

Fighting with the Germans against their own people

Gordon McGregor, *Die Suid-Afrikaanse Vrykorps van Duits-Suidwes Afrika*

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Almost forgotten, never (fully) told: This could apply to the story of a little-known sideshow in the context of the South African military campaign against the German colony of South West Africa (SWA) which began on 23 August 1914 (with a cattle-rustling incident) and which ended on 9 July 1915 (with the final German surrender).

As the title indicates, this slim volume recounts the beginning and end of the short-lived Boer Volunteer Corps (in German *Südafrikanisches Freiwilligen-Korps*, in Dutch *Vrywillige Coor*).

The *Vrykorps* was not a German creation. It was put together by Andries de Wet, a former officer who had served on the Boer side in the

Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). He was one of the Boer irreconcilables who refused to live in the Union of South Africa under the British flag, and had emigrated to the neighbouring German colony (p 26). A considerable number of Boers were already resident in German SWA and it was from among their number that the men for the *Vrykorps* were recruited on a voluntary basis (p 23).

The *raison d'être* of the *Vrykorps* was to lend whatever support it could to the 1914 Boer Rebellion in South Africa, the first stirrings of which became evident shortly after the Union government had ranged itself on the side of Britain when the First World War broke out in August 1914. The Union's rebels were strongly opposed to the planned invasion of German SWA. They also considered that in view of Britain's total engagement against the powerful Reich, the time was opportune to restore the freedom and independence which the Boer republics had lost in 1902 (pp 2 and 12).

The *Vrykorps* was formed in (the then) Windhuk on 9 September 1914 as an independent fighting unit but under the direct command of the local German Imperial Force, or *Schutztruppe* (pp 32–33). Its formation and objectives carried the full approval and support of Governor Dr Theodor Seitz. He reckoned that it would be politically and strategically advantageous in terms of the overall German strategy in the war to support such a unit. He counted on the Boer Rebellion in the Union overthrowing the pro-British government of Louis Botha and Jan Smuts. Whatever proxy help he could render, would be a good thing because the outcome would be a German-friendly, Boer-controlled regime in Pretoria and a consequent waning of British influence in the subcontinent (pp 13–14, 27 and 32).

In exchange for guns, ammunition, an attached German artillery division, uniforms, equipment, training and military pay for each man, the Germans expected the *Vrykorps* to assist the Boer rebels in the northern Cape Province by harassing the Union Defence Force (UDF) units that were stationed there. They urged the *Vrykorps* to attack and occupy Upington, a strategic centre (pp 18–38 *passim*).

Although the hastily and inadequately trained *Vrykorps* was involved in several battles and skirmishes against the vastly superior UDF, all too soon it became apparent to the German command that its efforts would fizzle. Upington was never taken; there were indications of vacillation instead of determination and forcefulness among the men; the will to fight against a much stronger and superbly equipped force (and, it should be noted, against their own countrymen) began to evaporate; the rebel leaders often disagreed among themselves; and finally, prompt and honest communication with their increasingly exasperated and suspicious sponsors across the border in German SWA all but broke down. For all the Germans knew, their protégés seemed to be constantly on the run (pp 60, 63, 69).

It was the collapse of the Boer Rebellion in the Union and the surrender of the last rebel units near Upington to the UDF on 2 and 3 February 1915 (p 74) that pulled the rug from under the *Vrykorps*. On 15

February 1915 Governor Seitz decreed in an official notice that the unit would be disbanded, effective from 1 March 1915 (pp 75–76).

Once the rebellion was quashed, and with the localised if somewhat pathetic “supporting role” of the handful of SWA Boer sympathisers in the northern Cape nullified, the road lay open for the conquest of German SWA. The by now battle-hardened UDF under General Louis Botha made short work of the diminutive *Schutztruppe*. The capital, Windhuk, was taken unopposed on 9 May 1915 and became Windhoek, while the German surrender was signed at Khorab in the north only two months later.

McGregor’s small book is a translation into Afrikaans from his original (unnamed) manuscript written in English. It is divided into an undated foreword, seven chapters, a source list and an index. Chapters 1 to 4 include an introductory survey, the establishment of the *Vrykorps*, its military operations, and its dissolution. Chapters 5 to 7 provide information on the *Vrykorps*’s casualties (6 dead, 11 wounded, 1 died of sickness, 19 taken prisoner); a nominal roll of (all?) 69 officers and men; descriptions and details of the *Vrykorps*’s German-supplied uniforms, ranks, weapons and equipment, with much explanatory information in footnotes. The source list includes documents consulted in the National Archives of Namibia, newspapers, books in English, Afrikaans and German. The author mentions that he had several interviews with descendants of *Vrykorps* members, but does not name them.

Although McGregor has drawn on a variety of primary and secondary sources to produce a well-researched book, the somewhat stodgy text is a straightforward narrative giving mainly the bare historical facts concerning the *Vrykorps* with a blow-by-blow chronicle of its brief military adventures.

I found it irritating that the author always uses the clumsy designation “Imperiale Koloniale Troepe” (imperial colonial troops) when referring to the German defence force. Why not just say *Schutztruppe*? But I appreciate the care that has been taken to render German names correctly, complete with those pesky umlauts where necessary. Exceptions are *Schutzenhaus* (p 41) where the “u” needs an umlaut, and *Grenzschutzregiment* (twice on p 67) which should be *Grenzschutzregiment* (with two z’s). And 1814 (p 56) should obviously be 1914, and 1815 (p 71) should read 1915.

The book contains 45 full-colour and black-and-white plates arranged in two separate sections. A regrettable omission is that neither the plates nor the pages on which they feature, are numbered, making easy reference between the text and the relevant pictures onerous if not impossible. The pictures show a wide range of subjects, including contemporary photographs of the *Vrykorps* leaders and groups of volunteers; South African Boer leaders; some German civilian and military figures (but no picture of Seitz – why not?); and there are plenty of reproductions of official notices and other printed and handwritten documents.

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Much space is wasted in that the texts of some of the clearly legible documents are repeated word by word in the respective chapters! Some illustrations add nothing to the story, for example there is an unnecessary half-page reproduction of the old ZAR *vierkleur* flag as well as a full-page reproduction of its very first coat of arms. Am I missing something here? Another thing: Johannesburg's Military Museum has two First World War German automatic cannons (also called Pom-Poms). These may or may not have seen service with the *Vrykorps*. Guess what – not just one but *both* cannons are depicted: one photographed from its right and the other one from the left, with identical captions!

One would expect a military history to have at least one good-sized map showing the dispositions and/or movements of the opposite forces in the war.¹ This work has one dreadfully amateurish and highly inaccurate map in a small, squashed format showing no more than most of the place names in German SWA and in the adjacent northern Cape where the actions took place. Puzzling omissions from the map are places such as Sandfontein, Ramansdrift and Hasuur (all mentioned in the narrative). And if Nakop was at the time a South African police station, why is it shown inside German SWA? Then, unbelievably, there are non-existent rivers that are shown flowing southward into the Orange River!

Although very much a niche military history, this little book should be counted as a useful addition to the literature of the 1914–15 Boer Rebellion, the First World War in southern Africa, and perhaps even of the Afrikaners *per se*. However, let it be said that this book could provide the stimulus for a more probing, critical and analytical investigation into the *Vrykorps*, with many more questions and theories being raised and (hopefully) answered. For example, the relationship between Germans and Boers in German SWA, and especially the role and status of the resident Boers there, could do with a much closer and more critical examination.

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