

Traces of black forced labour camps. Kimberley and Dry Harts, 1900-1902.

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Abstract

The South African War was a conflict that saw all the protagonists deliberately target civilians and is a harbinger of 20th century Total War. Civilians, and their resources, were harnessed to underwrite military operations, combined with scorched earth and the emergence of internment camps, later known as concentration camps. Set against the backdrop of concentration camps in Cuba and the Philippines, genocidal campaigns by Imperial Germany against the Herero people in German South West Africa soon followed in 1906.

Although civilian internment in was not genocidal by design and purpose, the high loss of life and bitterness amongst the Boer descendants shaped the political narrative of 20th century South Africa. Native Refugee Camps, now known as black concentration camps, were far more lethal and designed along a completely different model to that of the Boer camps. Yet the memory of this experience has only in the last two decades entered historical discourse. Drawing on the archaeological record, this paper examines the camps which interned black civilians at Kimberley and Dry Harts, during December 1900 until December 1902. Situated 170 kilometers apart, their identification occurred during 2001-2008.

Paper / notes

On 11 October 1899 hostilities commenced between the former British Empire and the two Boer republics, namely the South African Republic and Orange Free State Republic. The South African War was a conflict wherein all the protagonists targeted civilians from the outset of the first shots being fired. It is also remembered for the scorched earth campaign and the emergence of internment camps, later known as concentration camps. These camps are set against the backdrop of concentration camps in Cuba and the Philippines, and subsequent genocidal campaigns by Imperial Germany against the Herero and Nama in German South West Africa in 1906.

Although civilian internment was not genocidal by design and purpose, the high loss of life and bitterness amongst the Boer descendants shaped the political narrative of

20th century South Africa. Native Refugee Camps, now known as black concentration camps, were far more lethal and designed along a completely different model to that of the Boer camps. Yet the memory of these wartime forced labour camps and their experience has only during the last two decades entered historical discourse. Drawing on the archaeological record, this paper examines the camps which interned black civilians at Kimberley and Dry Harts, during December 1900 until December 1902. Situated 170 kilometers apart, their identification occurred during 2001-2008.

Conventional warfare and the transition to the initial British military retaliatory strikes against civilians.

From the outbreak of war through to mid-1900, the military campaign involved conventional battles, fought between the Republican forces (the Boers) and British Imperial forces. Hostilities commenced with Boer forces besieging the towns of Kimberley, Ladysmith and Mafeking and shelling civilians trapped within these towns in an attempt to force their surrender. By February 1900, the tide turned when British forces lifted the sieges of Kimberley and Ladysmith and by March 1900 invaded the Boer republics.

The British strategy hinged on capturing key towns, consolidating their supply lines around South Africa's railway network, reopening the gold, diamond and coal mines, restoring food production, and defeating any remaining military resistance. However, their achilles heel was their tenuous control over the railway infrastructure which formed their main logistic route from the coastal ports. Thousands of kilometres of track had to be secured which was surrounded by a rural countryside in which the Boer forces remained undefeated.

These Boer forces adopted guerilla warfare tactics and attacked the railway infrastructure. They destroyed bridges, derailed trains, captured isolated British garrisons, and replenished their munitions from captured British arsenals. Their support bases were the Boer civilians residing on farms and in small towns.

Field Marshal, Lord Roberts, implemented a counter guerilla warfare strategy which targeted civilian property belonging to people assisting the commandos. Homes near railway infrastructure that had been attacked and homes where able bodied men were absent were destroyed. Livestock was seized or killed and crops destroyed. During the final quarter of 1900, civilians were forcibly removed from their homes and interned in camps established near military garrisons.



The Boer concentration camp at Brandfort, 1901. Unlike black civilians, Boer civilians received tents, medical attention, were rationed and not compelled to provide labour. *Picture: War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, South Africa.*

Extending the war to civilians through a systematic concentration camp policy.

In November 1900, Lord Kitchener became Commander in Chief and immediately pursued an intensified counter guerrilla warfare. Kitchener realised that it was crucial that his forces dominate the rural landscape, as this formed the key to victory. Consequently, he extended Roberts's retaliatory tactics and applied a systematic scorched earth policy throughout the Republics. All civilians, be they Boer or African, were to be targeted.

In Army Circular 29, Kitchener spelled out, in no uncertain terms, his counter guerrilla warfare strategy:

“Of the various methods suggested for the accomplishment of this object, one that has been strongly recommended, and has lately been successfully tried on a small scale, is the removal of all men, women and children and natives from the districts which the enemy persistently occupies. This course has been pointed out...as the most effective method of limiting the endurance of the Guerillas...”¹

Kitchener applied three tactics with which to crush ongoing Boer military resistance:

- forced removals and land clearances and the associated destruction of all rural infrastructure

¹ Military Governor Pretoria, 21/12/1900, *Army Circular 29*, National Archives of South Africa, Volume 258, p. 17.

- securing the railway network by constructing at least 8000 fortifications known as blockhouses and then extending these to 'fence' in the fighting terrain, thus contracting the Boer forces zones of influence. These military grids or cordons literally parcelled up the fighting terrain.
- military operations, using superior numbers of troops, to engage and grind down the weakened Boer forces and through attritional losses, force their surrender or operational ineffectiveness.

On 15 March 1901 Kitchener further clarified his aims:

“All natives living on farms should be collected and sent to the railway; if possible household natives should be permitted to accompany families or sent to the same station. Supplies found on the farms should be sent in with the natives to feed them until their arrival at the railway. Additional supplies should be taken by the supply officers and the remainder destroyed. All standing crops are to be destroyed either by turning cattle into them or by burning. All forage is to be destroyed.”²



Lord Roberts's counter-guerrilla warfare strategy targeted civilians whose homes and property were destroyed. Lord Kitchener later extended this policy into a systematic scorched earth campaign which saw the emergence of a formalised concentration camp system. *Picture: War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, South Africa.*

The civilian population then experienced the full impact of a 'total war' strategy which shattered the rural economy, resulting in starvation and a humanitarian crisis. The internment camps were first described as refugee camps and later as concentration camps, established near towns, mines and railways sidings.

² Kitchener, H, *Circular Memorandum 31*, Free State Archives, 15 March 1901.

Civilians were separated based on their race and interned in separate camps. Black civilians were not officially rationed, nor provided with adequate medical support and building materials for shelters. This aim being to reduce the financial cost of the war, despite the humanitarian catastrophe it created. This policy of neglect sought to coerce black civilians to provide labour in exchange for rations. Should black internees refuse to work they were to be starved to death. Such a policy was aligned to the military policy of doing the bare minimum for enemy civilians who were to be managed (or mismanaged) along the basis of 'let die'. Civilians who had arrived with cash or cattle attempted to avoid labour as they maintained a level of self-sufficiency, yet this was eroded with time.

Refugees sought work from the British troops and the administrators of the Boer camps. Latrine cleaning and other work was rewarded with tinned meat, or discarded scraps of food. Many men worked in the mines or with the British forces yet by early 1901, starvation was rife. Infectious diseases, exposure and malnutrition in the black internment camps increased.

The Native Refugee Department, 1901-1902.

A key objective of the alliance between the British political, military and business structures was restoring economic activity through the gold, diamond and coal mines. The mines required labour and the military aimed to reduce the cost of supporting refugees. On 4 May 1901, the first gold mine reopened in Johannesburg. During May 1901, the military and the diamond mines in Kimberley finalised arrangements to increase diamond mining operations by coercing labour through the 'no work no food' policy.

Simultaneous to the resumption of mining activity was the formation of the Native Refugee Department, which fell under direct British military command. All black internees were to be administered by this Department, which had, as a key objective, underwriting the British war effort, reducing the financial cost of the war and redirecting labour to the British army and the mines. By July 1901, the Transvaal camps were brought under departmental control and by 1 August 1901, camps in the former Orange Free State Republic followed. Military officers selected the internment camp sites, assisted by departmental agricultural specialists. The camps were established on Boer farms which were already cleared of civilians, usually no further than two miles from established military garrisons on terrain favorable for natural drainage, near natural water supplies and on fertile agricultural ground.



Women carrying provisions on their way to a concentration camp in the former Orange Free State. Note the mounted soldier on the horizon as part of their escort, 1901. *Picture: Garth Benneyworth collection.*

The aim was that the interned women and children would grow food for the army departments and pay for their food. Refusal resulted in starvation.³ Internees who worked could purchase maize and those who refused had to pay double the price. Or starve. Consequently, it can be seen that the women, children and elderly men inside these camps were forced wartime laborers.

³ Military Governor Pretoria, National Archives of South Africa, MGP, Vol. 245, 27 May 1901.



Children undergoing a medical inspection inside a forced labour camp, 1901. To the left is an armed black soldier serving with the British forces while the Doctor was with the Royal Army Medical Corps. The child in the center appears to have a ruptured intestine. *Picture: National Museum of Military History, Johannesburg, South Africa.*

The Native Refugee Department also formed a labour reserve for the British army⁴. December 1901 saw over 6 000 workers directed to the army as labour, while some 13 000 camp internees were employed by the military⁵. Men working on the mines or with the British forces had the cost of feeding their families deducted from their salaries. The economy which developed was that the camps cost little or nothing at all, without any regard to the lives of those black civilians interned in them.

In positioning these camps along the railway network this helped to secure this military infrastructure by supporting the blockhouse fortification networks, making it difficult for the commandos to cross the railway and maneuver their forces. With thousands of hectares of land under agriculture, they reinforced the British military zones. Additionally, they functioned as a morale breaker, given that most of the camps were located on Boer farms. From the perspective of the commandos it appeared that their land was lost.

⁴ Transvaal Administration Reports, Final Report, 1901 and SRC, Volume 10, p. 3422, 1 July 1901.

⁵ De Lotbiniere to Major HJ Goold-Adams, Correspondence, Free State Archives, CSO 86, 358/02, 1902.

Fatality totals inside the Native Refugee Department camps cannot be conclusively established. Recent scholarly research relying on surviving archival records has resulted in a figure of approximately 20 000 deaths from medical neglect, exposure, infectious diseases and malnutrition⁶. Due to incomplete and in many cases non-existent British records the death toll was higher.

These camps were not set up for humanitarian purposes as were the camps established after the Second World War by the UNHCR. They resulted from the counter guerilla warfare strategy of clearing out from rural areas civilians who might assist the Boer forces in the struggle against the British forces. Consequently, these camps when viewed against contemporary refugee policy and camps stand in history as antagonistic figures.

The Kimberley and Dry Harts Native Refugee camps.

The written archive for the two Native Refugee Camps near Kimberley is fragmentary, and in the case of the Klippiesspan camp, nonexistent, other than three fleeting archival references to it. Nevertheless, it was possible to construct a history of these two camps using records that survived in the archives of De Beers Consolidated Mines which owned the farm, Blankenbergvlei, where an initial camp was formed at the close of 1900, and through an archeological survey of the terrain of the second camp located on Klippiesspan farm.

By December 1901, black refugees were arriving in Kimberley and were settled by the army on Blankenbergvlei farm located along the eastern outskirts of the city. The camp was called Blankenbergvlei Native Refugee Camp. Refugee numbers increased as the nearby rural settlements were destroyed through the scorched earth policy and removal of the civilian population. The men were coerced to work in the diamond mines or for the army in order to pay for rations to feed their families.

In 1901 Blankenbergvlei Native Refugee Camp was brought under the control of the Native Refugee Department who were then planning to create one single camp 170 km north of Kimberley near Dry Harts railway siding. Dry Harts would be formed by closing down the two camps at Kimberley and the camps at Orange River Station and Taung and consolidating these refugees at Dry Harts into one single forced labour camp. Dry Harts Native Refugee Camp opened in November 1901 and closed in December 1902, seven months after the war ended.

Refugees had already been sent to Dry Harts before the camp was officially formed. A missionary who visited Dry Harts in September 1901 reported what he saw:

“They are in great poverty and misery and our visit was a comfort to them. Many are dying from day to day – what is to become of the survivors I cannot think. Between the

⁶ Van Zyl, Constantine, Pretorius, 2012.

Dutch and the English they have lost everything, and there being no political party interested in their destiny, they 'go to the wall' as the weakest are bound to do."⁷

The fragmentary written archive offers some insight into its operations. The camp administrators occupied farm houses adjacent to the camp, located one mile west of a military garrison at Dry Harts Siding and the blockhouses securing the railway line. Insufficient building materials forced the internees to erect shelters from brushwood and clods of earth. The harsh climate killed many from exposure. Water was drawn from wells sunk by the military, yet insufficient firewood prevented the boiling of water during their food preparation, resulting in typhoid fever wiping out entire families. A medical assistant was appointed in August 1902, three months after the war ended, by which time scurvy was prevalent and starvation had killed many⁸.

A review of the surviving archives of the Native Refugee Department located seven monthly registers for Dry Harts Camp for the year that that the camp existed. Yet of the seven registers located only four of the monthly returns listed death statistics. From April 1901, the camp administrators stopped forwarding death statistics to headquarters in Bloemfontein who printed the monthly returns. Of these four months, 427 deaths are recorded, giving a 12-month average of 1 281 deaths.

Garth Benneyworth and Elizabeth Voigt undertook an archaeological survey of the burial site in 2008, identifying a definitive 1 672 individual graves and as many as 2 000 individual graves. Although the grave mounds indicate individual graves it is likely that they may contain more than one skeletal remains. Multiple burials in a single grave during wartime conditions was not uncommon. Numbers will have varied from one grave to the next, as the graves were probably dug - and closed up - at a constant rate (probably one daily), so that the numbers of interments in them varied according to the fluctuating daily death rate.⁹

Surveying Dry Harts and Klippiesspan Native Refugee Camps, 2001-2008.

Benneyworth and Voigt surveyed these two camps during 2001-2008. Their project titled *Traces*, was designed as a trans-disciplinary research project in its approach and methodology. Identifying the surviving remains from the past for these specific camps would be undertaken through a research process of uncovering three primary archives. These comprised the written colonial and military archive and the archive of archaeology and oral history. To date no similar approach has been undertaken in South Africa. At the outset of the project in 2001, no established methodology existed in South Africa to achieve such an objective and no single concise body of work existed to provide a historical narrative about these two specific camps.

⁷ Reverend WHR Brown, 3 September 1901, as quoted in Warwick P, *Black People and the South African War 1899-1902*, Ravan Press Pty Ltd, Johannesburg, 1983.

⁸ Senior Medical Officer, FJ Farrell, Free State Archives, CO, Vol. 146, Ref 1410/03, 1903.

⁹ Van der Merwe, Morris, Steyn, Maat, 2010.

Current methodologies focus only on archival records to provide historical interpretations, resulting in a few recent scholarly works and publications. The Traces project approach was that relying on archival records alone would result in limited insights into these camps. The research also sought to pioneer another South African first, to undertake archaeological surveys combined with excavations on the terrain of these two camps once they were located. The Traces project located seven such camp sites, although this chapter focusses on only two of them.

Surveying Klippiesspan camp, Kimberley.

Only three archival clues existed to indicate that a second camp, other than the Blankenbergvlei Native Refugee Camp existed at Kimberley. These pointed to this second camp being located east of Kimberley and beyond the municipal boundaries and military cordon protecting the Kimberley garrison.

The first was a reference made by Major General Pretzman commanding officer of the Kimberley garrison. Pretzman reported that, in pursuance of the Native Refugee Department seeking to create a camp in which forced agricultural labour could be used, he found it difficult to locate a suitable terrain as the large refugee camp was stretching way beyond the military outposts¹⁰. This could not refer to the camp at Blankenbergvlei as this was already located within the military cordon on the eastern outskirts of Kimberley. The second was a map produced by the Native Refugee Department in September 1901 which depicted a camp located at least approximately seven kilometres east of Kimberley¹¹. The third was a 10 August 1901 report in a Kimberley newspaper that the Native Refugee Camp was situated some distance beyond the town and further east and beyond one of the diamond mines, which is far further east than where the camp at Blankenbergvlei was located¹².

Based on these references the search for this camp was directed to farms that lay east of, and at least seven kilometres away from Kimberley. In December 2001 the burial site was located after the farmer mentioned being intrigued by old glass and tin cans on his farm, located in the middle of nowhere and far removed from any current farming activity or known historical activity.¹³

A GPS survey of surface finds during 2006–2008 identified more than 500 individual readings, all plotted during the foot surveys. Archaeological permits for excavations at Klippiesspan (and Dry Harts) were approved by the South African Heritage Resources Agency in October 2006 and fieldwork at Klippiesspan started a month later. The excavations produced hundreds of items, enabling an interpretation of the sites and their history.

Sites were chosen for excavation in order to provide a cross-section of types of sites so as to be able to interpret the overall terrain. Rubbish dumps and areas where

¹⁰ Pretzman, Major General, Free State Archives, SRC, Vol. 10, Reference 3933, 1901.

¹¹ Free State Archives, South Africa, VAB, CO, Vol. 56, Reference 3481/01.

¹² Africana Library, Kimberley, *Weekly Free Press*, 10 August 1901.

¹³ J Engelbrecht, 12 April 2008.

internees had erected their dwellings were identified and excavated and a wide variety of cultural materials uncovered. Ultimately rubbish dump areas, refugee living areas and military dumps, and a hospital area associated with the burial site were identified.

By 2014, the material retrieved during the excavations was cleaned, marked, sorted and stored at the McGregor Museum in Kimberley. The glass finds are particularly prolific, as too are the variety of ration tins and ceramic (porcelain) material of different patterns, and household goods such as fragments of cast iron pots and cutlery, along with personal items including jewellery, buttons, needles and a fragment of a child's writing slate and of the face of a porcelain doll.

An analysis of the items uncovered in the excavations offers a glimpse into the conditions inside this camp. The military used mounted troops from the Kimberley garrison to enforce control from a nearby ridge which they occupied during the day and these were well rationed based on the tins they discarded. Finding two British military regimental buttons adjacent to an area where the internees lived and prepared their food is indicative of the military and civilian interaction at this site.

When the refugees were brought into this camp they carried in fruit from the orchards such as peaches and grapes, pips of which were uncovered in their cooking areas, along with bones from wild animals and eggshells that they foraged. The army supplied them with unground maize and butchered mutton. The bones revealed that this was from the lesser cuts of meat. Rusted tinned beef and sardine cans were uncovered as well as condensed milk tins. Based on the number of internees which would have been approximately a few hundred people, and the amount of ration tins uncovered in the dumps, their rations were very limited.

Evidence from the excavations of the food preparation areas revealed that the women ground up their maize ration on grinding stones and also smashed apart mutton and animal bones in order to extract bone marrow. They used iron pots to prepare food which they had carried or transported from their homes. Traditional pottery was found in their cooking areas. Water was stored in timber barrels, as evidenced by rusted barrel hoops on the terrain and which were filled from a well that today is a cattle watering hole on the farm. They scavenged glass beer, wine and champagne bottles from a nearby diamond mine rubbish dump and used these as their personal water bottles. The terrain which they inhabited is strewn with glass shards and broken sections of these bottles.



Inside the Kimberley concentration camp, 1901. Shelters were made from scrap metal and sacks as no tents were issued. *Picture: National Museum of Military History, Johannesburg, South Africa.*

Rudimentary shelters were built from brushwood, sack cloths and corrugated iron. Pieces of such iron remain along with rows of stones that were used as weights to anchor the sack cloths against the ground. The only evidence of a tent was one erected near the burial site and which functioned as a hospital. Very little medicinal bottle glass was found, indicating that medical care was limited. The refugees arrived with much material wealth, jewelry, crockery, porcelain toys and household goods, which they dropped or left behind once the camp was closed. They arrived with carts and wagons given that bridles and other equipment associated with animal drawn transport was uncovered during the excavations. However, after their internment these vehicles were confiscated by the military, forcing them to later carry out of this camp only lightweight portable materials as evidenced by abandoned, heavy grinding stones. These remain today on the terrain as a permanent marker to their experience at this place and stand as their personal memorial (Benneyworth, 2016)¹⁴.

¹⁴ See also « Traces of enslavement - a forgotten history of indigenous civilians in British concentration camps during the South African War, 1899-1902 », by Garth Benneyworth, Colloquia "The Archaeology of Violence", International colloquium organized by Inrap and the Museum of Louvre-Lens, October 2, 3 and 4, 2104 at La Scène du Louvre-Lens. Internet link : <http://www.inrap.fr/en/traces-enslavement-forgotten-history-indigenous-civilians-british-concentration-12835>

Surveying Dry Harts Native Refugee Camp.

During June 2001, Benneyworth and Voigt located the burial site of Dry Harts Native Refugee Camp after consulting with local residents from a village that exists on top of the historic terrain. The search was undertaken in this area as it was known by Benneyworth from consulting a prior publication that a Native Refugee Camp existed somewhere in the vicinity of Dry Harts station.¹⁵ A Government Gazette publication, listing all the farms on which Native Refugee Camps were in existence at the cessation of hostilities on 31 May 1902, referred to a camp at Dry Harts and provided the original farm name. This narrowed down the search.¹⁶ Based on British military practice the camp would have been situated within a one to two-mile radius from the station, which further reduced the search area.

From 25 to 31 May 2007, fieldwork involved plotting all the surviving features with a GPS. The original farm Title Deed and accompanying map dating from the 1890s depicted three buildings, a furrow and irrigated lands, all of which would have been used by the camp administrators and their forced labourers. The camp authorities referred to using buildings and wells on the farm. The search sought to locate these and any old trees that may originate from the historic era, many of which the survey located and which informed an understanding of the size and position of the camp in relation to the burial site. During June and July 2008, the burial site was surveyed and the approximate number of graves established by means of a physical count. A final result could be obtained at a future date by using non penetrative methods such as ground penetrating radar.

Despite an intensive survey across the terrain during 2001-2008 no rubbish dumps or any trace of surviving dumps was found. This formed the conclusion that no tinned rations were issued, supporting the hypothesis of malnutrition and starvation as a cause of death.

The memory of Dry Harts Native Camp survives through the tangible evidence of the burial site in which numerous gravestones are engraved with the deceased's name and dates of death. Intangible evidence has survived amongst local memory and folklore where the cause of death is recalled as occurring from contaminated food and starvation. Many local people mention the food being poisoned, which refers to water borne diseases such as typhoid fever. The maize meal with which the refugees and forced labourers were issued became contaminated by the water used to prepare food and for drinking purposes. Ingesting the food and water killed them en masse.

As for internees performing forced labour in exchange for rations, this memory has survived. In 2001 at Dry Harts, discussions with Kleinjan Maruping then in his 80s, revealed that he learnt of the war from his father, who experienced it first-hand.

¹⁵ Warwick, 1983.

¹⁶ Orange River Colony Government. (4 July 1902), *Government Gazette*.

Maruping recollected that “the British took the Africans off the land, and then treated them like slaves”¹⁷.

Conclusion

Archival evidence is a logical line of research enquiry. Yet in the case of the black forced labour camps, a reliance on the written archive alone is limiting. Rather it is the terrain containing the footprint of this past that is key to deciphering this past, through its archaeological record, such as at Dry Harts and Klippiespan. In the case of Dry Harts Camp, surviving memory remained as a residual and intangible trace of that past when the survey initially commenced in 2001, and again in 2006-2008. It was possible to uncover the evidence of this wartime forced labour system, yet not through the written archive alone. On the landscape across South Africa there remain many such sites yet to be identified which form part of a neglected history. One which reveals the impact of Total War and its emergence into the 20th century, together with its interlinked counter guerrilla warfare strategy and the impact of that on the vulnerable, on the civilians caught up in the dragnet of violence, wartime violence and mass violence that characterized this experience in South Africa.

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¹⁷ Maruping, K, as quoted during an interview with Phillips, Barnaby. (29 November 2001), *Forgotten victims of the Boer War*, BBC World News.

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