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A war of words : Dutch pro-Boer propaganda and the South African war (1899-1902)

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Publication date
2010

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kuitenbrouwer, J. J. V. (2010). *A war of words : Dutch pro-Boer propaganda and the South African war (1899-1902)*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam]. Eigen Beheer.

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Part II: A War of Words (1899-1902)

Chapter 5: ‘Dum-dums of public opinion’. Pro-Boer propaganda, October 1899 - June 1900

The public outcry against the South African War is generally seen as the climax of the pro-Boer movement in the Netherlands. The struggle by the Transvaal and the OFS against the British Empire was immortalised on countless pages and in many genres. Historians tend to see this dazzling amount source material as the result of a unique and temporary phenomenon in Dutch history, during which public opinion was captured by a form of mass hysteria.¹ Literary scholars also have trouble interpreting the enormous wave of propaganda that flooded the Netherlands during the war. Writing in the 1910s, the Afrikaner literary critic G. Besselaar thought that only two works of the large collection of ‘gunpowder texts’ were worth reading.² At the centenary of the South African War, Ena Jansen and Wilfred Jonckheere compiled a more substantial volume with excerpts from Dutch sources about the conflict, both in High Dutch and in Afrikaans. In the introduction, they rightfully note how the sheer number of texts and the diverse backgrounds of the authors, who ranged from well-known writers in Amsterdam to farmer’s wives in the Karoo, made this corpus quite ‘chaotic’.³

The public debate about the conflict in the Netherlands was indeed a hotchpotch; different authors published about different aspects of the war expressing themselves in different genres. In the following two chapters a few *leitmotifs* in this heterogeneous mass of historical sources will be highlighted. This one will discuss the coverage of the period up to the occupation of Pretoria, during which the largest battles took place; the following chapter will discuss the coverage of the guerrilla phase of the war. It has been argued that the lines of communication between the Netherlands and South Africa came under mounting pressure during the conflict, but that information from the war zone continued to trickle through.⁴ In this sense there was continuity with the avenues of information that were set up in the 1880s and 1890s. Likewise, the contents of the debate should be seen in line with the feelings of *stamverwantschap* that took shape during the pre-war period.⁵

First of all, there remained ambivalences towards both sides in the war. The Boers on the one hand seemed to be well adapted to fighting a modern war, but on the other hand showed fundamental weaknesses in their overall strategy. Likewise, despite condemnation of the British military presence in South Africa, there was a certain amount of sympathy for the common soldiers who were ordered to fight and die in a war they did not ask for. But despite

¹ Bossenboek, *Holland op zijn breedst*, 351.

² ‘buskruitlectuur’. Besselaar, *Zuid-Afrika in de letterkunde*, 69-70.

³ ‘onoverzichtelijk’. Jansen and Jonckheere, *Boer en Brit*, 35.

⁴ Cf. chapter 3.

⁵ Cf. chapter 2.

these nuances, the South African War was fundamentally seen as being the result of the great struggle for colonial dominance between Dutch and British ‘races’ in South Africa, something that was considered to be the leading theme of the nineteenth-century history of the region. In that light, people in the Netherlands clearly took the side of the Boers and condemned the conflict as a deliberate attempt by imperialist statesmen to quash all resistance to their expansionist plans, not hesitating to use the most unscrupulous means available. Dutch commentators constantly accused the British army of atrocities on and off the battlefield, and the war was seen as a new episode in the history of the oppression of the Afrikaners that had started in 1806. To pro-Boers, this showed the down sides of modern capitalism and imperialism: the ‘ravenous hunger’ (*geeuwhonger*) and the arrogant cruelty of ‘perfidious Albion’ (*het perfide Albion*). By contrast, the conduct of the Boers was considered to be noble on the whole.

As with all propaganda, the Dutch account of the events that took place in South Africa between October 1899 and June 1902 certainly cannot be taken at face value. Contemporaries seem to have been aware of their biases to some extent, but they did not always consider them to be a problem. On the contrary, many publicists saw it as their duty to disseminate material about the South African War that highlighted the Boer perspective. British anti-Boer propaganda was seen as being part of the effort to strangle the Transvaal and the OFS, and the wave of pro-Boer publications that flooded the public on the European continent should be seen as a direct response to this perceived threat. The question remains as to how successful this was. On the one hand, propagandists did influence public opinion outside Great Britain to a large extent, but on the other hand they did not succeed in convincing the European governments to intervene in the conflict.⁶ These limitations were acknowledged in contemporary sources, but it was nevertheless argued that the agitation was vital to the Boer cause. In this sense, propaganda in Europe was seen as an extension of the war in South Africa. At times, Dutch commentators even used military metaphors to describe the efforts to counter the British coverage of the war. For example, a volume with pro-Boer cartoons appeared with the title *Dum-dums of public opinion*, in reference to widespread accusations that the British were using expandable bullets against the Boers.⁷ The propaganda was considered to be important in an even wider sense. Several publicists asserted that they were providing future historians with material so that they would not have to depend on British sources only.⁸

Although contemporaries were generally aware that they stood too close to the events as they were unfolding to write a balanced account, they nevertheless attached much value to these efforts, which they thought might be of use in South Africa later on. As has been shown,

⁶ Kröll, *Die Internationale Buren-Agitation*, 10-11; Van Niekerk, *Kruger se regterhand*, 215-218.

⁷ *Dum-dum's der publieke opinie*.

⁸ Editorial by Charles Boissevain. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 8 December 1899; Van Harpen, *Nederland Zuid-Afrika*, introduction. N. van Harpen was editor-in-chief of the *Amsterdamsche Courant*.

the sums that were collected for the burghers during the South African War were initially earmarked for reconstruction of the republics after the conflict had ended. Similarly, the numerous publications describing British atrocities and Boer heroics were seen as an essential asset in the preservation of the Dutch cultural element in South Africa, because these stories would help to strengthen Afrikaner identity. This clearly shows that the interest taken by the public in the Netherlands in the war – and the wave of publications that was resulted from it – were not simply symptoms of collective hysteria, but touched on Dutch notions of cultural identity and racial kinship in a global setting. This chapter and the next will discuss the coverage of the war in the context of these issues.

‘We know so well how you drifted into this war ...’

In the run-up to the South African War, there was a lively discussion about the causes of the conflict. The outbreak of hostilities by no means came as a surprise to observers, both in the republics and in the Netherlands. Even though the Boers started the war, invading the Cape and Natal after they issued an ultimatum, it was generally seen as being the result of the attempts of the British to dominate the Dutch element in South Africa and was thus aligned with events such as the Great Trek and the Transvaal War of 1880-1881. Moreover, the government in London had already despatched a large expedition force to South Africa, which was considered by the public in continental Europe to be a hostile act.⁹ Meanwhile, several Boer statesmen wrote pamphlets to reveal the historical injustice they were facing. As tensions rose, the Boers and their supporters in Europe did not shy away from framing the conflict in South Africa in terms of a struggle between good and evil. At first sight at least, the crisis seemed to obscure the ambivalences and contradictions of *stamverwantschap*.

In August 1899, Piet Joubert, commander-in-chief of the Transvaal, published an open letter to Queen Victoria (in English) in the Johannesburg newspaper *The Star*. Despite Joubert’s reputation as one of the most prominent political enemies of Paul Kruger and his *Hollanders* in the SAR, a Dutch translation instantly appeared in the Netherlands. Joubert’s description of the Boers was rather august, comparing the *Voortrekkers* with the people of Israel, chosen by God to establish their republics in the middle of the African ‘wilderness’ to bring ‘civilisation’ there. He ended with a polite call upon the queen and the people of Great Britain to stop statesmen like Chamberlain from attacking the republics, thereby tarnishing the reputation of their nation.¹⁰ In addition, a letter from SAR Secretary of State F.W. Reitz to his counterpart in the OFS, P.J. Blignaut, found its way to a publisher in the Netherlands. Reitz lamented the aggressive strategy followed by the British, who would do anything to get their hands on the goldfields of the Rand, the South African equivalent of Naboth’s vineyards from the Old Testament. Continuing to use Biblical terms of reference, Reitz prophesised that

⁹ Leyds ed., *Eenige correspondentie*, 186; idem, *Tweede verzameling* II, 25; Van Niekerk, *Kruger se regterhand*, 280.

¹⁰ Joubert, *Transvaal*.

God would be on the side of the Boers and help them withstand the imperial forces on the battlefield.¹¹

The most famous, and most radical, of these pamphlets from South Africa was *A Century of Wrong* by Jan Smuts, the young state attorney of the Transvaal.¹² Despite his upbringing in the Cape and his education at Cambridge University, which initially made him sympathetic towards the British cause, Smuts was deeply shocked by the Jameson Raid and opposed the growing pressure on the Boer republics.¹³ In September 1899, he wrote a pamphlet that was intended to arouse his fellow Afrikaners to join the republics. The SAR government also thought it suitable for publication in Europe and the USA and sent it to the diplomatic legation in Brussels, where it arrived in November of that year.¹⁴ It became one of the most famous pro-Boer publications in the Netherlands, despite the fact that Smuts, who was sceptical about the political influence of *Hollanders*, did not write it with that audience in mind. He argued, for instance, that the Prince of Orange had ‘sold’ the Cape in 1814, which offended several Dutch critics.¹⁵

Nonetheless, there was much praise for his vivid description of the ‘wrongs’ the British had inflicted on the Afrikaners throughout the nineteenth century, as well of the ‘native’ and the *Uitlander* questions. In general, the account followed the work of historians like George McCall Theal, which Smuts supplemented with his own experiences in order to counter the allegations made by Chamberlain concerning the ill-treatment of *Uitlanders* by the Boers.¹⁶ Towards the end of his historical overview, the young politician lost his academic tone somewhat. In the conclusion he sketched estranging visions, portraying Britain as ‘this gentle

¹¹ *Brief van den heer F.W. Reitz*.

¹² The pamphlet appeared in the Netherlands as: *Een eeuw van onrecht*. I will refer to the English translation. [Smuts], *A Century of Wrong*.

¹³ Hancock, *Smuts. The Sanguine Years*, 109; Marks, ‘Jan Christiaan Smuts’.

¹⁴ Editions from that time bear the name of W.F. Reitz on the advice of the British journalist William Stead, who thought the name ‘Smuts’ would not attract enough readers. The solution was found in the following formulation: ‘issued by W.F. Reitz’. Leyds, ed., *Tweede verzameling I*, xv-xvi. However, it was widely known in the Netherlands that Smuts wrote the brochure after Kiewiet de Jonge made a statement to that effect in the national press. *NRC*, 20 January 1900. For involvement ANV in publication cf. chapter 4.

¹⁵ Introduction by H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge in: [Smuts], *Een eeuw van onrecht*, i; biography of Smuts by Rompel. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 15 July 1901. The controversy was about a treaty from 1814 in which Great Britain handed back all Dutch colonial territories it had occupied during the Napoleonic Wars, except for the Cape of Good Hope and several other stations in the West (Ceylon had already been annexed by the British in 1802). In the 1880s some authors in the Netherlands and South Africa held that the Dutch had the opportunity to restore all her colonies and argued that Prince William of Orange willingly abandoned the Cape in exchange for money and thus ‘sold’ it. In 1898, Professor J.E. Heeres of the Colonial Institute in Delft published a pamphlet in which he argued that the Prince of Orange had had no choice in ceding the Cape because the British had risen to world dominance after they had defeated France, which was underlined by their strong position in the overseas territories. Given this situation, he argued, the Dutch prince had no choice than to give in to their demands for the colony in South Africa, where they already were in full control. In addition, British support was needed to rebuild the Netherlands after the French occupation. By 1899, Heeres’ view had become a common opinion in the Netherlands. Heeres, *Heeft Nederland de Kaap verkocht*; Muller, *Is de Kaapkolonie verkocht*. For Smuts’s dislike of *Hollanders* cf. Hancock, *Smuts. The Sanguine Years*, 69.

¹⁶ Hancock, *Smuts. The Sanguine Years*, 108-110. Rompel pointed out that Smuts made some inaccurate remarks about the war between the Boers and the Zulus under Dingane. Biography of Smuts by Rompel. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 15 July 1901. For these topics cf. chapter 2.

and kind-hearted Mother of Nations, [...] wrapped in all the panoply of her might, riches, and exalted traditions’, who approached the small population of the republics, ‘the little child, grovelling in the dust’, with a sharp knife in her hands. ‘This is no War – it is an attempt to Infanticide.’¹⁷ In Smuts’s view, the violent onslaught on the Boers was not only morally wrong, but it threatened the very existence of white settlement in South Africa because the British were not capable of withstanding the black majority alone. He continued with a ghostly dream in which the onlooker saw:

Bantu children playing amongst the gardens and ruins of the sunny south around thousands of graves in which the descendants of the heroes of Faith and Freedom lie sleeping. [...] And when the question is asked – why all this has happened? [...] An invisible spirit of mockery answers, ‘Civilisation is a failure; the Caucasian is played out!’¹⁸

Not only Afrikaner authors wrote to protest against the outbreak of the South African War; many people in the Netherlands could not keep their indignation to themselves either. Throughout the country, churches organised prayer meetings for the Boers. Several of these sermons were published and show how the ministers called upon their flocks to *Continue praying for the Transvaal!*¹⁹ Prominent publicists joined these pious protests. The journalist Charles Boissevain aimed his arrows directly at British opinion-makers. In his *Open Letter to the Duke of Devonshire* he accused them of deluding the public with anti-Boer rhetoric.²⁰ His pamphlet was known in the Netherlands too, and the full text – in English – appeared on the front page of *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, of which he was editor-in-chief.²¹ Boissevain too, writing the text on Christmas Day 1899, poured out his indictment in exalted terms:

We know so well how you [the British] drifted into this war ... we know so well what this cruel unrighteousness means for each of those armed peasants, those husbands and fathers, who sacrifice their lives for their independence, that we could wish for ignorance, so that our eyes might be shut and our hearts hardened. But we cannot ... we see, we know and we appeal to God Almighty for justice.²²

An opinion-maker at the other side of the political spectrum, the Calvinist leader Abraham Kuyper also wrote a famous pamphlet in defence of the Boer cause, which appeared

¹⁷ [Smuts], *A Century of Wrong*, 55.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Rudolph, *Houdt aan in het gebed voor Transvaal*.

²⁰ Boissevain, *The Struggle of the Dutch Republics: Open Letter to the Duke of Devonshire*, 12.

²¹ *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 7 January 1900.

²² Boissevain, *The Struggle of the Dutch Republics: Open Letter to the Duke of Devonshire*, 9.

in French on the pages of the influential international magazine *Revue des Deux Mondes* in February 1900. Soon after that, it was translated into English, Dutch, German and Swedish and published as a separate pamphlet.²³ The publication was a great success – Kuyper received a personal compliment from Queen Wilhelmina herself, no less than sixteen editions appeared of the English translation of the pamphlet alone, and even his political opponents in the Netherlands praised the text.²⁴ The historian Gerrit Schutte has called this brochure ‘a masterpiece of propaganda’ in which the case for the Boers was elucidated in a ‘scholarly’ fashion.²⁵ As such it was an important contribution to the pro-Boer campaign. Kuyper gave an overview of the race issue that largely followed the lines of other Dutch works on the nineteenth-century history of South Africa, supporting ideas on the inferiority of black people and pointing out the machinations of British statesmen. Moreover, while writing, the author was in direct contact with representatives of the SAR and the OFS, who provided him with source material and read the proofs.²⁶ Chris van Koppen, however, has pointed out that the pamphlet was Kuyper’s only contribution to the propaganda campaign and should therefore be considered to be an exception to the otherwise troubled relationship between the Protestant leader and the pro-Boer movement.²⁷

This sort of unity seems to have been widely present during the first months of the South African War. In the heat of the moment, domestic tensions fell away and people in the Netherlands rallied firmly behind the Boer cause. Both Boissevain and Kuyper were attacked by Yves Guyot, editor of the French magazine *Le Siècle* and they both replied with similar indignation, claiming that Guyot did not have the same knowledge of South African affairs as authors in the Netherlands. The two Dutch opinion-makers prided themselves in the fact that they had better access to information and that they backed their pamphlets with solid evidence based on documented research. In his bombastic style, Boissevain accused Guyot of being ‘*plus Anglais que [les] Anglais*’ and that he lacked the slightest knowledge of ‘the small, free people [the Boers] that he denounced in favour of the great gobbler [Great Britain]’.²⁸ In a brotherly gesture, the Dutch press took the side of their two colleagues against ‘that silly Frenchman’, who had been accused of manipulating the news in favour of the British from the beginning of the war.²⁹

The view that the South African War was the outcome of a ‘century of wrong’ was also apparent in less elitist publications, which is another indication that it was generally accepted

²³ The ANV press office co-ordinated the publication, with financial assistance from the NZAV. Cf. chapter 4.

²⁴ Van Koppen, *De geuzen van de negentiende eeuw*, 178-180. For praise from Liberals cf. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 3 and 4 February 1900. Kuyper’s pamphlet was translated from French into Dutch by an editor of this Liberal newspaper, C.K. Elout.

²⁵ ‘een meesterwerk van propaganda’, ‘wetenschappelijk’. Schutte, *De Vrije Universiteit* I, 82.

²⁶ Leyds ed., *Tweede verzameling* I, 211-212, 220 and 310. A file with information provided by Leyds can be found in: NASA, Leyds collection, LEY, 103.

²⁷ Van Koppen, *De geuzen van de negentiende eeuw*, 180.

²⁸ ‘het kleine, vrije volk dat hij afvalt ten gunste van den grooten slokop’. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 16 January 1900. In his reply to Guyot Kuyper used similar terms. *De Standaard*, 3 April 1900.

²⁹ ‘dien gekken Franzoos’. *NRC*, 16 January; letter of Paris correspondent. *NRC*, 29 October 1899.

in the Netherlands. The popular writer Louwrens Penning started writing a series of three books in which he described the war as it was unfolding, the first was published in 1899, the last in 1903. In the first issue, he gave an overview of South African history from Slachtersnek onwards and the ‘foolish native policy of England [in the Cape] that pampered the *Kaffers* and oppressed the Boers’.³⁰ Penning’s work certainly cannot be considered to be an unbiased or trustworthy depiction of South Africa’s history, but it was not all made up either. His chronicle of the war was based on sources like letters that reached Europe and were published in newspapers.³¹ The fact that he received material from the ANV press office, such as press circulars and the gazettes from the republics, is further evidence of his close connection with Boer lines of communication.³² Nevertheless, his style was emotive and he certainly did not attempt to give a balanced account of events. In addition, his work contains many factual errors and where he lacked information, he seems to have filled the gaps with imaginary scenes. In addition, between 1900 and 1904 Penning wrote seven novels about the South African War in which he placed fictitious characters in real battles.³³ His varied work reflects the haphazard contents of pro-Boer propaganda: a set of highly biased – and sometimes contradictory – views on the South African question in which it is often hard to separate fact from fiction. Despite these shortcomings, or maybe because of them, Penning’s work was massively popular. The first volume of his chronicle sold 40,000 copies, which was quite remarkable for the Netherlands at that time.³⁴

With due satisfaction, Penning noted that the feelings of *stamverwantschap* were at their peak at the end of 1899, both in South Africa, where the burghers of the SAR and OFS stood together, and in the Netherlands, where domestic partisan interests seemed to melt away.³⁵ Besides these apparent signs of racial unity, however, there remained tensions and ambivalences that spilled over onto the pages of pro-Boer writings too. As has been mentioned in chapter 4, the most noticeable result of the renewed interest in the situation in South Africa was a huge rise in membership of the NZAV and the numerous initiatives undertaken to help the ‘cousins’ in the republics. But just as the increased number of activities posed problems to the leaders of the movement, who had difficulty co-ordinating these efforts, there was a variety of different views on the war. People in the Netherlands still had ambivalent ideas about their relationship with the Boers and the future of the Dutch race in South Africa, which was clearly a continuance of the way of thinking before October 1899. Throughout the South African War, the public in the Netherlands oscillated in between fear

³⁰ ‘dwaze Kafferpolitiek van Engeland, die de Kaffers vertroetelde en de Boeren verdruchte’. Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* I, 3. Another popular chronicler of the war was: Priem ed., *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika*.

³¹ Van der Elst, ‘Die Anglo-Boereoorlog’, 150. Cf. chapter 3.

³² Address list ANV press office. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 889.

³³ For the most comprehensive bibliography of Penning during the South African War cf. Jonckheere, *Van Mafeking tot Robbeneiland*, 45-46.

³⁴ Interview with L. Penning in *Arnhemsch Dagblad*, 24 November 1924. HDC, Penning collection, 87/3; Jonckheere, *Van Mafeking naar Robbeneiland*, 44.

³⁵ Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* I, 82.

and hope about the outcome of the conflict and the question as to which group of white colonists would become dominant in the region, largely reflecting the fickle ideas about *stamverwantschap*.

‘Africa for the Afrikaner’?

Many pro-Boers saw a united and ‘free’ South Africa – from the Zambezi to the Simons Bay – under Dutch rule as a possible outcome of the war. The motto ‘*Afrika voor den Afrikaner*’ (‘Africa for the Afrikaner’) was therefore a popular phrase at the time.³⁶ In light of the military and political situation, it was considered of great importance that the Afrikaners of the Cape join the Boer cause. Most of the white inhabitants in South Africa lived there, the majority of whom were Afrikaners, so that the combined Dutch-speaking population actually outnumbered the British settlers. Moreover, if the inhabitants of the Cape took up arms against the British Empire, this would add greatly to the military might of the Boer republics, not only in numbers, but also because it would open a second front line. Some observers thought that this would cause the British army so much trouble that the public at home would force the government in London to order the retreat.³⁷ Despite these high hopes, only a small number of Cape Afrikaners actually joined the commandos. Dutch commentators thought this to be the result of fundamental problems in the colony that stood in the way of unification. They argued that because of English influences, particularly in the educational system of the Cape, many Afrikaners there had become alienated from their kinsmen in the republics and had developed sympathy for the imperial cause. This was a topic of discussion in several novels and stories about families that were torn apart by the different allegiances of family members, some joining the British and some the Boers.³⁸

Correspondents in Cape Town who wrote for the press in the Netherlands also noted political barriers that prevented the Afrikaners from affiliating themselves with the Boers. There was a degree of disappointment about the attitude of the nationalist leaders. Despite Jan Hofmeyr’s swing away from Cecil Rhodes in 1896 and the electoral victory of his *Afrikaner Bond* in 1899, he had to walk a thin line, given the tense situation in South Africa. He tried to find a political solution in the run-up to the war and he openly expressed his regret at the stubbornness of the Boer governments when the conflict started. In April 1900, an Afrikaner correspondent wrote to defend this cautious position, saying that Hofmeyr had tried to achieve Dutch unification through peaceful means and denounced the war that was to bring so much grief. Not all commentators in the Netherlands found this convincing and thought that it was unrealistic ‘to expect that they [the Boers in the republics] continue to see Hofmeyr as a true friend’.³⁹ In contrast with his political actions, Hofmeyr’s magazine *Ons Land* contained more

³⁶ Penning, *De Leeuw van Modderspruit*, 29. Cf. chapter 2 for the origins of this motto.

³⁷ *De militaire Gids*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1900), 25.

³⁸ Kloppers, “*Alles zal rech kom!*”, 81-93; *Boer en Brit*.

³⁹ ‘verlangen, dat zij in Hofmeyr een waren vriend blijven zien’. Editorial. *NRC*, 21 April 1900; letter from Afrikaner correspondent. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 20 April 1900.

unambiguous pro-Boer accounts, which provided an alternative to the coverage of the war in the British jingo press, protested against atrocities committed against the republics, and critically assessed local politics. Because the mail services from the Cape Colony were more reliable than from the republics, the press in the Netherlands gratefully used this magazine as a source. Later on during the war *Ons Land* became less influential because of the increasing censorship imposed by the British authorities, who in 1901 arrested several editors and did not allow editorials anymore.⁴⁰

Such measures were considered to be part of a wider campaign by the Milner government to quash all possible resistance in the Cape. Correspondents wrote in similar terms about the harsh treatment of Afrikaners fighting for the Boer commandos, who were considered to be rebels and thus risked the death penalty.⁴¹ Despite the gravity of the situation, many pro-Boers in the Netherlands continued to nurture the hope that the Afrikaner population would be able to cast off the oppressive yoke of the British administration. At the end of 1900, news about meetings by Afrikaner nationalist in the Cape – in Paarl (women) and Worcester (men) – was welcomed as a clear sign that their spirit had not been broken. Although the protests by those present at the meetings against the ongoing war and their demand that the Milner administration be replaced had little results, their patriotism was admired.⁴²

In pro-Boer literature there was not only reflection on the attitude of the Cape Afrikaners, but also on the morale of inhabitants of the two republics, which was at times a controversial issue. From the 1880s onwards, the focus of the pro-Boer movement in the Netherlands was clearly on the SAR. This republic was considered to be the most important destination for emigrants, as it was fertile and there were many opportunities for well-motivated settlers.⁴³ It was also in the light of the political situation in South Africa that the Transvaal received the most attention in the Netherlands. It had been the war for independence fought by the inhabitants of this republic in 1880-1881 that had aroused interest by the Dutch in their ‘cousins’ in South Africa, and the rapid development that took place under Kruger and his *Hollanders* was seen as highly promising for the Dutch race as they managed to strengthen the independence of the state.

There were more concerns about the OFS, where immigrants of British descent played an important role in public life, the education system and the railways, which made it dependant on Cape infrastructure.⁴⁴ In a publication that appeared shortly after the war ended, the leader of the ANV press office, Frederik Rompel, had another explanation for the relative obscurity of the OFS in the Netherlands. In an effort to avoid trouble with the British, the government

⁴⁰ Editorial. *NRC*, 19 February 1901. Cf. chapter 3.

⁴¹ Letters from Cape Town. *NRC*, 12 March and 5 June 1900. Cf. chapter 6.

⁴² For reactions to Paarl cf. ‘Van dag tot dag’ in: *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 13 December 1900. For Worcester cf. *NRC*, 7 December 1900 and 1 January 1901; *De Telegraaf*, 17 and 18 December 1900.

⁴³ Lion Cachet, *De worstelstrijd der Transvalers*, 372-5; Junius, *De koloniën en staten van Zuid-Afrika*, 9.

⁴⁴ W.F. Andriessen, ‘De rol van den Oranje-Vrijstaat in den oorlog in Zuid-Afrika’, in: *De Gids*, vol. 65, no. 2 (1901), 401-440, 431; Aitton, *De Oranje-Vrijstaat*, 16.

shyed away from making propaganda in Europe, a choice which stood in stark contrast to the campaign headed by Leyds.⁴⁵ This meant that, when the war broke out, the public in the Netherlands seemed to associate the war with the SAR, which is illustrated by numerous publications that only mentioned the Transvaal in their titles.⁴⁶ To make matters worse, at the beginning of the war several rumours emerged that Free State troops lacked motivation to fight and considered laying down arms.⁴⁷ Such indictments were a thorn in the flesh to representatives of the OFS. In interviews, Consul-General H.P.N. Muller, emphatically denied that these commandos were considering surrender.⁴⁸ In private he complained that the campaign by the pro-Boer organisations mainly focussed on the Transvaal and that he, as a representative of the OFS, was left out of the equation. ‘They confer with Leyds, but without me’, he lamented in a letter.⁴⁹ Although Leyds and other Boer diplomats stated that they represented the interests of both republics, complaints about neglect of the OFS continued throughout the war. Muller even expressed these sentiments in public while he was touring the USA in 1902.⁵⁰

There were, however, also efforts to brush up the image of the OFS during the South African War. Several publications appeared that were written by people who had lived in the republic, such as D. Aitton, a former teacher at Grey College in Bloemfontein, or who had travelled there, such as W.A. van Ittersum. They tried to play up the heroic past of the Free Staters, because they were of the opinion that they deserved the admiration of the civilised world for their conduct during the struggle against the British. Looking at the nineteenth-century history of South Africa, it was noted how they had been the victims of the imperialists’ lust for expansion when the diamond fields of Kimberley were taken from them.⁵¹ Moreover, it was emphasised that the Boers of the OFS were ‘unspoiled’ descendants of the *Voortrekkers*.⁵² Their heroic character became apparent during the Transvaal War, when, despite the official policy of neutrality, the Free Staters under President J.H. Brand expressed explicit support for their sister-republic, which was seen as one of the reasons for the British to retreat.⁵³ This kind of loyalty continued under the presidency of W.F. Reitz, who

⁴⁵ Rompel, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn*, 48; Van Ittersum, *De Vrijstaters en hun geschiedenis*, 37.

⁴⁶ Cf. ‘Etine’, *Voor Transvaal*; Hartlooper, *Transvaal A-B-C-*; Kolstee, *Transvaal album; Dordrecht-Transvaal album*.

⁴⁷ Editorial. *NRC*, 24 October 1899; editorial. *NRC*, 30 December 1899.

⁴⁸ Interview of H.P.N. Muller. *NRC*, 31 December 1899; excerpt from letter by H.P.N. Muller to *Morning Leader*. *NRC*, 9 February 1900; excerpt from interview of H.P.N. Muller in *Dordtsche Courant*. *NRC*, 29 March 1900.

⁴⁹ ‘Men confereert met Leyds, maar zonder mij’. H.P.N. Muller to A.S. van Reesema, 22 October 1899. ZA, NZAV archive, VI/129.

⁵⁰ Leyds ed., *Vierde verzameling* I, xv and 389-390. For complaints on neglect of the OFS cf. chapters 3 and 4.

⁵¹ Aitton, *Eene bladzijde uit de geschiedenis*; F.A.G. Beelaerts van Blokland, *De Oranje-Vrijstaat*, 18-19; Van Ittersum, *De Vrijstaters en hun geschiedenis*, 26-29.

⁵² ‘onbedorven’. Andriessen, ‘De rol van den Oranje-Vrijstaat’, 402; Van Ittersum, *De Vrijstaters en hun geschiedenis*, 2.

⁵³ Andriessen, ‘De rol van den Oranje-Vrijstaat’, 425-428. Cf. also earlier publications: Lion Cachet, *De worstelstrijd der Transvalers*, 514 and 553; Jorissen, *Transvaalsche herinneringen*, 71 and 87-92. Cf. F.A.G. Beelaerts van Blokland, *De Oranje-Vrijstaat*, 21-2. F.A.G. Beelaerts van Blokland, librarian of the ministry of

signed a treaty in which both republics pledged military support to the other if one was attacked.⁵⁴

President M.T. Steyn, who was head of state when the war started, was also considered to be a true hero. In the several biographical publications that appeared about him during and after the South African War, he was described as a typical Boer with simple tastes, but good instincts and much common sense: truly a member of the Afrikaner ‘aristocracy of South Africa’.⁵⁵ After the Jameson Raid, which took place just after his election, he continued to seek closer ties with the Transvaal, which to some observers was a sign that he believed that the combined Boer forces would withstand and possibly defeat the British.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Steyn did his best to avoid a military conflict, facilitating the Bloemfontein Conference between Kruger and Milner (May and June 1899) in a bid to find a political solution for the *Uitlander* question. When this effort failed, which the pro-Boers believed was Milner’s fault, Steyn prepared to stand by the SAR during the looming war.⁵⁷ On 22 September 1899, he made a famous speech at the *Volksraad* in Bloemfontein in which he accused the British of using the *Uitlander* question as a false *casus belli* and called upon the burghers of the OFS to join the Transvaal and fight for a just cause. When the text of this speech reached Consul-General Muller in the Netherlands, he instantly forwarded it to a newspaper in Rotterdam that published large parts of it, and Steyn’s words were also quoted with much reverence in other publications.⁵⁸

Despite this renewed attention for the OFS, in many ways the Transvaal remained the most telling symbol of the unjust war that was forced upon the Boers. It was this country that had been most affected by the British hunger for land in the past, during the annexation of 1877-1881. Moreover, by the end of the nineteenth century it had become clear that the world’s largest deposits of gold lay on its territory, something which was considered to be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, authors pointed out that the capital generated by this new industry enabled the Kruger government to initiate reforms that had led to the rapid development of the republic and had strengthened the Dutch element in South Africa. On the other hand, it had also aroused the greed of the British capitalists – and Rhodes in particular – who seemed to be determined to end the independence of the SAR once and for all.⁵⁹

war in The Hague, argued that Brand was reluctant to help the SAR, but was forced to do so by public opinion.

⁵⁴ Van Ittersum, *De Vrijstaters en hun geschiedenis*, 32-34; Andriessen, ‘De rol van de Oranje-Vrijstaat’, 428-431.

⁵⁵ ‘adel van Zuid-Afrika’. Rempel, *Marthinus Theunis Steyn*, 5; F.A.G. Beelaerts van Blokland, *De Oranje-Vrijstaat*, 23-30; Van Ittersum, *De Vrijstaters en hun geschiedenis*, 35-7; Andriessen, ‘De rol van de Oranje-Vrijstaat’, 432-440. Cf. Reitz, ‘President Steyn’, 199.

⁵⁶ F.A.G. Beelaerts van Blokland, *De Oranje-Vrijstaat*, 23; Andriessen, ‘De rol van de Oranje-Vrijstaat’, 434-436.

⁵⁷ For European public opinion on the Bloemfontein Conference cf. Leyds ed., *Eenige correspondentie*, 50.

⁵⁸ *NRC*, 5 February 1900; Van Ittersum, *De Vrijstaters en hun geschiedenis*, 46-60; Andriessen, ‘De rol van de Oranje-Vrijstaat’, 436-439. For later references, cf. Reitz, ‘President Steyn’, 203-204; Andriessen, *Gedenkboek van den Oorlog in Zuid-Afrika*, 86-88.

⁵⁹ [Smuts], *A Century of Wrong*, 26; Kuyper, *De crisis in Zuid-Afrika*, 27; Van Gogh, *Weerstaat den Rhodesgeest*. Cf. Te Winkel, *Waar het om gaat in Zuid-Afrika*, 11. Te Winkel argued that the perception of

The Boers’ struggle to cope with modernity was exemplified by Paul Kruger. The elderly president had grown up in the ox wagons of the Great Trek, had received virtually no education except from Bible reading and was considered to be inherently distrustful of the outside world. However, it was argued that his innate goodness, exceptional patriotism and common sense allowed him to accept the development of the SAR and chart out his policies accordingly. Although he did not always obtain perfect results, it was asserted that he did the best he could.⁶⁰ This was illustrated by his solemn, but decisive preparation for war. After the shock of the Jameson Raid, he started with an arms program during which the SAR acquired modern rifles and artillery. Still, it was said that Kruger did everything he could to save his country from war, because he knew what horrors it would bring to his people. In an intimate portrait of ‘*Oom Paul*’, Rompel, who had been present at the Bloemfontein Conference as a reporter, described how the SAR delegation offered to reduce the naturalisation period for *Uitlanders* in a bid to avoid conflict, an offer which was arrogantly rejected by Milner. The next morning, Rompel noticed that the elderly president had swollen eyes. His physician suggested that he had an infection because of all the tears he shed. ““Yes,” was [Kruger’s] reply, simple, very sad, “I do not sleep anymore, doctor: I cry all night long.””⁶¹

For many people in the Netherlands, Kruger’s tears were proof that justice was on the side of the Boers, who had tried everything to avoid war. It was noticed that even *Uitlanders* in the SAR, mainly of non-British descent, took up arms to defend the independence of the republic. In the Netherlands there was particular attention for one of these foreign regiments, namely the *Hollandercorps*.⁶² At first sight, the formation of this commando seemed the ultimate expression of loyalty by the *Hollanders* to their kinsmen in the Transvaal. However, many descriptions of the short and tragic history of *Hollandercorps* reveal that the difficulties between them and the Boers continued. The story of Herman Coster, one of the founders of the regiment, exemplified this. He went to the Transvaal after he finished his doctorate in law at the University of Leiden in 1890 and became state attorney five years later. Coster, who was considered to be a gifted man, had a problematic relationship with Kruger though, a matter which was openly discussed in contemporary sources. In a dispute in 1897, the president sneered at him that if there was to be a war the Dutchmen would remain behind their desks while the Boers would have to do the fighting. Coster was deeply insulted by this remark and resigned immediately, despite apologies from Kruger himself.⁶³ He remained in

Rhodes as a perfidious capitalist menace was unfair and that he also deserved respect as a worthy adversary to the Boers.

⁶⁰ [Smuts] *A Century of Wrong*, 26-27; Kuyper, *De crisis in Zuid-Afrika*, 27.

⁶¹ ““Ja,” was het antwoord geweest, eenvoudig, diep treurig, “ik slaap niet meer nie, dokter: ik huil die heelen nacht.” Rompel, *Uit den tweeden (Transvaalschen) vrijheidsoorlog*, 18.

⁶² For the establishment of this regiment cf. chapter 3.

⁶³ Vissering, ‘Een Hollander in Zuid-Afrika’, in: *De Gids*, vol. 64, no. 1 (1900), 46-72, 63-4. For other obituaries of Coster see: *Leiden Zuid-Afrika album*; ‘P.v.D.’, ‘Mr. H.J. Coster’, in: *Elsevier’s Geillustreerd Maandblad* vol. 9, (July-December 1899), 550-558. ‘PvD’ probably was the journalist L.J. Plemp van Duiveland, who also knew Coster from his student days.

Pretoria, though, and according to the Dutch banker Gerard Vissering, an old friend from university who wrote the most famous contemporary biography of Coster, he continued to be committed to the Boer cause.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Vissering thought that Kruger’s insult was still echoing in his mind when he prepared to join the invasion of Natal, together with approximately 150 other *Hollanders*.⁶⁵

On 21 October 1899, they had their baptism of fire near the train station of Elandslaagte, which was also the last stand of the regiment. There, the *Hollandercorps* was part of a Boer force of about 800 men with three cannons, facing a British column of approximately 3,500 soldiers with 18 pieces of artillery.⁶⁶ The dramatic battle of Elandslaagte became the most notorious incident that took place during the first phase of the South African War, and was probably the single event that was most mentioned in publications about the conflict that appeared in the Netherlands.⁶⁷ Although the outcome was dramatic – almost half of the Dutchmen who fought at Elandslaagte were killed, wounded or captured – the battle was portrayed as the ultimate expression of unity in the Dutch race, because Boers and *Hollanders* stood side by side and shed their blood together. Coster, who died after having been shot in the head while fighting off enemies with the butt of his rifle, became a hero, having given his life for Holland’s glory.⁶⁸ In the Netherlands he was commemorated with a monument at the University of Leiden and a fund that supported Afrikaner students in the Netherlands and financed the establishment of libraries in South Africa.⁶⁹

In addition to these signs of unity between *Hollanders* and Boers, Elandslaagte also showed up the disparities between the *stamverwanten*. Faced with the British superiority in numbers, the Boer commandos retreated, which was in keeping with the hit-and-run tactics that they had developed in previous conflicts. Instead, the Dutchmen tried to hold their ground, which was considered to be a typical European way of fighting, which was brave, but also prevented an orderly retreat, causing the high casualty rate. One veteran of the battle, the teacher Cornelis Plokhooy, described in his memoirs how at first he considered the retreat by his South African comrades as an act of cowardice. Later, however, he realised that they had been right. ‘If all Boers had fought as hotheadedly as the Dutchmen [...] there would have been few left and then the enemy would have been lord and master in South Africa, while we

⁶⁴ Vissering, ‘Een Hollander in Zuid-Afrika’, 67-68.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 70.

⁶⁶ Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* I, 197-198 and 241-242; Pakenham, *The Boer War*, 135.

⁶⁷ Cf. chapter 3. Later in this chapter it will be shown that the British were accused of war crimes after the battle.

⁶⁸ This was emphasised in poems that appeared about his death. J.B. Scheepers, ‘Dr. H.J. Coster. Ter gedachtenisse (sonnet)’ in: *Neerlandia*, vol. 4, (January 1900), 2; A. Verwey, ‘H.J. Coster’, in: *NRC*, 1 March 1900. Cf. Vissering, ‘Een Hollander in Zuid-Afrika’, 71; Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* I, 135; ‘P.v.D.’, ‘Mr. H.J. Coster’, 558.

⁶⁹ Gerard Vissering was one of the instigators of these initiatives. ZA, HCF collection 1. Coster’s portrait can be found in many publications about the war. In South Africa he was also remembered as a hero. Interview from *Het Algemeen Handelsblad. NRC*, 3 November 1900; Hofmeyr, *Zes maanden bij de commando’s*, 90-91. Cf. Meijer, *Dr H.J. Coster*, 179-187.

now [in 1901] still see thousands of Boers in the field.’⁷⁰ He also described how the Boer commanders were furious about the madcap performance of the *Hollandercorps* and decided to disband the regiment forthwith.⁷¹ In addition to these accounts, there was a particular embarrassing rumour that appeared about the *Hollanders* and their conduct at Elandslaagte. The night before the battle, the regiment captured a supply-train at the station, which contained a wagonload of whisky. Some sources reported that the *Hollandercorps* has spent the evening in drunken revelry and that this was the reason for their poor performance on the battlefield the next morning. Dutch veterans fervently denied these allegations. Plokhooy refuted them as ‘low’ and asserted that the bottles had immediately been smashed.⁷² However, it is telling that these incidents were not omitted from pro-Boer propaganda, which illustrates the ongoing tensions surrounding the concept of *stamverwantschap*. In the light of these ambivalences, authors in the Netherlands were torn between hope and fear concerning the military abilities of the Boers, which will be discussed in the following section.

The Boer people’s army

Contemporaries considered the Boer military system to be a typical example of the decentralised and small-scale political structure of the republics. Apart from a small police force and a permanent artillery corps, both the OFS and the SAR had a people’s army (*volksleger*) that was only raised in times of need. In principle, everyone who was allowed to vote (white adult men, mainly of South African descent), the so-called ‘burghers’, were obliged to join a commando when asked to do so by a local officer, the *veldcornet*. As a result, the structure of the army was loose and fluid, with generals presiding over several commandos and a commander-in-chief co-ordinating the overall strategy. These high-ranking officers had limited authority, however, because all important decisions had to be taken in consultation with lower officers who represented their men, during the so-called *krijgsraad*. This human aspect of the mobilisation system was emphasised, in many sources.⁷³ In general, the recruits were described as devoted fathers or loving sons, which drew on the idea that the family was the cornerstone of the republics.

⁷⁰ ‘Als alle Boeren zoo doldriftig gevochten hadden als de Hollanders [...], dan waren er maar weinig overgebleven, en dan was de vijand bepaald al heer en meester in Zuid-Afrika, terwijl we nu nog duizenden Boeren in het veld zien.’ Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 33. For Plokhooy cf. chapter 3.

⁷¹ Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 32. Cf. letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 30 November 1899. In the chaos after the occupation of Bloemfontein in March 1900, a new *Hollandercorps* was founded, consisting of 60 men and incorporated into a large *Uitlander* commando, which met its Waterloo under the command of the French commander Villebois de Marieull at the battle of Boshof, 5 April 1900.

⁷² ‘min’. Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 13-14. Cf. ‘Met het Hollandsche korps te velde’. *NRC*, 7 December 1899; excerpt article from *Volksstem*. *NRC*, 2 January 1900.

⁷³ ‘war council’. For contemporary descriptions of the Boer military system cf. Lion Cachet, *De worstelstrijd der Transvalers*, 397-399; Rovers, *De Transvalers en hunnen heldhaftige vrouwen*, 6-10; *De Militaire Gids*, vol 19, no. 1 (1900), 22-24. For the most extensive description of the military structure of the Boer republics in historiography cf. Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* I, 29-76.



Photo of the ‘three generations in the war’.

While in reality no more than 65% of the burghers who were eligible for military service in the republics, was mobilised at the outbreak of war⁷⁴, it was implied in pro-Boer propaganda that every man was prepared to do his bit for the fatherland. Stories about young boys who eagerly wanted to fight were placed besides descriptions of older generations, the though bearded men of *Voortrekker* stock, who took a more sober view, because they knew of the horrors of the battlefield, but realised the necessity of defending their independence. Penning used this kind of imagery in his novels. Writing about the outbreak of war, he described a discussion between his fictitious characters, an elderly farmer and his sons. The boys expressed great eagerness to fight and were confident that the republics could withstand the British, while the old man was gloomy, dreading the prospect of war. But when the hostilities did break out, these differences fell away and both old and young fulfilled their

⁷⁴ Grundlingh, *Die ‘hendsoppers’ en ‘joiners’*, 7.

duty.⁷⁵ In this way, the commandos were portrayed as a cross-section of all age-groups. One iconic image that symbolised this idea of total mobilisation was a photo that depicted ‘three generations in the war’; a boy of 15, a man of 42 and an elderly man of 65, all posing with rifles and bandoliers.⁷⁶

As was the case in literature about the *Voortrekkers*, the wives of the Boers were considered to be patriotic too, in their own way.⁷⁷ Many letters and memoirs contained descriptions of the emotional goodbyes that took place at train stations as the men left for the front lines. Although the authors noted that there was much personal grief, they also emphasised that the women fought back their tears and kept their composure, because they knew that their loved ones were fighting for a worthy cause. ‘A suppressed sob, a sigh, a kiss and so the precious sacrifice to the fatherland and to freedom was made!’, wrote one of them.⁷⁸ Apart from this moral support, a few correspondents also described how women played an active role in the republics’ war effort during the early phase of the war. They wrote about how housewives took over their husbands’ work on the farms, cultivating the land and supervising the black servants.⁷⁹ Some women even joined the commandos in the field, camping with their men in the *laagers*. Authors agreed that this was another sign of female bravery, but with hindsight it was also noted that the front line was no place for a lady. It was suggested, for instance, that General Piet Cronjé was severely hampered in his movements by the presence of about a hundred women in his camp, which led to his defeat.⁸⁰ Despite these examples, it should be remembered that descriptions of female bravery were much rarer than those of the heroics of their men. In general, Boer women were seen as onlookers to the conflict, who guarded the morale of the republics and urged their men to fight for independence.

Such ideas indicate that many contemporaries thought of the war in terms of mentality and national character. In general, there was much praise for the militia system from observers in the Netherlands because it was seen as the ultimate sign of patriotism. In 1897, C.B. Spruyt, who greatly admired the Boers for their character, already predicted that the ‘tough’ men of the republics would be able to withstand the degenerate recruits that would be fighting on the British side.⁸¹ In September 1899, he had not lost any of his enthusiasm and was one of the few authors in the Netherlands who actually welcomed the looming war as an exciting test for the Dutch race in South Africa: ‘a spectacle through which people come to

⁷⁵ For a dramatised version cf. Penning, *De leeuw van Modderspruit*, 95-97.

⁷⁶ *Neerlandia*, vol 4. (April 1900), 46. The picture was also used for a postcard series published by P.A. Nierstrasz.

⁷⁷ Cf. chapter 2.

⁷⁸ ‘Een onderdrukte snik, een zucht, een kus en daarmee was het dure offer aan vaderland en vrijheid gebracht!’. Kloppers, “*Alles zal rech kom!*”, 106. Cf. letter from Johannesburg. *NRC*, 25 October 1899; Hellemans, *Met het Rode Kruis*, 148-149; Jeltjes, *Uit het dagboek van H. Jeltjes*, 4; W.F. Andriessen, ‘De vrouwen der Boeren’, in: *De Gids*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1903), 64-88, 79.

⁷⁹ Letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 26 June 1900. Cf. Andriessen, ‘De vrouwen der Boeren’, 80-81.

⁸⁰ Van Everdingen, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika*, 272; Andriessen, ‘De vrouwen der Boeren’, 80.

⁸¹ ‘stoere’. Spruyt, *Engeland en Transvaal*, 45. For Spruyt cf. chapter 2.

understand that it is worth to be human’.⁸² Another professor, Jan te Winkel, also saw moral advantages for the Boers over British soldiers, who were mainly professionals. He pointed out that the Boers fought for a just cause and to defend their families, homes and independence. Therefore, he concluded, they were better motivated to fight.⁸³

People with a military background were more interested in the practical aspects of the commando-structure and one of the most interesting features of the war to them was to see a militia system in action. There was much discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of this way of fighting, which touched upon developing ideas about modern warfare and highlighted the troubled relationship that the Boers had with modernity. On the one hand there was much praise for the technical aspects of the republics’ military system. The swift mobilisation of the commandos in the weeks before the war made a good impression and it was reported with due pride that the NZASM (the most important Dutch company in South Africa) played an important role in the transportation of the burghers to the front lines.⁸⁴ Another of the commandos’ skills that was widely admired was their marksmanship. This was seen as a combined result of the typical Boer lifestyle, in which boys learned how to shoot from a young age, and the fact that Kruger had armed his men with the latest model of Mauser rifles. Military commentators were amazed by the efficiency of the Boer forces during the battles that took place in the first months of the war. The burghers had entrenched and camouflaged themselves well and shot with great accuracy without exposing their position, because they used smokeless powder, a recent invention. This combination of increased firepower and individual skill was considered to be of vital importance in modern warfare.⁸⁵

The enthusiasm about the Boer fighting methods spilled over to a wider audience in the Netherlands. The news that the Boer forces had advanced swiftly into British territory, surprising their adversaries and laying siege to them in Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking, was welcomed by many. The Boer victories in December 1899 and January 1900, when they reversed the British relief columns at the banks of the Tugela in Natal and the Modder River in the Northern Cape were celebrated enthusiastically. The Boers became heroic examples to men in the Netherlands, sometimes literally. Inspired by the commandos, an organisation that provided military training to citizens (*Vereeniging ‘Volksweerbaarheid’*) was founded in 1900 and from the start had the support of several prominent intellectuals and politicians. Two years later, it boasted that it had a membership of 14,000, with members going on holiday camps and practicing in field manoeuvres.⁸⁶

⁸² ‘een schouwspel, waardoor men er toe komt te begrijpen dat het toch de moeite waard is mensch te wezen’. C.B. Spruyt, introduction to: ‘Ratane’, *Vrede in Zuid-Afrika*, viii.

⁸³ Te Winkel, *Waar het om gaat in Zuid-Afrika*, 21.

⁸⁴ Steinmetz, *De Nederlandsch Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorweg-Mij.*; Van Kretschmar van Veen, *Rapporten van den directeur J.A. van Kretschmar van Veen, 87-130*; *In memoriam NZASM*, 101 and 104-108.

⁸⁵ De Bloch, *Wat wij uit den Transvaalschen oorlog leeren kunnen*; idem, *Wat er uit den oorlog in Zuid-Afrika te leeren valt*; Ram, and Thomson, *Lessen uit den Zuid-Afrikaanschen oorlog*, 329-332.

⁸⁶ M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 143; Te Velde, *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbesef*, 171-174; Bossenbroek, *Holland op zijn breedst*, 252.

The leaders of the pro-Boer movement also saw disadvantages to this huge enthusiasm, however. During the last months of 1899, Leyds became concerned that the public in Europe might become overconfident about the military abilities of the Boer republics. This became apparent when he tried to launch a petition that called upon the international community to settle the conflict between the Boers and the British by means of diplomatic arbitration, so that the war could end quickly. His old friend J.P. Moltzer and his new assistant H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge edited the text, a draft of which had been provided by the French foreign office. The pamphlet was called *For Justice and peace. Appeal to the nations represented at Peace Conference at The Hague*, and described the principles of international justice and arbitration, ‘soaring high above the reasons of state’.⁸⁷

Meanwhile they tried to persuade prominent intellectuals from the Netherlands to sign the petition. However, there was much reluctance to do so, particularly in academic circles. One of the main critics was Te Winkel, who wrote to Leyds just before the great Boer victories in December 1899, saying that he thought it a mistake to ask for arbitration at a time when the burghers were doing so well on the battlefield in their ‘glorious struggle’.⁸⁸ Moreover, he did not agree with the contents of the petition, which he thought to be ‘bombastic’ and would make a ‘comical impression’ on many readers.⁸⁹ Te Winkel’s resistance to the petition led to much delay and although 3,000 intellectuals in the Netherlands had eventually signed it when it was published in March 1900, it did not have the intended effect.⁹⁰ Instead, Te Winkel published a pamphlet in which he gave his own visions on ‘the great importance of this mighty struggle in the southern hemisphere’.⁹¹ In contrast to the carefully phrased *Appeal to the nations*, this publication can be seen as a rather uncontrolled and rash outburst.⁹² Te Winkel warned his readers that the war would probably last a long time, although there was a ten to one chance that the Boers would win. That victory would have to be total, ridding South Africa of all British presence, he argued. If not, the linguist predicted, peace would be ‘no more than a truce’. Instead, he expressed the hope that the ‘persistent and lengthy’ struggle would be crowned with a federal state of South Africa under Dutch rule.⁹³

The hangover of this bold enthusiasm followed soon after. At the end of February, the reinforced British forces broke through the Boer positions and relieved Kimberley and

⁸⁷ ‘hoog boven de redenen van staat [...] stijgen’. *Voor gerechtigheid en vrede. Beroep op de natiën vertegenwoordigd bij het Haagsche vredescongres* ([no place], 1900). Draft, not ready for publication. ZA, NZAV library, P14. This pamphlet was rewritten several times and several versions can be found in different archival collections. Moreover, the translations show great disparities, so it is difficult to establish which text was read by the public.

⁸⁸ ‘roemrijke strijd’. Leyds, ed., *Tweede verzameling* I, 182-183.

⁸⁹ ‘bombastische’, ‘komiicken indruk’. Ibidem, 202.

⁹⁰ Leyds ed., *Tweede verzameling* I, xi; Kröll, *Die internationale Buren-Agitation*, 179-184; Van Niekerk, *Kruger se regterhand*, 236-238.

⁹¹ ‘de groote beteekenis van dezen machtigen worstelstrijd in ons Zuidelijk halfmond’. Te Winkel, *Waar het om gaat in Zuid-Afrika*, 3.

⁹² Te Velde, *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbefef*, 166.

⁹³ ‘niet meer dan een wapenstilstand’, ‘hardnekkig en langdurig’. Te Winkel, *Waar het om gaat in Zuid-Afrika*, 24-25.

Ladysmith. At the same time, General Cronjé was surrounded at Paardeberg and forced to surrender along with 4,000 men. These disasters brought to light the deficiencies of the military organisation of the republics. When they realised they were far outnumbered, many of the burghers took to their heels and fled, which enabled the British ‘steamroller’ to advance and occupy both Bloemfontein and Pretoria in a matter of months. This sudden demise of the Boers came as a shock to many people in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, some military experts had an explanation and wrote that the loose and individualistic structure of the commandos had its disadvantages in that it lacked a strong form of hierarchy, which made discipline a problem.⁹⁴ Already during the sieges, correspondents complained about how the boring camp life eroded morale, and reported that many burghers wanted to return home to their families.⁹⁵ Initially, the views on the lack of discipline by the Boers had been met with scepticism by the enthusiastic public in the Netherlands, but the more became known about the retreat after February 1900, the more credible they seemed.

The so-called sentiment of ‘going home’ (*huis toe gaan*) and reluctance to fight an enemy that was growing in strength, were recurrent themes in letters from the battle zone that appeared in newspapers and later in pro-Boer publications. Several of the Dutchmen who returned from South Africa during the war wrote about it, because they felt that the public in Europe was mistaken on this issue. Months after the great Boer defeats, Rompel published an essay in which he tried to explain the conduct of ‘the Boer on the warpath’ because he wanted to introduce some nuance to the idealised vision held by the public in the Netherlands, and the great disappointment that followed.⁹⁶ The retreat, he argued, was not cowardly behaviour, but was in keeping with the character of the Boers, who were less reckless than Europeans. Instead of holding their ground and continuing to fight to the last man, they preferred to take cover and retreat to fight another day.⁹⁷ Likewise, Cornelis Plokhooy, who fought in the *Hollandercorps* at Elandsplaag, tried to correct the view that the Boers lacked discipline. He described how the burghers kept on going while having to suffer hardships in the field, exposed to the elements. This to him showed that the Boers did have discipline, which was not based on a strict hierarchy like in Europe, but on less tangible factors, such as respect.⁹⁸ Not all veterans gave the Boers as much credit concerning the events taking place in the first half of 1900. Dietlof van Warmelo was one of the most critical authors who wrote about this issue. In his view, the main reason for the crumbling morale of the Boer forces was the ‘leave plague’, which meant that during the sieges, many burghers randomly took off for visits home often without informing their officers.⁹⁹ After the fall of Ladysmith, where he was stationed,

⁹⁴ Analysis C. de Wit. *NRC*, 19 April 1900.

⁹⁵ Letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 23 January 1900. For more extensive descriptions of life in the siege camp cf. Van Warmelo, *Mijn commando en guerrilla-commando leven*; Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 32-78. Van Warmelo was negative about the situation around Ladysmith, while Plokhooy described it as quite adventurous.

⁹⁶ ‘den Boer op oorlogspad’. Rompel, *Uit den tweeden (Transvaalsche) vrijheidsoorlog*, 11-12.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, 1-3. For a similar analysis cf. essay by F.V. Engelenburg. *NRC*, 27 February 1900.

⁹⁸ Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 62-64.

⁹⁹ ‘verlofplaag’. Van Warmelo, *Mijn commando en guerrilla-commando leven*, 29. For the publication of this

this became worse and the morale of the commandos collapsed altogether, he argued.¹⁰⁰

While Plokhooy and Van Warmelo thought differently about the courage of individual burghers, they both noted how Boer officers failed to stop the collapse of the morale of their men during the chaotic retreat.¹⁰¹ This supported more general criticism on the overall strategy of the Boers. Instead of pushing through in the early months of the war while they had the upperhand, the republics’ forces halted to besiege towns where relatively small garrisons were stationed. As a result, the British had the opportunity to regroup in the south and reinforce the relief army. In several publications, the old Boer commanders, and Joubert in particular, were pointed out as the main culprits. One critic in Pretoria, a certain M. Mettius, had a rather peculiar theory on the lack stamina displayed by him and other elderly generals of the Transvaal, which he explained in a pamphlet. The author suggested that they had been entranced by a fifth column of British hypnotists, who had infiltrated the republic in the years preceding the South African War. According to Mettius, this explained why the Boer leaders, who had fought so bravely in the past, acted so indecisively.¹⁰²

The majority of correspondents had explanations that were more down-to-earth, but often revealed contradictory feelings on the matter. This is shown in responses to the death of Joubert in March 1900. Although there was admiration for his role during the Transvaal War of 1880-1881, some letters and reports from the SAR contained explicit criticism of his political views and personality. His dislike of *Hollanders* in particular was mentioned as one of his weaknesses.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, there were also people who were more positive about Joubert’s achievements and his admirers were at great pains to navigate between the controversies that surrounded him. The publisher and member of the NZAV executive committee J.A. Wormser, who had met the general in 1896, wrote a biography in which he described him as a prime example of a *Voortrekker* and praised him as a great patriot. The author conceded that Joubert did have a strong polarising effect, but he explained this as a typical flaw in the Boer character and left out sensitive issues such as the general’s hate of *Hollanders*.¹⁰⁴ Wormser also wrote about the Boers’ unsuccessful strategy during the war, although he did not offer a single explanation for this failure. On the one hand, he thought it a possible result of Joubert’s miscalculation that the British would surrender after their first defeats, just as they did in 1881.¹⁰⁵ However, Wormser argued that it could also have been the result of the innate compassion of the general, who was aware that most of his men were

book cf. chapter 3.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, 42.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, 42-3; Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 100-101.

¹⁰² Mettius, *Het hypnotisme in den oorlog*. The pamphlet was initially written for the public in South Africa, but in the introduction the publisher wrote that it might have more effect in Europe. In *NRC* it was described as ‘an eccentric pamphlet’ (*‘een zonderling geschrift’*). *NRC*, 19 June 1900.

¹⁰³ Letter from Pretoria. *NRC* 13 May 1900; letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 26 June 1900; Jeltjes, *Uit het dagboek van H. Jeltjes*, 7.

¹⁰⁴ Wormser, *Drie en zestig jaren in dienst der vrijheid*, 99 and 106.

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, 120.

fathers and therefore did not consider their lives disposable.¹⁰⁶ In this way, Joubert remained a hero, albeit a controversial one.

The failure of the old Boer generals and the hasty retreat of the republics’ forces did not mean that all hope was lost. New leaders came forward who seemed to be well suited to continuing the struggle. Louis Botha, who became famous after his successes during the battles at the Tugela River, such as Colenso and Spion Kop, succeeded Joubert as commander-in-chief of the Transvaal forces. After his surrender, General Cronjé, who in the view of commentators made serious mistakes by allowing himself to be cornered by Lord Roberts, was replaced by Koos de la Rey, who had become famous for his conduct at the victorious battles at the Northern Cape. Command of the OFS forces was taken over by Christiaan de Wet, who probably became the most legendary of all Boer heroes, establishing his reputation with daring raids on convoys, outwitting the British army and getting the best out of his men.¹⁰⁷

During the tense first half of 1900, these new military leaders seemed to embody everything that was good in the Boer military system. They were seen as strong individuals who could inspire – or push – their men to continue the fight against the enemy. Moreover, in their battle plans they displayed an in-depth knowledge of the terrain and made full use of the shooting skills and mobility of the Boer combatants. Not everybody in the Netherlands despaired, therefore, when it became clear that the forces of the republics could not hold their positions and retreated. One military commentator, for instance, did not consider the relief of Ladysmith to be an important victory for the British, because the Boer forces there had not been surrounded and had regrouped, which was a sign that they would keep on fighting. ‘It cannot be said enough that the war in fact only has started now.’¹⁰⁸ Such statements did not disappear from Dutch newspapers when the British army continued its advance. A few days before the capture of Pretoria in June 1900, Leyds publicly announced that he ‘still trusted in the courage of the Boers’ and expected the struggle to continue.¹⁰⁹ Another factor that gave hope to people in the Netherlands was the state of the British army, which, despite its enormous size, did not seem to be coping very well with the situation in South Africa. Just as the image of the Boers was marked by a degree of ambiguity, the depiction of the British military was by no means unequivocal, an issue which will be described in the following section.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, 75-76 and 119.

¹⁰⁷ For early biographies of this new generation of Boer generals see: Rompel, *Uit den tweede (Transvaalsche) vrijheidsoorlog*, 24-43. Cf. chapter 6.

¹⁰⁸ ‘Het kan niet genoeg gezegd worden, dat de oorlog eigenlijk nu eerst begonnen is.’ Analysis C. de Wit. *NRC*, 7 March 1900.

¹⁰⁹ ‘nog steeds vertrouwen had in de dapperheid van de Boeren’. Statement Leyds. *NRC*, 2 June 1900; interview with Leyds. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 8 June 1900.

Britain’s grave

In general, most Dutch authors agreed with Smuts’s metaphor of the mighty British Empire threatening to crush the tiny Boer republics. Schutte therefore argues that much of the sympathy for the commandos was the result of the Dutch public siding with the underdog, a phenomenon that can be explained by the highly moralistic view of foreign policy held by the country at the time.¹¹⁰ Many commentators of the day expressed the hope that the injustice of the war would not go unpunished and referred, for example, to Bismarck’s prediction that South Africa would become Britain’s grave.¹¹¹ In this sense, observers also drew parallels between the situation in South Africa and historical events. The comparison between the struggle of the Boers against the British and the Dutch war for independence against Spain in the sixteenth century, both portrayed as fights of a small people against imperial tyranny, remained popular in the Netherlands.¹¹² Likewise, many people saw similarities between the South African War and the American Revolution, hoping that the Dutch population would be able to forge a ‘United States of South Africa’ independent from the British Empire.¹¹³

Looking at current affairs, there was also much reference to the Irish question, which was considered the outcome of more than three centuries of British colonial oppression.¹¹⁴ Boissevain, who had started his journalistic career reporting on the Fenian movement in the 1860s and had an Irish wife, argued that the Dutch race was of ‘tougher fibre’ than the Celts and predicted great trouble if the British tried ‘to make a New Ireland in the South’.¹¹⁵ Kuyper noted how the crisis in South Africa might have had consequences for the political circumstances in the British Isles, where the Irish and the Welsh might have increased pressure on the government for greater autonomy.¹¹⁶ In fact, Leyds stood in direct contact with several figures from the Irish nationalist movement in the hope of pressurising the government in London.¹¹⁷ Also in South Africa a number of Irish emigrants chose the side of

¹¹⁰ Schutte, *Nederland en de Afrikaners*, 209.

¹¹¹ *Een sensationeel brief uit Zuid-Afrika*, 26; *De Boeren op Sint-Helena*, 78; editorial from *Le Petit Bleu*. NRC, 15 October 1901.

¹¹² Boissevain, *The Struggle of the Dutch Republics: Open Letter to an American Lady*; Simons, *Stambelangen*, 26-30.

¹¹³ Kuyper, *De crisis in Zuid-Afrika*, 3-5, 7 and 11; Boissevain, *The Struggle of the Dutch Republics: Open Letter to an American Lady*, 7; ‘Buitenlandsch overzicht’, in: *De Gids*, vol. 64 nr. 1 (1900), 190-194; Essay. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 23 January 1900; letter by the London correspondent. NRC 18 December 1900; editorials. NRC, 1 February, 21 May, 6 and 20 September 1901; article from *New Age*. NRC, 12 October 1901. For the term ‘*Vereenigde Staten van Zuid-Afrika*’ cf. Te Winkel, *Waar het om gaat in Zuid-Afrika*, 25. The same comparison was made in many English contemporary sources.

¹¹⁴ Cf. cartoons in: ‘Korpl. Achilles’, *Aanleiding tot den Engelsch-Transvaalschen oorlog*, [3]; Kras and Ponten, *Kronings-idylle*, [7].

¹¹⁵ Boissevain, *The Struggle of the Dutch Republics: Open letter to the Duke of Devonshire*, 45.

¹¹⁶ Kuyper, *De crisis in Zuid-Afrika*, 60.

¹¹⁷ NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 191, 326 and 615. The Irish movement was quite fragmented, however, and there were quite a lot of internal tensions. The relations of the European pro-Boers with the various factions was therefore complicated and often strained. Davey, *The British Pro-Boers*, 143.



Dead British soldiers on the battlefield of Spion Kop. Photo taken by the Dutchman Jan van Hoepen.

the Boers and formed their own regiment in the Transvaal, which became famous during the guerrilla war. Nevertheless, a greater number of Irishmen fought on the side of the British, who, in the eyes of many pro-Boers, used them as cannon fodder, sacrificing them in order to promote the interests of corrupt capitalists and statesmen – the same men who had oppressed their people for so long.

According to many pro-Boer propagandists, the higher echelons of the British army were of the same mould as deceitful imperialists, such as Milner and Chamberlain. At the beginning of the war, there were a few exceptions, though.¹¹⁸ The commanders who withstood the sieges of Ladysmith and Mafeking, General George White and Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, were praised in the Dutch press for their steadfast defence of these towns, notwithstanding some incidents that were condemned, such as the use of black troops at Mafeking.¹¹⁹ The depiction of other high-ranking officers was more negative. According to many commentators, the incompetence of the army command was particularly striking during the first phase of the war, which resulted in the large defeats in Natal and the Northern Cape. It appeared that the British underestimated the power of the Boers and rushed forward,

¹¹⁸ For an exception cf. ‘Britsche aanvoerders in Zuid-Afrika’, *De Militaire Gids*, vol. 19 (1900), 26-31. The anonymous authors of this article argued that also the British generals were victims of the greed of the capitalists.

¹¹⁹ For White cf. Editorial. *NRC*, 4 March 1900; *NRC*, 30 March 1900. For Baden-Powell cf. *NRC*, 17 May 1900; Kloppers, “*Alles zal rech kom!*”, 43; Andriessen, *Gedenkboek van den oorlog in Zuid-Afrika*, 151-154 and 173-178. The appreciation for Baden-Powell might have been the reason why the Scouts movement was so popular in the Netherlands in later decades.

without a proper assessment of the situation, after which they were repelled. The generals who suffered these humiliations, Redvers Buller and Lord Methuen, were targeted in the pro-Boer press throughout the war. The disastrous way in which Buller commanded the battle of Spion Kop (24 January 1900) became a famous example of his incompetence, which led to the butchering of his own men. The general failed to notice that the Boers occupied higher ground, and when the British troops reached the top of the hill they were exposed to a terrible bombardment. Despite the triumph of their victory, burghers who witnessed the battlefield just after the fight described what they saw there as a ‘terrible spectacle’.¹²⁰ Photos showing scores of dead British soldiers littered on the rocky ground were banned in Britain, but in the Netherlands they were published in several magazines and even printed on postcards, making them icons of the horrors of war.¹²¹

In January 1900, Lord Roberts arrived in South Africa and took over supreme command from Buller, assisted by Herbert Kitchener. From a military point of view there was admiration for the way they outflanked the Boer positions in a dazzling campaign, although it was also noted that the rapid advance exposed the British forces to raids. Both Roberts, who had fought a bloody guerrilla war in Afghanistan, and Kitchener, who had commanded the violent campaign against the Mahdist army in the Sudan, were notorious for the unscrupulous means they used to subdue their enemies. In the early months of 1900, it appeared that they were not going to spare their own men either, exhausting them so much that many died of hunger and disease. In her memoirs, which appeared after the war, a farmer’s daughter from the OFS described what she witnessed when the British army stopped at her farm. The officers arrogantly commandeered the comfortable house and had a lavish meal.¹²² By contrast, a regiment of ragged looking Scots was left out in the field. They had to find their own food and some were so hungry they ate from the pig’s trough. ‘Even the *kaffers* were surprised about that and did not understand that people could be starved to such an extent.’¹²³

In this sense, the British servicemen were seen as victims of the war too. In many descriptions of the large-scale battles during the first phase of the war, there was quite a lot of sympathy for the ordinary soldiers, the ‘Tommies’. What was most apparent was their bravery, as they kept advancing towards the Boer lines until the retreat was ordered, even though they came under heavy fire. According to commentators, this sort of rigid discipline was typical for the European style of military conduct, which was developed for professional armies. There were clear advantages to this system, because the trained soldiers were not as fickle as the undisciplined Boers.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ ‘verschrikkelijk schouwspel’. Letter from a veteran of Spion Kop. *NRC*, 20 March 1900; report, probably by an officer who was present at the battle. *NRC*, 10 March 1900; Jeltens, *Uit het dagboek van H. Jeltens*, 9.

¹²¹ *Neerlandia*, vol. 4, (April 1900), 47-48. The photos were taken by a *Hollander*, Jan van Hoepen (1856-1922), who had a studio in Pretoria. Zweers, *De Boerenoorlog*, 19 and 26.

¹²² Van Helsdingen, *Vrouwenleed*. 33-34.

¹²³ ‘De kaffers zelfs waren daarover verbaasd, en konden het maar niet verstaan, dat menschen zoo uitgehongerd konden zijn.’ *Ibidem*, 36.

¹²⁴ Analysis C. de Wit. *NRC*, 19 April 1900.

But observers also noted disadvantages to this strategy, because the skills and intellect of the individual Tommies were inferior. This made them totally dependent on orders from their commanders, who were considered to be incompetent and careless about the fate of their men. Plokhooy described how at the Tugela officers fired at subordinates if they refused to advance, which to him showed that British pluck was born of the fear of their own leaders.¹²⁵ Another example of this was the way in which the dead and wounded were treated. It was noted in several sources that the burghers were very caring with their casualties, showed respect for their wounded enemies and even helped to bury those who had died with genuine respect. By contrast, the British were ordered to leave their wounded comrades on the battlefield or dump the corpses of those who died in battle in mass graves, which shocked Dutch eyewitnesses.¹²⁶

Another topic of discussion was the morale of the British soldiers. It was believed that they had been misled about their adversaries by the jingo press, which portrayed the Boers as bloodthirsty barbarians. In the Netherlands, many stories appeared about Tommies who discovered that the Boers were actually respectable after they met them. Plokhooy, for instance, wrote about it in his memoirs. He recalled how during a scouting mission after a nightly skirmish near Ladysmith he found a dying British officer. While the Boers did their best to make the last moments of this man as comfortable as possible, he told them that he had changed his mind about the inhabitants of the republics, who had been ‘slandered’ in England and were wrongly accused of not helping wounded men. With his last breath he asked for forgiveness.¹²⁷ There were also many such stories about British prisoners of war (PoWs), who were taken in large numbers during the first months of the war. Correspondents in Pretoria reported that they were treated kindly by the Boers, a fact which was often acknowledged by the officers, who thanked their guards.¹²⁸

Besides these positive stories, Dutch accounts also described the dark side of Tommy Atkins that was exposed during the war. As casualties rose and the British commanders asked for more men to subdue the Boers, the quality of the recruits declined considerably, according to Dutch commentators.¹²⁹ There was some degree of sympathy for the Yeomanry, volunteers from the middle classes who joined with patriotic enthusiasm but had little experience.¹³⁰ It was believed, however, that the majority of the new soldiers were dragged from the slums of London and that these men were in poor physical condition, were ill-trained and had low

¹²⁵ Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 96-97.

¹²⁶ Ibidem, 92-93; Hellemans, *Met het Roode Kruis mee*, 106; Jeltens, *Uit het dagboek van H. Jeltens*, 24.

¹²⁷ ‘belasterd’. Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 73. For a similar account cf. letter from Dutch veteran of Spion Kop. *NRC*, 20 March 1900.

¹²⁸ Letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 28 November 1899; editorial. *NRC*, 29 November 1899; Wormser jr., *Een der oorzaken van den oorlog in Zuid-Afrika*, 8. One of the most famous prisoners was the young Winston Churchill, who also wrote that he was treated well by his captors, which was appreciated in the Netherlands. Kuyper, *De crisis in Zuid-Afrika*, 45-46. After his famous escape from Pretoria, however, he fell in the pro-Boers’ esteem. *NRC*, 31 January 1900.

¹²⁹ Te Winkel, *Waar het om gaat in Zuid-Afrika*, 212; Kuyper, *De crisis in Zuid-Afrika*, 60.

¹³⁰ Editorial. *NRC*, 30 December 1899.

moral standards. The longer the war went on, the more the degeneration of the Tommies became a topic of discussion, and in some sources it was even suggested that England’s prisons had been emptied in order to raise enough men.¹³¹ Troops that were recruited in the dominions were considered more competent in military matters, but became notorious for their cruel behaviour. The recruits that were levied in South Africa in particular – including Afrikaners who joined the imperial forces – were believed to have committed war crimes, as they had an innate hatred of the Boers.¹³²

The lack of competent and well-behaved soldiers showed a fundamental weakness in the British military system, and after the occupation of Bloemfontein and Pretoria the military commentator of the *NRC* wrote that the territorial gain was just a sham victory. ‘There is something rotten in the army’, he declared with due sense of drama.¹³³ This development was not only considered to be negative for the British war effort, but it threatened to destabilise public order in South Africa. Letter writers from Cape Town and the occupied republics increasingly complained about the behaviour of the troops. Apart from the systematic destruction of civilian property, which will be discussed in the following chapter, the British had a bad reputation for their loose morale. One problem was considered to be their preference for coloured prostitutes, which was strongly disapproved of by the inhabitants of the republics.¹³⁴ In addition, accusations cropped up concerning the raping of Boer women, which was considered a severe stain on the reputation of the British army. It was the British journalist William Stead who published the most significant report on this matter, after he had received documents concerning the Spoelstra case that had been smuggled out of Pretoria.¹³⁵ Stead’s pamphlet was translated and disseminated throughout Europe by the ANV press office.¹³⁶

Notwithstanding the outcry against the mischief committed by white soldiers, the worst affront in the view of Dutch commentators was the recruitment of black people to fight against the Boers. Throughout the war, there were reports that the British government was contemplating the large-scale transportation of coloured troops to South Africa. Citing the rumour that a contingent of Maoris had offered their services to the British Empire, the London correspondent of one Dutch newspaper shuddered at the very thought that the imperialists ‘called on the help of barbarians against fellow Christians’.¹³⁷ Even more

¹³¹ Feith and Van Ponten, *Pillen voor Joe*, [21]; analysis C. de Wit. *NRC*, 8 November 1901.

¹³² Editorial based on ANV report. *NRC*, 6 October 1900; report of a skirmish involving the Imperial Light Horse. *NRC*, 12 January 1901. In 1902, reports emerged on unlawful executions by the Australian Bushfield regiment. Several officers from this regiment were put on trial and executed and the Dutch press gave detailed accounts of the court proceedings in order to show the cruelty of these men. *NRC*, 5, 6, 8, 9, 11 and 19 April 1902.

¹³³ Analysis C. de Wit. *NRC*, 27 July 1900.

¹³⁴ Kuyper, *De crisis in Zuid-Afrika*, 47; interview with former inhabitant of Bloemfontein. *NRC*, 8 May 1900.

¹³⁵ Krebs, *Gender, Race and the Writing of Empire*, 99-100. Cf. chapter 3.

¹³⁶ *NRC*, 21 May 1902.

¹³⁷ ‘de hulp van barbaren in te roepen tegen mede-christenen’. *NRC*, 30 December 1900. Cf. *NRC*, 28 December 1900, 1 and 3 January 1901, 29 January and 9 April 1902.

worrying was the recurring news that the British were attempting to recruit local black ‘tribes’. Many historians today argue that contemporaries did not acknowledge this aspect of the war, which is probably true, if one looks at British sources.¹³⁸ However, it was quite an important topic in the pro-Boer propaganda campaign. Already before the war, Dutch authors generally argued that the British ‘native policy’ endangered the stability of colonial rule in South Africa, while the segregation system in the republics was praised as a means to ensure social order. After October 1899, such views reappeared in pro-Boer propaganda, which asserted that the British recruited Africans, while the Boers tried to keep them out of the ‘white man’s war’.

In most pro-Boer accounts, black people were depicted as treacherous spies, who provided the British with intelligence. But it was also noted that they often provided inaccurate information, which was seen as an explanation for the large number of mistakes that appeared in the jingo press. In Dutch media, the exaggerated reports about British victories and Boer atrocities in the London newspapers on several occasions were mocked as ‘*kafferstories*’.¹³⁹ Accusations that the British supplied black people with firearms were considered to be far more serious. In interviews, both Leyds and George McCall Theal warned against the dangers of this policy, predicting that the ‘tribes’ would turn against all white settlers in South Africa.¹⁴⁰ Officially, the British denied such allegations, but from the beginning of the war, information reached the Netherlands that indicated that this indeed take place. These documents, like articles from South African newspapers and pictures, were widely distributed.¹⁴¹ One of the most famous pieces of evidence from the early phase of the conflict was a photo that was published in the *London Illustrated News* of January 1900, which depicted armed blacks in Rhodesia, with the text ‘some of Khama’s trained soldiers, now acting with us’. Leyds ordered his staff to send a circular to all the SAR consuls and the European press to draw their attention to this publication.¹⁴² In the view of many pro-Boer propagandists, such material exposed the moral bankruptcy of the British Empire. But the concerns about the use of black troops and other acts that were considered to be war crimes should also be seen in the context of emerging ideas about international law. The following section will explore how the pro-Boer media reflected on such matters.

¹³⁸ In recent decades, however, there has been a marked interest in black participation in the South African War. Cf. Warwick, *Black People and the South African War*; Nasson, *Adam Esau’s War*; Idem, ‘Africans at War’.

¹³⁹ *NRC*, 14 November 1899; Letter from Cape Town in *Zwolsche Courant*. *NRC*, 12 March 1900; *NRC*, 13 April 1900; interview of Dr Poutsma. *NRC*, 11 June 1901; editorial. *NRC*, 18 January 1902.

¹⁴⁰ Excerpt from interview with Leyds in *Le Matin*. *NRC*, 24 December 1899; interview with Theal. *NRC*, 1 February 1900. Cf. *NRC*, 17 November 1899.

¹⁴¹ For such material cf. ZA, collection ANV/II, file 1.

¹⁴² Leyds ed., *Tweede verzameling* I, 337. It was mentioned in several newspapers in the Netherlands. Editorial *NRC*, 1 February 1900; *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 2 February 1900; *De Telegraaf*, 4 February 1900.

From The Hague to Derdepoort: war atrocities

In the light of the alleged atrocities committed during the South African War, many references were made to the Peace Conference that was held in The Hague from May to July 1899, a few months before the outbreak of hostilities. The Dutch government acted as a host for this meeting and Foreign Minister W.H. de Beaufort had the onerous task of inviting the participants. He feared that the British might boycott the conference if the Boer republics attended, which would have endangered the overall success of the meeting, and so he decided to leave the SAR and the OFS off the list of those invited. In addition to criticism in the newspapers, there was also a political backlash when Kuyper, who at the time was the leader of the opposition, attacked the government in Parliament. Several historians consider this to be an opportunistic move by Kuyper to discredit his political rival De Beaufort, which eventually backfired. Initially, this attack was supported by several Members of Parliament, but in the end a vote of no confidence was not passed and De Beaufort’s decision was condoned as a solid piece of *Realpolitik*, which was in keeping with the overall policy of neutrality.¹⁴³ Leyds also accepted this, but kept in contact with the Dutch government about the proceedings of the Peace Conference and its implications to the Boer republics. In order to avoid controversy, he did not visit The Hague during the conference, but he was invited by First Minister N.G. Pierson (his former tutor) and De Beaufort to discuss the outcomes shortly afterwards.¹⁴⁴

The British government argued that because the Boers had not officially signed the Hague Convention – which set out rules about international arbitration, conduct on the battlefield, treatment of PoWs and civilians and the use of weaponry – the treaty did not apply to the South African War. While this was officially correct, Leyds and other propagandists reasoned that the new rules of engagement should be implemented nonetheless. The Boer republics, they argued, were civilised and independent nations, and so from a moral point of view they had the right to be treated according to European standards.¹⁴⁵ In addition, the British were accused of violating the Geneva Convention that contained rules regarding the treatment of wounded soldiers and the conduct of the Red Cross, which had been signed by both republics. In 1902, the physician E.G.A. ten Siethoff wrote a pamphlet in which he asserted that, although there was still quite a lot of uncertainty as to how these rules should be applied in practice and many definitions remained vague, they represented ‘fundamental principles’.¹⁴⁶

In general, historians see such writings as evidence that there was a great interest in

¹⁴³ M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 178-180; Van Koppen, *De geuzen van de negentiende eeuw*, 150-161. Cf. Schutte, *De Vrije Universiteit I*, 82, who argues that Kuyper won the favour of the public opinion.

¹⁴⁴ Leyds ed., *Eenige correspondentie*, 83-87.

¹⁴⁵ *Voor gerechtigheid en vrede*.

¹⁴⁶ ‘les principes fondamentaux’. Ten Siethoff, *La convention de Genève*, 3.

international law in the Netherlands, which can be explained by its status as a small nation.¹⁴⁷ There was, however, also a link with the South African question. In emphasising that the Boers had a right to be treated according to the Geneva and the Hague Conventions, it was asserted that they were a civilising force in Africa and could not be placed on the same level as the coloured enemies the British faced in other colonial wars. Moreover, the British atrocities were in keeping with the idea of a ‘century of wrong’ and were considered to be part of the violent attack on the republics, in which every means possible was used to subdue the Boers. The press in the Netherlands extensively reported on these issues, in order to expose these machinations. In December 1899, Boissevain wrote about the atrocities that were committed on the battlefield by both sides, which he accepted as the unavoidable result of the ‘merciless lust to cut and kill’ that overcame all combatants in the heat of the moment. However, he accused the jingo press of giving a one-sided view, portraying the Boers as ‘treacherous savages’ and so inciting their troops to slaughter them like they did the Mahdi army at Omdurman.¹⁴⁸ An editor of the *NRC* wrote in a similar vein, arguing that not all reports from the Boer governments were necessarily true, which could be explained by the confusing situation, but that they at least acted out of good faith, while the British censors wilfully manipulated their dispatches, in a ‘despicable’ way.¹⁴⁹ Despite these virtuous words, the pro-Boer media were hardly less biased in their coverage of the alleged atrocities, and the evidence that was put forward to support these indictments was not always unproblematic.

One of the most persistent protests was against the use of expanding, or ‘dum-dum’, bullets. The Convention of The Hague banned this sort of ammunition in wars between the signatory nations and there was much pressure on the British government not to use it against the Boers either. Already months before the war, there were rumours that Britain was shipping dum-dum bullets to South Africa on a large scale, which Leyds used in his efforts to persuade the European powers to mediate.¹⁵⁰ After the conflict had started, many reports appeared in the press and in pamphlets that suggested that the British actually used such ammunition. But these allusions appeared to be incorrect at times. In June 1900, a military magazine, *De Militaire Spectator*, published a photo of wrappings of Mark II bullets, made by the dum-dum factory near Calcutta that had been found on the battlefield at Nicholson’s Nek. They did not provide any commentary, implying that these were the infamous expandable bullets. Although they considered the use of such ammunition by the British to be a fact, the editors of *NRC* criticised the magazine in this case, because Mark II bullets were hard-nosed and therefore not forbidden by the Convention of The Hague, which banned Mark IV. What ensued was a lengthy and rather technical polemic about the exact nature of expandable ammunition, but at least this shows that the indictments against the British were not always

¹⁴⁷ M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 209.

¹⁴⁸ ‘medoogenlooze lust om te kerven en te dooden’, ‘verraderlijke wilden’. Editorial C. Boissevain, *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 12 December 1899.

¹⁴⁹ ‘verachtelijk’. *NRC*, 29 November 1899 and 28 April 1900.

¹⁵⁰ Leyds ed., *Eenige correspondentie*, 58-60, 62 and 63-65.

uncontested.¹⁵¹

In addition to this sort of material, there were many accounts of wounded burghers who had supposedly been shot with dum-dum bullets. One male nurse from the Dutch Red Cross graphically described how he was haunted at night by the sight of a young man whose shoulder had been blown off by expanding ammunition.¹⁵² But this sort of evidence was not unproblematic either. In 1901, Leyds’s secretary sent out letters to three Red Cross doctors who had returned from South Africa, asking them for statements that they had seen wounds inflicted by dum-dum bullets. Most of them gave cautious replies. G.W.S. Lingbeek, for example, replied that he had encountered large wounds that could have been caused by expanding bullets, but might also have been inflicted by conventional ammunition fired at close range; ‘in my opinion all this is not incontestable proof’, he wrote.¹⁵³ Needless to say, this letter was not published, but a statement by another doctor who had recently returned from the war zone and did declare that he had seen dum-dum-inflicted wounds was forwarded to the ANV press office, who made a press circular of it.¹⁵⁴

British reports on dum-dum bullets that had been found at Boer positions were assessed quite differently. Some correspondents admitted that in some instances, they might have been used by the burghers. They argued, however, that the Boers had not bought dum-dum bullets themselves, but had taken them from the British, using them in retaliation and in far fewer instances.¹⁵⁵ Others insinuated that the burghers used such ammunition for hunting only.¹⁵⁶ In general, pro-Boer commentators preferred to discuss the ‘humane’ Mauser rifles used by the Boers. These were of a smaller calibre and fired steel-coated bullets that barely caused tissue damage.¹⁵⁷

Another recurrent complaint that was put forward by both sides was the violation of the Red Cross. On several occasions, British commanders claimed that the burghers shot at ambulances. These charges were dismissed by the Dutch press, however. The Boer governments sent an official letter of complaint to all foreign consuls in Pretoria in which they accused the British army of using the Red Cross as a cover for military convoys, making them justified targets.¹⁵⁸ Later during the war, it was even rumoured that high ranking British officers travelled in trains bearing the Red Cross sign, so that they would not be attacked by

¹⁵¹ *NRC* 19, 23 and 27 June 1900. In addition, a rectification was published that had been sent by the British ministry of war. *Militaire Spectator*, vol. 69 (1900), 628.

¹⁵² Jeltès, *Uit het dagboek van H. Jeltès*, 8.

¹⁵³ ‘m.i. [mijn inziens] zijn dit alles geen zekere bewijzen’. G.W.S. Lingbeek to L. Goldman [?], 13 April 1901. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 92.

¹⁵⁴ F. Rompel to SAR legation, 6 July 1901. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 92; ZA, collection ANV/II, file 14. I have found no references to this circular in other sources.

¹⁵⁵ Editorial. *NRC*, 3 March 1900; excerpt from letter by T.J. Krogh to his daughter. *NRC*, 16 March 1900; editorial. *NRC*, 6 August 1900; speech Dr E.C. van Leersum, member of Russo-Dutch ambulance. *NRC*, 29 November 1900; letter from C. de Wet delivered by German doctor. *NRC*, 27 April 1901.

¹⁵⁶ Excerpt from letter by Dr Romeyn to *Militair Geneeskundig Tijdschrift*. *NRC*, 16 August 1900.

¹⁵⁷ Jeltès, *Uit het dagboek van H. Jeltès*, 8; *NRC*, 7 February 1900.

¹⁵⁸ Kuyper, *De crisis in Zuid-Afrika*, 45. For a similar explanation cf. Plokhooij, *Met den Mauser*, 83.

the commandos.¹⁵⁹

By contrast, British acts against the Red Cross operating on the Boer side were extensively covered in the Dutch media, and letters from members of the ambulances about these violations were published at length. One incident that received a particularly large amount of attention took place in June 1900, when Kitchener stopped an ambulance train from the Dutch Red Cross and the NZASM near Pretoria. He ordered that the national tricolour of the Netherlands be removed, thereby breaking the Geneva Convention, which stated that Red Cross convoys should always bear the flag of their country of origin. In letters home, the Dutch doctors reported that Kitchener had acted arrogantly, ignoring their protests and stating that he did not ‘allow any other flag in this country except the British’.¹⁶⁰ Another notorious incident was the arrest of an ambulance team led by Dr Koster outside Pretoria, also in June 1900. The British accused him of carrying secret documents and ammunition for the Boers. In his official report, Koster denied these allegations, writing that the letters in his possession were harmless, including an epistle by the wife of Louis Botha to her husband accompanying a piece of *biltong* (dried meat).¹⁶¹ The government in the Netherlands started an inquiry, but this did not prevent the male members of the ambulance from being deported to a PoW camp in Ceylon, while the female nurses were shipped back to Europe. The sluggish official response to these two cases was criticised by the president of the Dutch Red Cross, who felt that the reports on these incidents should have led to more decisive action, because the national honour had been offended.¹⁶²

Not only the violation of the Red Cross was an issue, but also the behaviour of the doctors. In letters from the battlefields it was asserted that the British medical services were insufficient, and that doctors and nurses often left their own casualties behind. By contrast, the members of the Dutch Red Cross wrote about their hard work and also that they treated British injured soldiers where they could.¹⁶³ To emphasise the value of these activities, the official report of the Dutch Red Cross on the South African War contained several letters of thanks to its medical staff, both from Boer leaders and from British soldiers.¹⁶⁴ There was much pride in the Netherlands about the work of these doctors and nurses and their compassion for all victims of an unjust war. Moreover, such stories were in keeping with the perception that the Boer side acted as humanely as possible because they did not ask for the conflict, whereas the British were ruthless in their corrupt efforts to conquer South Africa.

¹⁵⁹ *NRC*, 21 April 1901 and 23 February 1902; Kloppers, “*Alles zal rech kom!*”, 97-99.

¹⁶⁰ Letters of Red Cross doctors in *NRC*, 28 June 1900 and 26 July 1900; *De Vereeniging Het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis*, 293-296; Templeman van der Hoeven, *Gevangen op Ceylon*, 18-19. Templeman van der Hoeven’s letters first appeared in the *Utrechtsch Nieuwsblad*.

¹⁶¹ *De Vereeniging Het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis*, 201-207. For an account of a female nurse who was also arrested and subsequently deported to the Netherlands cf. Helleman, *Met het Roode Kruis mee*, 188-221.

¹⁶² *NRC*, 4 January, 28 February and 14 March 1902; Templeman van der Hoeven, *Gevangen op Ceylon*.

¹⁶³ For examples cf. letter Lingbeek. *NRC*, 15 May 1900; Jeltjes, *Uit het dagboek van H. Jeltjes*, 8 and 24.

¹⁶⁴ *De Vereeniging Het Roode Kruis*, 372-283; essay by J.C. Kakebeeke. *NRC*, 12 September 1900. For praise from Boer side cf. excerpt from *Volksstem*. *NRC*, 30 June 1900.

In the view of Dutch commentators, events that occurred during actual battles also showed that the Boers held the moral high ground. The battle of Elandslaagte, that took place at the start of the conflict, was seen as the first clear example of British cruelty, and remained a popular subject for propagandists throughout the war.¹⁶⁵ As has been mentioned, this confrontation was extensively covered in the Netherlands because of the last stand of the *Hollandercorps*. In addition, it became notorious for numerous incidents, which, according to Dutch observers, were the result of the imperialist’s lust for vengeance that had also affected the soldiers. These biases significantly affected Dutch coverage of the battle. After a large artillery bombardment, the British troops advanced, outnumbering the Boers almost ten to one. In the chaotic mêlée that followed, part of the Boer forces retreated, while others, including the Dutchmen, stood their ground. In official British reports, which reached Europe first, the republican forces were accused of raising a white flag, while they continued shooting. This led to numerous casualties and infuriated the advancing soldiers, it was suggested. These allegations were questioned in the Netherlands as a possible slander from the start. A few weeks later, letters from the Boer side arrived that exempted the commandos from guilt. It was argued that because of the chaos in the lines, one section tried to surrender while other commandos, who had not noticed this, continued firing. Whatever the case, this incident was not a deliberate violation of the war conventions according to these sources.¹⁶⁶

Dutch authors were of the opinion that the fury of the British had other reasons, namely pent up frustration provoked by jingo propaganda. Several reports mentioned that the Highlander regiment broke through the Boer lines with the war cry, ‘Remember Majuba!’ The reference to Colley’s defeat in 1881 was illustrative, according to pro-Boers, because it showed that the British were not fighting for a just cause but in order to take revenge for humiliations they had suffered in the past.¹⁶⁷ This attitude became even clearer during the aftermath of the battle. After the Boers’ defences had been breached, a wild and uncoordinated retreat ensued. This gave the 5th Lancers cavalry regiment the opportunity to charge, during which many fleeing burghers were killed or taken prisoner. Throughout the war, numerous accounts were published of helpless Boers who were slaughtered, even after they had been captured.¹⁶⁸ What was even more scandalous in the view of Dutch authors was

¹⁶⁵ For more recent descriptions of the battle and its aftermath cf. Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* I, 245-258; Pakenham, *The Boer War*, 138-141.

¹⁶⁶ Editorial based on official report by P. Joubert and letter from an Irish chaplain. *NRC*, 18 November 1899; ‘Met het Hollander Corps te velde’, *NRC*, 23 January 1900. For indirect accounts cf. despatch by Steyn to Kruger. *NRC*, 19 January 1900; Kloppers, “*Alles zal rech kom!*”, 37. Throughout the war, both Boer and British sources accused each other of misusing the white flag.

¹⁶⁷ Editorial commentary on letter from a Dutchman who was at Elandslaagte. *NRC*, 23 November 1899.

¹⁶⁸ Excerpt from letter by veteran of Elandslaagte. *NRC*, 28 November 1899; letter from PoW ship *Penelope*. *NRC*, 5 December 1899; excerpts from letter by J.C. Kakebeeke. *NRC*, 19 December 1899; interview of F. Kannemeyer, *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 30 May 1900; Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* I, 138-142. In a footnote, Penning referred to British accounts published by William Stead, and he also used Kakebeeke’s story. Cf. Rompel, *Uit den tweede (Transvaalsche) vrijheidsoorlog*, 94; Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 28-31.



SLAGVELD HYENA'S.

De Lanciers vermoorden weerlooze Boeren die zich overgaven — daarmede het volkenrecht schendende.

Drawing of the lancer attack at Elandslaagte. Dutch text reads: ‘Battlefield hyenas. The Lancers kill defenceless Boers who surrendered – thereby breaking international law.’ From: C. Priem, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika*.

that this cavalry attack was described in British sources as a heroic and justified deed. The *Times* published a letter by an officer who wrote that it was ‘the most excellent pig-sticking’ and boasted that he managed to spear two men at once. These remarks were widely known in the Netherlands and became a showcase of the arrogant cruelty of the British. It was noted with disgust that this sort of crime was condoned in the London press, which, it was said, illustrated how public opinion there had been ‘blinded’.¹⁶⁹ A drawing depicting the charge that first appeared in the *London Illustrated News*, found its way to the Netherlands too. In Britain the caption described it as an ‘incident’ which was provoked by the Boers themselves when they kept firing at the advancing cavalry.¹⁷⁰ By contrast, Dutch authors referred to it as ‘slaughter’, during which ‘defenceless Boers’ were ‘murdered’.¹⁷¹

Another event during the first phase of the war that was considered by the pro-Boers to be a heinous crime took place at Derdepoort, in the western Transvaal on 25 November 1899. A local black ‘tribe’, the Bakgatla, raided this Boer settlement under the command of a number of British officers. They killed approximately twenty men and women, took eighteen of them as prisoners and drove them away together with their cattle.¹⁷² The impact of this skirmish on the course of the conflict was far less than the great battles that took place in Natal and the Cape, but it was nevertheless quite extensively reported on in the Netherlands as a ‘disgraceful page from the history of this war’.¹⁷³ This can be partly explained by the Dutch concern for international law. J.C.C. den Beer Poortugael, an expert in this field, listed Derdepoort as one of the atrocities that should be prosecuted under the Hague Convention.¹⁷⁴ But most concerns were regarding the impact that this event would have in South Africa. In material that reached the Netherlands, the indignation from the Boer side about the incident was clearly present. Detailed descriptions of the fight at Derdepoort and the official protest by the governments of the republics against the supposed armament of Africans were published in full on the pages of the press in the Netherlands.¹⁷⁵ Correspondents from the Transvaal wrote that the white inhabitants there were shocked by the events at Derdepoort, fearing great turmoil amongst the black population. They also stated that the Boers would never have considered using Africans against white opponents.¹⁷⁶ The editors of the *NRC* also saw

¹⁶⁹ ‘verblind’. Editorial Boissevain. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 17 December 1899; Kloppers, “*Alles zal rech kom!*”, 39.

¹⁷⁰ Cartoon from *London Illustrated News*, 2 December 1899. NASA Leyds collection, LEY 801.

¹⁷¹ ‘slachting’, ‘weerlooze Boeren’, ‘vermoorden’. Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* I, 136-137; Priem, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* II, [2]; Kolstee ed., *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika*, coverpage and [5].

¹⁷² The prisoners were released soon afterwards. Mbenga, ‘The Role of the Bakgatla of the Pilanesberg’, 91.

¹⁷³ ‘schandelijke bladzijde in de geschiedenis van dezen oorlog’. Letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 23 January 1900.

¹⁷⁴ Letter by J.C.C. den Beer Poortugael to the Institute for International Law at Neufchatel. *NRC*, 13 September 1900. In the actual text of the Hague Convention no references can be found to the use of black warriors against white people, but several contemporaries considered it to be a formal breach of the rules of engagement. Cf. Andriessen, *Gedenkboek van den oorlog in Zuid-Afrika*, 181-182.

¹⁷⁵ Eyewitness accounts. *NRC*, 27 January 1900; interview by the *Volksstem* with officers Kirsten and Stoffenberg. *NRC*, 22 February 1900; protests by SAR and OFS governments. *NRC*, 14 April 1900.

¹⁷⁶ Letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 11 January 1900; letter from Pretoria. *NRC* 23 January 1900; letter from J. Kiewit, in *De Standaard*. *NRC*, 1 March 1900.

Derdepoort as a continuation of the ‘century of wrong’. Referring to earlier colonial wars, they noted that the British had not shied away from using indigenous troops in other conflicts either. In comparison to other atrocities during the South African War, they noted that ‘the arousal of the black danger over the white minority in South Africa is an outrage, which can hardly be condemned too sharply’.¹⁷⁷

The skirmish at Derdepoort was followed by a punitive expedition by the Boers, who defeated the Bakgatla in a battle on 22 December 1899, killing around 150 people. Several villages were burned down during the days that followed. A report from the SAR newspaper *The Rand Post* that reached the Netherlands described these violent acts of revenge as a justified ‘chastisement’ of the ‘barbarians’ who had committed ‘crimes’.¹⁷⁸ The events at Derdepoort and its aftermath also inspired Penning. In his chronicle of the war, he provided his readers with a dramatic description of the ‘Kaffer assassination’ and the fate of the women who had been captured.¹⁷⁹ The writer also considered the Boer expedition to be a ‘justified punishment’ and the chapter had a happy ending. The victorious burghers joyfully celebrated Christmas, enjoying the chickens they had taken from the smouldering huts of the Bakgatla.¹⁸⁰

Conclusion

The strong responses by opinion-makers in the Netherlands to what happened at Elandslaagte and Derdepoort were part of the ongoing debate about the colonial future of South Africa and the question as to whether the Dutch or the British race would dominate there. It has been argued in this chapter that pro-Boer propaganda during the South African War was not a temporary fit of insanity, but a continuation of the debate on *stamverwantschap* that had started in the 1880s. At the beginning of the South African War, many publications appeared that considered the conflict to be the outcome of the ‘century of wrong’ following the British occupation of the Cape. The debate was not without ambivalence, even during the first months when there was much public enthusiasm for the men who defended the independence of Transvaal and the OFS. Certain doubts about the ‘kinsmen’ in South Africa continued to exist, for example concerning the reluctant attitude of the Afrikaners in the Cape, and the lack of discipline in the Boer commandos. Similarly, the British military presence in South Africa was strongly condemned, but at the same time there was a measure of sympathy for the common British soldiers, who were seen as victims of a war that had been initiated by corrupt statesmen and capitalists. When given the overarching colonial issue, however, propagandists in the Netherlands clearly sided with the Boers and attempted to provide an alternative to

¹⁷⁷ ‘het oproepen van het zwarte gevaar over de blanke minderheid in Zuid-Afrika is een wandaad, waarvoor men moeilijk zijn afkeuring te scherp kan uitspreken’. *NRC*, 11 January 1900.

¹⁷⁸ ‘tuchtiging’, ‘barbaren’, ‘wandaden’. Report from the *Rand Post*. *NRC*, 22 February 1900. Cf. Mbenga, ‘The Role of the Bakgatla of Pilanesberg’, 91-92. Mbenga argues that, looking at the entire war, the Bakgatla thrived from the cattle they took from the Boers, but also suffered heavy losses in terms of human life.

¹⁷⁹ ‘Kaffer-Sluijmoord’. Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* I, 342.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 351.

British coverage of the war. Reports of the burghers’ faults were largely glossed over or rejected as slander, while all available evidence of the atrocities committed by their adversaries was discussed extensively. In this regard, it was asserted that the republics were civilised nations that deserved to be treated according to international law.

The longer the war continued, the more emotional the indictments by propagandists became against the British ‘cruelties’. In April 1900, H. Wefers Bettink, professor in chemistry at the University of Utrecht, wrote a letter to protest against matters such as the use of dum-dum bullets, the recruitment of black soldiers and the mistreatment of Boer PoWs. He saw these as arrogant and cruel acts by the mighty British Empire, which were the result of its unscrupulous expansionism. He summarised the British point of view as: ‘The Transvaal must be subdued; its citizens should be exterminated as far as possible.’¹⁸¹ This sort of radical statement, in which the British imperialists were accused of trying to wipe out the Dutch race in South Africa, became more common after the territorial conquest of the Boer republics was completed in September 1900.

But there were also more hopeful signs. Although there was much disappointment at the commandos’ retreat, letters and reports from South Africa showed that the generals in the field continued fighting. The leaders of the pro-Boer movement in Europe used this material to emphasise that the war was far from over. This meant that the hope of a positive outcome for the Boers – restoration of their independence at least, unification of South Africa under Dutch dominance at best – lingered on. Many propagandists were of the opinion that the British atrocities had backfired in this regard. A correspondent in Cape Town wrote how the ‘racial hatred’ between the Dutch and English-speaking white colonists increasingly took ‘concrete shape’.¹⁸² Rompel too mentioned it as a hindrance to English dominance. ‘South Africa cannot come to rest under British rule. That has been made impossible by this war.’¹⁸³ Hence, the public in the Netherlands continued to oscillate between hope and fear concerning the future of South Africa from June 1900 until the end of the war in June 1902. The next chapter will describe the contents of pro-Boer propaganda during that period.

¹⁸¹ ‘Transvaal moet onderworpen worden; zijn burgers moeten zooveel mogelijk worden uitgeroeid.’ Letter H. Wefers Bettink. *NRC*, 6 April 1900.

¹⁸² ‘rassenhaat’, ‘vaste vormen’. Letter from Cape Town. *NRC*, 6 March 1900.

¹⁸³ ‘Zuid-Afrika kan niet tot rust komen onder Britsch bestuur. Dit heeft deze oorlog onmogelijk gemaakt.’ Rompel, *Uit den tweede (Transvaalsche) vrijheidsoorlog*, 94.