

# REMEMBERING CONFLICT: TRAUMA AND MEMORY IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS OF THE ANGLO-BOER / SOUTH AFRICAN WAR

By E van Heyningen

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## Abstract

Memory, especially when associated with trauma, is notoriously unreliable. At the same time, during the course of the twentieth century, it has been recognised increasingly that memory is central to processes of healing and reconciliation, not only for individuals, but also for societies. The most striking example in South Africa is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which, in turn, drew on the experiences of reconciliation and memorialisation in Chile and Argentina. This understanding of the relationship between memory and trauma was not available in the early twentieth century but South Africa is unusual in leaving a substantial body of women's testimonies which go some way towards casting light on our later understanding of the camp experience. The value of these testimonies is not uncontested for historians also recognise that memory may be manipulated for political purposes. This paper attempts to consider some of these issues, suggesting that these testimonies, although they have provided the bedrock of evidence for much camp history, have been both undervalued and taken too simply at face value

## Paper / notes

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to consider some of these issues, suggesting that these testimonies, although they have provided the bedrock of evidence for much camp history, have been both undervalued and taken too simply at face value.

In 1983 a book was published, called *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. It opened with the following words:

*My name is Rigoberta Menchu. I am 23 years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people. . . . My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.*<sup>1</sup>

It was an account of Rigoberta's tragic history which included the loss of her family and the torture and ill-treatment of her people. The acclaim with which the narrative was received helped Menchú to win the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her work on behalf of indigenous Guatemalan women.

The work was the product of two people, Rigoberta herself, and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, a Venezuelan social scientist. The two were open about their collaboration. Rigoberta was a Guatemalan peasant, ill-educated and speaking little Spanish so, to make her story more widely known, she needed an intermediary. Burgos explains that, from her interviews with Rigoberta, she searched for themes which she then cut and paste to make a coherent narrative.

*I proceeded with the task of stringing things together, which consisted of looking for rare pearls: sentences or words ... lost in the middle of the debris that must be eliminated so that spoken language will continue to transmit a voice and at the same time be readable - that is, something that is not boring, that reads like fiction.*

Despite the very substantial intervention of Burgos, she insists that 'everything that appears in the book is a product of the faithful translation of Rigoberta Menchú's

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<sup>1</sup> J. Beverley, 'The margin at the centre: on "testimonio" (testimonial narrative)', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 34:1, (Spring 1989), p. 16.

words'.<sup>2</sup> Accounts of this kind, emanating from South America, in which the record of the suffering of an individual came to stand for the suffering of the group, have become known as the *testimonios*.

This method of working bears a striking resemblance to the way in which Emily Hobhouse justified her publication of the Boer women's testimonies in *War Without Glamour*. She wanted the women to tell their own stories, she explained. Such testimonies were written immediately after the conflict and told the unvarnished truth. The few, she said, spoke for the many 'who had suffered as they did but who either had no skill in writing, no materials at hand or who died making no sign'.<sup>3</sup> What mattered to Hobhouse was the repetition, the universality, of suffering.

Many of the academics writing on the *testimonio* genre argue that precise veracity is unimportant; Rigoberta still gives voice to the suffering of Mayan women. One reason why there has been so little concern about the 'truth' of her story is that the *testimonio* genre is usually treated as literature rather than history; that it is 'a mixture of biography, oral history, allegory, and the chorus of collective voices'.<sup>4</sup>

For the historian, accustomed to providing evidence for every statement, this is particularly difficult. Distortion devalues the source. Are we wrong? In a context of violence, conquest, dispossession and suffering, does the exact truth matter? It is noteworthy that Rigoberta's account has not gone unquestioned. David Stoll has claimed, for instance, that Rigoberta was far better educated than she said; that, in essence, her account was propaganda for the guerrilla organization, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP - Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres). Her relationship with the EGP, Stoll suggests, implies an invalidation of her suffering.<sup>5</sup> Shonna Trinch disagrees. The book, she notes, 'has helped to create respect for the indigenous,

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<sup>2</sup> E. Burgos and R. Austin, 'The story of a testimonio', *Latin American Perspectives*, 26:6, November 1999, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> E. Hobhouse, *War without Glamour: or, Women's War Experiences Written by Themselves, 1899-1902* (Bloemfontein, Nasionale Pers, 1924), p. 5. For a fuller discussion of Hobhouse's methods see L. Stanley, *Mourning Becomes ...*, pp. 76-100; E. van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History*, (Auckland Park, Jacana, 2013), pp. 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> R.M. Mueller, 'Testimonio: oral histories woman to woman', *Revista Espaço Acadêmico*, 130, (March 2012), [www.periodicos.uem.br](http://www.periodicos.uem.br), accessed 17 September 2019.

<sup>5</sup> A. Arias, 'After the Rigoberta Menchú controversy: lessons learned about the nature of subalternity and the specifics of the indigenous subject', *MLN*, 117:2, (March 2002), pp. 482-483. Arias has also published a book on the controversy.

regardless of questions about its authenticity'.<sup>6</sup> She is concerned that these attacks on Rigoberta's veracity should not deny the underlying tragedy. 'It is almost as if Menchú's opponents believe that telling a story to achieve a political purpose is more evil than what the Guatemalan military indisputably did do to the indigenous', she explains.<sup>7</sup>

The Boer women's testimonies have usually been treated as raw primary sources. For the Boer women themselves veracity mattered and a number of their narratives have been given as sworn statements.<sup>8</sup> Until recently no-one has questioned this. Helen Dampier, a South African historian, now in Britain, has worked on the camp literature in collaboration with Liz Stanley. Her doctoral thesis examines Boer women's testimonies and letters. In a chapter on Hendrina Rabie-van der Merwe's *Onthou! In die Skaduwee van die Galg*, she locates the work within the *testimonio* genre. However, Dampier denies *Onthou!* validity because she questions the moral basis of the Boer claim to persecution and victimhood.

*The spotless innocence of victimhood and the related moral authority of the author are also compromised by the treatment of 'race' matters in Onthou! when these are re-read from a post-1994 perspective on segregation and apartheid in South Africa and their close relationship with nationalism..*<sup>9</sup>

Dampier is not alone in finding *Onthou!* problematic. John Boje comments that 'The rise of Afrikaner nationalism brought an unexpected level of inauthenticity' to the women's testimonies and he is also uncomfortable with the tendency for the Boer women to claim the moral high ground. 'The self-portrayal of Sarah Raal and Hendrina Rabie-Van der Merwe is as unconvincing as it is unattractive', he notes.<sup>10</sup>

Both Dampier and Liz Stanley took this discussion further in their joint article, 'Cultural entrepreneurs, proto-nationalism and women's testimony writings', and in Stanley's

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<sup>6</sup> S. Trinch, 'Risky subjects: narrative, literary testimonio and legal testimony', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 34:2. (June 2010), p. 180.

<sup>7</sup> Trinch, 'Risky subjects' p. 185.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Dampier, 'Women's testimonies', pp. 64-67.

<sup>9</sup> H. Dampier, 'Women's testimonies of the concentration camps of the South African War: 1899-1902 and after', (PhD, University of Newcastle, 2005), p. 54. She notes, also, that later work on the South American *testimonios* also questioned the interplay between fact and fiction. p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> J. Boje, 'Sexual relations between British soldiers and Boer women: a methodological approach', *South African Historical Journal*, 68:2, 2016, pp. 208-209.

book, *Mourning Becomes ...*.<sup>11</sup> They have located the publication of the women's testimonies in the context of the Tweede Taalbeweging and emergent Afrikaner nationalism, noting that many of these volumes, beginning with Elizabeth Neethling's *Should We Forget* (1903), promoted Afrikaner identity. They have argued that:

*Our view, indeed, is that these Boer women's testimonies are not in fact 'personal writings', but rather particular individual expressions of an actually communal 'small p' political form, and that recognizing this is essential to making sense of them as part and parcel of cultural politics of the day.*<sup>12</sup>

Stanley states explicitly that aspects of the 'nationalist mythologized account of the concentration camps' was 'deliberately engineered by the individuals and organizations that constituted the political and cultural entrepreneurs of Afrikaner nationalism'.<sup>13</sup> She continues

*... The testimonies were in fact subject to a high level of solicitation, promotion and distribution, and across all the testimonies, both published and unpublished, there are none oppositional to the meta-narrative.*<sup>14</sup>

For Stanley and Dampier, then, the political context of the testimonies nullifies their authenticity.<sup>15</sup>

Boje's discussion of the methodology that can be used to validate accounts of violence to Boer women is particularly helpful here. Using conventional historical verification, only the Havenga Collection stands up to close scrutiny.<sup>16</sup> Apart from that collection, he comments, very few of the women's testimonies refer directly to physical attacks

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<sup>11</sup> L. Stanley and H. Dampier, 'Cultural entrepreneurs, proto-nationalism and women's testimony writings: from the South African War to 1940', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 33:3 (September 2007), pp. 501-519; L. Stanley, *Mourning Becomes ... Post/memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006). The term 'cultural entrepreneur' was taken from Hermann Giliomee, who suggested that the male intellectual elite of the National Party made a major contribution to the 'ideolisation' of Afrikaner identity and history. Stanley and Dampier, 'Cultural entrepreneurs', p. 516.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley, *Mourning Becomes ...*, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley, *Mourning Becomes ...*, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup> Although they are more cautious in their published works, in private conversation with me, both Stanley and Dampier have suggested that many of these books, including diaries, have been written long after the war, and are pure propaganda.

<sup>16</sup> The N.C. Havenga collection in the Free State Archives consists of about 50 testimonies in which women described their experiences of sexual assault at the hands of the British soldiers. The collection was closed for a century and has only become available fairly recently. FSPA, A69, Havenga Collection. See also Boje, 'Sexual relations', p. 200, 204-5.

on women, let alone rape. Those that do are difficult to substantiate using conventional methods. The account of Elizabeth Human, who shot and buried a British officer who had been plaguing her, was only published in 2002. How, then, does one verify such a narrative? A deconstructionist methodology, he suggests, offers a more acceptable interpretation. It may be argued that, in oral history, the informant's subjectivity takes precedence over 'facts'. 'History, in this interpretation is a truth-making rather than a truth-finding discourse and if Elizabeth Human's story is not *the* truth, it is still *her* truth, derived from the memory bank that constituted her identity.'<sup>17</sup> But how is that identity constructed?

The South American *testimonios* do not stand alone. Since the 1980s, starting in France, a 'great tide' of memory studies has swept the historical profession. The relationship between trauma and memory has been particularly prominent in Holocaust studies. In literary studies the concept of 'collective memory' has gained great traction. The atrocities in South America in the 1970s and 1980s, and *apartheid* in this country, have all given rise to harrowing accounts in the various truth and reconciliation movements and have interacted with one another. The Argentinian commission enquiring into the fate of the *desparecidos* (the disappeared), *Nunca Más (Never Again)*,<sup>18</sup> and the Chilean Truth and Reconciliation Commission both informed our own TRC. Forgetting and remembering are both strategies for ensuring political stability after conflict.<sup>19</sup>

We also understand now that memory is dynamic; it is constantly reshaped and altered.

*Individual and group memories, like individual and group identities, are the product of active creation, not passive inheritance; through selective remembering and forgetting, people construct out of the randomness and fragmentation of human experience comprehensible stories in which past*

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<sup>17</sup> Boje, 'Sexual relations', pp. 208-209.

<sup>18</sup> Argentine National Commission on Disappeared, *Nunca Mas: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared* (Buenos Aires, The Commission, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> B. Mercer, 'The moral rearmament of France: Pierre Nora, memory, and the crises of Republicanism', *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 31:2, (Summer 2013), p. 102.

*events cumulatively determine present existence and provide signposts to guide future action.*<sup>20</sup>

Memory, then, is fluid and unreliable. We misremember and forget all the time. We also know now that memories can be implanted. Psychologists and others may 'encourage' people to remember events that have never occurred.<sup>21</sup> More ticklish for the historian, dependent on evidence, is 'the tenacity of delusive recall', as the novelist Salman Rushdie describes it. He has a clear memory of being in India during the war with China in 1962.

*I 'remember' how frightened we all were ... I also know that I couldn't have been in India at that time. Yet even after I found out that my memory was playing tricks my brain simply refused to unscramble itself. It clung to false memory.*<sup>22</sup>

So we can remember things that have never happened to us - although it may have happened to others who are close to us, or to others in our community.

Academics draw distinctions between individual memory and social memory - 'collective memory' as it was termed by the French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs. For Halbwachs individual memory can only 'be recalled in the social framework within which it is constructed'.<sup>23</sup> It is the group that retains collective memory and it is only within such groups that any individual can remember and express personal memories. Gilad Hirschberger, a psychologist writing about memory and the Holocaust, locates collective trauma within this paradigm of collective memory:

*Collective trauma is a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society. Aside from the horrific loss of life, collective trauma is also a crisis*

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<sup>20</sup> C.P. Boyd, 'The politics of history and memory in democratic Spain', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, (May 2008), p. 134.

<sup>21</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memory\\_implantation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memory_implantation), accessed 15 September 2019. This seems to be a reliable article which cites a number of well-known case studies and examples that can be followed up in the relative literature. One of the more remarkable examples is that of a man, Richard Ingram, who was accused by his children of abusing them. He came to believe this was true, admitted his guilt and was tried and imprisoned for his crime. Subsequently it was shown that such abuse never occurred.

<sup>22</sup> D. Lowenthal, 'History and memory'. *The Public Historian*, 19:2, (Spring 1997), p. 34. (pp. 30-39). The neuroscientist, Oliver Sachs, gives a similar example, remembering in vivid detail a bomb exploding in the family garden, but later discovering that he was a child evacuee and was not there at the time.

<sup>23</sup> S. Crane, 'Writing the individual back into collective memory', *The American Historical Review*, 102:5, (December 1997), p. 1376-7.

*of meaning. ... the process ... begins with a collective trauma, transforms into a collective memory, and culminates in a system of meaning that allows groups to redefine who they are and where they are going.*<sup>24</sup>

Collective memory, Hirschberger suggests, is different from individual memory because collective memory 'persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events and is remembered by group members that may be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space'. In other words, unlike Halbwachs, Hirschberger is suggesting that collective memory may remain vital many generations after the event. But, as these memories are passed down through the generations, they may be reconstructed. Such 'chosen traumas' may be vital to the sense of identity and connectedness in the community. Over time, Hirschberger argues, 'collective trauma becomes the epicenter of group identity, and the lens through which group members understand their social environment'.

Some historians are uncomfortable with this denial of individual memory. Caroline Boyd considers that 'collective memory' is merely a metaphor for 'mediated knowledge of past events'.<sup>25</sup> As an historian I am sympathetic to Boyd's view but, as a South African, I have to recognise the power of collective memory. So these definitions of collective memory and collective trauma are, I think, useful in understanding the Boer women's testimonies.

It is now well recognised that people who have suffered need to tell their stories. At a conference at UCT in the 1990s, the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, Erika Apfelbaum, commented on the psychological importance of telling stories.

*'Social communication is vital to our social balance ... As long as they do not report their devastating experiences, survivors of abuses of human rights and mass violence live in a no-person's land of silence where the experiences of the past receive no legitimation. The memories become*

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<sup>24</sup> G. Hirschberger, 'Collective trauma and the social construction of meaning, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9, (2018), published online, 10 August 2018.

<sup>25</sup> C.P. Boyd, 'The politics of history and memory in democratic Spain', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 617, (May 2008), pp. 134.



*deeply buried and induce a sort of dissociation between the individual's private and public personae.'*

In addition, such suffering needs to be respected. The Chilean lawyer José Zalaquett of Chile, in talking about our TRC, emphasized that 'In the end, human rights are about respect for people and their dignity. ... It is very important to listen to relatives respectfully and let their voices be heard.'<sup>26</sup> The Boer women who told their stories of their wartime experiences were probably driven by a number of motives. The theme of 'not forgetting' often runs through them; the humiliation that they felt at the hands of British and black soldiers comes through powerfully as well. I would suggest that, whatever the 'post/memory' of these testimonies may, in trying to understand the camps and their consequences, we need to bear this in mind.

This paper can only touch lightly on some of the issues that we need to consider when we use the women's accounts of their wartime experiences. Other experiences of trauma are suggestive however. The South American *testimonios* share several elements with the stories of the Boer women: the *testimonio* authors insist that they are telling the truth and they emphasize that they are speaking for their people as well as themselves. Like some of the Boer women's narratives, the *testimonios* hover on the border of fact and fiction although the *testimonios* have usually been seen as a form of literature while the Boer women's testimonies have usually been treated as reliable historical sources. Should we not learn from them? Does veracity matter or should 'resistance' narratives be treated as a different form of source? We also need to take into account modern research on trauma and memory and we need to think about the notion of 'collective memory'. Or should the women's stories be seen as a form of literature, a genre, rather than reliable historical sources? If we look at the camp documents through these lenses, do we not arrive at a much richer understanding of camp history, in which the women's experiences are at once more personal and communal and less political?

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<sup>26</sup> A. Boraine & J. Levy, *The Healing of a Nation?* (Cape Town, Idasa Publishers, 1995), p. 53.