

Elizabeth van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History*

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Elizabeth van Heyningen's intelligent and comprehensive social history of the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War is sure to become the new standard bearer on the subject. Based on rich government records (especially files of the Superintendent of Refugee Camps in the Free State Archives) along with inmate testimonies, Van Heyningen offers an intimate portrayal of life inside the camps and a clear-sighted vision of the motivations and limitations of those civilian and military officials in charge. Scholars interested in the range of sources Van Heyningen uses can consult: <http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/mss/bccd/index.php>.

In the same vein as Liz Stanley's *Mourning Becomes* (2006), Van Heyningen cuts through what she calls the politicised "haze" of camp commemoration, which emphasises the suffering and martyrdom of inmates as a central component in the building of Afrikaner nationalism. She combats existing scholarship in a spirited fashion, whether it be *Die Konsentrasiekampe* (1954) by J.C. Otto, a scholar "extensively committed to the nationalist project" (p 20), or the "crude example" (p 21) of Owen Coetzer's *Fire in the Sky* (2000).

She treads on hallowed ground, perhaps, when she twice describes Emily Hobhouse as an "arch-propagandist" (pp 16 and 121), although her contextualisation of the pro-Boer advocate within the antagonisms of British party politics is measured and necessary to understand how the camps controversy played out in Europe. By demystifying a venerated mythology, Van Heyningen seeks to overturn simplistic binaries of British brutality and Boer suffering. In the process, she offers a rich portrait of the highs and lows of camp policy; of the immense diversity of the camp system across space and time; and of successes as well as tragic failures. Much existing historiography conflates the extreme with the norm, Van Heyningen complains, for it implies that the dreadful conditions of late 1901 were representative of a more complex and variable experience that unfolded over more than two years. "Undoubtedly violence towards women occurred and was firmly swept under the carpet by the British" (p 111), Van

Heyningen concludes, but “in reality, life [in the camps] was not entirely bleak” (p 283). “Occasional moments of enjoyment” even punctuated the “mundane monotony” of camp life (p 318).

Framed by a discussion of legacy and commemoration that usefully compares the trauma and selective memory of camp inmates with survivors of the Holocaust, Japanese internment camps, and the atrocities of apartheid, Van Heyningen’s chapters unfold thematically and chronologically. The narrative begins by considering the people of the camps. In contrast to popular notions reinforced by the post-war testimony of mostly literate and wealthy women, she argues that the vast majority of camp inmates were impoverished and socially marginal. With the sympathy of a social historian, Van Heyningen rescues the landless *bywoner* from the condescension of a posterity that tends to remember the average inmate as “middle class”. In a later chapter, Van Heyningen also notes that one-third of adult inmates were in fact able-bodied men, a notion that runs counter to the common assumption that camps only concentrated women and children, the heroic victims of an ungentlemanly war. It is too simple, Van Heyningen continues, to assume that male inmates were craven collaborators “joiners” or “*hendsoppers*”. Instead, we must consider the compelling economic demands of family. Men could earn income in the camps to support their wives and children during and after the war, and by the end of 1901, Britain’s camp administration paid more money in wages to inmates than to official staff.

Van Heyningen is sympathetic to the experiences of camp inmates, noting “there is no reason to believe that the stories the women told were not a valid expressions of their suffering” (p 122). But she is keen to distinguish the suffering of inmates from the mindset and motives that governed the management of the camps. While they operated within a military context, the camps, importantly, were administered for most of their existence by civilian authorities, whose agenda was often at odds with that of the military. Understanding the rival authorities involved in camp administration; the disconnect between imperial centre and periphery; and the often ad hoc and contingent quality of British decision making is an important step toward appreciating the many contradictions of an institution that contemporaries referred to, interchangeably, as both “refugee camps” and “concentration camps”.

The most important contribution comes, perhaps, in chapter 3, which depicts the camps not only as instruments of military strategy – the dominant impression one garners from such classic works as S.B. Spies’ *Methods of Barbarism?* (1977) – but of a tentative (and far from effective) exercise in imperial poor relief. British administrators drew inspiration from a humanitarian impulse, albeit one cast in the condescending terms of Victorian “civilising missions”, to distribute emergency relief and inculcate the “British” habits of thrift, cleanliness, and industry into a population conceived in the terms of the day as “ignorant and unschooled in civilised ways” (p 28). As tragic as they were, death rates resulted from a habitual obsession with frugality in matters of government charity (exemplified by the miserly English Poor Law) rather than any punitive agenda. The British “did not see the internment as forced” (p 117), and the camps were “not meant to be prisons” (p 118). In this regard, however, the book might have discussed in more detail the fenced-off “undesirable wards” used to punish

insubordinate inmates. Van Heyningen alludes to the “unique” case of Winburg camp, which “was really a prison housing ‘undesirables’” (p 117), but she makes no mention of a similar enclosure at Bloemfontein the “bird cage” where “singing birds” were “worked 8 hours a day with pick and shovel”. In this nuanced and balanced account there is surely room to consider more fully the forced incarceration of the socially and politically “undesirable”, while still preserving the revisionist emphasis on humanitarian aid.

Other chapters examine work; education; nutrition; and concentration camps for black Africans (a story that remains unavoidably incomplete owing to a lack of sources). The practise of medicine in the camps and what Van Heyningen has previously deemed a “clash of medical cultures” provides a chapter of special interest. Folk remedies and humoral theory (a derivative of eighteenth-century European medicine) confronted a professionalised science that enshrined the hospital rather than the home as the locus of care. Much to the dissatisfaction of many camp inmates, the men of science replaced family and friends as the principal healers. Ironically, Van Heyningen points out, British medicine was also steeped in an outdated miasmatic approach to disease. But in the minds of camp officials, it was a vehicle of medical advance and sanitary reform.

The pivotal chapter “Winds of Change” brings to light an often-neglected dimension of the camps: their reform into model sanitary institutions. New camps on the Cape and Natal coasts were the result of significant investment and forethought, and by applying the many lessons of nineteenth-century discipline and sanitation, they achieved death rates of close to zero. The coastal camps proved that the healthy management of concentrated populations was possible. With more careful planning and with greater trust between haughty British doctors and camp inmates, epidemics of measles and typhoid (the principal killers) *could* have been avoided. This chapter also reminds us that the camps were *historical* constructs that varied greatly over time. The camps of October 1901 bore little resemblance to those of May 1902.

This work should be required reading for historians of the Anglo-Boer War, as well as for those invested in such diverse issues as social reform, the development of Afrikaner nationalism, and the cultural history of medicine. Van Heyningen’s book speaks to a South African audience, and it engages in historiographical debates specific to South Africa’s national past. It also illuminates the double-edged nature of British imperialism and its contested programmes of violence and humanitarianism. A rich, empathetic and carefully researched account, Van Heyningen’s book also forms an important source for those interested in the global development of concentration camps and other technologies for the management of populations on a macro scale. Current research is increasingly exploring connections between British camps in South Africa (and also India) and similar colonial practices in the German, American and Spanish empires. Although she does not spell it out, Van Heyningen provides the first step in a larger project: that of tracing the imperial and transnational origins of twentieth-century practices of crisis management, forced detention, and humanitarian relief.

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