

# Agamben, Todorov and the British concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War, 1900-1902: Reflections on memory and the state of exception

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## Abstract

Historians debate whether the first concentration camps were the *campos de concentrations* established by the Spanish regime in Cuba in 1896, to suppress the people's insurrection of the colony, or the concentration camps into which the English imperial government herded the Boer civilians at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In both these instances, the declaration of a state of emergency during a colonial war was enforced on an entire civilian population. The concentration camps were thus established not in terms of ordinary law, but were the products of a state of exception and Martial Law. The juridical basis for the internment of civilians was protective custody and regarded to be a preventative police measure insofar as it allowed individuals to be "taken into custody" (*Schutzhaft*) independently of any criminal behavior, solely to avoid danger to the security of the state. In his work *Homo Sacer*, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben considers the moral implications of the notion of *Schutzhaft*, the biopolitical context thereof, and concludes that the concentration camps represent "the biopolitical ... threshold of absolute indistinction between law and fact, juridical rule and biological life." Tzvetan Todorov's work *Hope and Memory* investigates the moral implications of the concentration camps and the memory of individuals who remained human in the midst of tempests and monumental battles like war. To Todorov these examples of "remaining human" under severe conditions – similar to those of *Schutzhaft* - should keep the past alive in the present through memory, historical inquiry and commemoration. In this paper, the author investigates the narratives of survivors of the British concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902 within the Agamben-Todorov paradigms. It is argued that these testimonies of camp inmates give meaning to life and the construction of an identity and of moral-sensitivity amidst dire circumstances of life in the concentration camps.

## Paper / notes

### 1. Introduction

Historians debate whether the first concentration camps were the *campos de concentrations* established by the Spanish regime in Cuba in 1896, to suppress the

people's insurrection of the colony, or the concentration camps into which the English imperial government herded the Boer civilians at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> In both these instances, the declaration of a state of emergency during a colonial war was enforced on an entire civilian population.<sup>2</sup> The concentration camps were thus established not in terms of ordinary law, but were the products of a state of exception and Martial Law. The juridical basis for the internment of civilians was protective custody and was regarded to be a preventative police measure insofar as it allowed individuals to be "taken into custody" independently of any criminal behavior, solely to avoid danger to the security of the state. The notion of protective custody employed by the British to justify the Martial Law and the mass concentration of women and children in the camps became a standard feature of concentration camp systems in later epochs.<sup>3</sup>

In his work *Homo Sacer*, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben investigates the moral implications of the notion of protective custody, the biopolitical context thereof, and concludes that the concentration camps represent "the biopolitical body of the West ... [and] appears as a threshold of absolute indistinction between law and fact, juridical rule and biological life."<sup>4</sup> In effect, the occupants of the camps reduced to this state - unmediated by traditional forms of political belonging, ordinarily expressed in the form of rights - encountered juridico-political power from a condition of comprehensive political abandonment.<sup>5</sup> The concentration camp, for Agamben, is an absolute biopolitical space in which power is exercised not against juridical subjects but against biological bodies. It is in effect, a space in which sovereignty exists but the law does not, a territory in which actions are neither legal nor illegal.<sup>6</sup> Biopolitics - a term coined by Michel Foucault - becomes the norm and with it racism, devaluation of human life and the negation of the most vulnerable, namely the civilians who are the victims of the ideological master paradigms from which the biopolitics emanate.<sup>7</sup> In this paper

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Ploeger, *Die Lotgevalle van die Burgerlike Bevolking Gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902. Vol. 5*. Pretoria: Staatsargiefdiens (1990), pp. 41:1-3; E. van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media (2013), p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> A. Marks, *The Churches and the South African War*. London: New Age (1905), pp. 36ff.; A.M.S. Methuen, *Peace or War in South Africa*. London: Methuen & Co. (1901), pp. 41-42.

<sup>3</sup> G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press (1998), p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 38ff.

<sup>6</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 38ff.

<sup>7</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 68, 71, 72, 75ff.

the author reflects on the phenomenological essence of the concentration camp as an historical phenomenon and on the testimonial literature emanating from the women in the state of exception.

## **2. The nature of the British concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902**

### **2.1 Reconstructing the master narrative of British imperialism and the ideological matrix of the state of exception**

Michel Foucault offers insight into how the construction of danger and risk, through British imperialist policies and practices and their changing social meaning, lead to the demand for control and management at the institutional and individual levels in the form of biopolitics.<sup>8</sup> Foucault includes British imperialism among the ideologies that evinced new techniques of institutional management, control, and organization, which he labels "discipline", leading simultaneously to an increase in efficiency and capacity and to an increase in docility and subjection in individuals and manifest invulnerability.<sup>9</sup> On Foucault's account, through the concept of biopower, the processes of life itself become political matters, issues and objects of control and regulation. Biopower functions on two levels: Through discipline at the level of the individual body and through regulatory control at the level of the social body or population.<sup>10</sup> Disciplining the bodies of individuals aims to make them simultaneously more efficient, productive, and obedient; regulatory controls are interventions at the level of the body of the species for controlling that population.<sup>11</sup>

The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of British imperialism. According to Paula M. Krebs in her seminal work *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire*, imperialism remained the political vehicle for justifying British colonialism and represented the public face of British ideological commitment although the ideological bonds of imperialism showed signs of fragmentation by the end of the century.<sup>12</sup> By the late nineteenth century, British imperialism had grown into a complex biopolitical ideology

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<sup>8</sup> M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978-79*. Michel Sennellart (ed.). Translated by Graham Burchell (2004). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, pp. 474ff.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, p. 101.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, p. 474ff.

<sup>12</sup> P.M. Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire. Public Discourse and the Boer War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2003).

with distinct features of social Darwinism<sup>13</sup> and the naturalism of Herbert Spencer,<sup>14</sup> accompanied by racial prejudice,<sup>15</sup> militaristic jingoism<sup>16</sup> as well as social and religious intolerance.<sup>17</sup>

The prospects of war with the two Boer Republics whipped up the imperial imagination to a state of frenzy and no area of life was immune from its effects. The imperial press and other social media - the public face of British imperialism – employed every conceivable tactic to degrade the South African Boers, to debunk their religious views and to justify militaristic solutions for solving the "South African problem."<sup>18</sup> British imperialism was for all practical purposes the civil religion, which proposed war, justified violence as a solution to the deadlock with the Transvaal Government and cried for the revenge of Majuba.<sup>19</sup> At the outbreak of the War, intolerance towards ideological opposition was a common phenomenon and civic militarism reflected the deeper strata of imperial sentiments at work.<sup>20</sup> The imperial press fanned the flames of intolerance towards British race inferiors and violence-talk and "blackguardism" was a common mode of discourse.<sup>21</sup> The *Indian Planter's Gazette* affords a lurid illustration of the militarism at work in the imperial mind: "Should we slay our brother Boer? Not only should he be slain, but slain with the same ruthlessness that they slay a plague infected rat. Exeter Hall may shriek, but blood there will be, and plenty of it, and the more the better. The Boer resistance will further this plan, and enable us to find the excuse that Imperial Great Britain is fiercely anxious for the excuse to blot the Boers out as a nation, to turn their land into vast shambles, and remove their name from the muster role of South Africa."<sup>22</sup> The imperial consciousness was aroused to an unprecedented level - even among the youth.<sup>23</sup> *The Evening News* reported on the unprecedented fostering of violence in the minds of the youth. During a game of

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<sup>13</sup> *The Coming Day*, December 1899, p. 365; May, 1900, p. 130; November 1901, pp. 337-339.

<sup>14</sup> *The Coming Day*, November 1900, p. 322.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. e.g. Anna Howard's "The Boer at Home", *Cornhill Magazine*, 49 (July, 1900), pp. 118-126.

<sup>16</sup> *The Coming Day*, April, 1900, pp. 105-107, 115.

<sup>17</sup> *The Coming Day*, July, 1900, pp. 212-213; November, 1901, p. 341.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J.A. Hobson, *How the Press was Worked Before the War*, London: S.A.C.C. (1900); *The War in South Africa. Its Causes and Effects*. New York/London: Garland Publishing, Inc. (1972), pp. 206-228. Also cf. R. Sinclair, *The War in South Africa: The British Attitude*. On behalf of the War Fund (1900), pp. 1-8.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. e.g. C.F. Farrar, "Imperialism and Christianity", *North American Review*, 71, (September, 1900), pp. 289-295.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *The Coming Day*, April, 1900, pp. 105ff; 118ff; 121ff; May, 1900, pp. 145ff.

<sup>21</sup> *The Coming Day*, May, 1900, pp. 143-144, 148.

<sup>22</sup> A.M.S. Methuen, *Peace or War in South Africa*. London: Methuen & Co. (1901), p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> *The Coming Day*, April, 1900, p. 116; June, 1900, p. 183.

Britons and Boers at St. Mary's Board School, a boy scholar, Victor James Batchelor drew a pistol from his pocket, remarking, "See me bring that Boer down," fired at Franceska Rossi, a boy in the opposition team, hitting him in the right breast.<sup>24</sup> Participating in the same militaristic game, at Blackpool, a large packing case opposite a draper's shop was set on as a Boer convoy, and corsets and skirts looted to the value of 32s.<sup>25</sup> The Erastian form of Church government of also provided churches with a platform for promoting the British war effort and to support the war mongering of the British politicians.<sup>26</sup> Religious fervor in support of imperial ideals grew to a common mode of religious expression.<sup>27</sup> William Lloyd Garrison composed a new "Onward, Christian Soldiers" for *The Springfield Republican*, of which the first stanza reads:

*The Anglo-Saxon Christians, with Gatling gun and sword,  
In Serried ranks are pushing on the Gospel of the Lord.  
On Afric's soil they press the foe in war's terrific scenes,  
And merrily the hunt goes on throughout the Philippines.*

The composer ends on a climax extolling the blessings of Christian militarism:

*Then, onward, Christian soldiers! through fields of crimson gore,  
Behold the trade advantages beyond the Open Door!  
The profits on our leaders outweigh the heathen loss;  
Nail up the Anglo-Saxon flag above the played-out Cross!<sup>28</sup>*

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<sup>24</sup> *The Coming Day*, April, 1900, pp. 120-121.

<sup>25</sup> *The Coming Day*, April, 1900, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> M. Davidson, *That Great Lying Church of England*. London: Francis Riddell Henderson (1900), pp. 1ff. Also cf. The views of the South African Vigilance Committee in *Vigilance Papers No. 1; The Voice of the Churches in Support of the Imperial Policy*. Cape Town: The South African Vigilance Committee (1900); G.G. Thomas, *The Free Churches and the Military Spirit*. London: T.G. Howe (1901); *The Coming Day*, November, 1900, pp. 341-342.

<sup>27</sup> A. Marks, *The Churches and the South African War*. London: New Age (1905).

<sup>28</sup> *The Coming Day*, September, 1900, pp. 335-336. Also cf. Henry S. Salt's "Hymn of Thanksgiving" to be sung in St. Paul's Cathedral at the conclusion of the war (*The Coming Day*, March, 1901, p. 88).

Public violence<sup>29</sup> at meetings promoting peace,<sup>30</sup> assaults of academics voicing mediation as an alternative to war,<sup>31</sup> and appeals to the imperial project as sole justification for advancing war against the Boer Republics became common occurrences.<sup>32</sup>

Of the two faces of the British civil ethos during the nineteenth century, the imperialist one grew in prominence, much to the disadvantage of the liberal one.<sup>33</sup> The control of memory was facilitated mainly through propaganda, Martial Law, censorship measures<sup>34</sup>, restrictions on the press<sup>35</sup> and incarceration in detention camps in the Cape Colony.<sup>36</sup> The press and the dissemination of what E. Grottle Strebel calls "primitive propaganda" in propaganda films, had a major impact on the mind of the British public.<sup>37</sup> These films without exception were shot exclusively from the British point of view, since the Boers had photographs but no cinematographs, producing remarkable documents of the times, undoubtedly more revealing of Victorian England than of South Africa, full of myths and symbols of British Imperialist iconography.<sup>38</sup> Apart from several hundreds of topical, naval and military films, the war also inspired recruiting, dramatic, war and even some social films. Millions of people including Royalty in Britain saw these films. Patriotic audiences in Britain cheered Tommy and booed Paul Kruger. Kruger bashing and derogating the image of the Boers were the order of the day.<sup>39</sup> Imperialists vilified the Boers, picturing them as immoral beasts and presenting them as untrustworthy species of the human race.<sup>40</sup> Most of these films had characteristics common to most of the anti-Boer propaganda films. First is the physical obliteration, transformation and ultimate transcendence of the enemy.<sup>41</sup> Just

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<sup>29</sup> *The Coming Day*, November, 1900, pp. 342-344.

<sup>30</sup> *War Against War in South Africa*, March, 16, 1900, p. 350; *The Coming Day*, March, 1900, pp. 76-77, 80.

<sup>31</sup> *The Coming Day*, April, 1900, p. 106.

<sup>32</sup> *The Coming Day*, April, 1900, p. 115.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *The Coming Day*, June, 1900, p. 185.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. e.g. Major-General J.G. Maxwell's Proclamation in Government Notice, No. 31, of 1901, dated 14th March, 1901, in the *Gazette* of April 7th, 1901, criminalising the evasion of censorship.

<sup>35</sup> F. MacKarness, *Martial Law in the Cape Colony*. Temple: The National Press Agency, Limited (1902), pp. 21-22.

<sup>36</sup> F. MacKarness, *Lifting the Veil in Cape Colony*. Temple: The National Press Agency, Limited (1902), pp. 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> J.H. de Lange, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 on Film*. Pretoria: State Archives and Heraldic Services (1991), pp. xxii-xxviii.

<sup>38</sup> De Lange, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 on Film*, p. xxii.

<sup>39</sup> A.M.S. Methuen, *Peace or War in South Africa*. London: Methuen & Co. (1901), p. 54ff.

<sup>40</sup> De Lange, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 on Film*, p. xxvi.

<sup>41</sup> De Lange, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 on Film*, p. xxvii.

as the early cinema audience marveled to see the physical preservation of real objects, so too it was fascinated with the cinema's seemingly magical ability to make images, particularly of villains - like the Boers - disappear. A second characteristic of these films is the all-encompassing, mystical power of the Union Jack, symbol of the all-powerful British Empire.<sup>42</sup> These scenes of obliterating the enemy also took the form of the physical obliteration of Kruger and the Boers. Strebél concludes on the mythical proportions of these productions: "Even though the Boer War ultimately troubled many a conscience and generally shook Imperial confidence, the cinema only served to gloss over that which was disturbing, perpetuating the myths of the Empire and satisfying the emotional needs of a populace at war. And the myths of Boer War cinematography aptly conform to the function of all myths, which in the view of Lévi-Strauss are adopted to make coherent that which is basically self-contradictory."<sup>43</sup> Notably absent from these film productions were scenes of the concentration camps or for that matter visual presentations of the women and children transported to camps or incarcerated there. Even the raw documentaries served as propaganda through selection, omission and emphasis revealing lacunae in visual documentation, including the absence of film footage on the concentration camps or on the razing of farms and crops. The actual choice of subject matter is just as illuminating - representing self-censorship and keeping the fate of the civilians from the British public. In addition to propaganda, British imperialists also used other techniques to control memory. Accompanying the British into the interior of the country there followed Martial Law measures stifling the flow of information.<sup>44</sup> On the eve of the war Jingoism,<sup>45</sup> "patriotomyrotics"<sup>46</sup> and "paramountcynensis"<sup>47</sup> became the standard modes of imperialist discourse in editor's columns, and the imperialist newspapers degenerated to levels of Boer bashing hitherto unknown. To this was added the "blackguardism"<sup>48</sup> of the imperial press when occasion allowed. Alluding to Mrs.

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<sup>42</sup> De Lange, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 on Film*, p. xxvii.

<sup>43</sup> De Lange, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 on Film*, p. xxviii.

<sup>44</sup> F. MacKarness, *Martial Law in the Cape Colony during 1901*. Temple: The Natal Press Agency (1902). In private discussions with the late Stowell Kessler on his research on the concentration camps, he informed me that whilst working through documentation of big mining houses he had come across proof that on his return to England, Lord Horatio Kitchener had vast volumes of documents dumped into the sea.

<sup>45</sup> *The Coming Day*, January, 1900, pp. 21, 23; cf. Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire*, p. 26ff.

<sup>46</sup> *Weekly Budget Special: Transvaal War of 1881*, October 1899.

<sup>47</sup> *The Coming Day*, April, 1900, p. 117.

<sup>48</sup> *The Coming Day*, July, 1900, p. 206.

Cronjé (wife of General Piet Cronjé) and the alleged Boer fear for soap, *The Sun* in its leading article commented that "(e)ven washing is an important art. It is reported that, in time, even a Boer gets used to it, and if Mrs. Cronjé is at all successful in her operations, she may be able to usher into the Transvaal a new era, and, perchance, a new soap and a new kind of scrubbing brush with it. Peace and the scrubbing brush! It is a glorious dream. Who knows but that, some day, Mrs. Cronjé may be able to induce Mrs. Kruger to persuade Mr. Kruger to cleanse his teeth."<sup>49</sup>

## **2.2 Lord Roberts and the dawn of the state of exception**

The imperialist press reported with much enthusiasm on Lord Roberts' advance into the Free State and the unleashing of the proclamation war on the two Boer Republics. In due course, the Boer civilian population was drawn into the unfolding of the biopolitical program of imperialism to end the war for the British forces. The British press clamored for strict measures to subdue the Boer's resistance. The concentration camp system unfolded as a state of exception as the proclamations by Lord Roberts increased.<sup>50</sup> Into these camps were gathered women and children from the country districts, and all the burghers who surrendered voluntarily. In effect, the new plan was the concentration system of General Weyler in Cuba, with this distinction that Roberts undertook the responsibility of feeding the refugees.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *The Sun*, Vol. 10(115), p. 206.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Cd. 426. *Proclamations Issued by Field-Marshal Lord Roberts in South Africa*. London (1900); W.T. Stead, *How not to make Peace*. London: Stop the War Committee (1900), pp. 18-26.

<sup>51</sup> S.B. Spies, *Methods of Barbarism?* Cape Town: Human & Rousseau (1978), pp. 148, 270, 296, 342.





**The family of Mrs. Smith, photographed by British soldiers at Taaiboschspruit before their house was destroyed by the British.**



**Lt. O'Reilley stirring up the flames at Taaiboschspruit. It is the sequel to the previous photo, and shows the destruction of Mrs. Smith's house by British forces.**

The nexus between the state of exception and the concentration camps is important for understanding the nature of the camps that sprang up in the aftermath of the scorched earth policy. Ironically, the "protection" of the inmates in question in the protective custody is a protection against the suspension of the law that characterizes the state of emergency. The state of exception as a temporal suspension of the state of law, acquires a spatial arrangement that remains outside the normal state of law. The life of the civilians in the camps depended solely on the discretion of the military authorities who took them into protective custody - not as fully honored citizens but merely as human beings at the mercy of the British authorities and the camp commandants. The Reuter's correspondent at Pretoria justified the massing of women and children in the camps as a Christian act of war and explained the logic underlying the state of exception as follows: "It has of late been apparent to the British military authorities here that among a great number of poor in the town, who were being fed practically free of charge, were the wives of many burghers now actually in the field

against us." The message continues: "Even to British magnanimity there must be some limit (!) and to-day a proclamation has been issued ordering the wives of all Boers now fighting to report themselves to the authorities tomorrow in order that they may be sent into the enemy's lines."<sup>52</sup> The logic of this argument proceeds as follows: Women and children were taken into protective custody, fed as acts of magnanimity, then deprived of their own houses and beds, driven from places of safety into the field of active warfare to force the men to lay down their arms and to convert the Dutch into submissive subjects. So far the justification for the system of British concentration camps. The question is: How should the impact of the British concentration camps, as a form of protective custody, on the lives of the inmates be studied?



**The destruction of civilian property reflects the fundamental dichotomy at the heart of the idea of protective custody: Boer property was destroyed, women and children taken into “protective custody” and subjected to the state of exception to bring the war to a close.**

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<sup>52</sup> *The Coming Day*, November 1901, p. 346.



### **2.3 The existential encounter of camp inmates with the state of exception.**

Official camp documentation, camp reports and official publications on the camps are not sufficient for fully understanding what life was inside the camps. The memoirs by camp inmates over a period of almost a century, chronicling their lives in the camps, offer an unmediated voice of those detained in the camps. These highly personalized historical accounts provide a counterbalance to the biases and silences inherent in the official documentation on the camps. However, to be useful as historical sources, memoirs, like other texts, must be read with and against other evidence. To re-create the world of the camps survivor testimonies is of primary importance. Oral histories, like written memoirs, represent a person's subjective remembering of past events. Daniel Schacter points out that memories are complex constructions. There is a constant interaction between the past and the present in all human memory such that oral testimonies, like memoirs, tell us as much about a person's current state of mind and the society in which he or she lives as they do about a particular historical moment.<sup>53</sup> What do these testimonies tell us about the world in the camps experienced by the inmates? Above everything else, these testimonies testify on the *vulnerability*

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<sup>53</sup> D.L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin (2001); *Searching for the Brain, the Mind and the Past*. New York: Oxford University Press (1985).

experienced by the camp inmates and their experience of abandonment in the no man's land of exception - beyond the law, beyond the normal civil protective legal measures. This experience of vulnerability is a spontaneous reflex emanating from their experiences of traumatic events that are actually better and more accurately remembered than ordinary life experiences.



**Women's testimonies of their experiences of abandonment in the no man's land of exception testify to Boer civilian vulnerability in the concentration camps. The photo shows a dying child on her mother's lap.**

The experience of vulnerability was a shared experience of the momentous impact of camp life in the state of exception. The most striking feature of these oral and written testimonies are the consistencies between them. It was not just that survivor memories when held together evoked a general period of extreme misery, abuse and brutality; it was that they provided recollections of events, processes, relationships, and individuals that were very similar. Take, for example, the camp inmates' recollections on the penal system in the form of the "Bird Cage" in the Bloemfontein camp,<sup>54</sup> the

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<sup>54</sup> A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die Konsentrasiekamp te Bloemfontein Gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*. Bloemfontein: Oorlogsmuseum van die Boererepublieke (1993), pp. 240-242.

sanitary measures at Bethulie<sup>55</sup> and the abuse of camp inmates by the camp Commandant, John Godlieb Brink, in Vredefort camp.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die Konsentrasiekamp te Bethulie Gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*. Bloemfontein: Prisca Uitgewers (2001), pp. 73-74.

<sup>56</sup> A.W.G. Raath & R.M. Louw, *Die Konsentrasiekamp te Vredefortweg Gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902*. Bloemfontein: Oorlogsmuseum van die Boererepublieke (1992), pp. 43-46, 68.



Not only the consistency of the oral testimonies over time and space are striking, it is also the degree to which the oral data correlates with what remains in the written record.

Photos 8 & 9 (below): The existential encounter with the state of exception was also experienced by black civilians on their way to concentration camps. The photos show black civilians waiting to be transported to a concentration camp.

#### **2.4 The state of exception and the testimonies of vulnerability of the camp inmates**

Vulnerability is not equivalent to suffering, harm, loss, hardship, or pain. Rather, it is the condition that makes these things possible.<sup>57</sup> The women and children were vulnerable in the camps because they were dependant and relied upon others, requiring assistance and support, being open to be affected by their environment and by these others. The testimonies of camp inmates who survived the concentration camps, are scenes of vulnerability. What joins these testimonies - crossing the different situations, persons, and ways of being vulnerable - is the fact that vulnerability is pervasive, fundamental, shared. These scenes of vulnerability share the common experience of women and children who could neither fully know nor control the forces outside their control; an extreme form of incapacity and frailty that leads to dependence on others as caretakers; the lack of mercy, pity or compassion and lack of feeling to act in response to their suffering. Robert Goodin explains the ethical basis of vulnerability as follows: Vulnerability generates and explains responsibility; I am responsible for those others who are vulnerable in relation to me. Thus, vulnerability is the basis for special responsibilities: "It is their vulnerability, not our promises or any other voluntary act of will on our part, that imposes upon us special responsibilities with respect to them ... I promised and others are depending on me in consequence, then I am obliged to do as I promised - not because I promised, but merely because they are depending on (i.e. are vulnerable to) me."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> E.C. Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*. New York: Routledge (2014), pp. 11, 16.

<sup>58</sup> R.E. Goodin, "Vulnerabilities and Responsibilities: An Ethical Defense of the Welfare State". *The American Political Science Review* 79(3), pp. 775-787.





The existential encounter with the state of exception and the vulnerability of Boer women and children is reflected by this photo of Boer civilians destined for the concentration camp at De Jagersdrift. Note the women's backs turned towards the camera – probably reflecting their shame at being transported to the camp.

## 2.5 Historiography of vulnerability, exploitation and the ethics of research on the camps

Ethically unacceptable vulnerabilities are those where the likelihood of exploitation is strong. According to Goodin, the vulnerability relationship is "morally objectionable" when: (1) there is a power asymmetry in their relationship; (2) the vulnerable party needs what is provided by the dominant party; (3) the vulnerable party can only access those resources through the relationship with the dominant party, and (4) the dominant party controls, and can withhold those resources.<sup>59</sup> The principle is that vulnerability demands ethical responsiveness via caring for and protecting the vulnerable, mitigating their vulnerability, and cultivating the virtues that enable one to do those things well - vulnerability is thus the ground of ethical obligation. The narrowed sense

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<sup>59</sup> Goodin, *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1985), p. 27.

of responsibility evinced by the imperialist bureaucracy encouraged the view that those who are vulnerable - in the sense of being weak, needy, and dependant - are inferior and undeserving of care.<sup>60</sup> The perspective of those sharing a common vulnerability in the camps was not one of atomism and individualism: Those who shared in the common vulnerability were not a community of individuals but one premised on an unwilling, prior, and constitutive relationality. It was a community they did not choose and one they could not escape or avoid insofar as they could not choose to be in some kind of relation to others.<sup>61</sup> The Boer women and children experienced an interconnectedness going all the way down and being prior to the establishment of individuals who can be said to depend on one another. These relations and this interdependence made them the individuals they were: "Interdependence and community, thus, are not just matters of solidarity of interest but of shared history and potential for self-dispossession, that is, being undone by the ties that of necessity link us."<sup>62</sup> It is this shared history of community that Helen Dampier and Liz Stanley negate in their readings of the testimonies of the camp survivors.<sup>63</sup> The publications by Elizabeth Neethling and other feminine authors, were not foremost the records of their efforts to promote Afrikaner nationalism, but the plea of women and children who were subjected to extreme forms of vulnerability and political abandonment and who experienced the effects thereof as a community of vulnerable subjects in the state of exception.

The dehumanization of camp inmates grows out of an inability to recognize them as vulnerable and the pervasive failure to recognize them as vulnerable is rooted in how we think of vulnerability (and how we connect it to gender, race, and class, and the cultural meanings that are associated with these aspects of identity). On this understanding, those who are generally perceived as physically strong, active,

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<sup>60</sup> Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, p. 32.

<sup>61</sup> Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, p. 55.

<sup>62</sup> Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, p. 56.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. L. Stanley, *Mourning Becomes .....: Post/memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press (2006); "A Strange Thing is memory". Emily Hobhouse, memory work, moral life and the concentration system", *SAHJ*, 52 (2005), pp. 60-80; L. Stanley & H. Dampier, "Cultural entrepreneurs, proto-nationalism and women's testimony writings: from the South African War to 1940", *JSAS*, 33(3) (September 2007), pp. 501-519; "Aftermaths: Post/memory, commemoration and the concentration camps of the South African War, 1899-1902", *European Review of History*, 12(1) (March 2005), p. 95; H. Dampier, *Women's testimonies of the concentration camps of the South African War: 1899-1902 and after* (PhD thesis, University of Newcastle (2005)).

stereotypically masculine, and the agents of harm cannot be vulnerable.<sup>64</sup> This logic is premised upon a reductively negative view of vulnerability and the persecutory posturing that is made possible by such a view of vulnerability. Framing vulnerability in this view allows us to ignore the vulnerability of those who are socially devalued and thus justifies our failure to respond to it. The portrayal of the women in the camps as brutish, masculine, and strong and not in need of assistance was wide spread in the visual portrayals of imperialist iconography of the camps.<sup>65</sup>

Denial of vulnerability manifests as epistemic invulnerability and is tantamount to a pursuit of invulnerability - by pursuing invulnerability, one becomes ignorant of vulnerability. Ignorance of vulnerability underlies other oppressive types of ignorance and its complex manifestations perpetuating oppressive social, economic, and political relations. An ethics of vulnerability is crucial not just to living one's life well but also to instantiating more just and equitable social relationships. Denial of vulnerability is an ethically and politically dangerous one. The spirit of British imperialistic invulnerability was expressed in literature extolling the virtues of natural supremacy and military power as a process of natural development and "infernal gospel", as Darwin and Spencer laid it down, pointing out "that the highest type of organism is the warrior, and that battle is the process ordained by Nature for dividing the born subordinates and cowards from born nobles and proprietors - also that man who is really free, is under no obligation to obey any commands, human or divine." To which the same author added:

*Then war for life and land and love,  
For women, power and gold;  
This earth, and all its treasure vast,  
Is booty for the bold.*<sup>66</sup>

In similar Darwinian terms, the author of a "Poem for the Times" hailed the ethos of imperial invulnerability - literary expressions of the "dominant temper of the hour":

*The strong must ever rule the weak, is grim Primordial law -  
On earth's broad racial threshing floor, the meek are beaten straw -  
Then ride to power o'er foemen's necks, let nothing bar your way;  
If you are FIT you'll rule and reign is the logic of to-day.  
You must prove your Right by deeds of Might, of splendour and renown -*

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<sup>64</sup> Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, p. 66.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. e.g. Anna Howarth's portrayal of Boer women in "The Boer at Home", *Cornhill Magazine*, July, 1900, p. 119.

<sup>66</sup> *The Coming Day*, December, 1899, p. 365.

*If need be, march through flames of hell to dash opponents down.  
Cain's knotted club is sceptre still - the 'Rights of Man' is fraud;  
Christ's ethics are for creeping things - true manhood smiles at 'God.'  
For Might is Right when empires sink in storms of steel and flame;  
And it is RIGHT when weakling breeds are hunted down like game.<sup>67</sup>*

In the same publication, the author ends his prose poetry on a climax of naked invulnerability:

*Death endeth all for every man - for every 'son of thunder;'  
then be a lion (not a 'lamb'), and don't be trampled under.<sup>68</sup>*



British iconography reflecting the invulnerability of the imperialist ethos. Juxtaposing imperial “civilization” over and against Boer “barbarism” was a standard technique of British war propaganda.

By perpetuating the myth of invulnerability, authors are perpetuating oppression, violence and subjection. Studies on epistemologists of ignorance have made the convincing case that ignorance is no mere lack of knowledge but rather is actively produced and maintained. Ignorance of the situational vulnerabilities of others who are

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<sup>67</sup> *The Coming Day*, December, 1899, p. 365.

<sup>68</sup> *The Coming Day*, December 1899, p. 366.

perceived as "other"- for instance, the vulnerabilities of concentration camp inmates to the physical control and violence of the agents of imperialism - is a product of a deeper ignorance of shared ontological vulnerability.<sup>69</sup> On its part, ignorance of vulnerability is generated through the achievement of invulnerability as a desirable character trait and form of subjectivity. This taxonomy of ignorance manifests in four modes of ignorance: (1) knowing that we do not know yet not caring to know; (2) not even knowing that we do not know, (3) not knowing because (privileged) others do not want us to know, and (4) willful ignorance.<sup>70</sup> Thinking and operating in such a reductionist fashion is a way to achieve mastery and command. Through reducing an object or a subject to the properties that are essential to one's ends, which are likewise reduced by fiscal imperatives, one is better poised to know it and better equipped to manipulate it in the desired manner. Willful ignorance is constitutive of what Val Plumwood has called the "master model" of subjectivity, which is effectively the cultural identity of those who occupy positions of privilege and/or participate in relations of domination.<sup>71</sup> The "master subject" is the model of humanity that is implicitly presumed by the dominant imperialist culture, yet it is a model based on the exclusion and domination of the sphere of nature and those associated with the sphere, such as Boer concentration camp inmates by a largely male elite. This pursuit of invulnerability is at the core of masterful subjectivity and has as its consequence a pragmatic efficiency in accomplishing narrowly defined (reductionist) goals. When one's interests are narrowly construed and based on socioeconomic exigencies and ideologies, it appears in one's interests to develop such a self-identity and, thus, to eschew and ignore the vulnerability of the self of others in all its permutations.<sup>72</sup> Yet, these interests, goals, and desires emerge from a social world in which inequity, bias, and oppression persist, and the values of the dominant hold sway. In sum: the imperialist ethos of willful ignorance of vulnerability is a closure to being affected and shaped by others; it is willful ignorance and a kind of unconscious self-deception and, more specifically, a self-deception oriented towards retaining privilege and eschewing recognition of those facts that would destabilize privileged subjectivity, and is central in the formation of masterful self-identity and grounds and perpetuates various forms

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<sup>69</sup> Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, p.74.

<sup>70</sup> N. Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance. The World's Health Movement and Epistemologies of Ignorance". *Hypathia* 21(3), pp. 1-19.

<sup>71</sup> V. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. New York: Routledge (1993).

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, p. 23.

of oppression and exploitation.<sup>73</sup> Research based on the same premises of willful ignorance perpetuates the notion of the imperialist master subject, and serves the interests of the oppressors. Willful ignorance also makes very little contribution to research and the values that humankind should cherish and promote.



**Boer children on their way to a concentration camp – the vulnerable entering the state of exception.**

If invulnerability as willful ignorance is the basis for the forms of ignorance that make possible oppression, precisely because it enables one to isolate and close oneself off, then an essential part of overcoming these pernicious types of ignorance is fostering a specific type of vulnerability, namely, epistemic vulnerability. In brief, epistemic vulnerability is what makes learning, and thus a reduction of ignorance, possible.<sup>74</sup> Undoing ignorance involves cultivating the attitude of one who is epistemically vulnerable rather than that of a masterful, invulnerable knower who has nothing to learn from others or for whom others are merely vehicles for the transmission of

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<sup>73</sup> Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance ...", p. 11.

<sup>74</sup> Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, p. 74.

information.<sup>75</sup> We all have lapses, gaps in our experience and attunement that demand alterations in our knowing attitudes, which the cultivation of epistemic vulnerability can ameliorate - evidence which can be found within feminist theory itself.<sup>76</sup>

### **3. Zvetan Todorov on historical research and the quest for memory**

#### **3.1 The essence of historical research on the camps**

Historical research is a quest for making the past live on in the present. According to Zvetan Todorov three stages mark the processes through which historical research proceed.<sup>77</sup> Past events leave two kind of trace: "mnestic" traces in people's minds; and material ones in the outside world, such as letters, pottery, laws or other tangible products.<sup>78</sup> All these traces are small parts of past events. Reflecting on the dearth of historical evidence on the camps and the plethora of camp testimonies by inmates in the form of diaries and statements on life in the camps, research on the camps need to give account of all three stages of scholarly endeavor.

#### **3.2 Establishing the facts**

Everything has to rely on the groundwork of establishing the facts. Before we can judge on the actions of the camp authorities and the conduct of the women and children in the Barberton concentration camp for example, we have to know inter alia: When was the camp established? Where was it located? Who was the camp commandant? How many inmates were in the camp? This is where we must draw the line between historians and frauds. We have to make discriminations between reliable witnesses and myth maniacs. Lies, misrepresentations and pure fictions have to be rooted out if we really wish to resurrect the past and not just confirm our own prejudices.<sup>79</sup> There should be no higher authority in the state that can say, you don't have the right to look for the truth, or people who don't accept the official version of the past will be punished. Autonomy of judgment is the lifeblood of academic research and everybody has the right to know their own history and to make it known to others.<sup>80</sup> The right of individuals or groups who have experienced extreme or tragic events also

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<sup>75</sup> Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, p.93.

<sup>76</sup> Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability*, p. 94.

<sup>77</sup> Z. Todorov, *Hope and Memory*. Translated by David Bellos. London: Atlantic Books (2003), p. 117ff.

<sup>78</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>79</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>80</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, p. 120ff.

have the duty of remembering and bearing witness. Therefore, it is wrong to legislate on the facts of history. The French law making Holocaust denial an offense is inappropriate. Todorov remarks: "Existing legislation allows charges of libel and of incitement to racial hatred to be brought to protect individuals affected by negationist nonsense; but law courts are not the right places to establish historical facts, however grave."<sup>81</sup>

### 3.3 Constructing meaning

Construction of meaning has to follow the establishment of facts. Facts, once known, have to be interpreted - fitted together, strung out along the line of cause and effect, compared with each other, distinguished from each other, and set against each other. Whereas facts are subject to the test of truthfulness (did these things take place?),<sup>82</sup> truth signifies the power to unveil the underlying meaning of an event. Great works of history do not just give us reliable information; they also teach us about the workings of human psychology and social life. The inter-subjectivity of constructing meaning needs to be sensitive towards the ideological lens through which the key-role players in the historical process worked, contributed and interpreted the facts with which they were confronted.<sup>83</sup> Relevant questions to the construction of meaning relating to the Barberton camp would be: Was Harry Graumann, the camp Commandant, a genius? Was he a tyrant? Did he conduct the affairs of the camp with a warped mind? In this respect historians are in the same boat as novelists and poets: the only real proof that they have unveiled a deeper level of underlying meaning is their success in persuading their readers that they have done so. Different to factual verification, the ultimate criterion of unveiled truthfulness is inter-subjective, not referential.<sup>84</sup>

### 3.4 Application

After establishing the facts and interpreting them, we can now *use* the knowledge we have obtained.<sup>85</sup> An historian's work is hard to imagine unless it refers at some level to values, and these values determine the historian's own approach to his material. The questions and topics on which a historian focuses can only be ones that strike

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<sup>81</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, p. 122.

<sup>82</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, p.122ff.

<sup>83</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, p. 122ff.

<sup>84</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, p. 123.

<sup>85</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, p. 127ff.



him or her as being truthful, important, and in need of urgent inquiry. The historian picks out from archives, testimonies, and other sources those elements that seem most revealing. These must then be knitted together to support an argument and to show the lesson that can be drawn from the chosen fragment of history, even if the moral is not as explicit as we would like it to be. Values are everywhere, and that doesn't upset anyone. But values can't be separated from the wish not just to know the world, but to act on it, and to change it in the here and now. Todorov remarks: "Scholarship is obviously not the same thing as politics, but scholarship, being a human activity, has a political finality, which may be for good or bad."<sup>86</sup> Memory being selective by nature, there have to be criteria that allow it to choose what it retains from the great mass of information received; and those very criteria, conscious or unconscious as they may be, are most likely to be the main guide to the uses we make of the past. Use cannot be kept out of history; to think that knowledge and its application can be insulated from each other is just a fantasy. With reference to our research on the Barberton camp, the final question is: What is the message emanating from our research on the camp? Does our research teach us anything about values and their application to our concrete life world?

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<sup>86</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, p. 128.



Boer women and children on their way to the Barberton concentration camp. The camp was established after women and children were dumped on the Boer commandos.

### 3.5 The Barberton camp: facts, interpretation and meaning



A panoramic view of the Barberton concentration camp.

In the first standard work on the concentration camps, J.C. Otto's *Die Konsentrasiekampe* (The Concentration Camps) (1954) there are only eight references to the Barberton camp.<sup>87</sup> These references provide us with fragments of information on the establishment of the so-called *Vrouwenkamp* by General Ben Viljoen in midwinter 1900 to accommodate women and children sent from Pretoria and Johannesburg to the Boer commando's;<sup>88</sup> the women's singing of patriotic songs to the dismay of the British authorities en route to Barberton;<sup>89</sup> President Steyn's concern about the care for these civilians; the establishment of a fully fledged concentration camp in February 1900 and the instruction of the children in the camp school through the medium of English.<sup>90</sup> Except for Ben Viljoen's diary, no other testimonies by camp inmates are referred to.



***The Boer children in the Barberton camp were instructed through the medium of English. The photo shows the children at the Pavilion where the school was situated.***

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<sup>87</sup> J.C. Otto, *Die Konsentrasiekampe*. Kaapstad: Nasionale Boekhandel Beperk (1954), pp. 37, 38, 55, 96, 156, 158, 159, 172.

<sup>88</sup> Otto, *Die Konsentrasiekampe*, p. 37.

<sup>89</sup> Otto, *Die Konsentrasiekampe*, p. 37.

<sup>90</sup> Otto, *Die Konsentrasiekampe*, p. 156.

In Elizabeth van Heyningen's work on the camps, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War* (2013), Barberton camp receives even less attention. The author refers exclusively to the monthly reports by the camp commandant and alludes to everyday occurrences in the camp with the exception of the coronation activities of June 1902.<sup>91</sup> The author observes that the Barberton camp celebrated for an entire week, with a soir e given by the staff, separate concerts for adults and children, a dinner for younger adults, and sports and a picnic for the children, who received coronation medals. The author describes Graumann as a more "efficient" superintendent compared to that of the Belfast camp, although he presented "terse" reports.<sup>92</sup> The author cites no testimonials by camp inmates.



**Boer civilians from the district of Barberton and their British masters. These civilians were transported to the *Boeren Vrouwenkamp* at Barberton.**

Reconstructing the history of this camp in the present reveals the following:

The facts regarding the establishment, locality and numbers of inmates in the Barberton camp are well established. The camp was started on 1st February 1901.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps*, pp. 102, 158, 160, 251, 268, 335.

<sup>92</sup> E. van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps*, pp. 351, 355.

<sup>93</sup> Cd. 893: *Report on the Concentration Camps in South Africa by the Committee of Ladies appointed by the Secretary of State for War, containing Reports on the Camps in Natal, the Orange River Colony and the Transvaal* (1902), p. 156.

Dr. Kendal Franks, Honorary Consulting Surgeon to Her Majesty's Forces in South Africa described Barberton as the most beautifully situated town he had seen in the Transvaal. It is close to the Swaziland border, surrounded by hills. The camp was to the south-west of the town on high ground, sloping gradually to the south and west. It was prettily planted with trees and possessed a good water supply.<sup>94</sup> Under Superintendent Graumann censuses showed increases from 445 on 30 April 1901<sup>95</sup> to 1 994 on 31 July of the same year, decreasing to 1 631 on 31 December 1901.<sup>96</sup>



**The Barberton concentration camp was situated to the south-west of the town on high ground, sloping gradually to the south and west.**

According to an account by Rayne Kruger in *Goodbye Dolly Gray*, there were as many as 2 500 Boer refugees encamped at the Barberton *Boere Vrouwenkamp* before the British forces under Lieutenant General French and his Chief of Staff, Colonel D. Haig, occupied the town.<sup>97</sup> This information is borne out by General Ben Viljoen in his

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<sup>94</sup> Cd. 819: *Reports etc. on the Working of the Refugee Camps in the Transvaal, Orange River Colony, Cape Colony and Natal* (November 1901), p. 320.

<sup>95</sup> Cd. 819, p. 47.

<sup>96</sup> Cd. 819, p. 223.

<sup>97</sup> R. Kruger, *Good-bey Dolly Gray*. London: Pan Books (1977), p. 362.

*Reminiscences of the Anglo-Boer War*.<sup>98</sup> He adds that the Boer commando's were forced to transport women and children by rail to the *Barberton Vrouwenkamp* on two occasions.<sup>99</sup> There were fears that the Boers in the existing camp would aid the Boer forces from beyond enemy lines and because of the constant influx of inmates, the British authorities moved the camp to a new site by August 1900.

The pro-British *South African Magazine* of 10 May 1903 singles out the Barberton concentration camp as a model camp and adds that the Boers enjoyed comforts in camp "far transcending, in the vast majority of cases, anything they have hitherto experienced in their lives, and which will render a return to their normal conditions exceedingly trying."<sup>100</sup> Whereas the pro-British post-war *South African Magazine* provides a glowing account of the camp, providing in every need of its inmates, the diary of an inmate, Annie Kruger<sup>101</sup> sketches a totally different picture: the camp inmates often had to survive on the barest of essentials; rations consisted of a little bit of sugar, coffee, rice, salt, flour and a few tins of corned beef which had to be eked out over the next six days; inmates were forced to eat the spoilt food and suffer the consequences; vegetables were provided only once - brought by a German acquaintance; rations were cut and inmates had to go hungry; pressure was exerted on the inmates to spur them to appeal to the men in the field to stop the war; Graumann used the rations system to maintain discipline in the camp; individual rations were halved for the slightest infringement, such as keeping lights on after "Lights out!" was called at 21:00, not sweeping the tent properly, not attending roll call at 8:00 and so forth; many of the Boer women and children arrived at the camp with only the clothes on their back; inmates were commandeered to dress up in their finest for photographs to be taken - posing as if they were on a picnic - empty cups, dour facial expressions and several different women wearing the same outfit testifying to the contrary; preparations for the Ladies Committee's visit, with tents being repaired and inmates forewarned not to raise any problems with the committee. The reports by the Camp

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<sup>98</sup> B. Viljoen, *Im Kampf um Süd-Afrika*. München: J.F. Lehmanns (1902), pp. 115, 118, 130, 131.

<sup>99</sup> Cf. A.W.G. Raath, *Die Boerevrou, 1899-1902. Dl. 2: Kampsmarte*. Nylstroom: Volkskomitee vir die Herdenking van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog (2003), pp. 47-48.

<sup>100</sup> Quoted by Ina Georgala, "The Barberton Concentration Camp", unpublished manuscript (no date), p. 3.

<sup>101</sup> A. Kruger, *Konsentrasiekamp Dagboek*. Original in the Voortrekker Museum. All references to this source are to Ina Georgala's transcript of portions of this diary.

Commandant provides no information on the day to day experiences of the inmates and their treatment at the hands of the camp authorities.



**Camp inmates of the Barberton concentration camp.**

The testimonials by women who were camp inmates and who committed their memories to writing from 1903 to 1904 reveal much more on the way in which Graumann conducted the administration of the camp. Testimonies and reminiscences by C.C.Nel,<sup>102</sup> M.E.J. Vermaak,<sup>103</sup> C.D Pretorius,<sup>104</sup> C. de Lange,<sup>105</sup> A.M.C.B. Kruger<sup>106</sup> and M. Swart<sup>107</sup> corroborate the basic information in Annie Kruger's diary

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<sup>102</sup> C.C. Nel, Copy of her handwritten memoirs on the Barberton camp in the author's (AWGR) collection, compiled (c. 1903), unpaginated.

<sup>103</sup> M.E.J. Vermaak, Copy of her handwritten notes on camp experiences by the camp inmates in the Barberton camp in the author's (AWGR) collection (dated 24<sup>th</sup> July 1904), unpaginated..

<sup>104</sup> C.D. Pretorius, Copy of her handwritten camp memoirs in the author's (AWGR) collection (compiled c. 1904), unpaginated.

<sup>105</sup> C. de Lange, Copy of her handwritten camp memoirs on the Barberton camp in the author's (AWGR) collection (c. 1904), unpaginated.

<sup>106</sup> A.M.B.C. Kruger (born Geertzen), Copy of her handwritten memoirs on the Barberton camp in the author's (AWGR) collection (compiled c. 1904), unpaginated.

<sup>107</sup> M. Swart, Copy of her handwritten report on her experiences in the Barberton camp in the author's (AWGR) collection (dated 12<sup>th</sup> November 1904), unpaginated.

and add that the camp was a wire-enclosure surrounded by three barbed fences. Camp testimonies of the experiences of women give a totally different picture of the camp under the administration of the notorious Commandant Harry Graumann. Who was Graumann? He was a financier, born in London in 1867; Deputy Chairman of the Finance Committee of the Johannesburg Town Council; member of the Executive of the Queen Victoria Hospital; ironically also the President of the Johannesburg Zionist Association. Before the War, he was an Alderman of Johannesburg. During the War, he was Chairman of the Cape Town Uitlander Committee, and a member of the Rand, Athenaeum and New Clubs, Johannesburg.<sup>108</sup>



**The British camp staff of the Barberton concentration camp. The notorious camp Superintendent, Harry Graumann, sits in the front row to the right. Testimonials by Boer women describe in detail the barbarous punishments executed by Graumann for trivial offences of the camp rules.**

The testimonies of women reflect a heartless, ambitious and authoritarian personality who did not hesitate to meet out harsh punishments to both women and children alike - descriptions supported by the photographic impressions of a militaristic and cold personality. Transgressions of the camp regulations were punished by reducing the

<sup>108</sup> *South African Who's Who*. Durban: Who's Who Publishing Company (1909), p. 181.



rations; children were locked up in dark rooms without windows or any form of light for more than 24 hours and because of bad administration only a few inmates received the meat ration on Christmas day 1901.<sup>109</sup> M.E.J. Vermaak's son was a victim of Graumann's sadistic punishments. She writes: "Also in this camp a very small room called the 'dark room' for children transgressing the camp regulations; they were interred for one or two days without food and water."<sup>110</sup> According to the testimonies of a number of these women, Graumann not only enjoyed watching the effects of his harsh policy of punishment for trivial offences, but he also had a sadistic streak to his personality. In a number of testimonies, mention is made of him throwing sweets on the dust streets of the camp and reveling in the scenes of children wrestling in the dirt for these luxuries.<sup>111</sup>

### **3.6 Reflections on the value of testimonials by Boer women for Barberton camp research**

The existing historiography on the Barberton camp needs to be revised. Historical truth - that is truth unveiled - is always, fortunately, subject to revision, every historical advance is in a sense "revisionist" and the history of the camps needs to be expanded and made more complete. This, however, stands opposed to *negationism*. By *negationism* is meant the politically motivated claim that established and/or well-documented facts on the camp do not exist.<sup>112</sup> For example, the view that the concentration camp was not the extension of the *Vrouwenkamp* or that Graumann was a benign reformer. However, negationism in the form of willful ignorance of invulnerability also entails the methodological negation of relevant sources - like testimonials and diaries - and/or the *ex post fact* exclusion of material merely on grounds of political tendencies manifesting in a later epoch - different to those of the researcher - which may coincide with sentiments the camp author(s) expressed in their original testimonies.

If the views of Stanley and Dampier are to be taken seriously, not only Annie Kruger's diary, the testimonials by Boer women on the Barberton camp as well as the diary of Annie Kruger do not qualify as sources for professional historiographical research on

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<sup>109</sup> Cf. Raath, *Die Boerevrou*, p. 52.

<sup>110</sup> M.E.J. Vermaak, Notes.

<sup>111</sup> Raath, *Die Boerevrou*, p. 52.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, pp. 133, 191, 193-194.

the camps because these autobiographical writing constitute mythical and unreliable sources. According to Stanley and Dampier the fact that these sources were consulted for a work on the camps, *The Boer Woman* (Die Boerevrou), Part 2 (2003), degrade them to the level of unhistorical sources shrouded in myth.<sup>113</sup> According to Liz Stanley and Helen Dampier, these testimonies are highly politicized feminist contributions to the creation of a post-war Afrikaner nationalist identity. In addition Stanley argues that the myth-creating impact of these testimonies make people see the camps through a narrow lens. Because nationalism gained momentum in post-war Afrikaner circles because of these testimonies, these accounts are tainted and have less value as authoritative historical sources. This argument is problematic for a number of reasons and poses some vexed questions: Firstly, the accounts quoted on the Barberton camp are not different to any of those published by Hobhouse, Neethling, and other Afrikaner women in their historical publications. Does the fact that they were published in 2003 make any difference to their truthfulness compared to those published shortly after the war by Hobhouse and other women? Does the fact that the author in whose work the previously unpublished sources are quoted is an Afrikaans speaking person have any relevance for determining the quality of truth contained in those testimonials? Is there any difference in historiographical quality between those published before and after 2003?

The exclusion of these testimonials is motivated by imputing a common political purpose to these sources by Stanley and Dampier and classifying these testimonies as a body of false mythologized information that has originated from spurious historical sources. Secondly, the authors imply that published autobiographical testimonies by authors struggling for political freedom and succeeding in a later epoch, are tainted and devoid of primary historical weight. This of course would disqualify most of the struggle literature prior to 1994. A similar fate would befall the autobiographical texts of inmates from Nazi camps who identified with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948; also the testimonies by Mau Mau sympathizers who were detained in Britain's Gulag in Kenya.

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<sup>113</sup> H. Dampier, in her publication "Re-reading as methodology: the case of Boer women's testimonies", *Qualitative Research* 8(3), pp. 367-377, at 372, labels research on the camps in terms of "politicized" and "non-politicized" publications. Otto's work on the camps and that of the author (AWGR) represent "nationalist-inspired histories" (or "politicized statements") in contradistinction to the "untainted" work of the author. No criteria are, however, provided for drawing this distinction.

Elizabeth van Heyningen also contributed to the issue of the mythology of the camp history by projecting a wider spectrum of mythologizing elements attached to the writings of Boer women. She identified at least four such elements which need to be corrected: Firstly, the argument that the camp inmates were prisoners rather than refugees;<sup>114</sup> secondly, that the term "refugee" is confusing and that the plight of other people caught up in the war is usually ignored;<sup>115</sup> thirdly, the term "concentration camp" has blurred the difference between the South African camps and those of Nazi Germany;<sup>116</sup> fourthly, that the camp people came mainly from the middle class and that the suffering was made unduly vivid in pro-Boer writing;<sup>117</sup> fifthly, the post-war Afrikaners, engaged in building a new nation, tended to emphasize the affluence and refinement of the camp people, rather than their poverty or ignorance.<sup>118</sup> She summarizes as follows: "The camp mythology I have described has influenced our understanding of the camps so powerfully because it has deep roots, having been shaped and refined during the first half of the twentieth century. One reason for its tenacity has been the lack of research on the camps."<sup>119</sup> It is noteworthy that for purposes of rectifying this lack of research, the author firstly relies almost exclusively on the official British documentation emanating from the camps in the form of correspondence between the camp authorities and their superiors. Secondly, she relies heavily on the official camp reports - both published and unpublished - compiled by the respective camp commandants. Her interpretation of the historiographical value of testimonial literature by Boer women also raises a number of questions: Does the distinction between prisoners and refugees determine the historiographical quality of testimonial literature? Does the social status of concentration camp inmates determine the level of credibility of their testimonies? Does a higher economic status of camp inmates make their testimonies more reliable? Is the truthfulness of testimonies by camp inmates dependent upon the poverty and/or educational level of the authors, and do these factors make inhuman conduct towards them morally less reprehensible?

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<sup>114</sup> Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps*, p. 2.

<sup>115</sup> Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps*, p. 3ff.

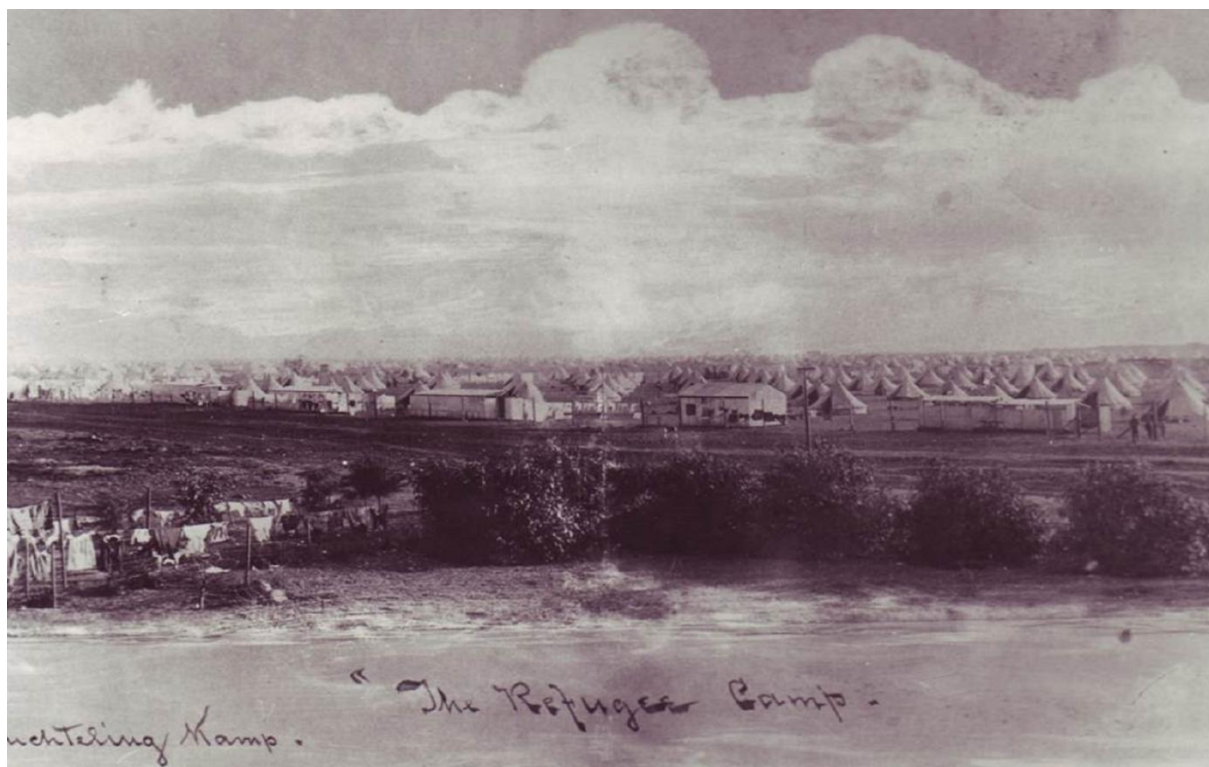
<sup>116</sup> Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>117</sup> Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps*, p. 4.

<sup>118</sup> Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps*, p. 4ff.

<sup>119</sup> Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps*, p. 9.

From a theoretical perspective, the approach by Stanley and Dampier breathes the air of a discomfiting form of determinism by seeking totalizing explanations that leave no space for moral judgment. If humans are like ants in all respects, then we should not judge them, but only try to explain. However, this extrapolation did not satisfy even those who laid bare the various determining forces of human existence, because they too could only admit the obvious fact that no unified causal explanation allows the actions of individuals to be predicted; some degree of freedom always seems to escape the grip of causality. Benjamin Constant added that even when historical circumstances determine the general trend, they still leave individuals with a wide margin of freedom.<sup>120</sup> This is also true of women authors writing on their camp experiences, except if we subscribe to forms of conspiracy theory, which exceed the borders of sane and logical historiography. Hitherto no traces could be found of a master narrative in the form of a gigantic Boer conspiracy to flood the book market with mythical texts to pave the way for a republican revival of the Boer republics or to fabricate untruths in their camp testimonies with a view to further nationalistic aims.



**A photo showing a typical concentration camp environment reflective of the vulnerability of the Boer civilians subjected to the state of exception. Epistemic invulnerability negating the Boer civilian suffering in the camps furthers the cause of the master subjects of British imperialism, and negates the value of testimonial literature by camp inmates of their experiences under**

<sup>120</sup> Cf. B. Constant, *Euvres complètes*. Tübingen: Niemeyer (1955), II, I, p. 528ff.

extreme conditions in camps such as this. The captions to this photo read: “The Refugee Camp” and “Marteling Kamp”.

#### 4. Summary and conclusion

Authors on concentration camp history have to subscribe to the basic rules of historiography: corroborating the facts, interpreting the collected data and applying these with a view to determine the lessons to be gleaned. With particular reference to the concentration camps, the phenomenological essence of the camps and the forms within which the camps manifested themselves have to be determined. Research on the concentration camps should take this into account, as well as the ideological context of the British establishment of the camps. Furthermore, camp testimonies should be read from the perspective of the vulnerable in the state of exception.

Formalistic negationism - both in a material and in a methodological sense - of testimonial literature on the British concentration camps leaves traces of imperialist bias, the process of historiographical research incomplete and silences the voices of those who could make a meaningful contribution towards re-living the past in the present. The historiographical research and discourse on the British concentration camps by Dampier and Stanley reflects a formalistic methodology, inevitably placing the official documents of British bureaucrats on the subject in a position of impeachability. The version of history for which I find little corroborating evidence is that which depicts the camps as a benign system, and colonial officials, camp commandants, and guards as paternalistic reformers. In the official written record as well as later interviews, the testimonies of British colonial agents are littered with prejudices, omissions, misrepresentations, half-truths, and lies.<sup>121</sup> Powerful motivations existed for them to evade and conceal the truth; but to believe many of their testimonies - those offered either at the time or in subsequent years - would require dismissing other historical evidence and accepting the self-exonerations by colonial officials. Concentration camp research should avoid the path laid out by those directing and executing the policies of detention and human massing of women and children and to offer instead a comprehensive account of Britain's last desperate attempt to end the war, to subject the Boer men still fighting, and using the state of exception to that end.

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<sup>121</sup> cf. *The Coming Day*, March, 1902, p. 92.

Historiographers on the British concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War should maintain the integrity demanded by the research process: fact-finding, interpretation and revealing the deeper lessons to be drawn from this. Secondly, researchers have a distinct duty to convey the moral lessons to be learnt from the history of the concentration camps. These moral lessons, however, can only surface if researchers consider the autobiographical testimonials in question without imputing fictitious motives to authors based on their cultural, religious and ethnic affiliations. Negation renders no service to professional historical writing, serves to foster propaganda, and undermines historiographical work. If ideological preferences determine the outcome of research there will not be a scholarly tradition to be handed to the next generation of researchers - only politically motivated marginal notes to closed texts.

