

# **Motive of Brotherhood in Russian – South African Relationships. From the personal accounts of Russian volunteers, military observers, doctors and nurses in Anglo-Boer War.**

In memory of my Uncle, Ruben Torosov, a young man from a noble family in Tiflis, Georgia. Family memories recount the story that he ran away from his home to fight in the Anglo – Boer War and dramatically disappeared somewhere in Russia on his return.

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## **Abstract**

The Russian people displayed a sincere and passionate interest in the epic battle of the Boers, and showed unlimited compassion for Boer's victories as well as downfalls, equally. Two medical detachments were organized, financial and humanitarian aid collected, and approximately 220 volunteers went to then South African Republic (Transvaal).

Their mission was to assist the two Boer republics withstand the might of the British Empire and to protect the freedom of these small, young nations. They also wished to further their military knowledge by gaining experience of the British's army new methods of war, with an eye to a possible confrontation with their historical foe in the future. During their stay and engagement in the war, the Russians observed and experienced South Africa first hand, heralding the world in their impressions of this new nation of Afrikaners and about a unique period in Africa's history - the battle of two white races for domination in South Africa during the formative stages of the most powerful African country for the coming century.

This dramatic account of the deeply patriarchal rooted, daring new nation on the one hand, and cutting edge, new world order, business approach of the established first world on the other, in fighting for fairness and freedom became a signature for South Africa's development. Russia's brotherhood and aid remained consistent throughout this period, leading to confrontation on a third country's land later, in Angola. During the de montage of colonial system the Soviet Union was supporting African brothers in freedom fighting.

## Paper / notes

The Russian people displayed a sincere and passionate interest in the epic battle of the Boers with the British and showed unlimited compassion for the Boer struggle, admiring their heroism. On a national scale it could be seen as an expression of empathy, since Russia could identify with their striving through her own history and aspirations. Two medical detachments were organized, financial and humanitarian aid collected and **225 volunteers went to South Africa.**

Their mission was to assist the two Boer Republics withstand the might of the British Empire and **protect the freedom of these young republics. They also wished to further their military knowledge by gaining experience of the British army strategy and new warfare methods; like all Russians he was aware of an imminent possible confrontation with their historical foe in the future.**

Diplomatic relations between Russia and South Africa were established in September 1898. The growing tension between the two Boer Republics, (Orange Free State and Transvaal) and Britain was **followed with great interest at every level of society in Tsarist Russia.**

Representing a self-determined nation, Russia was targeted for domination by Western European forms of economic strategy. In that regard the relations between the Russian people and South African people are deeply rooted.

Diamonds and gold were discovered first in the Orange Free State and then in the Transvaal and the Boers faced the great task of developing and managing the industry. This was an enormous strain, considering their lack of experience and knowledge of the international arena, already divided up by the major empires.

Britain, Russia's historic rival, was seen as an imperial power, striving to dominate the South African region due to the newly discovered gold and diamond wealth.

**Tsar Nikolas II was a fervent supporter of the Boer Republics. However, as the State Governor, in the service of the State, he was bound by restrictions with regard to his personal preferences. Empress Alexandra Feodorovna ardently sympathised with the British.** She persuaded the Tsar to offer the sum of 50 million pounds to Queen Victoria as a loan, which was held in the bank of England by the Russian Imperial Family. (1)

The Tsar himself and high military authorities were in favour of sending official, as well as unofficial military agents and volunteer officers to South Africa. Volunteers with a military background had to take long leave and in some cases, unpaid leave. Some of them took the decision to be seconded to the national reserve in order to go to South Africa, but with guarantees of re-enlistment in the army upon their return.

To observe the course of the operations between the troops of the British and the Boer forces, two officers of the General Staff were appointed, one on each side, as comparative reports on military action are of fundamental value to military intelligence. It is interesting to note that the British, from the beginning of the war and later, were very reluctant to allow the presence of foreign military officials. Lt Colonel P. Stakhovich and others, enjoyed great hospitality at the hotels and camps for two months, before being permitted with the advance of Lord Roberts's forces to finally reach the front lines, even though their activities were restricted. In contrast, Lt Colonel A. Romeiko-Gurko shared a simple camp life with the Boers and could move around without restrictions.<sup>1</sup>

Some Russians were already in South Africa at the outbreak of the war. Some Jewish immigrants, who escaped the pogroms in Russia, joined as volunteers, mainly serving with the Boers.

### **An overview from the personal accounts of some volunteers.**

Military correspondent Lt. Y. Augustus left most comprehensive memories, in which he described the spirit of the Boers and predicted the unique development of the course of events. Here are some quotes from his reports:

"The outcome of the struggle is undeniable – the Boer Republics will be wiped off the face of the earth; as with the Russians in the Caucasus and the French in Algeria, so the British would win in the end. The unprecedented courage and dedication of the Boers would serve their cause in that, in time, the Boer concept and guerrilla tactics

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<sup>1</sup> One third of official documents were destroyed by order of the Minister of War A. Kuropatkin in 1900, which has further frustrated efforts to determine official Russian Military involvement and accurate numbers and identities of the volunteers. Personal records of many volunteers did not survive revolutionary times and the Soviet period.

of De Wet, De la Rey and Botha, would become paradigmatic of guerrilla warfare in textbooks on tactics.”<sup>2</sup>

“How much of a spiritual might, how much unshakable consciousness regarding the righteousness of their cause, such a deep faith, that “God is not in power, but in truth” carried by the leaders of this nation, who are fighting, for nearly a year, not for life, but a fight to death, with the ‘formidable master of the seas’.

“It would have been easier for the British to overrun thousands of Boer troops at the beginning of the war, when they were lacking in good organisation and skilful leadership, than it is now, with the Boers spread over the whole country operating in flying groups of 10-15 people, suddenly attacking transport or destroying the railways or the telegraph. Operations using large numbers are unthinkable for this nation, who went through combat schooling fighting the Hottentots and the Zulus. It is not for us, the European volunteers, to teach the Boers. Rather it is we who have to learn about partisan warfare, as well as the arts of musketry and cavalry.” (3)

### **Reflections on fighting strategy**

It was a topical question for the participants, that from a military point of view, the Boers seemed unable to take full advantage of their initial successes. Unusual remarks about the reasons behind that were noted in the excerpts of Captain V. Aip on the consecutive British defeats during one week at Magersfontein, Stormberg and Colenso.

“News of these defeats shook Britain to the core and left a great impression on the nation. The whole of Britain descended into a deep grief. The British losses could have been far more significant, were it not for the Boers reluctance in following up on the retreating enemy. Unlike true warriors of that time, the Boers did not pursue and destroy the fleeing British but rather defended their positions and repelled attacks against them. This is because their system of beliefs

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<sup>2</sup> The new way of tactical and strategic thinking of the Boers was indeed studied by the later SADF which successfully developed and applied what they learnt in the Border War. Nowadays, with the necessary experience, these concepts continue to be broadened and further developed. The paradigm of mobile and composite warfare has become a subject of study in military schools worldwide.

regarded military activity as a wholly inevitable evil. As soon as that inevitability disappears, their guns are silenced and they lower their rifles.

“They seemingly strive to shed as little blood as possible – there can be no other explanation for the Boers allowing the British troops to retreat across the Tugela River, without harassment. This does not indicate confusion on the side of the Boers – their brilliant victory did not motivate them to chase the enemy and finish them off at the river bank. Rather, it indicates a strict consistency in their actions, whereby they always strive to bring morals and Christian principles into their warfare. Notwithstanding all their military inexperience, the Boers, nevertheless, so skilfully deployed their troops, that they absolutely divided the British forces.”(4)

Regarding the use of weapons, the Boers were known to be excellent riflemen.

“Hardly detaching his Mauser from the shoulder, the Boer without haste, accurately sends off one bullet after another with such a feeling as though each one is tearing out of his heart.”(5)

“The Boer is taking a decision himself – when to start shooting – the ideal of sniper fighting training!”(6)

The Boers did not have bayonets and lacked cold steel, referring to those weapons as having no value and as a foreign concept altogether. Many Russian officers commented that it was often to their disadvantage in attack. It is clear that the Boers were personally opposed to living with the moral stain of blood on their hands when in close combat.

The war progressed fiercely and unpredictably for both sides, signalling a turning point in the tide of events:

“In review of the hardship of the war, it is clear that the British currently wage a most shameful war, ignoring all international agreements regarding war amongst all civilised nations. In an attempt to shake and ultimately break the Boer resistance, the British viciously employed tactics such as bribery, false promises and proclamations, violence, plundering, beating of civilians, women and children, even death threats against valiant President Kruger. Yet the British found it difficult to break the Boer resistance under the command of leaders such as Botha, De Wet, Olivier and Meyer.”

The tenacious Boers were learning from their own mistakes. Being highly adaptive and resourceful, they began to adopt a new approach.

“Even now the situation in South Africa gives rise to serious fears for the British. In all regions occupied by the British, hunger and devastation prevail, all farms have been burned down by the Brits. The Boers constantly harass the Brits; the Brits do not see them, yet sense their presence. As soon as a few English officers venture outside the camp, like an invisible source bullets would strike them.”

The dire situation is further described with a view to a solution:

“Hoping to find a truce, the Boers sent a mission of officials to Europe, in order to seek arbitration from European countries. But the Transvaal diplomacy seemingly lost hope, as the European countries maintain full neutrality, despite the fact that the British are trampling all over international agreements concerning war, while themselves waging the most barbaric of wars.”

“Finally, in order to induce intervention, elderly President Kruger arrived in Europe, where his diplomatic skills and discerning mind astonished even Bismarck himself.”

“The elderly Kruger now visits Europe, mourning the misfortunes of his country, with the name of God on his lips. He came from afar, not only as a representative of his nation, but as a judge of British lawlessness.” (4)

## **Specialists' reports**

Three more Russian official military agents were later sent to South Africa to provide an informed opinion on new military technology and fortifications. Two of them were specialist engineers with a particular interest in the use of the railways and operations in differing terrain, both the plains and the mountains. They came with a strict military-scientific purpose to aid Military Attaché Lt. Col. V. Romeiko-Gurko.

As a Military Engineer, Captain of an Engineer Battalion, M. von Zigern-Korn made the following outstanding observations.

About General Botha's Camp near Dalmanutha station:

“The headquarters of the Chief Commander, General Botha consisted of his Secretary, the Chief of the Military Telegraphy and two or three telegraphists. Not in a habit of using maps, the Boer leaders regard them with great suspicion and with their

excellent knowledge of the terrain, manage without any. No lists, written orders or disposition of forces and no trace of paperwork at all. All orders and reports were delivered, primarily, verbally.

“To follow the course of events or to issue an order, the Chief in Command would either personally ride to the relevant position, or climb the highest hill to communicate with different teams by heliograph.

“Only the Chief in Command and his secretary would know who is located in which position and what is going on. The rest of the formation, the mere mortals, would only have a vague and approximate idea about a position and only know their nearest neighbours. However, their information about the enemy was more comprehensive.

“Under such circumstances there are two options: either to relentlessly follow the Chief in Command or act oneself. For the success of the latter option, one would have to be a Boer or possess a reserve of perseverance and patience. It is very difficult to orientate oneself in a wild monotonous desert. That capacity is inherent in the Boers and is developed from childhood. However, a foreigner or newcomer would have to acquire that ability by means of long and bitter experience. Yet this is not the only difficulty. The Boer will willingly answer your question, but the trouble is that he possesses a deeply rooted habit of providing any stranger, especially a foreigner, with completely false information. Whether this would be due to his mistrust of all foreigners, his desire to disguise the truth, to maintain a code of an innate secrecy or his fear of running into a British spy – I cannot say. In any case, in such situations you should not trust the Boer.”

Such characteristics could possibly be understood through the Boer’s innate sense of being present in their environment, maintaining integrity in the face of the harsh climate, confronting the wildness of elemental nature and surviving unpredictable encounters.

As a professional officer, M. von Zigern-Korn stated:

“I must admit that a lot of what I have observed and learned about, at first glance seemed to me unworthy. The absence of military organisation, the negligible role of the leaders or their relegation to merely routine responsibilities; no trace of discipline

or even simple reverence... Everything from which we form our concept of a real army, is either absent or exists only in a primal and peculiar manner with the Boers.”

”The real power of this improvised army rests on individualism, mutual trust, widely expressed initiative in each particular situation, common sense and inborn personal qualities, both moral and physical, informed by century’s practice of war and the deep religiosity of the Boers.”

“Many European volunteers... made premature dismissive conclusions through their observations. Despite the above, the fighting force of the Boer army is truly significant and, in comparison with the 200 thousand army of the British, is of an impressive magnitude.”

“In taking this viewpoint, one has to seriously consider every aspect, even that which is naïve and not worthy of study. It is not easy for Europeans to study the Boer lifestyle. The Boers are not only secretive by nature and distrusting of foreigners, but their upbringing and lifestyle is so austere, patriarchal and peculiar, that it is hard to get to the truth. The imperturbable calmness and restraint of the Boer toward the foreigner could possibly be interpreted as hidden unfriendliness, malevolence or inhospitableness, but this would be a mistake.”(7)

Many Russian officers were not accustomed to a system of warfare without conscription and this was the system employed by both the Boers and the British, though in a different way. In praising Boer commando tactics, it was noted that with the lack of discipline in serving one unifying idea, organisation and strategic planning, a people’s army would not be suitable for the future.

Most foreigners attributed regular long leave, which the commandos used to visit their farms, to their lack of military commitment. However, it is important to stress, that during times of absence from the front lines, the Boers were able to take care of their farmsteads. Later in the war the situation changed drastically, when the burning of farms started.

## **Critical challenges**

Capt. M.von Zingern-Korn wrote about the changes for the worse in the relations of tribal men toward the Boers, which reached an apogee during the period of the war after Pretoria was taken.



“Let me touch on one very important phenomenon, artificially created by the British with purely strategic objectives. The essence of the phenomenon was that almost the entire black population were to become free spies, very skilled and devoted to the British. Petty gangs of black robbers, through their unbridled hostility would terrorize defenceless farmsteads whilst the Boer farmers were away at war.

The British strategic calculation was correct. The Boers were reluctant to leave their farms and families to their fate and they deviated from their calling to the ranks of the troops, leaving their commando without permission. The result was that the hidden and unpredictable character of the commando's actions could not remain consistent in outcomes and required more vigilance and caution.”

“Before the war, the peace was firmly enforced due to the total economic dependence of the Black population on the farmers, as well as by strict police measures. The condition had changed by the time the war started. The British soon realised that the Blacks could be very useful allies and did not limit their approach in luring the natives onto their side by evoking in them naïve hopes of citizenship rights, equality and so on. Wishing to create new and serious troubles for the Boers, the British resorted to using reprehensible, for Europeans, measures, which were highly dangerous and represented a double edged solution – they started to arm petty gangs of Blacks, supposedly for the police service. In reality, these gangs led by British officers and non - commissioned officers, very willingly and with complete impunity, engaged in robbery, looting and all kinds of outrageous acts.”

“At the time, no one in Europe would ever guess that the British would decide to utilize in that way the untamed hatred of the Blacks towards Whites. British censorship would not allow such exposure, for understandable reasons – the war was being fought in the name of civilisation, freedom and other altruistic ideals...”

“From all sides the news about outrageous atrocities of armed Blacks was being reported. These rumours spread among the Boers with the speed of lightening and filled their hearts with horror and trepidation for the fate of defenceless mothers, wives and children, who were left alone on the remote farms.”

Such an escalation of events precipitated the Boers into an existential inner conflict.

“What was to be done? Whom to defend, relatives or homeland? These fatal questions contain the essence of the innermost idea of the English venture. Not everyone could withstand the battle between the consciousness of a sacred duty to protect the Fatherland on the one hand, and a loving commitment to the family, on the other. Many rushed home...”

“All doubts concerning British involvement in the matter would soon completely disappear. The Blacks would never dare to have raised a hand against the Boers, unless authorised by the British. The natives were armed, neither for humanitarian and enlightened ideas, which would turn their convictions, nor for numerical reinforcement of troops which could be a partial justification. The only ultimate objective was – to suppress, by terror, any desire and any possibility of fighting for the Boers.”

“And so their hopeless plight began. All protests by the Boers and appeals to the civilised world would be in vain – they would not reach further than African shores. The British would be in denial and would evade any responsibility to Europe, by understatement...”

“Irreconcilable hatred burned in the hearts of the most peaceful Boers. Not only a question of surrender to the British, but the mere option of any negotiations disappeared like smoke, evaporating under a wave of common indignation.” (8)

## **Medical aid**

Two medical detachments were established to be sent to South Africa – the Russian Red Cross Detachment and the Russo-Dutch Ambulance. The Russian Red Cross (RRC) Detachment was formed by order of the Minister of War A. Kuropatkin, dated as early as 1 October 1899. Initially it was intended that they would give medical aid to both sides, the British and the Boers, however the British declined medical aid.

Hundreds of people applied to participate in the Medical Detachments to the Transvaal and Orange Free State. Mainly doctors, medical students, nurses, medical assistants, pharmacists and bored aristocrats applied. Both military and reserve officers also applied.

It is interesting to note, that Lt Colonel Y. Maximov, who later became known as the Russian Boer General, also applied to be appointed as a representative of the Russian Red Cross, as he had served in other campaigns in Bulgaria, in Turkestan and in

Abyssinia. His first attempt to go to the Transvaal as a reporter was unsuccessful, as the newspaper's publishers doubted the significance of the war. However, he was not destined to be part of the Red Cross Detachment. On his third try, Y. Maximov was appointed as an official war correspondent, only to be recalled at the last moment by the War Minister, as Britain protested against the presence of a special war correspondent. This decision was crucial, as, if approved, Y. Maximov would not have been permitted to participate in action. With the utmost determination to join the Boers, Lt. Colonel Y. Maximov eventually departed to South Africa in his private capacity to work as a free-lance reporter, which thereby allowed him to participate in combat. He was later promoted to the rank of *Vecht - Generaal* (Combat General) and fulfilled his exceptional destiny.

Even ordinary people wanted to be included in helping the Boers. Peasant D. Miloslavsky wrote:

"I believed that the Russian Red Cross would not stay idle in the current times. As the Hague Peace Conference was recently ended, the RRC would be distressed by the British military action against the innocent Transvaal and it would send a detachment to assist the Boers, wounded in an unfair war. I request of you to accept me as a hospital assistant or for other useful service which would aid the wounded warriors of the Transvaal, their allies and foes. Regarding the strenuous work as a medical orderly, allow me to point out that such hardships would drop by half in a case of good will."<sup>3</sup>

The selection process was scrupulously carried out with preference given to experienced military personnel, who would have already been acquainted with Africa during the Abyssinian Campaign.

Dr N. Kuskov was appointed as the head of the detachment, consisting of 33 members. Medical assistants skilled in saddlery, plumbing, cobbling, carpentry and cooking were included.(10)

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<sup>3</sup> D. Miloslavsky continued: "Beside which, with an uncertain future as a poor man, I have committed myself to dutifully engage in hard physical labour in my free time. In this way, over the past two years, I have developed a good physique. I have engaged in physically hard extra jobs, daily, in St. Petersburg which enabled me to pass severe tests on my physicality and conjugate deprivation."  
(9)

The RRC was under the governance of Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, the mother of Tsar Nikolas II. The Empress received the Red Cross Detachment on 25<sup>th</sup> November and a Russian Orthodox Service was held for them. Upon departure, everyone was gifted a small holy icon with Mother Tsarina's blessing for the great Christian act they would perform of helping the suffering. The Boers were seen as a daring and earnest patriarchal folk. In a stronghold of the Christian religion liturgy services were held in Russia to invoke divine favour upon President Kruger and "our Orthodox Brothers the Boers." Father Johan of Kronstadt called upon the holy guidance of Archangel Michael to protect the volunteers in their striving to help their oppressed Boer brothers. (11) On 27<sup>th</sup> January 1900 upon arrival in the Transvaal, President Kruger welcomed the RRC Detachment with heartfelt warmth.

The equipment to be shipped to the Transvaal was thoughtfully chosen. The list included 351 boxes (more than 14 tons) of medicaments, pharmaceutical goods, surgical instruments, bandages, 9 tents, food, 300 bottles of wine, 600 bottles of cognac and 300 bottles of vodka. On reflection, all proved to be useful and practical. (Spirits would be used for medicinal purposes and wine jelly would be served for weak, recovering patients.) (12)

The RRC deployed hospitals in various areas. During that time, a hospital train was organised to carry out expeditions to the battlefields. In March 1900, the RRC was to have been recalled. Tsar Nicolas II wrote in response to a report by the Military Attaché V. Romeiko-Gurko : "I cannot bear the thought that our Medical Detachment will leave the Transvaal before the war is over. In that regard, address the Chair of the Red Cross Society."(13)

Accordingly, their stay was formally prolonged, until the conventional war fighting had ceased. Under the British advance and with the beginning of the guerrilla warfare phase, the RRC could not continue to function and had to leave, much earlier than expected, at the beginning of August 1900. In July Dr A. Sadovsky arranged the flying ambulance to the frontline. During July, in General Ben Viljoen's commando, 328 sick and wounded received medical assistance. In six and a half months, 1090 sick and wounded were treated in hospitals and 5716 outpatients were attended to by the RRC. (14)

According to Dr A. Sadovsky's memoirs, "the Boers are a healthy nation, with a strong nature and not weakened by constitutional sicknesses. Cases of enteric disease amongst the Boers were very rare because they seldom used natural water. Even at short stops, they quickly boiled water to prepare coffee. They would be admitted to the hospital upon the appearance of first symptoms and what was also important is that the Boers were relatively unwearied. Due to the extreme inertia of the British, all Boer warriors were able to go on leave from time to time, to rest on their farms for two to four weeks." (15)

All doctors involved reported most favourable outcomes for gunshot wounds. Dr F. Weber from the Russo - Dutch Ambulance made an analysis about the specifics of injuries caused by cartridge bullets of the Lee Metford and the Mauser rifles.

"The most special characteristic of the modern bullet is that it is covered in a hard metal cartridge, mainly made of a mixture of nickel and copper. The cartridge, fully enveloping the bullet, prevents it from easily changing its shape on impact with harder objects, which greatly effects the damage done to property on the human body, resulting in significantly milder injuries. It is interesting to note, that the reasons for the development of cartridge bullets is far from being humanitarian but is rather aimed at improving the ballistic qualities of the bullet... The fast rotation of the bullet, its force as well as the accuracy of the newly developed weapons improved." (16)

In contrast, it should be mentioned that the British suffered great losses due to their unsatisfactory medical set up. It was difficult to organise appropriate medical support to fulfil their overwhelming and demanding needs. The War Ministry had not foreseen a long - term engagement of their 200 000 strong army and in the unfamiliar climate, numerous soldiers fell victim to exhausting fevers which claimed more lives than enemy weapons did. <sup>4,5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Y. Augustus wrote this interesting remark: "When British society made all efforts to mobilise Police and volunteers, the reason for the high rate of sickness and mortality was attributed, in particular, to the weak physique of the contingent from city' outskirts, who were unfamiliar with the hardships of military camp life, and who were recruited into service without the appropriate medical examination." (17)

<sup>5</sup> During January 1902, the RRC branch in Kazakhstan initiated a campaign to send a detachment to assist Boer families in the concentration camps. Funds were raised and vigorous correspondence between the Russian and the French Red Cross took place, in order to strengthen their efforts and unite all the European Red Cross in regard to approaching the British regarding the sending of aid

During the first days of war, Pastor Hendric Gillot, Minister of the Dutch Community in St Petersburg, founded the Dutch Committee for the Relief of Wounded Boers. By his initiative and the immensely successful appeals to the Russian public, the large sum of 100 000 roubles was collected. As a result, the Russo-Dutch Ambulance was better equipped than any other medical detachment to arrive in the Transvaal.

The selection process of the civil doctors was very strict. Knowledge of the German language was obligatory, and familiarity with Dutch or English was required. For that reason many Russians of German origin from the Baltic region were recruited. (19)

There are interesting details on the organisation of the hospital. Daily work and duties are described in the memoirs of Nurse Sophie Izedinova.

“When the Russo - Dutch hospital enlarged its capacity to 100 beds, meals were provided 6 times a day. These were scheduled for 6.30 – coffee, 9.00 - porridge, meat, sandwiches (and, for weaker patients smooth porridge or jelly), 11.00 - bullion (or milk with egg for the weak), 12.30 – 3 course lunch, 16.00 - chocolate and tea, 19.00 - 2 course supper and tea, for the night tea and coffee with milk was provided.”(20)

The advance of the British forced the detachment to cease its activities and leave South Africa at the end of May 1900. Dr V. Kucharenko and his group stayed and were captured by the British upon the occupation of Kroonstad. They were asked to attend to the sick and wounded British, which continued until 1 July. Field Marshal Lord Roberts twice visited the hospital, and expressed his appreciation for the Russian medical personnel.

A Russian doctor of German origin, Karl Gustav von Rennenkampf, while working in St Petersburg Hospital, joined the Russo-Dutch Ambulance. He decided to stay in South Africa until the end of the war and earned the deep gratitude of the Boers and the respect and friendship of their leaders. “The Boer Doctor” von Rennenkampf served General Koos de la Rey’s Western Transvaal commandos. He also attended to President Steyn on his sickbed at his homestead in Bloemfontein.<sup>6</sup>

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to the concentration camps. Due to bureaucratic diplomacy the attempt was prolonged and the war ended before the initiative could be realized. (18)

<sup>6</sup> Upon arrival in Russia, gold and silver medals and two orders were awarded to 11 members of the RRC. (21)

After Pretoria was taken by the British and the guerrilla phase of the war started, most of the volunteers left, both physically and morally exhausted.<sup>7-8</sup> About 31 volunteers were held in captivity and shared the hardships of life in prison of war camps together with the Boers. (22) 37 Russian Volunteers were laid to rest on African soil.

## **The outcomes**

During their stay and engagement in the war, the Russians observed and experienced South Africa first hand, heralding their impressions of this new nation of Afrikaners to the world. They captured a unique period in Africa's history - the battle between two white races for domination in South Africa during the formative stages of the most powerful African country for the following century.

During the Anglo-Boer War seeds of hatred were sewn in a sophisticated way, which evolved into contemporary evil. During the war it manifested through three definitive actions. The scorched earth policy became an attack on the heart of the Boer values – the farmstead and the family on their cultivated land. Then, the introduction of the concentration camps for the Boer women and children and the Black people of South Africa. Finally, the tempting of Black people to unleash terror and thereby influence the outcome of the war. Each war bears testimony to the significance of the loss of human lives. During the Anglo - Boer War the practice of inflicting immense suffering on the civil population was implemented for the first time. The biggest sacrifice of all was borne by Boer women and children and the indigenous people. Over 26 000 Boer women and children died in the concentration camps and 40-50 000 Africans perished in the Black concentration camps. Yet their death remained unredeemed and their suffering did not become an awakening call for unity.

The war illuminated the danger of underestimating an apparently weaker and outnumbered enemy.<sup>9</sup> Opposite principles regarding the use of manpower at war can be recognised through the Anglo-Boer War. One later led to the disastrous losses

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<sup>7</sup> For some of them the situation was desperate, many went back as sailors and deck hands on the ships and, for some friends, collected money to send them off.

<sup>8</sup> Upon return most officers, were granted permission to receive pay for the time that they spent at war, as part of their military service. This was however, not extended to all of them and not everyone was remunerated.

<sup>9</sup> In a way “an imperial approach” toward the South African army persisted over the century.

during the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, another one resulted in establishing a principle of saving troops' lives in the South African Army.<sup>10</sup>

The British expected to finish off the Boer resistance with their 50 000 regular army and during the course of the war had to increase their troop strength to 250 000, constantly drawing on the national reserve. About 22 000 British soldiers lost their lives during the Anglo-Boer War. From the Boer side over 4 000 died. In spite of their great bravery and the fact that the Boers were prepared to fight till the last drop of blood for their freedom, the principle of cherishing commando fighters' lives was upheld.

This dramatic encounter of the patriarchal, pioneering nation, on the one hand, and the cutting edge, new world order, business approach of the established first world on the other, whilst fighting for fairness and freedom, became a signature for South Africa's development. Russia's brotherhood and aid remained consistent throughout this period. As the Russian volunteer Ensign in Reserve A. Diaptropov declared that he came to fight for human rights, equality and "to learn how to die for freedom." (25)

At first it seems paradoxical that Tsarist Russia was lending a hand to the oppressed minority, as it saw the Boers, while later, Soviet Russia supported the oppressed Black majority. During the dismantling of the colonial system, the Soviet Union supported the African freedom fighting brothers. Russian volunteers were the messengers of goodwill from Russia, who laid the foundation stone of Russian-South African relations, as an expression of spiritual brotherhood. This brotherhood, as the common history of our countries has shown, is not based on blood, religion, nationality or race. It is formed by individuals, who share the communion of freedom and suffering. It encourages likeminded people, who are prepared to work together for the future of mankind, with reverence for living history.

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<sup>10</sup> This approach was maintained in the SADF and estimates of potential losses became a decisive factor in all strategic planning of SADF.



The unveiling of the Plaque for Russian Volunteers in the Anglo-Boer War took place at Fort Wynyard in Cape Town on 25<sup>th</sup> November 2019. It was the initiative of South African Border War Veterans Major Willem Steenkamp and Chairman of Gunners Association Western Province Kevin P. Ashton, Russian compatriots in South Africa and the Russian Diplomatic Corps. It reads 'To the memory of those Russians who fought for the Boers in the Anglo - Boer War, and some of whom lost their lives for the



Boer cause.'

This article is dedicated to Dr G. Shubin, whose life's work on military history, including the Anglo-Boer War, served as an inspiration and gave access to the material for the publication.

## References:

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