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

Chapter 6: ‘All will be well!’ Pro-Boer propaganda, June 1900 - June 1902

Early in 1902, the Dutchman P.J. Kloppers, who had been a teacher in the Transvaal and was deported back to the Netherlands by the British, published a volume of stories about his experiences during the South African War. The book had the stirring title: *Alles zal rech kom!* (*All will be well*), a reference to the famous words of the former president of the OFS, J.H. Brand.¹ These words were quite popular amongst pro-Boers between 1899 and 1902 and provided a glimpse of hope at a time when the future of the republics looked increasingly grim. Kloppers did not deny the gravity of the situation and extensively described the methods used by the British to subdue their adversaries, which – as he could tell from his own experiences – inflicted great suffering on the inhabitants of the republics, something he already mentioned in letters when he was still in South Africa.² But he also wrote about how, despite his sorrow, the patriotism of the Boers and particularly that of the commandos still left in the field, made him defiant. ‘No dear reader, I do not even think about submitting myself, I will not make peace with Chamberlain, Milner and their band of robbers, I will continue writing: “All will be well!”’³

Kloppers’s words reflected the general feelings amongst pro-Boer propagandists during the last phase of the conflict. There was much pessimism concerning the chances of the burghers after the defeat of the commandos in the first half of 1900 and the occupation of the republics, finalised with proclamations by Lord Roberts announcing the annexation of the OFS (May 1900) and the SAR (September 1900). What followed were further proclamations, implementing harsh measures to end hostilities, such as the deportation of PoWs and other undesirables, farm-burning and concentration camps, which led to much suffering amongst the Boer forces and the civilian population of South Africa. But there were also reasons for optimism according to the pro-Boers. The governments of the Transvaal and the OFS, although they had been severely weakened after having been forced to flee their capitals, still operated in the field and contested the annexations. Likewise, the Boer representatives in Europe continued to campaign for the restoration of independence. News about the military situation was also used to shore up the hope that the Boers would prevail in the end. Interviews with people returning from South Africa and several reports from Boer generals that were brought to Europe by couriers asserted that the commandos remained defiant, and

¹ The original citation is: ‘alles zal recht komen als elkeen zijn plicht doet’ (all will be well if everyone does his duty), but it was the shortened version that became popular. In addition, it should be noted that Brand wrote these words in the 1880s and used High Dutch. Kloppers made some sort of Afrikaans version of it.

² Schutte, *Van Amsterdam naar Krugersdorp*, 44-45.

³ ‘Neen lezer, ik denk er niet aan, mij te onderwerpen, ik sluit geen vrede met Chamberlain, Milner en hun rooverbende, ik blijf schrijven: “Alles zal rech kom!”’ Kloppers, *“Alles zal rech kom!”*, 6. Eventually Kloppers’ pessimism prevailed and after the war he ended his affiliation with the pro-Boer movement. Schutte, *Van Amsterdam naar Krugersdorp*, 57-58.

were able to acquire enough supplies to continue their guerrilla campaign.

Historians tend to see the propaganda in the Netherlands during the South African War as a fleeting phenomenon, which ended when it became clear that the republics would not hold up. In this chapter it will be argued that there was a large degree of continuity in the debate about South Africa up until the end of the war. To many people, the events from this period, such as the guerrilla campaign by the Boers and the proclamations of the British to counter them, constituted a new phase in the ongoing struggle between the Dutch and British races for colonial dominance in South Africa. The South African War was considered to be the outcome of a century of British oppression of the Afrikaners, a notion that had become common amongst opinion-makers in the Netherlands during the 1880s and 1890s. It should be remembered that this debate was never consistent and that there were continual ambivalences. In this sense, the mix of melancholy and hope that characterised the mood of propagandists between June 1900 and June 1902 was typical for the pro-Boer movement in the Netherlands. The tone of the propaganda did become increasingly radical, however.

The emotional reactions to events taking place in South Africa should be seen in the context of general ideas that existed about the South African question. To contemporaries, the struggle for colonial dominance between the two ‘white races’ was not only fought out on the battlefield. In the view of many, the counter-guerrilla campaign by the British went beyond military conquest and territorial annexation of the republics, but targeted the Afrikaner people as a whole, which was seen as an attempt to destroy the Dutch presence in South Africa. The propaganda campaign was therefore as an appeal upon the international community and the people in Britain to force the Salisbury government to stop this onslaught. Moreover, it was thought that it could help the Boers in a real sense. Money that was collected during the campaign was sent to relieve the most immediate needs. In addition, publications on the atrocities were supposed to preserve and rebuild Afrikaner identity after the war. In this way, there continued to be a direct connection between the pro-Boer movement in Europe and events in the war zone.

In historiography, it is asserted that the Peace of Vereeniging, which signalled the formal surrender of independence by the Boers, came as a great shock to people in the Netherlands, who were very disappointed.⁴ But even this dark cloud had a silver lining to some Boer supporters, which will be further discussed at the end of this chapter. Despite the loss of the republics, the people who remained defiant to the bitter end showed that they possessed moral fibre and would not accept Anglicisation, it was thought, and there was even hope that their sacrifice would mean that the Dutch-speaking population would still be victorious in the end. This state of mind concerning the future of the Afrikaners in South Africa was already apparent during the war itself.

⁴ M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 189-190; Te Velde, *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbefef*, 163; Bossenbroek, *Holland op op zijn breedst*, 352; De Graaff, *De mythe van de stamverwantschap*, 9.

After the British occupation

On 1 September 1900, Lord Roberts announced the annexation of the Transvaal by the British Empire. Whereas the general stated that this proclamation would officially end the war, commentators in the Netherlands had other opinions on the matter. With regard to the legal aspects, it was noted that none of the European powers at that time recognised the annexations of Transvaal and the OFS.⁵ The diplomatic representatives of both republics officially protested against Robert’s declarations and issued an address.⁶ In September 1901, they even tried to bring it before the newly formed Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague. Although this initiative came from the Dutch foreign office and was supported by prominent members of the political elite, the court did not hear the case on the formal grounds that it had no jurisdiction in it.⁷

What was considered even more important was that the Boer leaders in the field did not surrender. The SAR authorities had moved into the north-eastern part of the country, where they set up a seat of government. Reports coming from that region suggested that the British occupation of the towns and railway lines had a limited effect in the rest of the country, where the Boers remained in control.⁸ In addition, several proclamations by the Boer leaders in which the annexation was rejected and the inhabitants of the SAR were called to remain loyal to the old leadership reached the Dutch press.⁹ Similar actions were taken by President Steyn and his men, who also remained active, contesting the annexation of their republic. One former commando member recounted an adventurous mission in the occupied parts of the OFS during which he and a small band spread a proclamation by Steyn in which he declared that these lands were still under the rule of the Free State government. This group managed to mobilise an effective force that commandeered supplies and punished people who collaborated with the occupying forces.¹⁰ Such stories were presented as evidence that the British only ruled as far as their guns reached, and that the Boers who roamed the countryside were far from beaten.

Nevertheless, the annexations made public opinion in the Netherlands increasingly discontented with the official policy of neutrality that prevented significant action. To appease these feelings of dissatisfaction, the government offered to help Paul Kruger to leave Africa in September 1900, after having transferred his duties to acting President Schalk Burger. Kruger’s voyage on the cruiser *Gelderland* and tour through Europe were extensively covered

⁵ Editorial. *NRC*, 9 September 1900.

⁶ Address by the Boer deputation. *NRC*, 16 September 1900.

⁷ Leyds ed., *Vierde verzameling* I, xxxiv-xxxvi and 378-379; *NRC*, 13 September 1901; statement by the Dutch clergy (all denominations). *NRC*, 25 October 1901; Hoedemaker, *A Plea on behalf of Equity and Truth*, 21-26.

⁸ Excerpt from letter by correspondent of the *Laatste Nieuws* (Belgium) in Nelspruit. *NRC*, 18 October 1900; map showing territory ‘under control of the Boers’, which was bigger than the British Isles. *NRC*, 10 January 1901.

⁹ The text of a proclamation by Botha, issued in October. *NRC*, 12 December 1900.

¹⁰ J.C. Kakebeeke, ‘Brazelle’. *NRC*, 15 September 1900.

by the continental press and great crowds of people came out to honour him everywhere he showed himself in public. Still, there was some controversy surrounding this masterstroke of publicity. Opposition leader Kuyper criticised the government for the fact that the *Gelderland* did not sail under the Transvaal’s flag. Kruger, he argued, was still head of state and should therefore have been treated with full protocol.¹¹ Liberal commentators dismissed Kuyper’s complaints as hair-splitting, because the foreign minister had referred to Kruger as being president during the debate on this topic in Parliament, which showed that the government did not recognise the British annexation of the Transvaal. The motivation for helping him was humanitarian, however, as the elderly man was in poor health and therefore travelled incognito after he had been forced to end his active service to his country. On a more practical level, it also ensured that the *Gelderland* was granted safe passage.¹² Eventually Kuyper accepted these arguments, which ended the polemic about the flag on the *Gelderland*.¹³

The Dutch debate about the validity of Lord Roberts’s proclamations did not only touch upon political and diplomatic issues surrounding the neutrality policy of the Netherlands. They were seen as being inherently part of British efforts to subdue the Boers at any cost and to secure dominance in South Africa, not only on the battlefield, but also culturally. The sense that there was a continuous struggle between the two ‘white races’ that was more than just a military conflict, grew stronger during the later phases of the war. Correspondents reported how the British regime became increasingly brutal after the occupation of the two Boer capitals. It was noted how people who had emigrated from continental Europe, and the Dutch in particular, were singled out. Many of them were ordered to leave South Africa and from June 1900 they were actively deported.¹⁴ This aroused much resentment of the British in the Netherlands and the exiles were welcomed with compassion. Historians who have written about this subject attribute these sentiments to offended national pride.¹⁵

There was also another aspect to the protests against the deportations that exposed the fear that the end of the independent Dutch presence in South Africa was imminent. In a letter from Pretoria written just before the occupation of the city, a correspondent predicted that the British would close Dutch schools and dismiss *Hollander* administrators, as they were seen as the greatest obstacles for Anglicisation of the occupied republics. ‘The Englishman will trample us [Dutchmen] where he can.’¹⁶ In numerous reports that reached the Netherlands after the occupation of Pretoria, it was asserted that the British discriminated against the remaining Dutch inhabitants, making life hard for them by shutting down their businesses and

¹¹ Editorial by A. Kuyper. *De Standaard*, 22 September 1900; Jager, ‘*De vlag op de Gelderland*’. I would like to thank Jouke Turpijn for providing me with this paper, which brought this topic to my attention.

¹² Letter by J.C.C. den Beer Poortugael in *Het Haagsch Dagblad*. *NRC*, 28 September 1900. Cf. chapter 3 for reception of Kruger in The Hague.

¹³ Editorial by A. Kuyper. *De Standaard*, 2 October 1900.

¹⁴ Cf. chapter 3.

¹⁵ M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 185.

¹⁶ ‘Den Engelschman zal ons vertrappen waar hij kan.’ Letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 27 June 1900.

putting them on trial for no reason.¹⁷

The people who were deported, also wrote about how badly they were treated during their forced journey to the coast in open cattle wagons, during which women and children were not sheltered from the elements. One of them, Cornelis Plokhooy, noted in his memoirs that Britain made many enemies in this way. ‘Oh, we will never forget the scandalous conduct of England.’¹⁸ The situation was not much better on the ships, he continued. The author was particularly offended by the lousy food; he suspected that tea was made with sea water and that bread was at least one week old when served.¹⁹ During the sea journey, which took longer than expected, there was little space to live and almost no washing facilities.²⁰ Another deportee, J.C. Kakebeeke, wrote a feuilleton about his experiences, which were similar to those of Plokhooy, with the cynical title ‘England’s interpretation of martial law’.²¹ In a later essay, he argued that the racial antagonism of the British against the Dutchmen living in South Africa was largely the result of propaganda by the jingo press. To prove this, he quoted extensively from the *Bloemfontein Post*, a newspaper that had been taken over by English journalists who condoned the deportation policy, describing *Hollanders* in the SAR as ‘parasites’, who were paying for their misbehaviour.²²

Naturally, it was clear to contemporaries that not only the Dutch were being targeted. From the moment the British army entered the territory of the Boer republics, British high command issued dozens of proclamations that affected the population. The first ones demanded the immediate surrender of the combatants who were still fighting in order to end hostilities. As it became clear that the commandos were turning to guerrilla tactics, the tone of these documents became more menacing. People who did not surrender voluntarily or pledged to be neutral were threatened with penalties, such as deportation and destruction of their property. These measures were not only implemented against the Boers who actually fought, but increasingly also against civilians who were suspected of giving help to the commandos. By contrast, collaborators were rewarded and were able to carry on with their lives as normally as was possible under the circumstances. The leader of the ANV press office, Frederik Rompel, analysed these proclamations in a pamphlet from 1901. He argued that they were the result of the failure of the British military to subdue the Boer forces on the battlefield. As a result, the army command and policymakers chose other means to try and secure victory: ‘what I would like to point out is the ridiculousness of the policy of threats followed by England’s government with regards to the Boers, and the cowardice of only

¹⁷ Letters from *NRC* correspondent in Pretoria. *NRC*, 23 August 1900, 21 April, 13 September and 1 October 1901.

¹⁸ ‘O, nooit vergeten zullen wij de schandelijke handelswijze van Engeland.’ Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 135-136.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 137-138.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 137.

²¹ J.C. Kakebeeke, ‘Engelands opvattingen van het oorlogsrecht’. *NRC*, 28 August - 2 September 1900.

²² ‘parasieten’. J.C. Kakebeeke, ‘De haat tegen Hollanders’, *NRC*, 5 September 1900.

daring to implement this policy of threats when it affects the vulnerable’.²³ Rompel continued by pointing out that the British also tried to lure Afrikaners over to their side with all sorts of promises and rewards. But he concluded that this policy of carrots and sticks was failing: ‘all these threats, pleas and promises did not help: the Boers persevered’.²⁴ As the war went on, the commandos who continued to fight and the civilians who supported them were considered to be the only hope for the survival of the Dutch race in South Africa and to opinion-makers in the Netherlands they became heroic martyrs. On the other hand, there was a growing antipathy to those who laid down their arms, or worse, collaborated with the British army. In the following section this emerging dichotomy between the imagery of the men who fought until the bitter end and those who surrendered will be discussed.

Bittereinders and Handsoppers

The Boers who continued fighting after the occupation of the republics became known as *Bittereinders*.²⁵ In the Netherlands, they were admired for their courage and reports of their exploits read like adventure stories. Cornelis Plokhooy, for example, wrote in his memoirs how he and a comrade outwitted an enemy patrol of six men with rapid fire, which gave the British soldiers the impression that they were being ambushed by a large group.²⁶ Another aspect of the guerrilla campaign that interested pro-Boer authors was the holding up of trains. Several memoirs of people who had fought with the commandos included detailed descriptions of how explosive charges could be used to derail trains or blow up locomotives.²⁷ The British saw these attacks as war crimes, but, although it was admitted that the railway personnel did sometimes suffer as a result, the Boers and their supporters in the Netherlands condoned them as legitimate means for the commandos to try and weaken the British army and to secure supplies for themselves.²⁸

After the death of Piet Joubert and the capture of Piet Cronjé a new generation of Boer generals assumed command, including Louis Botha, Koos de la Rey and Jan Smuts, who became famous for their guerrilla-style tactics. Arguably the most legendary of these men was Christiaan de Wet, commander-in-chief of the OFS forces. Reporters, both Dutch and British, saw him as the main architect of the Boers’ guerrilla campaign. De Wet’s reputation made him a target for the British military, which organised so-called ‘drives’ to hunt him down

²³ ‘[...] waar ik op wil wijzen is op het bespottelijke der dreig-politiek van Engeland’s regeering tegenover de Boeren, op het laffe om alleen deze dreig-politiek te durven uitvoeren wanneer zij weerlozen geldt’. Rompel, *Een studie in proclamaties*, 4.

²⁴ ‘al deze dreigingen, smeekingen en beloften mochten niet baten; de Boeren hielden vol’. Ibidem, 15.

²⁵ The term referred to the fact that these men continued to the bitter end (*bitter eind*).

²⁶ Plokhooy, *Met den Mauser*, 121-123. This story was also published in a feuilleton: C. Plokhooy, ‘Een reis met hindernissen’, *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 5 and 6 July 1901.

²⁷ Jeltès, *Uit het dagboek van H. Jeltès*, 30 and 32; Kloppers, “*Alles zal rech kom!*”, 97-102; Speech VerLoren van Themaat. *NRC*, 2 June 1902; Reitz, *De dochter van den Handsopper*, 66-70 and 86-88; Viljoen, *Mijne herinneringen*, 327-333.

²⁸ Editorial. *NRC*, 24 May 1901; Letter of Smuts to Steyn. *NRC*, 23 June 1901; Editorial. *NRC*, 19 October 1901; editorial. *NRC*, 25 January 1902.

during which he and his commando were chased by many thousands of soldiers. Despite this great superiority in numbers, De Wet managed to escape time after time. The Dutch audience eagerly awaited news about his adventurous exploits and commentators cheered when it appeared that he had outwitted his adversaries once again: ‘Bravo De Wet!’²⁹ Reports of people serving with him contained more detailed description of his bold plans.³⁰ In such accounts, De Wet was described as an assertive leader, who at times was a bit rash, but inspired his men with patriotic speeches and commanded their respect with strict discipline. In addition to these moral qualities that distinguished him from older generations of Boer leaders, he was praised for his ‘military genius’.³¹ In popular culture too, De Wet became an icon. He featured in a number of adventure books and in epic poems, which celebrated his abilities as a scout in the veldt.³² In several plays that were written for amateur theatre he was staged as an untouchable vigilante who punished the British.³³

In many ways, these images of the heroic *Bittereinders* resembled the Dutch literature that appeared about the Boer people before the war began. It was argued by many contemporaries that the essential skills for guerrilla warfare – such as marksmanship, horse riding and scouting – had been ingrained in the Boer character during the pioneering days of the Great Trek. As has been mentioned, the attitude towards the Boers in the Netherlands was ambivalent in this respect. On the one hand authors praised the individual qualities that the *Voortrekkers* had developed over the years, while taming the wilderness, but at the same time it was noted that they had lost touch with the outside world. Also during the first phase of the war, the lack of discipline in the republics’ armies was considered a disadvantage to the advantage of their tenacity.³⁴ Negative descriptions about the Boers continued to pop up throughout the war, but became increasingly controversial. One of the most notorious incidents took place in January 1902, when Mrs Junius from Arnhem wrote an article under the pseudonym ‘Mimosa’ which was published in the magazine *Hollandia*. She argued that the Boers were a petty and conservative people, deeply divided by a strong sense of partisanship and full of hate towards outsiders, including people from the Netherlands. Willem Leyds responded furiously to these statements, which might have been used in the British press and were therefore harmful to the pro-Boer propaganda campaign. As a result, the publisher of the magazine, P.A. Nierstrasz, even stopped the publication of *Hollandia* altogether.³⁵

²⁹ Editorial *NRC*, 18 August 1900.

³⁰ Boldingh, *Een Hollandsch officier in Zuid-Afrika*; feuilleton by ‘Si Omong’. *NRC*, 15 and 24 October, 7, 9, 10 and 13 November 1900.

³¹ ‘militair genie’ Editorial. *NRC*, 18 August 1900.

³² Mijnsen, *De depecherijder van De Wet*; Penning, *De verkennen van Christiaan de Wet*

³³ Reineker, *Lord Kitchener en De Wet*; Hogeweg, *Een Engelsche spion in de knel, of, hoe Generaal De Wet trakteert*.

³⁴ Cf. chapters 2 and 5.

³⁵ Cf. correspondence in: NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 95; H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge to W.J. Leyds, 27 January 1902. NL-HaNA, Leyds, 2.21.105, inv.nr. 51.; W.J. Leyds to P.A. Nierstrasz, 23 January 1902. NL-HaNA, Leyds, 2.21.105, inv.nr. 73. For Mr Junius cf. chapter 4.

Nevertheless, certain developments during the war made the majority of observers more positive about the morale of the commandos. When Boer forces regrouped after the occupation of Pretoria, it appeared that a much smaller number remained. Although this was disappointing at first sight, it was not only seen as a setback by Dutch commentators. Some argued that only well-motivated and able Boers had decided to continue and that in that sense the wheat had been separated from the chaff.³⁶ The *Bittereinders* were considered to be the embodiment of the positive aspects of the Boer character. Their ability to cope with the harsh circumstances in the field was greatly admired. It was asserted in sources coming from the war zone that they were forced to lead a primitive lifestyle as a result of the British anti-guerrilla measures and the loss of control over towns and infrastructure. The fact that they were constantly on the move meant that they were not able to carry many supplies with them and that they had to mainly live on what they found in the field and captured from British convoys. Writings from commandos that reached the Netherlands contained descriptions of a monotonous diet of meat and corn, distasteful surrogates for coffee and tobacco, and their worn-out clothes.³⁷

Despite these hardships, from September 1900 onwards the overall tone of reports coming from the commandos became more and more positive, and correspondents wrote about improving morale. In June 1901, J.C.J. Bierens de Haan, a Red Cross doctor returning from South Africa where he served with the commandos, gave an interview about ‘the war and the character of the Boers’. He admitted that he had left the Netherlands with too high a view of the common Boers, many of whom he considered to be ‘children with a good character, but who have been left too much on their own [...] and whose bad qualities – aside from their good ones – have sometimes grown to disturbing proportions.’ However, he thought that the war had brought much improvement in this respect. The Boers had set aside selfish interests and the discipline of the commandos had improved considerably, according to the doctor, who predicted that they would continue to fight in the foreseeable future.³⁸

In letters from the war zone, this renewed fighting spirit was reiterated and it was also stated that the commandos were able to secure enough supplies to continue the struggle. Such information was widely published, while less positive news was suppressed. General Smuts, for example, wrote several reports that reached the Boer representatives in Europe via couriers. In private letters to the diplomatic deputation, he expressed his doubts about the situation, but he explicitly indicated that these were not for publication.³⁹ By contrast, one-sided official accounts, in which he mentioned the successes of the commandos and the

³⁶ Analysis C. de Wit. *NRC*, 22 July 1900; Van Warmelo, *Mijn commando en guerrilla-commando leven*, 50.

³⁷ For example cf. excerpt from a diary found at Roodewal. *NRC*, 19 September 1901; Boldingh, *Een Hollandsch officier in Zuid-Afrika*, 88-89.

³⁸ ‘De oorlog en het volkskarakter der Boeren’; ‘kinderen met een goed karakter, die echter te veel aan zich zelf overgelaten zijn geweest [...] en waarvan de slechte eigenschappen – naast de goede – tot soms aanstootelijke proportiën zijn gegroeid.’ *De Nieuwe Courant*, 9 June 1901.

³⁹ Report by Smuts, not dated. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 94; Hancock, *Smuts: The Sanguine Years*, 140.

cruelty of the British, were published and distributed by the ANV press office. In these writings Smuts boasted about the morale of his men:

The mood of my burghers is splendid. Although they have, perhaps, suffered more heavily than any other group of burghers in this war, today they look toward the future with hope, convinced that no difficulty or enemy force, whatever its size, can prevent this struggle from being continued until Right triumphs over Might.⁴⁰

As was the case in *Voortrekker* romance, in these sources the wives of the Boers were considered to be at least as heroic as their husbands, persevering when all appeared to be lost. Although the fortunes of the men fighting in the commandos were reported much more extensively, there was a certain amount of coverage about this aspect of the war too. In several letters it was reported how, when a number of men considered surrender after the breakthrough by the British army, their wives would not accept it and sent them back to fight.⁴¹ In other ways too, women in the Transvaal and the OFS resisted the occupation of their republics. Stories appeared about how the British were not made welcome by them. Correspondents from Pretoria mentioned that only a few girls started affairs with soldiers from the occupying forces and were ostracised by the community as a result.⁴² Several sources even reported that some women became actively involved in the resistance. They gathered intelligence, which they passed on to the commandos in the field, and there was even some mention of women fighting with the commandos. Such rumours were rare, though, and did not receive much attention in the media.⁴³

A subject that received far more coverage was the suffering of the women in the republics, which was considered to be the most typical aspect of the women’s experience of the war. In 1903, the publicist W.F. Andriessen wrote an article about the ‘wives of the Boers’ in which he noted that they were far more vulnerable to the British army than the men, who operated in the field and were less affected by the occupation. In addition to accusations that

⁴⁰ ‘De stemming mijner burgers is prachtig. Hoewel zij misschien zwaarder geleden hebben dan eenig ander klompje burgers in deze oorlog, zien zij vandaag met blijmoedigheid de toekomst tegemoet, overtuigd dat geen moeilijkheid of vijandelijke overmacht, hoe groot ook, zal kunnen verhinderen dat deze strijd zal worden voortgezet tot Recht zegeviert boven Macht.’ Report by Smuts, not dated. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 94; *Ambtelijke verslagen van generaal J.H. De la Rey en generaal J.C. Smuts*, 33; *NRC*, 20 April 1902. English version of this text quoted in: Hancock, *Smuts. The Sanguine Years*, 140.

⁴¹ Articles from *De Volksstem*. *NRC*, 27 April and 8 June 1900; Rompel, *Uit den tweede (Transvaalsche) vrijheidsoorlog*, 50-51; W.F. Andriessen, ‘De vrouwen der Boeren’, in: *De Gids*, vol. 67, no. 1 (1903), 64-88, 81.

⁴² Letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 23 April 1901; letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 1 December 1901; Rompel, *Uit den tweede (Transvaalsche) vrijheidsoorlog*, 60. It was the central theme in a novel by Hjalmar Reitz: Reitz, *De dochter van den Handsopper*.

⁴³ For women gathering intelligence cf. Andriessen, ‘De vrouwen der Boeren’, 84. Andriessen referred shortly to *Blackwood Magazine*. For women fighting cf. article from *Advertentieblad*. *NRC*, 15 September 1901. Only years later did significant publications appear on this subject. Brandt-Van Warmelo, *Die Kappie kommando*; Raal, *Met die boere in die veld*. For Brandt-Van Warmelo cf. chapter 3.

British soldiers and their black auxiliaries committed rape, many accounts noted how women were forced to witness the destruction of their homes and how they were deported to concentration camps, a matter that will be discussed later in this chapter. What matters here is that commentators like Andriessen emphasised that even these extreme hardships did not break the women’s spirit. ‘They have drunk the cup of sorrows that has been put to their lips to the last drop, and even then they remained standing, they have remained faithful and defiant.’⁴⁴ In the view of many people in the Netherlands these women shared in the heroism of the *Bittereinders*, because they kept faith in the Boers’ cause. This sacrifice provided hope that all was not yet lost. There were other groups, however, who did seem to falter or even break under British pressure.

Of all the Dutch-speaking people in South Africa, at most 20,000 men fought against the British till the bitter end, a small minority considering the total population. Contemporaries were particularly disappointed about the situation in the Cape, where the majority of the white population lived. Even before the war started, there were doubts about the commitment of Afrikaner nationalists there to the overall struggle against British hegemony, as they had been subjects of the British Empire for many decades. These doubts persisted, but there also remained hope that the various Dutch-speaking groups would unify. The fact that the Cape government of Conwright Schreiner did not take a firm stance against the war led to much irritation among observers.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the neutral middle ground became increasingly limited. The longer the war continued, the more oppressive British rule became, which was seen by correspondents as an attempt by Milner to quell any form of opposition. Farmers were ordered to turn in rifles and horses, supplies were commandeered, censorship tightened and people who were suspected of sympathising with the republics were locked up. But these dark clouds gathering over the inhabitants of the colony did have silver linings as well in the view of Dutch commentators. Several letter writers argued that this ‘reign of terror’ had the opposite effect and undermined support for the British.⁴⁶

Thus there was continual hope in the Netherlands that the majority of the Afrikaners would rise up against the imperial administration if they had a chance. In this respect, much was expected from an invasion by the Boer commandos, which, it was hoped, would arouse these men into joining the republics’ forces. Plans for such an operation were developed by the Boer leadership from September 1900, resulting in an expedition under the command of General De Wet and President Steyn in February 1901. This operation failed when they

⁴⁴ ‘Den lijdensbeker, die haar aan de lippen werd gezet, hebben zij tot den laatsten druppel leeggedronken en toen ook nog hebben zij pal gestaan, zijn zij gebleven trouw en onbezweken.’ Andriessen, ‘De vrouwen der Boeren’, 65-66.

⁴⁵ Editorial. *NRC*, 20 June 1900; interview of Mrs Reitz by *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*. *NRC*, 6 August 1900; article from *Ons Land*. *NRC*, 13 November 1900.

⁴⁶ ‘terreur bewind’. Letters from Cape Town. *NRC* 31 July, 17 and 25 September 1901; Elout and Rompel, ‘Olive Schreiner’, 113-114.

encountered a large British force, but other, smaller, commandos did penetrate the border and become active in the wake of this invasion. Several thousands of Afrikaners joined these troops, but it was not nearly the mass rebellion the Boers and their supporters in Europe had hoped for. These disappointments were kept relatively quiet, though. In the official despatch about his operations between October and November 1901, Smuts maintained that the general situation in the Cape was ‘very promising’.⁴⁷ In more discrete correspondence, however, he was far less optimistic, asserting that the number of men joining his commando was far less than he had expected, which he attributed to British tactics and a lack of co-ordination between the commandos.⁴⁸ As has been mentioned, the reports in which Smuts expressed such doubts never became propagandistic material.

Other painful matters that exposed the weaknesses of the Dutch position in South Africa were mentioned more explicitly in the pro-Boer coverage of the war. Also in the occupied territories of the republics, the British increased pressure on the population to prevent them from joining the commandos. One of the measures was an oath of neutrality. Men who had signed this document, known as *Handsoppers*, turned in their weapons and promised not to give support to the Boer forces in the field.⁴⁹ In return, their farms would be left alone. In the writings of the commandos, such men were portrayed as selfish misers who only wished to save their own hide. The statesman W.F. Reitz wrote a poem about these men. He raged that while they sat peacefully at home they were selling ‘their birth right’ by surrendering to the enemy.⁵⁰ This sort of opportunism was considered to be indicative of their lack of patriotism. Some even criticised Boers who broke their oath of neutrality. In his memoirs, the veteran Dietlof van Warmelo noted that burghers who had already surrendered to the British joined the commando of Koos de la Rey again. According to him this showed a great ‘defect in the character’ of these men who apparently had not only sworn the oath ‘without any qualms’, but easily broke it again too.⁵¹ Although he believed it not to be opportune to discuss this sort of behaviour at length while the war still went on, it is clear that Van Warmelo denounced such fickleness as a bad trait in his compatriots.

To pro-Boers, the worst opportunists were people who not only signed the oath of neutrality, but even worked for the British. In the view of Dutch opinion-makers, several prominent Boers betrayed their brothers by seeking conciliation with the occupying forces. They formed so-called peace-committees (*vredescommissies*) and wanted to broker a deal between the Boers and the British, as they considered the republics’ cause to be lost. In the

⁴⁷ ‘zeer gunstig’. Report by Smuts, not dated. NASA Leyds collection, LEY 94; *Ambtelijke verslagen van generaal J.H. De la Rey en generaal J.C. Smuts*, 33; Hancock, *Smuts. The Sanguine Years*, 140.

⁴⁸ Report by Smuts, not dated. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 94; Hancock, *Smuts. The Sanguine Years*, 140.

⁴⁹ The term *Handsopper*, or *Hendsopper*, is derived from the phrase ‘hands up’.

⁵⁰ ‘zyn geboorte reg’. Quoted in: Reitz, *De dochter van den Handsopper*, 5-6. This novel by W.F. Reitz’s son Hjamlar after the war, was about the love of a young *Bittereinder* for the patriotic daughter of a *Handsopper*, which represented the love for the Afrikaner nation prevailing in the end.

⁵¹ ‘karakterfout’, ‘zonder eenige gewetenswroeging’. Van Warmelo, *Mijn commando en guerrilla-commando leven*, 71.

Netherlands, these initiatives were rejected with great vehemence as a danger to the commandos who continued to fight. One of the most notorious of these ‘traitors’ was Piet de Wet, who of all people was a brother of the famous general: an astounding contrast, according to many commentators.⁵² Not only did he seek rapprochement with the enemy, but he even formed a regiment which served the British forces. These so-called National Scouts were considered to be a great threat to the commandos. Besides the moral blow, it was pointed out that Boers serving in them knew the tactics of the commandos and could therefore be quite dangerous.⁵³ In letters from South Africa, the National Scouts – also known as ‘National Scoundrels’ or ‘National Scandals’ – were described as rascals who deserved to die.⁵⁴ On several occasions, Boer commanders shot Afrikaners whom they accused working for the enemy. The British protested against such executions, but the Dutch press argued that they were legitimate.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the protests against the British policies became more vocal as the war progressed.

‘Methods of barbarism’

By June 1901, there was growing concern amongst certain groups in British society about the war dragging on in South Africa. Stories emerged about the campaign by the army to subdue the Boers that showed the ruthlessness of these efforts. In July 1901, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, leader of the Liberal opposition, attacked the government on its policies in South Africa. During a speech in the Holborn restaurant in London, he coined the phrase ‘methods of barbarism’. This performance was met with mixed response in the Netherlands. Some saw it as a sign that the public mood in Britain was changing in favour of the anti-war party, a hope that proved to be in vain.⁵⁶ Others were sceptical about Campbell-Bannerman’s dedication to really trying to stop the war, as he had failed to do so when the conflict had started.⁵⁷ Whatever the motives behind these words may have been, however, pro-Boer authors agreed with their meaning. In general they condemned the counter-guerrilla measures of the British army as ‘barbaric’.⁵⁸ Many wondered how a progressive and morally upright nation such as Great Britain could trample their fellow Christians in such a way. One Calvinist minister expressed this indictment in a dramatic sermon delivered at Flushing that was also published in English:

⁵² Editorial about speech Piet de Wet. *NRC*, 1 April 1902. Cf. letter from the wife of Christiaan de Wet. *NRC*, 24 March 1901.

⁵³ Analysis C. de Wit. *NRC*, 7 February 1902; editorial. *NRC*, 17 April 1902.

⁵⁴ Letter from German lady in *Alldeutscher Blätter*. *NRC*, 26 March 1902; letter from Johannesburg. *NRC*, 21 May 1902.

⁵⁵ Editorial. *NRC*, 9 June 1901; interview Leyds. *NRC*, 21 December 1901.

⁵⁶ Letter London correspondent. *NRC*, 23 June 1901.

⁵⁷ Editorial. *NRC*, 28 July 1900.

⁵⁸ The words of Campbell-Bannerman reached the Boers in South Africa. In an article in *State Gazette* of the OFS, Steyn declared that he agreed with the term ‘methods of barbarism’. *NRC*, 12 March 1902.

If I mistake not, Great Britain is undoing the work God hath wrought in the sixteenth century [the Reformation], and preparing the way for the Antichrist. [...] The highest interests of humanity are at stake; faith in God, in man, in Government, in religion, in arbitration, in international laws, in the power of right.⁵⁹

Such prophetic words did not end the war, and only few people nurtured the hope that the rampant jingoism, which they believed had enchanted the public in Britain, would be replaced by common sense soon.

In this respect, Britain’s military campaign was compared to notorious conflicts of the past and present. For instance, Milner’s rule in the Cape and Roberts’s occupation of the republics was believed by many to be similar to the reign of the Duke of Alva, who terrorised the Low Countries in the 1560s.⁶⁰ Others saw resemblances to less distant events. The measures used to subdue the Boers were seen as the equivalent of those that were used in Cuba by the Spaniards to quell the guerrilla uprising there.⁶¹ Some went even further and likened the British army to the Turks and the atrocities they committed in Armenia.⁶²

A number of contemporaries also saw a parallel with the campaign that the Dutch colonial army was conducting in Aceh, in Sumatra. Since the 1870s, it had tried to ‘pacify’ this region, and the war had developed into a bloody guerrilla struggle. Several military specialists noted that the British faced similar difficulties in attempting to overcome their adversaries in South Africa. The tone of these remarks was quite reserved because it brought up painful memories about the failure of the Dutch military to quickly put an end to this conflict.⁶³ Several critics, such as the Socialist leader Troelstra, took a less cautious approach to this sensitive issue, and argued that the wars in South Africa and Aceh were both expansionist conflicts caused by the greed of capitalists. Moreover, the harsh methods used by the colonial army in the archipelago were considered to be at least as devastating as the conduct of the British in the SAR and the OFS.⁶⁴ Such remarks caused an outcry, particularly amongst Liberal opinion-makers. The Boers could not be put on a par with the inhabitants of Sumatra, one Member of Parliament argued, because they promoted ‘European civilisation

⁵⁹ Hoedemaker, *A Plea on behalf of Equity and Truth*, 20.

⁶⁰ Letter P.J. Blok. *NRC*, 3 September 1900; Letter prof. Wefers Bettink. *NRC*, 23 November 1900; Boissevain, *A Great Crime*, 14-15; letter from Cape Town. *NRC*, 29 September 1901; analysis C. de Wit. *NRC*, 16 October 1901 and 25 May 1902. For British references to the Dutch revolt cf. speech Frederick Harison. *NRC*, 10 October 1901.

⁶¹ Letter P.J. Blok. *NRC*, 3 September 1900; London correspondent. *NRC*, 9 December 1900; Boissevain, *A Great Crime*, 14-15; Boldingh, *Een Hollandsch officier in Zuid-Afrika*, 52. One correspondent reported that the people of Cuba supported the Boers. Letter from Havana. *NRC*, 27 January 1900.

⁶² Editorial. *NRC*, 6 October 1900; Boissevain, *A Great Crime*, 47; Kloppers, “*Alles zal rech kom!*”, 147.

⁶³ Interview of Lieutenant M.J. Nix (military attaché) in the SAR press. *NRC*, 7 June 1900; analysis by C. de Wit. *NRC*, 2 February 1901; editorials. *NRC*, 31 December 1901 and 30 January 1902.

⁶⁴ M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 192. For a similar comparison cf. Bastings, *Brochure contra Leyds*, 5. Bastings was a Belgian radical Catholic author.

and industry’, while the latter were ‘a people [...] barbaric in its actions’. One of his colleagues added that there was also ‘a difference in skincolour’.⁶⁵ Such comparative remarks should be seen in the light of ongoing concerns about the race question in South Africa. Many of the people in the Netherlands considered the Boers to be a kindred developed people, who had the right to be treated according to the conventions of international law. The British were accused of ignoring these principles and of using every means possible to subdue their enemies in the struggle for colonial dominance in South Africa. One of the concerns in this respect was the use of black people, which will be discussed first.

It is asserted in recent historiography that black people performed auxiliary tasks – as drivers, scouts and couriers – mainly for the British army. From the beginning of the war, the Boers and their supporters in Europe argued that black people should be left out of a war between white men. Such complaints continued to reach the Netherlands during the guerrilla campaign. The fact that the Boers also used black auxiliaries, the so-called *agterryders*, was barely mentioned in Dutch contemporary sources.⁶⁶ In April 1902, a controversy arose when the former military attaché Lieutenant L.W.J.K. Thomson made a speech in which he suggested that Boers used black scouts on a large scale. After he was criticised in the press for these remarks, he publicly offered his apologies and stated that he had referred only to isolated incidents.⁶⁷ In memoirs and novels there was more frequent mention of black servants at farms who remained loyal to their masters, helping them to flee from the British.⁶⁸ Some observers noted how this showed that the Boers were not as cruel to Africans as the British accused them of being.⁶⁹

However, these examples should be considered the exception rather than the rule, and in general it was asserted in Dutch sources that the Boers could not trust black people. In his reports, Smuts repeatedly mentioned incidents during which he or other commandos were attacked by coloured troops armed with firearms.⁷⁰ The commandos did not take half measures against them. From the beginning of the war, it was announced that every black person who was caught scouting or carrying messages for the British would be shot, which

⁶⁵ ‘Europeesche beschaving en industrie’, ‘een volk [...] barbaarsch in zijne handelingen’. ‘verschil in huidskleur’. Quoted in: M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 191. The journalist Charles Boissevain also attacked Troelstra. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 31 October, 1, 4, 15 and 16 November 1901.

⁶⁶ Fransjohan Pretorius estimates that there were at least 14,000 *agterryders*. Pretorius, ‘Boer Attitudes to Africans in Wartime’, 104-120.

⁶⁷ *NRC*, 20, 22 and 27 April 1902. Thomson wrote his letter of apology on the advice of his fellow attaché Captain J.H. Ram, who believed that the remarks about black scouts had been harmful to their public image. J.H. Ram to C.J. Asselbergs, 23 April 1902. NL-HaNA, Asselbergs, 2.21.013, inv.nr. 12. For Ram and Thomson cf. chapters 3 and 7.

⁶⁸ Memoirs: Kloppers, ‘*Alles zal zal rech kom!*’, 146-147; Kestell, *Met de Boeren-commando's*, 210-211; Helsdingen, *Vrouwenleed*, 40-41. Novels: Penning, *De overwinnaar van Nooitgedacht*, 121-136; Reitz, *De dochter van den Handsopper*, 14.

⁶⁹ Letter from Cape Town in *Nieuws van den Dag*. *NRC*, 25 November 1900; speeches by H.D. van Broekhuizen. *NRC*, 1 and 16 December 1900.

⁷⁰ Report by Smuts to Steyn. *NRC*, 24 June 1901; report by Smuts. *NRC*, 20 May 1902. *Ambtelijke verslagen van generaal J.H. De la Rey en generaal J.C. Smuts*, 9, 16-17 and 27-31. Novels: Penning, *Vredeburg*, 93 and 119; Reitz, *De dochter van den Handsopper*, 56 and 199-201; Penning, *De overwinnaar van Nooitgedacht*, 10.

pro-Boer commentators thought perfectly legitimate.⁷¹ At times, the British themselves were even blamed for these harsh measures, as they had recruited the black people in the first place.⁷² One of the most notorious incidents that took place was the gruesome execution of Abraham Esau, a coloured blacksmith from Calvinia in the Northern Cape.⁷³ When the Boers invaded the colony he founded a scouting regiment. When Calvinia was temporarily occupied by a commando, Esau was arrested. After several beatings with a *sjambok* (bull whip), he was dragged behind a horse and shot outside town. British opinion-makers condemned this execution, which they saw as a clear example of the deep-seated cruelty of Boers to black people. In the Dutch press, however, this view was rejected as jingo propaganda. A correspondent from Cape Town who wrote about the execution referred to a report by General Smuts in which it was asserted that Esau was the ringleader of black opposition against the Boers in the Northern Cape and was thus a legitimate target. Moreover, he suggested, Esau had probably ‘taunted’ his captors and so they ‘were right to put [him] in his place’.⁷⁴

According to pro-Boer propagandists, the Esau case did not stand by itself. It was noted in many letters, reports and memoirs how British rule had corrupted Africans and imperilled social order. The same letter in which the execution of Esau was condoned contained a reflection on the relations between black and white in the Cape. The author described how, in contrast to the Boer republics, black people had more rights there, which he felt was ‘one of the most unpleasant things here’. He continued that, unlike what many people from Europe probably might have thought, the greater amount of freedom led to much disturbance in public life, as it made the coloureds more rowdy, lazy and insolent.⁷⁵ Correspondents from the Transvaal and the OFS also wrote about how the ‘*Kaffers*’ there had become more unruly due to the British introducing a milder regime after the occupation. It was noted how servants on farms refused to work or had ran off altogether and how the miners had become lazy without the strict discipline previously imposed by governments of the republics.⁷⁶ What was considered to be at least as problematic, if not worse, was that black people became increasingly abusive. Boer combatants who had been taken prisoner wrote about how they had been mocked by Africans as they were marched down the streets, which they considered

⁷¹ Letter from Johannesburg in *Zwolsche Courant*. *NRC*, 21 March 1900; *NRC*, 5 August 1901; *NRC*, 19 September 1901; editorial about Lotter case. *NRC* 19 October 1901; editorial about Scheepers case *NRC*, 25 January 1902; editorials about Kritzinger case. *NRC*, 16 February and 9 April 1902; Bolding, *Een Hollandsch officier in Zuid-Afrika*, 187.

⁷² Interview of Leyds. *NRC*, 21 December 1901; editorial about Kritzinger case. *NRC*, 7 March 1902.

⁷³ For an excellent discussion on this incident and its effects on Cape identity, cf. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War*, 120-140.

⁷⁴ ‘getard’, ‘gelijk hadden met [...] op zijn plaats te zetten’. Letter from Cape Town in *Arnhemsche Courant*. *NRC*, 16 March 1901.

⁷⁵ ‘Een der onaangenaamste dingen hier’. Letter from Cape Town in *Arnhemsche Courant*. *NRC*, 16 March 1901. Cf. article from *Advertentieblad* (Cape Town). *NRC*, 16 April 1902.

⁷⁶ *NRC*, 5 July 1900; letter by Dr Rijckevorsel. *NRC*, 12 July 1900; letter from OFS in *Ons Land*. *NRC*, 16 December 1900; diary from Pretoria. *NRC*, 7 March 1900; article from *Advertentieblad* (Cape Town). *NRC*, 13 March 1900.

degrading.⁷⁷ Women who were brought to concentration camps also complained about this humiliation.⁷⁸ There was, however, a greater threat menacing the Boer wives and daughters. In several letters, it was reported that the numbers of white women who were being raped by black men was rising.⁷⁹

The repeated reports of involvement by black people in the war caused much concern amongst pro-Boer commentators. In one of his writings, Smuts predicted that it would form a grave threat to civilisation, and he condemned the use of armed ‘*Kaffers*’ as ‘the biggest crime [...] that can ever be committed against the white race in South Africa’.⁸⁰ These remarks were singled out in the press in the Netherlands, which highlights that the situation in South Africa was first and foremost considered in terms of race.⁸¹ As had been the case before the South African War, contemporaries did not only associate this question with relations between black and white, but also with the struggle between the two ‘white races’. This issue became more important during the guerrilla, because the British were accused of attempting to exterminate the Dutch presence in South Africa with every means possible.

‘The English have a red haze before their eyes’: farm-burning

Many contemporaries considered the advance by Roberts’s army into the Boer republics in early 1900 as the first sign of the destruction that lay ahead. At the time, the endless columns in which many thousands of soldiers marched forward were known as the ‘steamroller’. In her memoirs, one Boer woman described it as being a machine that literally flattened everything in its way. From her farm in the OFS, she saw the army approaching. ‘A hellish spectacle! We cannot call it by any other name. With flames, fire and smoke they approach! The grass is consumed by fire and paves the way for them.’⁸² The columns also confiscated livestock to supply them with food. In official reports, British officers claimed that they had neatly recorded everything they had taken so that farmers who had laid down their arms could ask for compensation. Correspondents said that things happened quite differently in practice. One member of the Boer deputation, for example, received news from his son that a large part of his cattle had been taken by the British, and no receipt was left.⁸³ The devastation went beyond this sort of plunder, though. Eyewitnesses reported the slaughter of large herds of livestock and the destruction of crops so that the commandos could not make use of them. To

⁷⁷ Feuilleton by H. Oost. *NRC*, 22 September 1901; Kloppers, “*Alles zal rech kom!*”, 40.

⁷⁸ Letter by a prominent woman in the OFS. *NRC*, 31 August 1901; Hobhouse, *Report to the Committee*, 37-39. Cf. Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire*, 64; Jansen, “‘‘Ek ook het besluit om van my bittere lydingskelk te vertel’’”, 174-176.

⁷⁹ Letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 20 September 1900; article from *Advertentieblad*. *NRC*, 16 April 1902. For the contemporary fear of black male sexuality cf. Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire*, 65 and 78.

⁸⁰ ‘de grootste misdaad [...] die ooit tegen het blanke ras in Zuid-Afrika gepleegd kan worden’. Report by Smuts. *NRC*, 20 May 1902.

⁸¹ Editorial. *NRC*, 22 May 1902.

⁸² ‘Een helsch tooneel! Met geen andere naam kunnen wij het bestempelen. Met vlammen, vuur en rookdamp naderen zij! Het gras wordt door het vuur verteerd en baant hun den weg.’ Helsdingen, *Vrouwenleed*, 32.

⁸³ Editorial about a letter from the son of C.H. Wessels to his father. *NRC*, 9 December 1900.

pro-Boers this showed the contrast between the good burghers of the republics, who had worked hard to cultivate the lands where they had settled and the ruin the British Empire had brought upon South Africa. One correspondent described it as follows: ‘The English have a red haze of revenge and bloodthirstiness before their eyes. They see nothing anymore, they only want death – away with it all!’⁸⁴

What was considered even more illustrative for the British appetite for destruction was the policy of farm-burning. The family was widely seen as the cornerstone of Boer society, so the demolition of their homesteads was experienced as a traumatic event. News of farm-burnings reached Europe soon after the British advance began. At first, these were considered ‘shameful’ but isolated incidents, as it seemed as if only the homes of Boer leaders were being targeted.⁸⁵ Later on during the war, it became clear that it was happening on a much larger scale, and that British generals were issuing proclamations in which they condoned farm-burning as a legitimate means to combat the guerrilla tactics used by the Boers.⁸⁶ In the Netherlands, many people took offence at these proclamations, denouncing them as criminal acts that targeted the Boer population as a whole. One commentator described the farm-burning as ‘a kind of system of depopulation’, which was used ‘to turn everything into a wilderness’.⁸⁷

One shocking aspect of the reports about farm-burnings was the apparent brutality of the British troops. The daughter-in-law of an OFS general wrote a letter in which she described how soldiers arrived after a small skirmish that had taken place nearby. Although she explained that she had no contact with the commandos, the men ordered her to move out her furniture, and within an hour had set fire to the farm. The woman and her elderly parents were forced to spend the night in the open air before they could travel to the nearest town.⁸⁸ It was reported how in other cases no time was given to empty the house, so that everything was burned. Other sources suggested that valuable belongings were stolen by soldiers, leaving the victims completely destitute.⁸⁹ There were also accounts of women who had been killed during raids on their houses. On some occasions, their homes were bombarded, but other sources reported how women were shot in cold blood.⁹⁰

Such reports of farm-burnings were used in popular literature too, although the scenes

⁸⁴ ‘t Wordt den Engelschen rood voor de oogen van wraakzucht en bloeddorst. Ze zien niets meer, ze willen maar dood hebben – weg met alles!’ Letter from Cape Town correspondent of *Zwolsche Courant*. *NRC*, 21 November 1901.

⁸⁵ ‘schandelijk’. Editorial. *NRC*, 28 April 1900; interview with C. de Bruin. *NRC*, 8 May 1900; excerpt from letter by Blignaut. *NRC*, 10 June 1900; letter from Cape Town. *NRC*, 27 June 1900.

⁸⁶ Excerpt from proclamation by Colonel Beauchamp Duff. *NRC*, 8 December 1900; Rompel, *Een studie in proclamaties*, 10-11.

⁸⁷ ‘een soort van ontvolkings-systeem’, ‘om alles tot een woesternij te maken’. Editorial. *NRC*, 19 October 1900. Cf. letter by Smuts to Steyn. *NRC*, 23 June 1901.

⁸⁸ Letter Mrs Cronjé. *NRC*, 10 December 1900; Boldingh, *Een Hollandsch officier in Zuid-Afrika*, 45.

⁸⁹ Letter from a Welsh soldier. *NRC*, 14 November 1900; letter in *Ons Land*. *NRC*, 11 December 1900; letter from *Alldeutsche Blätter*. *NRC*, 21 February 1902; Boldingh, *Een Hollandsch officier in Zuid-Afrika*, 46.

⁹⁰ Letter from Pretoria. *NRC*, 22 January 1901; *Ambtelijke verslagen van generaal J.H. De la Rey en generaal J.C. Smuts*, 6; *NRC*, 8 April 1902.

were often dramatised. In his chronicle of the war, the author Louwrens Penning mentioned the letters about farm-burnings that the adventurous artillery officer Gerrit Boldingh sent to *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*.⁹¹ He probably also used these writings as a source of inspiration for his novels, which contained fictitious descriptions of such events. In one of his stories he described how a group of British soldiers ‘disgraced’ (*ontwijd*) the farm of the family of *Veldcornet* Louis Wessels, the hero of the book. His mother who had remained behind stood helplessly as these men with ‘faces like bandits’ (*roverstronies*) stuffed their pockets with loot. What they could not take they smashed to pieces and furthermore they killed all the livestock and destroyed all the supplies. ‘The Khakis danced with pleasure. Their hooliganism had no limits anymore, and while they scooped the precious butter from the pots with their dirty hands, they threw it at each other like snowballs.’⁹² In another scene he described how soldiers cheer exuberantly when they set fire to yet another Boer farm. ‘They joined hands and wildly danced in a circle as the flames rose high above the roof of the doomed house.’⁹³

Despite such dramatic imagery, there was still hope that the British public would put an end to such practices. Anti-war authors like William Stead and Alfred Marks were seen as whistleblowers who tried to expose the truth about the farm burnings, which, they said, was kept out of the press by the government and jingo propagandists. Their publications about these matters were known in the Netherlands and were discussed in the media.⁹⁴ One of the most notorious examples became the razing of the village of Dullstroom in the north-eastern Transvaal. Marks wrote an article about the destruction of this prosperous settlement, which had been founded by emigrants from the Netherlands in 1883. In it, he contested the figures published by the British government, which claimed that eleven houses had been burned, while military reports seemed to indicate that this number was forty-eight at the very least. Moreover, Marks disputed the claims by General Smith-Dorrien (who had ordered the action), that the village was a stronghold of the Boer forces, as there had been no fortifications. Instead, he argued, the main target of the soldiers had been the devout inhabitants of Dullstroom. They had even destroyed house organs and the edifying contents of the local library. The Dutch translation of this article was supplemented with a statement of J.H. Janson, one of the pioneers who had founded the village and who had returned to the Netherlands. He reported that Dullstroom had been revisited twice by the British, who had eventually blew up the local church, the last building left standing, with dynamite. ‘Now

⁹¹ Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* II, 959, footnote. For Boldingh cf. chapter 3.

⁹² ‘De Khaki’s dansten van plezier. Hun baldadigheid kende geen grenzen meer, en terwijl hun vuile handen de kostelijke boter uit de potten klauwden, gooiden zij er elkander mee, alsof het sneeuwballen waren.’ Penning, *De overwinnaar van Nooitgedacht*, 108-110. For another dramatised account of the brutality of the British soldiers cf. Reitz, *De dochter van den Handsopper*, 58.

⁹³ ‘Zij grepen elkaar bij de hand en maakten een woeste rondedans, terwijl de vlammen hoog uitsloegen uit het dak van het ten ondergang gedoemde huis.’ Penning, *De held van Spionkop*, 74.

⁹⁴ Reference to letter by Leonard Courtney in which he protested against farm-burning. *NRC*, 29 November 1900; reference to protests by Dillon MP. *NRC*, 1 March 1901; London correspondent about protests in British press. *NRC*, 17 May 1901; references to protests by Marks. *NRC*, 23 May and 8 June 1901.

nothing remains of Dullstroom, the product of years of labour and struggle. It has disappeared from the face of the earth.’⁹⁵

Just as had been the case during the first phase of the war, the Tommies were not depicted as all being evil in pro-Boer propaganda. There was material that suggested that some of them were opposed to the farm-burnings. Anti-war activists in England published letters from British soldiers and officers who expressed their dislike of this policy, but were forced to do it, and these documents reached the press in the Netherlands too. Their authors reiterated that the destruction of farms did not serve any useful purpose, and that they thought that the only result would be that the Boers would simply have nothing to lose anymore and so would continue fighting.⁹⁶ This kind of source reinforced the idea held by pro-Boers that such actions were inspired by jingo propaganda or ordered by British high command and worsened the ‘racial hatred’ between the Boers and the British. In their view, the destruction of the homes of the *Bittereinders* was not effective in stopping the war, but quite the contrary. It also became clear, however, that not only the material belongings of the Boers were being targeted as a means of subduing them; the anti-guerrilla campaign was increasingly seen as an onslaught on the Afrikaner people as a whole.

‘That lethal idleness’ of being locked up: the treatment of PoWs

The first people to suffer from these measures were the thousands of people who had been taken prisoner by the British. There were concerns about the treatment of captured Boers from the beginning of the South African War. In Particular, the killings following the battle of Elandslaagte caused an outcry amongst the pro-Boers in the Netherlands. Throughout the conflict, this incident was described as one of the greatest offences by the British army.⁹⁷ Accounts of executions continued to emerge during later phases of the war, particularly concerning Cape Afrikaners who had joined the Boer forces. Officially, they were subjects of the British Empire and were therefore branded as rebels by the British and faced severe punishments. A number of those who were caught even received the death penalty. In several cases, a comparison was made with the incident at Slachtersnek at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when colonists were hanged for rising up against the British authorities. Many authors saw this historical event as one of the earliest signs of the wilful oppression of the Afrikaner people.⁹⁸ Likewise, the executions of the Cape rebels were seen as being

⁹⁵ ‘Van Dullstroom het product van jarenlangen arbeid en worsteling bestaat thans niets meer. Het is alles van de aarde verdwenen.’ Janson jr. ed., *Het verbranden van hoeven in Zuid-Afrika*.

⁹⁶ Review *Hell let loose*. *NRC*, 17 and 18 November 1900. This pamphlet was followed by: Stead, *How not to make Peace*. In it, the material on which *Hell let loose* was based was completely published in full. Cf. Stead, *Methods of Barbarism*, 56-66, in which he referred to eyewitness accounts from both soldiers who condoned and condemned farm-burning. For a review cf. *NRC*, 20 July 1901.

⁹⁷ Editorial in *Frankfurter Zeitung*. *NRC*, 17 July 1901; editorial. *NRC*, 31 July 1901; letter by S. van Lier. *NRC*, 3 August 1901; editorial. *NRC*, 15 December 1901; editorial. *NRC*, 7 March 1902. Cf. Penning, *De verkennen van Christiaan de Wet*, 14-16.

⁹⁸ Cf. chapter 2.

excessive. In the view of commentators in the Netherlands they had rightfully joined their brothers in the struggle against the British. Moreover, the acts for which they were prosecuted, such as the derailment of trains and the execution of black scouts, were legitimate wartime actions according to many pro-Boer authors.⁹⁹

One of the most notorious cases was that against Gideon Scheepers, who led a commando in the Cape. Dutch correspondents portrayed the trial as a farce, because, for instance, Scheepers’s claim that he was a citizen of the OFS was immediately dismissed by the court. Such reports were seen as evidence that the British falsified evidence and invented charges so that they would have a pretext to ‘get rid of him, now that they have their hands on him’.¹⁰⁰ The death sentence therefore came as no surprise, but according to pro-Boers his execution was ‘a murder, nothing else; it will forever be England’s shame’.¹⁰¹ In addition, a gruesome detail emerged a few months later: Scheepers, who had been severely ill since his capture, was shot while sitting on a chair, because he had not had the strength to stand up.¹⁰² To many, this showed the British determination to eliminate the young commander.

In contrast to the indignation about the way in which his life was ended, commentators praised Scheepers’s calm response and acceptance of his fate. In an obituary, Rompel described him as a dedicated officer who inspired his men. Moreover, his dramatic end did not diminish the hope that everything was not lost for the Boers – on the contrary. ‘His blood, his martyr’s blood will not have been shed in vain, because a man like Scheepers must have had innumerable friends who just like him will want to fight until the end. He probably will recruit more in death than in life.’¹⁰³ Such eulogies underlined the fact that men like Scheepers remained defiant to the bitter end and even thereafter. Many PoWs also shared in this kind of heroism, suffering captivity in distant and barren places.

During the first months of 1900, prisoners of war were kept in camps at the Cape Peninsula and on ships in Table Bay. Many of them sent letters in which they described their fate to people in the Netherlands. Although there were some who were quite satisfied with their treatment, the majority of the letters contained complaints about the conditions the prisoners were subjected to. One notorious account of the situation was given by F.K. Kannemeyer, a former PoW who had managed to escape to Europe. In an official statement and in interviews, he told of the poor sanitary conditions on board of the prison ships, where

⁹⁹ Report of execution of J.P. Coetzee. *NRC*, 19 March 1901; editorial. *NRC*, 22 March 1901; analysis by C. de Wit. *NRC*, 26 March 1901; letter by Smuts to Steyn. *NRC*, 23 June 1901; editorial. *NRC*, 9 August 1901.

¹⁰⁰ ‘uit den weg te ruimen, nu zij hem in handen hebben.’ Editorial based on Reuters telegrams. *NRC*, 22 December 1901. Cf. editorial based on Reuter telegrams. *NRC*, 15 October 1901; editorial based on Reuter telegrams, *NRC*, 31 December 1901; editorial based on report in *Petit Bleu*. *NRC*, 1 January 1902.

¹⁰¹ ‘een moord, niets anders; zij zal Engeland altijd tot schande zijn’. Editorial. *NRC*, 25 January 1902.

¹⁰² Question in the British parliament. *NRC*, 10 March 1902; abstract of report in the *Manchester Guardian*. *NRC*, 26 March 1902; Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* III, 1251-1253.

¹⁰³ ‘Zijn bloed, zijn martelaarsbloed, zal [...] niet noodeloos hebben gevloeid, want een man als Scheepers moet oneindig veel vrienden hebben gehad die nu beslist als hij, zullen willen strijden tot het einde. Bij zijn dood maakt hij wellicht meer recruten dan bij zijn leven.’ Obituary Scheepers in *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*. *NRC*, 22 January 1902. Cf. editorials. *NRC*, 23 and 25 January 1902; statement Hobhouse. *NRC*, 25 February 1902.

the inmates barely had room to move. The camps on the shore were better in that respect, but there was a general lack of food and clothing, he reported.¹⁰⁴ Commentators in the Netherlands compared these descriptions with reports from the Boer side that described the ‘humane’ treatment of their prisoners.¹⁰⁵ When Lord Roberts issued statements in which he protested about the situation of captured British soldiers at Pretoria, these were therefore met with great scepticism. Referring to the ‘dirty, [...] contaminated ships’ where the Boer PoWs were ‘packed like sardines’, commentators in the Netherlands accused him of hypocrisy. ‘It seems that there exists no other people that is more candid in accusing others of things it is guilty of itself, than the English.’¹⁰⁶ Just as with other issues, the treatment of PoWs was seen as a sign of the contrast between the Boers, who tried to accommodate their prisoners as well as possible, and the British, who tried to break the morale of their captives. When the army command started to deport PoWs to overseas camps, this was considered in line with this policy.

After the surrender of Cronjé and his commando of 4,000 men at Paardeberg, the locations near Cape Town were no longer sufficient for housing PoWs, and other solutions had to be found. The British authorities decided to deport them to overseas camps, the first of which was located at St. Helena, the barren island in the Atlantic Ocean where Napoleon had spent his final days. Other camps were set up in Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), northern India and the Bermuda Islands. In the view of pro-Boer authors this solution was not simply a question of logistics, however: they also saw it as an attempt to neutralise the prisoners. The response of one commentator to the news that Cronjé and his men were to be shipped to St. Helena was quite cynical. Reports showed that the transport ships were a hotbed of disease, meaning that many Boers would die during the voyage, which, he argued, would be cheaper for the British government, as the bodies could be fed to the sharks and there would be fewer men to take care of.¹⁰⁷ Although many correspondents did complain about the sanitary conditions on board the ships, such indictments were not repeated in later commentaries, because it appeared from letters that the casualty numbers remained relatively low, particularly in the overseas camps.¹⁰⁸

Still, the deportation of PoWs was seen as a cruel act intended to break the morale of burghers by taking them away from their homeland. First of all, most inhabitants of the landlocked republics were puzzled by the sea, which many of them had never seen before, let alone crossed. Correspondents noted how these men were amazed by their journey and

¹⁰⁴ Statement by F.K. Kannemeyer to J. Pierson. *NRC*, 29 May 1900; interview of F.K. Kannemeyer. *NRC*, 1 June 1900.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. chapter 5.

¹⁰⁶ ‘vuile, [...] besmette schepen’, ‘als haringen in een ton’. ‘Er lijkt geen ander volk te bestaan, dat met grooter vrijmoedigheid anderen verwijt waaraan het zelf schuldig is, als het Engelsche.’ Editorial about Roberts. *NRC*, 16 May 1900. Cf. editorial about report by Lieutenant-Colonel Hunt. *NRC*, 15 September 1900.

¹⁰⁷ Editorial. *NRC*, 30 March 1900.

¹⁰⁸ Excerpt from a camp periodical on St. Helena, *De Krijgsgevangene*. *NRC*, 22 August 1901; letter from St. Helena. *NRC*, 24 October 1901.

wondered how the ship was able to navigate the endless ocean, which these simple minds compared to the equally vast South African veldt.¹⁰⁹ Having arrived at the overseas destinations many of them felt homesick, a feeling that was aggravated by the fact that they worried constantly about their farms and their families.¹¹⁰ Moreover, it was added, a monotonous, sedentary life between barbed wired fences was opposite to the character of the Boers, who were used to living in open spaces and engaging in outdoor activities. ‘How must that lethal idleness, that cruel dependency, that being locked up and guarded, have been experienced by the men who love their freedom, their independence as much as, yes even more than their own lives.’¹¹¹

Many contemporaries considered the deportations of PoWs to be part of the attempt to rid South Africa of people opposing British rule. In a proclamation, General Kitchener threatened to banish all those who continued their resistance. In the Netherlands, this proclamation was described as ‘shameless’ and an ‘open acknowledgement of [England’s] incompetence and moral degeneration’.¹¹² In the camps an attempt was made to intimidate the inmates in a similar way, it was argued. In letters that slipped through, inmates complained about censorship and that they barely received news about the situation in South Africa other than from the British press. As a result they felt increasingly isolated.¹¹³ In addition to these measures, the camp authorities tried to get everybody to sign the oath of neutrality in exchange for better treatment and the promise that they would be repatriated as soon as the war ended. These promises were also considered to be illegitimate means to subdue the Boers. In many accounts, however, it was asserted that most of the PoWs were not susceptible to this sort of manipulation, and that only a small number of them gave in. Correspondents from several camps wrote that these people were seen as traitors, who had to be kept in separate locations – so-called ‘Judas camps’ – to prevent them from being attacked by their fellow inmates or being dipped in the latrines.¹¹⁴ The defiance evident in the majority of letters from PoWs reinforced the idea that a significant number of Boers, including those who had been deported, held on until the bitter end, refusing to give in to British machinations and retaining their Dutch identity.

Inspired by such sentiments, collections were held for the inmates of the PoW camps in the Netherlands. Prominent inmates joined committees that corresponded about aid with

¹⁰⁹ Letter from St. Helena. *NRC*, 11 June 1900. Cf. Van Warmelo, *Mijn commando en guerrilla-commando leven*, 213-214. Van Warmelo was sent to India.

¹¹⁰ Letter from St. Helena. *NRC*, 26 October 1900; letter from a visitor in Ceylon camp. *NRC*, 16 December 1900; letter from St. Helena. *NRC*, 2 May 1901.

¹¹¹ ‘Hoe moet die doodende werkeloosheid, die wreede afhankelijkheid, dat opgesloten zijn en bewaakt, wel worden gevoeld door mannen die hun vrijheid, hun onafhankelijkheid zoo liefhebben als, ja liever dan hun leven.’ *De Boeren op Sint-Helena*, 50.

¹¹² ‘onbeschaemde’, ‘openlijke erkenning van onvermogen en zedelijk verval’. Editorial. *NRC*, 10 August 1901.

¹¹³ For example cf. letters from St. Helena. *NRC*, 2 August 1900, 13 June, 28 July and 20 September 1901.

¹¹⁴ ‘Judaskampen’. Letter from St. Helena. *NRC*, 28 July 1901; letter from Ceylon. *NRC*, 2 May 1901; letters from Bermuda. *NRC*, 5 February and 10 March 1902; letters from India. *NRC*, 25 March, 12 April and 18 May 1902.

‘All will be well!’

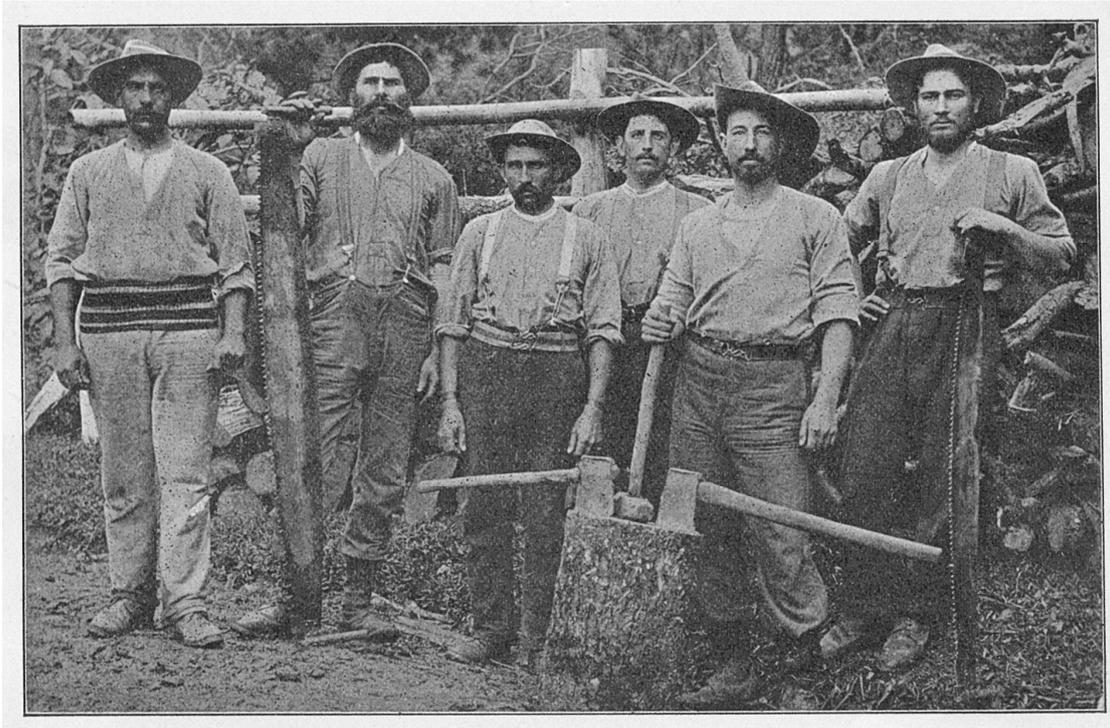


Photo of Boer PoW, working as woodcutters on St. Helena, from the album *De Boeren op Sint-Helena* (1902). The accompanying text mentions that the wooden objects they made, were for sale in the Netherlands.

Dutch pro-Boer organisations. On St. Helena, B.G. Versélewel de Witt Hamer, an officer from the *Hollandercorps*, was the main co-ordinator of such activities. In his reports, he emphasised that apart from tobacco, which was a popular commodity amongst the Boers, there was much need for intellectual guidance. To keep the burghers from becoming Anglicised, choirs, libraries and schools were set up in which they were acquainted with the Dutch language. These institutions, mainly run by *Hollanders* were actively supported with book shipments by pro-Boer organisations in the Netherlands. In some camps, it was negotiated that periodicals be allowed too, so that the inmates might feel less isolated from the outside world. Initially, Versélewel de Witt Hamer warned in letters that results would not come instantly, and he described how inmates tore out pages from the books they borrowed from the library, because ‘of a shortage of sanitary paper’.¹¹⁵ As time went by, the tone of his reports became more positive, especially about the schools, which were considered quite useful, because many of the Boer PoWs had never before received an education.¹¹⁶

Other fruits of these patriotic initiatives were plays and concerts that were well-attended by the inmates. The British also allowed national holidays, like the birthdays of Kruger and Queen Wilhelmina, to be celebrated, with sing-a-longs, bazaars and sporting events. The public in the Netherlands learned about these activities from letters that reached the media and photo albums that depicted the daily life of the PoWs.¹¹⁷ There was even more tangible

¹¹⁵ ‘bij gebrek aan saniteitspapier’. Letter Versélewel de Witt Hamer. *NRC*, 31 July 1900.

¹¹⁶ Letters Versélewel de Witt Hamer. *NRC*, 24 November and 30 December 1900.

¹¹⁷ Letter from Ceylon. *NRC*, 8 October 1901; Ihle, *Dagelijks leven van de Boeren krijgsgevangenen; De Boeren*

evidence that the Boers retained their Dutch identity in the camps. Many of them turned to woodwork to pass the time, and a number of objects, which often contained patriotic symbols or slogans, found their way to the Netherlands, where they became quite popular. Pro-Boer exhibitions held throughout the country displayed samples of this work, and visitors could buy them as souvenirs from stalls, the proceeds of which went to charities that helped people in PoW and concentration camps.¹¹⁸ Through their handiwork, the camp inmates were seen as a kind of *Bittereinder*: heroes who bravely suffered the cruel treatment by the British, but clung onto their identity and resisted imperial dominance. Despite the outcry over the treatment of the PoWs, their fate was not considered to be as bad as that of the women and children in the concentration camps. This important topic in pro-Boer propaganda will be discussed in the following section.

A ‘policy of torturing women’: concentration camps

The policy of farm-burning caused problems for the British high command, because it left the farm inhabitants homeless. From the end of 1900, the army set up concentration camps throughout South Africa to which these displaced people were deported. In total, hundreds of thousands of white inhabitants of the Boer republics were put in these civilian camps, as they were called by the British authorities. Black farm labourers were interned in separate camps. Because of the poor hygienic conditions, the death rate in the camps was very high. Between 25,000 and 28,000 Boers died there, no less than ten percent of the white population in the republics before the war. It is estimated that tens of thousands of people lost their lives in black camps too.¹¹⁹ Although the existence of the latter was known to contemporaries, it was the fate of the Boers, particularly that of women and children, that caused great commotion amongst the public in Europe and the Liberal opposition in Great Britain.¹²⁰ Faced with this scandal, the British authorities reformed the management of the white concentration camps in accordance with the recommendations of a ladies’ committee under the leadership of Millicent Fawcett. This proved to be effective, and the death rates decreased dramatically by the end of 1901.¹²¹ In historiography there is much controversy about the meaning of the concentration camps. Afrikaner nationalists described them as an attempt to exterminate the

op Sint-Helena; Douwes Dekker, *Wilhelmina-dag op Ceylon*.

¹¹⁸ *Zuid-Afrikaansche tentoonstelling; De Boeren op Sint-Helena*, 74.

¹¹⁹ After the war, Botha commissioned an inquiry, which yielded the number of 27,927 Boer casualties. Recently, the historians Iain R. Smith and Elizabeth van Heyningen have compiled a databank in which they counted ‘around 25,000’ deaths. Van Heyningen, ‘Costly Mythologies’, 496 and 507. There are far fewer sources left about the black camps, so it is even harder to establish those figures. The official number was 14,000, but Smith and Van Heyningen estimate that the number of deaths there might have been as high as in the white camps. *Ibidem*, 496, footnote 5.

¹²⁰ For reference to black camps cf. Hobhouse, *Report to the Committee*, 13. Cf. Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire*, 79. Paula Krebs argues that Hobhouse did not mention the black camps at all, while in fact she did note, albeit briefly, how there were similar problems in these camps, and recommended that these be taken into consideration too.

¹²¹ Pakenham, *The Boer War*, 553-554.

Boers. Especially after the Second World War, such remarks became quite contentious, because some authors equated the camps in South Africa between 1900 and 1902 with the Holocaust. Recently, such comparisons have rightfully been dismissed by academics such as Liz Stanley, Elisabeth van Heyningen and Iain R. Smith, who have pointed out that they are anachronistic.¹²² Moreover, they argue, the deaths were not the result of a deliberate strategy, as is the case with genocide, but largely ‘accidental, the unintended result of military policies that failed to consider the likely human consequences’.¹²³

Valuable as these assertions are, these revisionist authors overlook the fact that the Afrikaner nationalists’ vision on the concentration camps was not only constructed decades after the South African War ended, but also rooted in the pro-Boer propaganda campaign in Europe during the period 1899-1902. The condemnation of the concentration camps as an attempt by the British to destroy the Dutch race in South Africa was evident in contemporary sources. Commentators in the Netherlands had already accused the British army of a policy of ‘extermination’ when they described alleged atrocities during the earlier phases of the South African War, before the camps were introduced.¹²⁴ Such terms became more common as the war dragged on. For instance, when Kruger arrived in Marseilles in November 1900, he gave a speech in which he assured his audience that the republics would only lose their independence ‘after the two Boer peoples with their women and children have been exterminated’.¹²⁵ The response to the concentration camps in Dutch sources must be seen in the context of this sort of rhetoric. To pro-Boers, they formed part of the onslaught the British were unleashing on the Afrikaners to wipe out all resistance to their colonial dominance, during which they did not spare even the most vulnerable groups. The concentration camp policy did lead to protests in Britain, and there was a significant exchange of information between certain figures from the Liberal Party and the pro-Boers in the Netherlands. The ways in which the camp system was interpreted on either side of the North Sea differed considerably, however. Whereas British dissidents saw it as an unfortunate excess, many Dutch observers saw it as the outcome of the racial struggle for colonial dominance in South Africa. This will be discussed in more detail below.

The debate about concentration camps was intertwined with the outcry over the farm-burnings, the very reason that so many people had been displaced. Besides the destruction of material goods, livestock and crops, the human costs were considered to be high too. While the men were still out fighting or had been put out of combat, it was argued, their wives, children and elderly family members were left without any means of subsistence. The British army command initially sent away these groups to live with the commandos in the field, because they thought that the obligation to care for civilians lay with the Boer authorities.

¹²² Stanley, *Mourning becomes*, 3-4; Heyningen, ‘Costly Mythologies’, passim.

¹²³ Stanley, *Mourning becomes*, 7.

¹²⁴ Letter by H. Wefers Bettink. *NRC*, 6 April 1900.

¹²⁵ ‘nadat de twee Boerenvolkeren met hunne vrouwen en kinderen zullen zijn uitgeroeid’. Waszkiewicz-Van Schilfgaarde ed., *Paul Kruger’s tocht*, 14.

Pro-Boers argued that this meant that the British had chosen not only to fight the commandos in the field, but also the women and children. In this regard, Kruger remarked that he had:

often fought against barbaric African tribes; but the barbarians we now have to fight against are much worse than the others. [...] [T]hey burn our farms; they chase away the women and children, whose husbands and fathers have been killed or taken prisoner; they leave her [*sic*] without protection, without a roof, without bread often.¹²⁶

Despite these hardships, there were accounts of women who managed to survive in the open field, and who were portrayed as living the life of their heroic ancestors during the Great Trek. The most famous example was the wife of General Koos de la Rey, who camped out in her ox wagon for 19 months after Lord Methuen’s troops burned down her house.¹²⁷ The defiance of these women was also mentioned in other sources. In one of his reports, Smuts wrote of an encounter with a band of destitute women roaming the countryside. Although he lamented their fate and condemned the ‘indescribable barbarity’ inflicted on them by the British, he described their ‘unbreakable perseverance’, rooted in their patriotism and their belief in God.¹²⁸

When the British set up camps to house the displaced persons, there was not much assurance that this would improve their situation. In December 1900, one of the first accounts from a civilian camp near Port Elizabeth reached the Netherlands via *Ons Land*. It was written by an Afrikaner lady, S. Hofmeyr, who described the women and children as ‘prisoners of war’. According to her, the conditions in which the destitute internees were living were shocking, suffering from disease, lack of food and want of clothes: ‘no man however hard and strong, tears will spring from his eyes of the sight of this, and the mothers and daughters are not capable of speaking about the situation in which they find themselves without tears rolling from their eyes’.¹²⁹ After a few months, more ominous news came from camps on the territory of the Transvaal and OFS. An anonymous correspondent who called himself ‘Pax’ wrote to *Het Algemeen Handelsblad* about the situation in Johannesburg, where he was a member of the local charity that provided aid to the inmates. The editors of the newspaper kept the identity of the author secret, but it is likely that ‘Pax’ was Cornelis Broeksma, a

¹²⁶ ‘meermalen tegen barbaarsche Afrikaansche stammen moeten strijden; maar de barbaren, met wie we nu moeten vechten, zijn veel erger dan die anderen. [...] zij verbranden onze hoeven; zij jagen de vrouwen en kinderen weg, wier mannen en vaders gedood of krijgsgevangen zijn; zij laten haar [*sic*] zonder bescherming, zonder dak, zonder brood vaak.’ Waszklewicz-Van Schilfgaarde ed., *Paul Kruger’s tocht*, 13-14.

¹²⁷ After the war her memoirs were published by J.A. Wormser. De la Rey, *Mijne omzwervingen en beproevingen*. Cf. *Ambtelijke verslagen van generaal J.H. De la Rey en generaal J.C. Smuts*, 5; anonymous letter. *NRC*, 20 March 1902.

¹²⁸ ‘onbeschrijfelijke barbaarschheid’, ‘onbreekbare volharding’. Letter by Smuts to Steyn. *NRC*, 23 June 1901.

¹²⁹ ‘geen mensch, al is hij ook hoe hard of sterk, tranen barst hem uit de ogen bij het aanschouwen van dit, en de moeders en dochters zijn niet in staat om te spreken van den toestand waarin zij verkeeren zonder dat de tranen hun uit den oogen rolden’. Article from *Ons Land*. *NRC*, 23 December 1900.

public prosecutor who had emigrated from the Netherlands. He sent a report of a meeting between his committee and British authorities, who in his view did not furnish the camp with sufficient building material and supplies. To back up these indictments, he included letters from British doctors that had been suppressed by the authorities in which they complained about the living conditions.¹³⁰ In the months that followed, Broeksma sent several secret reports about the deteriorating conditions in the Johannesburg camp, including mortality figures, which were smuggled to the Transvaal legation in Brussels and published by the NZAV.¹³¹ Such accounts were supplemented by an increasing amount of material, especially from the committees that were established to provide aid to the internees of various camps throughout South Africa. Pro-Boer organisations in the Netherlands regularly published such letters, which were reproduced in newspapers. Also, letters from private individuals were occasionally smuggled past the censorship and reached the press in Europe.¹³²

However, the most influential account of the concentration camps was provided by an English author: Emily Hobhouse. In October 1900, she established contact with the ANV press office via a mediator in London. In preparation for her journey to the camps on behalf of the Distress Fund for South African Women and Children, between December 1900 and April 1901, she asked for information about the humanitarian situation from people who had recently left the war zone and stayed in the Netherlands.¹³³ There was not much information available at the time, and during her tour of the Cape, Transvaal and OFS she visited many different sites, being the first to give a survey of conditions in all the camps. When the report of her journey reached the ANV press office, it was considered ‘too important not to use’ and it was immediately translated and distributed in the Netherlands and continental Europe.¹³⁴ In addition, one of her photo’s, depicting a starving girl named Lizzie van Zyl, became an icon for the suffering children in the camps. In the Netherlands, it was published in many magazines and pamphlets and printed on postcards, which were greatly in demand.¹³⁵ H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge ensured that a lanternslide was made of it that could be used during lectures about the camps: ‘[t]hat image, during a meeting, enlarged on a screen, [...] would have an enormous effect, more than a thousand books.’¹³⁶

What made the Hobhouse report so important was that it provided a general overview of

¹³⁰ Letter by ‘Pax’. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 21 February 1901.

¹³¹ His reports addressed to ‘dr. Williamson’ and signed with ‘Chr. Brooks’ (codenames for respectively Leyds and Broeksma) can be found in the secret files of the SAR legation. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 315. In September 1901, Broeksma was executed by the British after he was convicted of high treason. Cf. chapter 3.

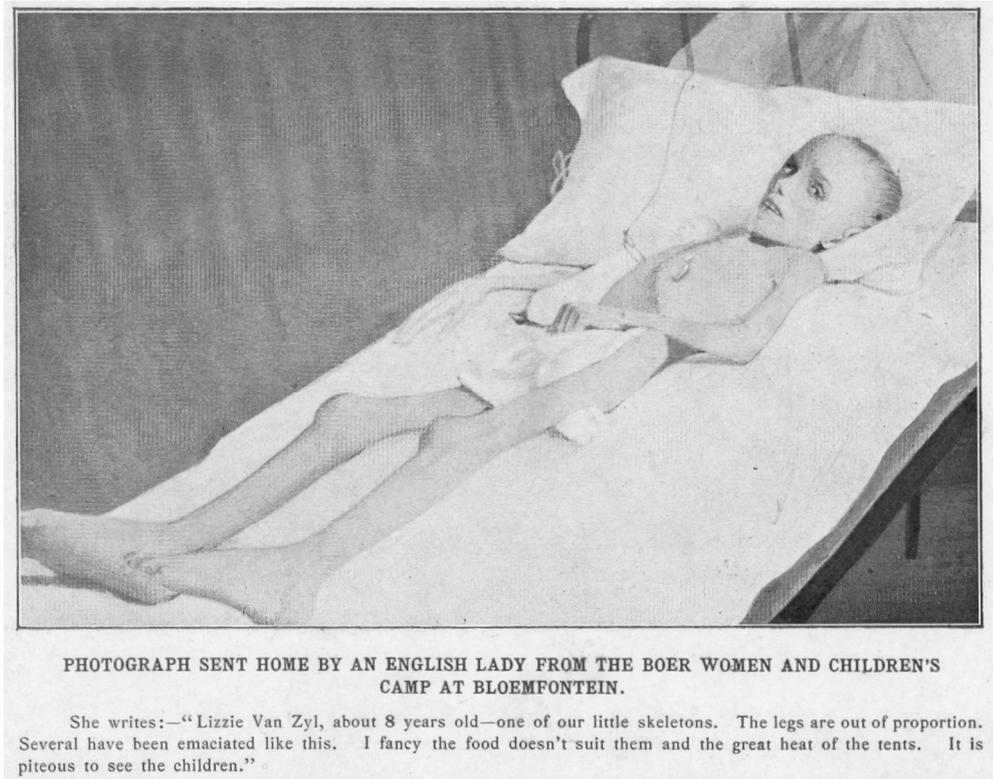
¹³² For an overview of these sources cf. chapters 3 and 4.

¹³³ Correspondence between W. Roosegaarde Bisschop and ANV press office, 20 October, 6 and 19 November 1900. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 811.

¹³⁴ ‘te belangrijk om niet te gebruiken’. F. Rompel to H. Tiedeman, 20 June 1901. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 811.

¹³⁵ Correspondence about photograph Lizzie van Zyl, July 1901. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 811.

¹³⁶ ‘Dat beeld, in een vergadering, vergroot op een scherm, [...] zou een geweldige uitwerking hebben, meer dan duizend boeken’. H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge to W.J. Leyds, 21 June 1901. NL-HaNA, Leyds, 2.21.105, inv.nr. 51. For use of this photo in later Afrikaner nationalism cf. Stanley, *Mourning becomes*, 127-131.



Postcard depicting Lizzie van Zyl. Dutch text on the back reads: 'Lizzie van Zyl, a starved girl, 8 years old, from the womencamps. The Christian work of the English'.

the state of affairs, because she had been able to travel around, whereas other correspondents only focused on the locations where they were. Although the situation differed per camp, such accounts contained similar explanations for the high death rates, and one Dutchman who had been an inmate himself praised the Hobhouse report as 'unbiased', 'dignified and true'.¹³⁷ One point of concern was the poor quality and lack of food and clean drinking water. In addition, there was almost no soap available, which made hygiene problematic. Other complaints were concerning housing. The inmates were mainly accommodated in tents, which left them exposed to the bitterly cold South African winter nights. Moreover, there were few beds, so that many had to sleep on the bare floor, and there was hardly any fuel. All these factors meant that disease was rife in the camps, and the medical facilities were too limited to provide adequate help. Correspondents wrote that it was painful to see how the prosperous women of the republics had fallen to such poverty.¹³⁸ Just as the PoWs were described as men who desperately longed for their lost freedom, the misery in the concentration camps was considered to be a stark contrast with the comfortable life the Boers had enjoyed before the war.

The Fawcett committee also noted deficiencies, but concluded that the Boer women were responsible for the situation themselves to a large extent. The report described a terrible lack

¹³⁷ 'onbevooroordeeld', 'waardig en waar'. Statement by the Dutchman H.A. Cornelisse, who lived in a camp for several months. NASA. Leyds collection, LEY 809. Cf. editorials. *NRC*, 21 and 22 June 1901.

¹³⁸ Letter by nurse H. Broers from Norvalspont. *NRC* 4 July 1901; letter from Irene. *NRC*, 30 August 1901.

of hygiene and primitive remedies for illness, which was considered to be the result of the underdevelopment of the republics. These remarks were used by the jingo press and members of the British government, such as Chamberlain.¹³⁹ Before the war, several Dutch authors who wrote about South Africa did mention the primitive housing and bad hygiene conditions of Boer families.¹⁴⁰ During the war, however, pro-Boers opposed such indictments. Together with Hobhouse, they emphasised the cleanliness and the moral strength of the Afrikaner women, who were portrayed as devoted mothers. The high death rates, they argued, were solely the fault of the British authorities, who did not provide adequate means to keep the inmates healthy.¹⁴¹ To highlight this, an international campaign was started in October 1901. Charts with the death rates of the camps were taken from the British opposition paper *The Morning Leader* by the ANV press office and made into leaflets that were distributed throughout Europe. In addition, huge posters were hung on walls in cities in which the death rates in South Africa were compared to the mortality figures in the respective cities.¹⁴²

Besides these joint actions, there were also great differences between the protests by British activists and the pro-Boers in the Netherlands. Paula Krebs has shown that Hobhouse believed that the camps were beneficial in principle, because they protected Boer women and children from the dangers of the open field, especially black men and their untamed sexual lusts. As such, her protests were directed against the mismanagement of the camps rather than their actual existence.¹⁴³ Dutch authors had a fundamentally different outlook on this matter. In several letters, claims by the British that they were protecting the women and children in the camps because the Boers failed to do so were branded as ‘hypocritical’.¹⁴⁴ Instead, the camps were seen as a means to target the civilian population of the Boer republics and particularly the most vulnerable groups. Rompel saw the proclamation policy as a sign that the British army in South Africa had failed to subdue the commandos, which was a reason for soldiers to take out their frustrations on the families of their adversaries with a ‘policy of torturing women’.¹⁴⁵ In addition, he and others argued that the British used the camps as a means to force the Boer men to lay down their arms, which was confirmed by a Reuters report which stated that the families of men who were still fighting were put on half rations.¹⁴⁶

The outrage at the concentration camps also touched upon another aspect of the race question in South Africa. In many Dutch texts it was suggested that the camps were used to

¹³⁹ Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire*, 73-76.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. chapter 2.

¹⁴¹ Editorial. *NRC*, 28 July 1901; editorial. *NRC*, 17 December 1901; editorial. *NRC*, 22 February 1902; letter in *Daily News*. *NRC*, 9 March 1902; letter by German lady. *NRC*, 26 March 1902. Cf. Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire*, 70 and 74.

¹⁴² Letters ANV press office to OFS consul-general’s office, 23 October and 8 November 1901. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 809. The leaflets can be found in: ZA, Emous collection, EM 13.

¹⁴³ Krebs, *Gender, Race, and the Writing of Empire*, 64-66.

¹⁴⁴ ‘schijnheilig’. Letter from J.C. Pretorius. *NRC*, 22 January 1901; editorial. *NRC*, 20 December 1901.

¹⁴⁵ ‘vrouwenmartel-politiek’. Rompel, *Een studie in proclamaties*, 12.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 10 and 15; letter by J.C. Pretorius. *NRC*, 22 January 1901; letter in *Advertentieblad*. *NRC*, 12 February 1901; letter by German lady in *Alldeutscher Blätter*. *NRC*, 26 March 1902.

deliberately wipe out the Boer population by killing the women so that reproduction was made impossible. In this context, the word ‘murder camps’ was used in several sources.¹⁴⁷ The lack of food in particular was seen as the result of an orchestrated attempt by the authorities to starve the inmates.¹⁴⁸ In the Netherlands, one of the most outspoken authors on this subject was H.J. Emous, a leading figure in the network that provided aid to the camps, who forwarded letters about the situation there to newspapers in the Netherlands. In a series of essays that were published in *Het Algemeen Handelsblad* in July and August of 1901, he stated his views on the matter and tried to convince the public to donate money.¹⁴⁹ He described the poor conditions suffered by the Boer camp internees as an example of ‘hypocritical wickedness’ that was unprecedented in world history. The British, he argued, starved and exhausted women and children so that they did not have to kill them. He therefore coined the word ‘strangling camps’.¹⁵⁰ The consequences of the British lust for power were perfectly clear according to Emous: the Boers were being exterminated. He even went so far as to call it ‘*volksmoord*’, which is a word that had no equivalent in the English language at the time, but can be considered to be an early form of the term genocide.¹⁵¹ Of course the meaning of this word was very different from the meaning it has acquired after the Second World War, and the radical statements made by Emous should be seen in the light of contemporary ideas on the South African War that were held in the Netherlands. In the heated atmosphere after the Hobhouse report, it seemed to some that the British were prepared to use any means possible to subdue their rivals during the struggle for colonial dominance and were even capable of mass murder.

The propaganda campaign against the camps reached its climax between July and November 1901, when death rates were the highest. The most tangible results were collections for women and children, which resulted in a steady flow of aid. In addition, several plans were developed to try and persuade the British to put the concentration camps under international mandate so that the internees could be better taken care of.¹⁵² However, when news reached Europe that the number of casualties was dropping (around the New Year of 1902), this all came to an end rather quickly. The rapidly declining mortality rates were not only seen as the result of the changing policy of British authorities, but were also interpreted in Darwinian terms. Some commentators argued that the weakest groups, such as

¹⁴⁷ ‘moordkampen’. *De Boeren op Sint-Helena*, cover page; Janson jr. ed., *Het verbranden*; Penning, *De oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* III, 1195; idem, *De kolonist van Zuid-Afrika*, 15.

¹⁴⁸ Letter from visitor Potchefstroom camp. *NRC*, 17 September 1901; interview with refugee. *NRC*, 18 January 1902; letter by Mrs Joubert. *NRC*, 22 January 1902.

¹⁴⁹ Letter H.J. Emous to ANV press office, 16 August 1901. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 809. For Emous’s work during the war cf. chapter 4.

¹⁵⁰ ‘huichelachtige snoodheid’, ‘worgerkampen’. Letter by H.J. Emous. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 6 July 1901.

¹⁵¹ Ibidem. For similar word ‘*volkerenmoord*’, cf. Penning, *De kolonist van Zuid-Afrika*, 17. This book was originally published in 1904.

¹⁵² Waszkiewicz-Van Schilfgaarde, *Plea for the grand of a neutral territory*. A Socialist Member of Parliament proposed to move the camps to Europe and even received support from orthodox Protestant pro-Boers. *Voor de Boeren*, 14 December 1901, 3.

young children, had largely died out, so that only the strong survived.¹⁵³ Others saw it as evidence that the Boers were a stubborn people. The Dutch press welcomed a Reuters report which stated that there had been thirty-eight births and twenty-seven deaths in the Bloemfontein camp in March 1902. ‘Bravo! The Afrikaner race is not easily exterminated.’¹⁵⁴ In the view of contemporaries, the women who survived the camps showed themselves to be defiant against the British onslaught and this respect shared in *Bittereinder* heroism, which made people in the Netherlands confident about the future of the Dutch race in South Africa. The declining death rates were probably not the only reason that the protests against the concentration camps dwindled, however. At the beginning of 1902, persistent rumours appeared about peace negotiations: news which started to dominate the coverage of the war.

The Peace of Vereeniging

At several points during the war, news emerged about possible peace negotiations between the British army command and the Boer leadership in South Africa. In February 1901, for instance, the commander-in-chief of the Transvaal forces, Louis Botha, met Horatio Kitchener, acting commander of the British army in South Africa. The Dutch press was suspicious about the British reports of this encounter, and at first commentators dismissed them as jingo propaganda or a trick to stall for time.¹⁵⁵ After a few months, however, it became clear that the meeting truly had taken place when a newspaper in the Netherlands received a Dutch account of the negotiations, written by someone with the remarkable pseudonym ‘B.ot H. Anicus’.¹⁵⁶ According to this report, the men had met on Kitchener’s initiative and Botha had boldly stated that the restoration of independence to the republics was a prerequisite for peace. Although the British commander tried to make other offers, the Boer general refused to settle for anything less, and the negotiations were promptly ended. It was emphasised that the leaders of both the SAR and the OFS agreed with Botha on this point.¹⁵⁷ In other sources that reached the Netherlands too, it was emphasised that the Boer leadership in South Africa would never have accepted peace without the annulment of Lord Roberts’s annexations. President Steyn in particular was outspoken in this matter.¹⁵⁸

This kind of report was in keeping with the romantic image of the *Bittereinders* held by Europeans. Accounts of the destruction of farms and the fate of the internees of PoW and civilian camps caused much outcry and despondency. By contrast, official missives from Boer

¹⁵³ Letter by *Commissie voor de Vrouwenkampen*. *NRC*, 19 March 1902; editorial. *NRC*, 21 March 1902.

¹⁵⁴ ‘Bravo! Den Afrikaander stam wordt niet licht uitgerooid.’ Editorial. *NRC*, 16 April 1902. The question as to who fathered the children, after almost two-and-a-half years of war, was not mentioned. For illegitimate children in concentration camps cf. Stanley, *Mourning becomes*, 134-137, 147 and 162-163.

¹⁵⁵ Analyses by C. de Wit. *NRC*, 27 February and 12 March 1901.

¹⁵⁶ J.H. Bierens de Haan, the former physician of Genral Louis Botha, wrote the account. Cf. chapter 3. It was first published in *NRC*, 29 May 1901. Later it appeared as a separate pamphlet. ‘B. ot H. Anicus’, *De onderhandelingen van Lord Kitchener en Louis Botha*.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 12.

¹⁵⁸ Proclamation by Steyn and Schalk Burger. *NRC*, 24 August 1901; letter by Steyn to Kitchener. *NRC*, 30 October and 11 November 1901. The former letter was also published as a pamphlet by the ANV press office.

generals like Smuts that stated that things were going well, militarily speaking, and that the morale of the remaining Boer commandos was high, fed the hope that the republics might somehow be restored. Even in May 1902, less than a month before the peace was signed, a Dutch veteran who recently had returned from South Africa, declared that the situation at the time actually looked better than in June 1900.¹⁵⁹ Such sentiments were used by the Boer deputation in Europe and their propagandists. When in December 1901 and January 1902 several continental newspapers reported on rumours that new peace talks had started in South Africa, Leyds issued several statements. He declared that he had no information that supported these claims, that no serious negotiations would take place without the involvement of the deputation in Europe and that the restoration of independence to the Boer republics remained a *conditio sine qua non* for peace.¹⁶⁰ These stout denials were soon made redundant by the actions of the newly elected government in the Netherlands, headed by Abraham Kuyper.

In August 1901, great political change took place when Kuyper’s Protestant party won the elections and he headed a government in the Netherlands for the first time. Some contemporaries were of the opinion that his attacks on the previous cabinet on issues related to the South African War contributed to his victory at the ballot box. As first minister he made clear that the Netherlands would remain neutral, but did state that he would do his best to end the war, should he get the opportunity.¹⁶¹ This did occur in January 1902, when he secretly offered the British government to mediate in the conflict in South Africa. Although the British government refused the Dutch offer, it instantly forwarded this memorandum to the Boer generals in South Africa. As a result, secret talks including representatives of the Transvaal and OFS forces were started.¹⁶²

During the aftermath of the mediation attempt, the strained relations between Kuyper and the pro-Boer movement in Europe came to a head. In February, the Dutch government published a memorandum containing confidential correspondence with the British government. Kuyper had only consulted one member of the Boers’ diplomatic deputation, Danie Wolmarans, who supported the initiative. In his memoirs, Leyds recounted how he, Kruger and Abraham Fischer were kept in the dark about this contact between the Protestant leader and the ‘weaker brother’ in the deputation, and how they had had to learn of the initiative from the newspapers.¹⁶³ Even more painful was the fact that the memorandum stated that peace should be negotiated between the British army and the Boers who were left

¹⁵⁹ Interview of H. VerLoren van Themaat. *NRC*, 15 May 1902.

¹⁶⁰ W.J. Leyds to H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge, 5 December 1901; correspondence between W.J. Leyds, A. Fischer and P.A. Nierstrasz, 24-26 December 1901. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 103.

¹⁶¹ M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 187-188; Van Koppen, *De geuzen van de negentiende eeuw*, 183-185.

¹⁶² For an overview of this meditation attempt and its effects cf. Van Koppen, *De geuzen van de negentiende eeuw*, 185-197; M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 188-189.

¹⁶³ ‘zwakke broeder’. Leyds ed., *Vierde verzameling* I, xlvii-xlviii. The role of the third member of the deputation, C.H. Wessels, is not clear.

in the field in South Africa, thereby bypassing the envoys in Europe, who were demanding the restoration of independence.

Kuyper’s sudden move received much attention from both international and domestic media. There was appreciation for his peace initiative. In the Netherlands, Protestant authors described the action as a prime example of philanthropy. Penning, for instance, praised the ‘humanitarian motives’ of the Dutch government that, as he saw it, had wanted to end the suffering of the Boer population during the ‘terrible war’.¹⁶⁴ Protestant journalists welcomed the memorandum as a diplomatic victory, arguing that it would force the British authorities to abandon demands of unconditional surrender. Moreover, it was argued that Kuyper’s initiative had been very good for the international reputation of the Netherlands, providing a reminder of the country’s glory days as a world power in the seventeenth century.¹⁶⁵ These arguments could also to be found on the pages of other newspapers.¹⁶⁶ But there was also severe criticism on Kuyper’s mediation attempt, particularly from Liberal journalists such as Charles Boissevain. He argued that Kuyper had given the British exactly what they wanted: a pretext to start negotiations that excluded the Boer diplomatic deputation, during which the independence of the republics would not enter the discussion. Moreover, he did not think the mediation attempt would improve the international reputation of the Netherlands as Kuyper’s supporters argued – on the contrary. ‘Such pompous and absurd self-glorification is particularly suited to making us look completely ridiculous in Europe.’¹⁶⁷

Boissevain’s castigation of Kuyper undoubtedly had to do with the domestic political situation. After the victory of the orthodox Protestants, the Liberals were in the opposition.¹⁶⁸ But this sort of criticism should also be considered in the light of the public debate about the South African War itself. Although he refrained from commenting at the time, Kuyper later defended his actions by stating that he had tried to broker a peace deal ‘to at least prevent the massacre of the Boer race’, so that the possibility remained that it would ‘revive even stronger in the future’.¹⁶⁹ This analysis of the situation in South Africa was clearly connected to the fear that the Dutch race in South Africa would be exterminated. At the same time, it went in against the propaganda campaign by the pro-Boer movement, which tried to emphasise the positive as well by celebrating the perseverance of the *Bittereinders*. Leyds was of the opinion

¹⁶⁴ ‘menschlievende beweegredenen’, ‘schrikwekkende [...] oorlog’. Penning, *Den oorlog in Zuid-Afrika* III, 1282.

¹⁶⁵ *De Standaard*, 6 February 1902; *Voor de Boeren*, 15 February 1902, 2.

¹⁶⁶ For responses in domestic and international press cf. *De Standaard*, 6 and 8 February 1902; *NRC*, 7 and 8 February 1902.

¹⁶⁷ ‘Zulke hoogdravende onzinnige zelfverheerlijking is buitengewoon geschikt om ons volkomen belachelijk te maken in Europe’. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 7 February 1902. Similar criticism was heard from the Socialists. Cf. Van Koppen, *De geuzen van de negentiende eeuw*, 198-199. Other Liberal newspapers were less critical. The *NRC* expressed its concerns about the memorandum, but *De Nieuwe Courant* was very positive.

¹⁶⁸ Also the Socialist leader Troelstra was sceptical about Kuyper’s actions, probably for similar reasons.

¹⁶⁹ ‘althans de uitmoording van de Boerenstam verhinderd werd [...] in de toekomst het krachtiger weer opleven’. Quoted in: Leyds ed., *Vierde Verzameling*, xlvii. Leyds referred to a publication from 1917. Cf. M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 188; Van Koppen, *De geuzen van de negentiende eeuw*, 201.

that nothing disheartening was to come from Europe, so that the Boers would remain motivated to fight on. Although he did not openly condemn Kuyper’s move at the time, he later made it clear that he was of the opinion that it undermined the position of the commandos, who were wearing out the British army with their guerrilla tactics.¹⁷⁰

With the knowledge of hindsight, Kuyper’s memorandum can indeed be seen as the event that launched negotiations between Kitchener and the Boer leaders that led to the Peace of Vereeniging, which finalised the annexations of the republics.¹⁷¹ These talks were held in secret, though, and there was very little coverage of them at the time. A myriad of rumours reached the press in the Netherlands, often via English newspapers, but there was no clear picture of the proceedings. In the meantime, reports from the commandos that had been sent in February, before the negotiations had gotten under way, expressed confidence that the struggle would continue, so even during this uncertain period there was lingering hope that the Boers would be able to win back their independence. This explains the fact that when the news came on 2 June 1902 that peace had been signed and that the independence of the republics had been irrevocably lost, it hit the public in Europe like a lightning bolt. In their memoirs, several pro-Boer activists recounted that they had had no idea that it would come so soon and under those terms. Subsequently, the propaganda campaign was immediately suspended.¹⁷²

After a few days, the dust started to settle a bit and the full implications of the treaty became known in the Netherlands. The primary feeling that dominated the initial response was one of disillusion at the loss of independence. All commentators extensively lamented this aspect of the treaty, and the Boers were not spared of criticism. Editors of newspapers spoke ‘a few harsh words’ to the burghers who had given up ‘something so valuable’.¹⁷³ At first sight, it seemed that *Handsopper* mentality had prevailed over *Bittereinder* heroism. Historians today argue that it was as a result of this setback that the interest in the Boer cause by the public in the Netherlands that had been so strong during the course of the South African War, suddenly seemed to evaporate.¹⁷⁴

These sentiments, although they signalled a significant change, do not tell the whole story, however. There were also positive responses to some of the articles of the treaty, particularly those that guaranteed amnesty for the Cape rebels and suspended political rights for black people. These were signs that the surrender had not been unconditional at least, and that the position of the white inhabitants of the former republics was protected to some extent. It was also emphasised that the Boers had shown themselves to be morally superior compared

¹⁷⁰ Leyds ed., *Vierde verzameling* I, xliii-iv; Van Winter, *Dr. Leyds en Zuid-Afrika*, 18-19; W.H. de Beaufort, ‘De Zuid-Afrikaansche republieken en de vredesconferentie van 1899’, in: *De Gids*, vol. 80 (1916), 465-478.

¹⁷¹ Leyds ed., *Vierde verzameling* I, xlix; Van Koppen, *De geuzen van de negentiende eeuw*, 199. Cf. M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 189.

¹⁷² Leyds ed., *Vierde verzameling* I, 1; Sandbergen, *Twintig jaren onder Krugers Boeren*, 365.

¹⁷³ ‘een enkel hard woord’, ‘kostbaar goed’. Editorial. *NRC*, 3 June 1902.

¹⁷⁴ M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 189-190; Te Velde, *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbesef*, 163; Bossenbroek, *Holland op op zijn breedst*, 352; De Graaff, *De mythe van de stamverwantschap*, 9.

to the mighty British army that had lost all standing in the world. Moreover, there was sympathy for the conditions under which the commandos had surrendered in the end. In addition to the growing menace of black groups armed by the British, they had had to witness how their families pined away in the concentration camps. These views were confirmed in a declaration that the Boer leadership issued after they had signed the treaty, which was published in the press as soon as it reached the Netherlands.¹⁷⁵

These glimmers of hope came forth from the general ideas that existed about the South African question. Many authors predicted that the peace would only be temporary. Boissevain, for example, refused to call the treaty of Vereeniging a surrender. He thought that the devastation of the old republics had caused so much resentment amongst the Boers and the Cape Afrikaners that the two groups had been ‘forged into the race that eventually will civilise and rule South Africa’.¹⁷⁶ This once again shows that the war in South Africa was not seen in military terms only, but was also considered to be part of a larger struggle for colonial dominance in the region, which touched upon ideas about race and culture. Even though the republics had been lost as political entities, such ideas continued to exist. Many of the people who were involved in the pro-Boer movement remained defiant and predicted that the end of the war did not rule out Afrikaner dominance.

A few days after he heard about the news of the peace Leyds wrote to his brother. ‘I am glad to read in your letter that you believe that the Boers in South Africa will be victorious in the long run. I agree completely.’¹⁷⁷ As a result of these hopes, he devoted the rest of his life to assisting in the development of intellectual life amongst the Afrikaners.¹⁷⁸ The same sentiment can be found in several Dutch publications from that time, and some people in the Netherlands were still prepared to do their bit in the racial and cultural struggle for colonial dominance in South Africa. Just as before, such sentiments were couched in belligerent terms, referring to *Bittereinder* heroism. The executive of the CNBC, for example, compared themselves with a sentry, a *brandwacht*: ‘to guard and to wait, to stare into darkness perhaps, but thereby training the eye and serving our kindred nation’.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ NRC, 11 June 1902. This version was taken from *The Standard*, and seems to have been censored, as it did not contain the passage in which the armament of black people and the concentration camps were described as reasons to surrender, matters which were mentioned in the original document. These quotes can be found in other publications. Transcript Boer statement, 31 May 1902. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 869; publication of letter Boer leaders to former inhabitants of the Republics, 31 May 1902. NASA, Leyds collection, LEY 206; Reitz, *De dochter van den Handsopper*, 276.

¹⁷⁶ ‘gehamerd tot het ras dat Zuid-Afrika ten slotte beschave [sic] en regeeren zal’. *Het Algemeen Handelsblad*, 2 June 1902. Cf. Scholtanus, *De reacties in Nederland op het einde van de Boerenoorlog*, 77-78.

¹⁷⁷ ‘Ik ben blij in je brief te lezen dat naar je meening, op den duur het Boeren-element in Zuid-Afrika zegenvierend zal zijn. Daarmede stem ik volkomen in.’ Leyds ed., *Vierde Verzameling* I, 757.

¹⁷⁸ Van Niekerk, *Kruger se regterhand*, preface. For an extensive discussion of these activities cf. chapter 7.

¹⁷⁹ ‘te waken en te wachten, in het duister staren wellicht, maar daardoor het oog te oefenen en onze broedernatie te dienen’. *Voor de Boeren*, 14 June 1902, appendix.

Conclusion

The coverage of the South African War in Dutch pro-Boer propaganda during the last phase of the conflict showed great continuity with ideas that existed about the rivalry between the Boers and British during previous periods. The unilateral annexations of the republics and the proclamations issued by the British army command were seen as renewed attempts to crush the Dutch race in South Africa. Although some of the responses in the Netherlands can be accounted for by offended national pride and frustration about the policy of neutrality, the main concern was the apparent imminent destruction of the republics. In this heated atmosphere, perception of the Boers became polarised, which was also the result of the fact that propagandists left out passages from reports that they considered to be in contradiction to their overall message. Those who continued to fight, the *Bittereinders*, were celebrated as heroes, while those who surrendered, the *Handsoppers*, were denounced as traitors to their people. This dichotomy also coloured the description of the so-called ‘methods of barbarism’ that the British used against their adversaries, such as the armament of black people, farm-burning, the deportation of PoWs and the introduction of concentration camps. Although these measures caused great anxiety – some even saw it as an attempt to exterminate the Boers – there remained a glimmer of hope that was kept alive by reports of ongoing perseverance by the burghers and their wives. Even when the peace negotiations were well under way, propagandists in Europe boldly proclaimed that the Boers would never abandon their claim to independence.

It cannot be denied that the Peace of Vereeniging signalled a new phase in relations between the Dutch and the Afrikaners. The end of the Boer republics meant that the hopes for a colony in South Africa that would flourish and become a ‘New Holland’ were definitively dashed. To contemporaries, however, the question went beyond these geopolitical considerations. From the 1880s onwards, the Dutch pro-Boer movement strongly emphasised cultural relations. The network that was set up by administrators, engineers, journalists, clergymen and teachers transferred information to the Netherlands, which provided public opinion there with a highly coloured view on the situation in South Africa. It has been argued in the last few chapters that these lines of communication, although severely hampered by the hostilities, provided the material that furnished the pro-Boer propaganda campaign in Europe with material during the South African War.

The contents of such publications were never without ambivalences. Even before the war, authors from the Netherlands wrote about both the positive and the negative sides of the Boer character. These ambiguities continued in the depiction of the commandos during the war, who showed lots of bravery when things were going well, but many of whom lost discipline after the British started their advance. This attitude of ambivalence deepened during the later phases of the war and became polarised in the light of the worsening humanitarian situation. In historiography, it is asserted that despondence prevailed after the war suddenly ended,

which appears to be true at first sight. However, many contemporaries within the Dutch pro-Boer movement were of the opinion that all was not lost.

The ongoing defiance of the propagandists should be seen in the context of the struggle between the Boers and the British for colonial dominance in South Africa. To contemporaries, this issue was not only fought out on the battlefield, but also in books, pamphlets and classrooms. Pro-Boer propaganda from the 1880s onwards had the explicit aim of countering British claims on the region and providing the SAR and the OFS with material to justify their independence. When the republics were formally annexed by British, however, the views that were put forward in such publications were not considered to have lost their relevance. Indeed, some thought they were more important than ever, especially when it became clear that self-governance could be expected for the white population (it was granted in 1906). The Dutch-speaking population outnumbered the English-speaking population and so could potentially achieve a majority in government. Both parties were aware that language represented a crucial divide between them that could be used to mobilise public opinion, making it a politically charged issue. In addition, South African history was a hotly debated issue because both sides tried to appropriate it for their own agenda. In this sense, the war of words about the country’s colonial past and future continued after the fighting had ended in 1902. The next chapter will explore how the pro-Boer movement in the Netherlands was connected to this ongoing struggle.