gold in 1886 in the Transvaal, one of the republics controlled by the Afrikaners, as the key reason for the outbreak of war. For Britain, “the temptation to intervene was too great”. Britain then justified its wish to intercede by the apparent need to protect the Uitlanders (from the Dutch for ‘foreigners'—British and other Europeans who flooded into the Transvaal following the discovery of gold). This view of the causes of the war is a little simplistic.

It is true that gold was a factor. Indeed it was widely believed at the time, and for half a century later, that the mine owners had manipulated the British government into provoking the war. However, government papers released during the 1960s make it clear that the British government manipulated the mine owners as much as the reverse. The mines would have remained in private ownership and the gold would have been traded on the London bullion market whichever government controlled the Transvaal. It was not gold, therefore, which primarily motivated the British government to go to war.

The late nineteenth century was the time when the European powers were dividing Africa up amongst themselves, in what became known as “the scramble for Africa”. South Africa, with its location at the tip of the continent, is a strategic location, with all shipping trade to the east passing by. Britain's control of the Cape colony and Natal gave it control of the whole southern coastline and these colonies were not under threat. In 1884, Germany had gained control of South West Africa (Namibia), immediately north-west of the Cape Colony. Portugal had controlled Mozambique (immediately to the north-east of Natal) for some time. Britain's strategic interests lay, therefore, in a push northward up between the two.

Britain feared an independent Afrikaner state, especially one that was wealthy. This was not because it felt its current colonial possessions were under threat, but because its future possessions might be. In particular, Britain was anxious to make sure that such a state would not have access to the sea and thus the ability to operate completely outside of British influence. Britain had consequently annexed Zululand and Tongaland (in 1887 and 1895 respectively) stopping Boer advances toward the Indian Ocean and thereby isolating the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The military intervention into the Transvaal represented the logical conclusion to the previous 30 years' policies of the British government, in which it had also annexed Basutoland and southern Bechuanaland and had made inroads into Rhodesia.

The isolation of the Transvaal was complete. Germany and the United States, who might have been seen as allies of the Afrikaners, actually supported Britain's aims as they stood to gain from the opening up of the Transvaal. The US compared the Afrikaners to the slave owners of the pre-war southern States. Republican sympathisers from the US and Europe did support and aid the Afrikaners, but the world powers in general supported Britain and thought it natural that the greatest power in the world should go to war to support its strategic interests.

Professor Bernard Mbenga of the University of the North West in Mafeking sees three main reasons why the Boer war was thought of as a white man's war. Firstly, both sides considered it distasteful, morally indecent and outrageous to use blacks in a war between whites. Secondly, the British were confident of an early victory. Lastly, both sides thought it dangerous to arm blacks on a large scale, as it might lead to a rebellion against white control later.

Finding themselves under unexpected pressure from the Boers, the British did, however, arm black Africans. Jan Smuts, a leading Afrikaner intellectual, wrote to a British newspaper declaring that it was horrendous for Britain to have armed blacks. It was, he argued, far worse than the use of concentration camps or the deaths of women and children, because it would hang over the future.

General Piet Cronje, in a letter to Colonel Baden-Powell, was of the same opinion: “It is understood that you have armed Bastards, Fingos and Baralongs against us—in this you have committed an enormous act of wickedness ... reconsider the matter even if it cost you the loss of Mafeking ... disarm your blacks and thereby act the part of a white man in

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a white man's war."

The British, with antiquated battle strategies, were totally unprepared for the war, in a terrain they did not understand and fighting an enemy they could not see. This incompetence led to the deaths of some 22,000 British soldiers—13,000 died from disease—and forced a reappraisal of the role of black Africans in the fighting. Somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 were armed and participated in the war, although Baden-Powell denied it. They took part in a variety of offensive military operations, including on Boer farms and going behind enemy lines to steal cattle, etc. Black involvement was widespread—many participating for their own reasons, not least the chance to settle old scores.

There was a strong belief amongst blacks that Britain represented a more liberal order, and that they would reward loyalty after the war. The renowned black diarist at the siege of Mafeking, Solomon T. Plaatje, who went on to become one of the founders of the African National Congress, believed that Britain represented a future that was fair and free. Britain betrayed this trust and went against their own pronouncements of 1901, in which they considered that it would be "shameful" to exclude blacks from the franchise. They compromised with the Afrikaners at the peace treaty of Vereeniging by excluding Africans from any political rights. This was later compounded in the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, which enshrined white supremacy in its constitution . The question of "native franchise" was to be left until there was "responsible government". In the event, it took until the end of apartheid in 1994.

The second part of the programme described a meeting between Neville Chamberlain and Hermann Goering, in which Chamberlain complained about Germany's use of concentration camps. Goering flourished an encyclopaedia reference, claiming that Britain had invented them. The programme examined whether the Nazi concentration camps and Britain's were comparable.

Elria Wessels, curator of the Anglo-Boer War Museum in Bloemfontein, took Judd to the site of one of the camps. She described what the scene would have been like. Between 5,000 and 7,000 people were incarcerated at Bloemfontein, and it was only one of about 50 camps. Fully 27,000 women and children died in the camps, of which 81 percent were children. While Britain has tried to write this chapter out of history, the Afrikaners at the other extreme attempted to elevate it to folklore. Both routes led to a distorted history.

The British were unable to fight the Boer soldiers into submission. In 1900, General Sir Herbert Kitchener authorised a scorched-earth policy in response. Dr. Keith Surridge described how British soldiers scoured the countryside looking for farms to burn. He estimated that some 30,000 farm buildings were destroyed. Livestock was killed in huge numbers and often left to rot. This policy caused a vast refugee problem, with those who were left behind often requesting that the British take them away. The British agreed, walking them to the defensive *laagers*, which in time became concentration camps.

Not only had the British now to feed 250,000 to 400,000 soldiers, but also the civilian population of the war zone. Since they had wiped out most of the agriculture within the region, they had to import food. The task overwhelmed them. Professor Albert Grundlingh of the University of South Africa in Pretoria suggested that the herding of so many people into such small areas was comparable to rapid urbanisation of these farmer people. In the unhygienic conditions diseases spread quickly—thousands died of measles.

The programme explained that the war was not just a tragedy for the Boers. Just as many blacks were caught up in the fighting. Tens of thousands were displaced along with the families they worked for. This suffering has gone largely unrecognised. Grundlingh pointed out that more than 14,000 died in the black camps, in which conditions were even worse than for the Boers. He claimed that the memory of the black experience during the war largely receded within the black community, as the experiences of apartheid came to dominate. The Boer War became just one of many bad experiences. For the Afrikaners, however, the war remains a focal point.

Many Afrikaners thought at the time, and still think, that Britain implemented a policy of deliberate genocide in setting up the camps. Grundlingh argued cogently against this. He believed that this viewpoint was manufactured for political purposes and that the reasons why so many died in the camps were poor administration and a lack of medical care. He also pointed out that the British did not treat their own sick very well.

Other academics agreed. Dr. Donal Lowry of Oxford Brookes University made the point that the treatment of the Boers fed the grievances at the base of Afrikaner nationalism and paranoia. It led to a sense of their being aggrieved and besieged and fed into the perspective of affirmative action for poor whites that became popularly known as apartheid.

Grundlingh observed that the war represents an heroic period for the Afrikaners, with the British as the perpetrators of injustice. It was a period in which they held the moral high ground and for which they do not feel the need to apologise. The war is now being resurrected as a sacred period of history.

The programme ended with the family of Eugene Terre-Blanche (founder of the fascist South African AWB party) visiting the war memorial. He imagined the difference to the white population if 26,000 women and children had not been killed and reckoned on the white population now being at least 10-12 million, instead of 5.4 million, which he asserts could have changed the situation in the country. "In the new South Africa" he said "they will change the syllabuses and tell them about the Kaffir wars, but not about the wars that have been fought by white people".

Both these programmes were valuable in drawing attention to the work of recent historians who have tried to break away from the old nationalist myths developed under the apartheid regime in South Africa. Their work shows that the British concentration camps were not like those of the Nazis, part of a deliberate and conscious programme of genocide, but were nevertheless one of the most brutal aspects of an imperialist war for strategic control of land and resources.

Emily Hobhouse, the humanitarian campaigner, was able to travel without threat to her personal safety or liberty to the British concentration camps and, on her return, to expose in the press the appalling conditions and horrendous loss of life, particularly among women and children. This would have been impossible in Nazi Germany. The comparison with fascism was a superficial and self-serving attempt to portray the Afrikaners as a down-trodden people, whose privileges under apartheid merely redressed previous injustices.

At the same time, the programmes unwittingly demonstrated that historians today are under pressure to present a version of South African history that is in line with new nationalist conceptions. In post-apartheid South Africa, the Baralong see the vindication of their part in the Anglo-Boer War as the means to win financial compensation that will benefit them in the struggle for investment. The role of black Africans in the war, whether fighting on behalf of British imperialism or their suffering in the camps, has a place in the history books which has until now been denied, but one nationalist interpretation of history cannot be allowed to replace another. The black nationalism of the ANC cannot answer the rhetoric of Terre-Blanche, because neither gives an objective picture of the past.

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