

# The Scandinavian Corps in the Second Anglo-Boer War

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The presence of military participants on both the republican and imperial sides in the Second Anglo-Boer War was internationally known before the conclusion of that conflict and indeed received fairly extensive, if piecemeal, coverage in the world's press at that time. Subsequently, this dimension of the war has repeatedly, though generally only briefly, been treated in histories of the war and provided the material for numerous articles and monographs about individual aspects of it. During the fourth quarter of the twentieth century, renewed historiographical interest in the general topic led to such studies as Roy Macnab's study of the French officer Villebois-Mareuil's part in the hostilities<sup>2</sup> and Davidson's and Filatova's survey of Russian armed intervention.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, for nearly that long historians and other observers of the Second Anglo-Boer War have recognised that immigrants from several northern European countries who had settled in the South African Republic organised a Scandinavian Corps which fought on the republican side during that conflagration. Its deeds received notable publicity in the Nordic countries as early as 1900, and its renown spread far outside Scandinavia. The unit is mentioned in passing in the *Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902*, and in April 1908 a monument was erected at the site of the Battle of Magersfontein where this regiment had been decimated on 11 December 1899. An amateur Swedish historian, H.E. Uddgren, published his nearly hagiographic sketch titled *Hjältarna vid Magersfontein (i. e. The Heroes of Magersfontein)* in 1924. In the 1970's the Swedish-American historian Alan Winqvist included a chapter about the Scandinavian Corps in the doctoral dissertation about Nordic immigrants which he wrote at New York University, but that account, like much of his study, rests on an indefensibly small fraction of the available sources and is so riddled with errors as to be essentially

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  2. R. MACNAB, *The French Colonel. Villebois-Mareuil and the Boers 1899-1900* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1975).
  3. A. DAVIDSON and I. FILATOVA, *The Russians and the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1998).

untrustworthy. Much the same can be said of Brian Pottinger's brief consideration of this Nordic detachment in his survey of foreign ethnic groups' intervention in the war.<sup>4</sup> The centenary of the war provides an opportunity for reconsidering the history of the Scandinavian Corps, relying largely on previously untapped sources. A more complete and essentially different picture of the Scandinavian Corps emerges when one delves into a broad spectrum of extant primary materials, such as government archivalia from the South African Republic, letters by soldiers to the press in Scandinavia, contemporary press accounts in southern Africa, and memoirs published shortly after the conclusion of the war. Resting chiefly on such source testimonies, the present article focuses on the origins and provisioning of the Scandinavian Corps, hostility to its formation, motives for joining it, the history of its participation in the siege of Mafeking and, less fortuitously, at the battle of Magersfontein, and the life of its survivors who became prisoners of war in and near Cape Town as well as on St. Helena.

The term *Scandinavian* is variously defined, but in the present study it is used inclusively to refer to the residents of and immigrants from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland as well as to their cultures. The number of people from these northern European countries who settled in southern Africa was minuscule compared to the Nordic emigration to North America. Furthermore, in both the South African Republic of Paul Kruger and the British colonies of the Cape and Natal the Scandinavian population was dwarfed by several other European groups. After the discovery of gold near Johannesburg in 1886, however, thousands of Nordic peoples joined the human flow to that auriferous region. To be sure, many did not remain permanently, and the economic recession of the mid-1890's significantly reduced the Scandinavian population on the Witwatersrand. On the eve of the Second Anglo-Boer, one prominent and articulate Norwegian who was then especially active in ethnic affairs, Anton Høyer, estimated that there had been approximately 3 000 Scandinavians there before many of them chose to leave because of the impending hostilities.<sup>5</sup>

Because to some extent these immigrants had vested interests in the economies of all three and, in many cases, had married local residents, it was virtually inevitable that they would respond in different ways when hostilities erupted that year. Their situation in the Transvaal was unique. Many of the Nordic residents there had never come to terms with their second-class status as *Uitlanders* in Paul Kruger's republic and indeed protested vociferously throughout the 1890's, sending dozens of letters to the press in the Scandinavian countries. Others, however, felt reasonably well integrated, in some cases because they had married Transvalers, and were thus loyal

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4. B. POTTINGER, *The Foreign Volunteers. They fought for the Boers (1899-1902)* (Hans Strydom Publishers, Melville, 1986), pp. 58-62, 133-140.

5. *The Natal Mercury* (Durban), 10 October 1899 (letter).

“strangers in the land” if in most cases not citizens of it. In late September 28 Scandinavians met two members of the Volksraad at the Polar Hotel in Pretoria in a parley at which an American acted as interpreter. Indicative of the divided mind of the Nordic *Uitlanders*, they passed by a majority of one a resolution supporting Kruger’s government. The majority opinion was to remain neutral.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, on 12 October, the day after the war officially began, a group of Scandinavians gathered at the National Hotel in Pretoria to discuss their plight and their continuing relationship to Kruger’s threatened government. Presumably to nobody’s surprise, these immigrants were not of one mind. Some favoured neutrality. A majority, however, declared their unswerving allegiance to the republic and passed a resolution of support for the republican cause:

We Scandinavians, who during times of peace have lived here in the Transvaal without our livelihood being disturbed, should as upright people do our best to support the Boers during their critical situation.<sup>7</sup>

Less sympathetic Nordic *Uitlanders* voted with their feet by boarding southbound trains crowded with refugees and spent the duration of the war in Natal or the Cape. Sympathy for the Boers appears to have been rare among the Scandinavians whom they joined in these British colonies. When Scandinavians in Durban learnt of the first resolution passed in Pretoria, for example, well over 100 countered by meeting at the Masonic Hall in Smith Street and approving almost unanimously one discountenancing the action their fellow Scandinavians had taken in the South African Republic. They insisted that their ethnic fellows in Johannesburg and Pretoria do not represent the general sentiment of the “Scandinavians of South Africa” and suggested that “about all” the Nordic *Uitlanders* who supported the Kruger regime were civil servants who could hardly do otherwise. Those assembled also declared themselves “in full sympathy with the uitlander cause”.<sup>8</sup> “So much for solidarity amongst the Scandinavians”, observed a disgruntled young Norwegian shortly thereafter in a letter to the Kristiania daily newspaper *Dagbladet* sent from Estcourt, where his unit, the Durban Light Infantry, was encamped.<sup>9</sup> One of his compatriots in Durban wrote on 19 October that in retaliation for the Transvaal Scandinavians’ declaration of support for the Boers several firms in Johannesburg and Durban had already dismissed their Nordic employees.<sup>10</sup>

Scandinavians on the Witwatersrand foresaw some of the tribulations the war

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6. *The Natal Mercury*, 11 October 1899 (letter). John Nerén, a pro-British Swedish journalist who spent approximately the first half of the war in southern Africa, subsequently noted that the meeting had taken place on 23 September 1899; see his *På veldet. Skildringer från livet i Transvaal* (Ljus, Stockholm, 1902), p. 283.

7. UDDGREN, *Hjältarna vid Magersfontein*, pp. 13-14.

8. *The Natal Mercury*, 11 October 1899.

9. *Dagbladet* (Kristiania), 24 December 1899 (letter).

10. *Aftenposten* (Kristiania), 21 November 1899 (letter).

would bring. With the approval of Kruger's government they organised early in October a committee headed by Marius Hansen Stormoen (1845-1926), chairman of the local Norwegian society *Nordkap*, to appeal to the Nordic countries for humanitarian aid. On the eve of the war they sent letters to newspapers in Scandinavia urging sympathetic readers to raise funds to help ameliorate "the need that will undoubtedly result among Scandinavian women and children" in the event the British managed to invade the Transvaal.<sup>11</sup>

Less irenically, dozens of Nordic *Uitlanders* in Pretoria and on the Witwatersrand responded to the crisis by conceiving the Scandinavian Corps. Christer Ugglå, a Swedish engineer who then headed the railway shops in Pretoria, claimed to have taken the initiative before the war to form a pan-Scandinavian organisation in the Transvaal whose purpose was to prevent the impending war from breaking out. When that proved impossible, Ugglå and other leaders of the group turned their attention to the welfare of Scandinavians in Pretoria, Johannesburg, and other communities in that part of the South African Republic. They attempted to collect food, clothing, and other necessities, and, according to Ugglå, played a key rôle in keeping all the Nordic immigrants in the region employed during the war. These efforts proved to be a prelude to direct military participation. At a meeting of the organisation either immediately before or very soon after the declaration of war, the formation of a Scandinavian corps was proposed. The idea met with wide support, and members responded by informing the government of their desire to establish a voluntary unit.<sup>12</sup> They received official sanction but at that stage neither sought nor obtained a promise of financial or other compensation other than a grant for their expenses.

Scandinavian opinion in southern Africa was no less divided with regard to this military unit than it was with regard to Kruger's administration. Writing from Durban on 8 October 1899, Høyer vilified the formation of the Scandinavian Corps in a letter to *The Natal Mercury*. Claiming to be giving "the true facts of the matter" as he had uncovered them immediately "before leaving Oom Paul's autocratic country", this correspondent of a prominent Norwegian daily newspaper insisted that the corps numbered no more than 10 or 20 men, most of whom had little or no military training or could even ride horses. Their reasons for supporting the Kruger regime, Høyer insisted, lay partly in the desire of these "lick-spittles" to ingratiate themselves with their government and thereby secure future promotions in the Dutch-South African Railway Company, in which they were employed. He emphasised that far more Scandinavians had long volunteered for service in British colonial units and cast his remarks for their doing so in a Manichaean mould. The Nordic loyalists, he declared, preferred

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11. *Dagbladet*, 5 November 1899 (letter).

12. "Slaget ved Magersfontein 11 dec. 1899", *Fram*, November 1924, p. 3.

to fight the battle of freedom, liberty, and justice, to fight the battle against Boerdom, tyranny, oppression, and ignorance.

The Boers, in Høyer's judgment, were an "ignorant and autocratic pastoral nation . . . who do not belong to our 19<sup>th</sup> century".<sup>13</sup> Høyer's calumnious allegations notwithstanding, the Scandinavian Corps was in no sense a minute band of mercenaries. Immediately after gaining the approval of the Kruger regime, Uggla and his followers begin the task of recruiting. This proved fairly easy. On the first day no fewer than sixty-five men signed up for combat service; in addition, three myopic individuals were accepted for non-combatant medical duty. Soon the corps tallied over 100 members.<sup>14</sup> The precise number is impossible to ascertain, not least because it clearly fluctuated during the next few months. Uddgren asserted that 113 men served at one time or another but, curiously, listed 114, including forty-six Swedes, twenty-four Danes, eighteen Finns, and thirteen Norwegians. There were an appreciable number of non-Scandinavian. In Uddgren's compilation there were also seven Germans, four Netherlanders, a Russian, and an Italian.<sup>15</sup> Following this, Winquist also declares that the corps encompassed 113 combatants but, no less inexplicably, breaks them down into nationalities totalling 117 men.<sup>16</sup> The difficulties do not end there. It is almost impossible to ascertain when each recruit enlisted. A Swede in Pretoria wrote on 4 November that the corps then numbered "about 100 men".<sup>17</sup> Moreover, there is reason to believe that many members did not long remain in the corps. It does not appear to have been near its full strength at the devastating battle of Magersfontein, where only about fifty of its men were directly involved in the fighting and fewer than a dozen others were well behind the lines tending the horses or attending to other duties.<sup>18</sup> Where the other members – or former members – of the corps were on that fateful day is simply unknown.

Complicating matters further still, not all the men who belonged to the Scandinavian Corps initially served in it. Einar Olsen, for example, a mine worker who had been residing in Johannesburg, first joined the Irish and American Brigade in October 1899. The day he left for the war, this uniformed Norwegian met a compatriot in Rissik Street and shared with him a letter he had just received from his mother in Norway.

"Go to war if you believe it is right, son," she had written, "for it is better to die a man than to live a coward". Before saying farewell and departing for the front in north-western Natal, Olsen requested the other Norwegian to write to his bereaved

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13. *The Natal Mercury*, 10 October 1899 (letter).

14. UDDGREN, *Hjältarna vid Magersfontein*, p. 15.

15. UDDGREN, *Hjältarna vid Magersfontein*, pp. 15, 86-89.

16. WINQUIST, *Scandinavians and South Africa*, pp. 212-214.

17. *Morgenbladet* (Kristiania), 11 January 1900 (letter).

18. *Dagbladet*, 17 January 1901 (letter).

mother if he did not survive the war. At Ladysmith Olsen was hit in the chest, one arm, and both legs. His wounds healed during a period of six weeks' convalescence in Pretoria, after which Olsen joined the Scandinavian Corps. His service in that unit was also brief, however, ending when he was killed at Magersfontein.<sup>19</sup>

Why did these immigrants, most of them presumably in their twenties and thirties and inconspicuous members of the Scandinavian community on the Witwatersrand, join the corps in the first place? Anton Høyer's previously mentioned allegations must be discounted as tendentious assertions unsubstantiated by the adduction of any evidence. Most of the men who enlisted do not appear to have recorded their motives. Stormoen, however, writing as a civilian who returned to his native Norway midway through the war, defended them from journalistic allegations that they were mercenaries on the one hand and bloodthirsty fanatics on the other. Some, he maintained, had attained citizenship in the South African Republic and thus were obliged to serve in one capacity or another. Others, according to Stormoen, wished to defend the Transvaal as a matter of conviction. All, he generalised, regarded it as their "new fatherland" and believed that a British invasion

would rob them of their jobs and their livelihood [and] disturb their homes, happiness, and everything else.<sup>20</sup>

Most of the men who served in the Scandinavian Corps appear to have come from the immigrant working class, and little about them has been preserved to disturb their anonymity - apart from their names and, in several instances, whether they were killed in action or taken prisoner - as historical characters. A few of the leaders, however, left indelible marks on the pages of history. Chosen as field cornet was Johannes Flygare (1863-1899), by his own account a Natalian by birth and one of the sons of the late Carl Flygare, a Swedish Lutheran pastor who had served in both the German Hermannsburg Mission and the Church of Sweden Mission in Natal. The younger Flygare, like Uggla, was employed as a railway engineer in Pretoria on the eve of the war; no doubt this professional connection played some rôle in his involvement in the Corps. To be sure, he was not a universal choice. Nils Viklund, an ethnic Swede from Finland who had been employed in the mines near Johannesburg since arriving in the South African Republic in 1894, recorded in his memoirs that the other candidate for the post, the Swedish immigrant Erik Stålberg, would have been a better choice from a military perspective, but that Flygare's command of Dutch tipped the scales in his favour. After returning to Finland, Viklund also questioned the ingenuousness of Flygare's claims regarding his profession. Viklund bluntly wrote.

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19. "I Johannesburg", *Fram*, February 1925, p. 10.

20. *Dagbladet*, 17 January 1901, (letter).

He told me that he was an engineer, but I do not believe that he was actually anything!

Stålberg was elected first lieutenant and a Dane, William Bærentzen, was chosen second lieutenant. Another Swede, Carl David Appelgren, was given charge of the commissary, and the men chose sergeants from each of the represented Nordic ethnic groups.<sup>21</sup>

Considerably more is known about the unit's medical officer, a Norwegian immigrant doctor named Wilhelm Bidekap (1858-1911), not least in terms of the pivotal question of his motives for joining the Corps. He was a native of Kristiania (since 1925 called Oslo) and a son of that capital city's highest ranking public health official. Bidekap had completed his medical studies at the university in his hometown in 1891 and emigrated to the South African Republic two years later. A talented amateur pianist, he had been a popular performer at Scandinavian social functions in Johannesburg for several years when the war broke out. Bidekap also became known among his fellow Norwegians in that city for his outspoken hostility to the Kruger government, especially during the *Uitlander* protests of 1896.<sup>22</sup> His opposition to the regime, however, did not prevent him from accepting an appointment as a district medical officer in Swaziland in 1897 or 1898, a position he held until the outbreak of the war. At that time Bidekap was in Bremersdorp where, he later asserted in commenting on the absurdity of the hostilities, "Boer and Briton had previously lived together peacefully".<sup>23</sup>

When Swaziland was evacuated, the young doctor received orders to report to Piet Retief, which he reached after a lonely ride of twelve hours. For some reason not recorded in a memoiristic article he wrote in 1901, however, Bidekap left almost immediately for Pretoria, where he learnt that the Scandinavian Corps had been organised.<sup>24</sup> On 16 October he filled an eleventh-hour petition to be transferred to it from the Piet Retief Commando, stating two reasons for his request:

Ik doe dit eerstens omdat het de algemeen uitgedrukte wensch van det corps is en teen tweede omdat het ook voor mij aangenaam zou zijn om met mijn landsgenoten in het veld te gaan.<sup>25</sup>

The officers of the Corps supported Bidekap's request. Calling him "een geliefde

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21. M. GUSTAVSSON and NILS VIKLUND, *Boerer och engelsmän. Skildringar ur det sydafrikanska kriget 1899-1901* (Tidnings- & Tryckeri-Aktiebolagets Tryckeri, Helsingfors, 1910), pp. 13-14.

22. *Morgenbladet*, 6 July 1898 (letter).

23. *Aftenposten*, 14 July 1901 (memoiristic article); *Studenterne fra 1885. Biografiske meddelelser samlet i anledning av deres 25-aars studenterjubilæum* (Kristiania: Det Mallingske Bogtrykkeri, 1911), p. 21.

24. *Ibid.*

25. CENTRAL ARCHIVES REPOSITORY, PRETORIA. Transvaal Archives (Forthwith TA) KG 386, 7920, W. Bidekap (Pretoria) to Den Wel. Ed. Heer Officier van Gezondheid aan Den Wel. Ed. Gest. Heer Staatssecretaris, 16 October 1899.

landsman”, Flygare and his two lieutenants, one of whom was a Dane and the other a Swede, petitioned the government

om Dr Bidenkap aan te stellen als geneesheer bij ons corps.<sup>26</sup>

Undoubtedly realising the potential danger of their mission, 41 men of the Corps, most of them bearing Swedish surnames, also signed a petition seeking Bidenkap’s presence when they rode off to war.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike most other republican combatants, the members of the Scandinavian Corps wore uniforms. Viklund related that one of the first tasks of the leaders was to purchase matching grey “sporting costumes” as well as felt hats whose brim was propped up on the right side by cockades. Like large numbers of their Afrikaans-speaking comrades-in-arms, the Scandinavians carried Mauser rifles. Bandoleers slung over their left shoulders complemented these weapons. Each man was also assigned a saddle and bridle.<sup>28</sup>

The finances of the Scandinavian Corps for procuring these and other supplies were not initially in order. Although these immigrants all fought as volunteers, the government of the South African Republic granted them funds to defray part of their expenditures. Before departing the Witwatersrand, they drew a cheque in the amount of £300 on the Johannesburg branch of *De Nationale Bank der Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*. There does not appear to have been anything culpable about their doing so, but on 17 October the directors of the headquarters of that institution in Pretoria complained to the Commandant Generaal that the account on which the cheque had been drawn had a balance of only £51 and requested the army to augment it to the point that it would not be overdrawn.<sup>29</sup>

Uggla, the Swedish engineer who had helped to organise the Corps, served as its treasurer. He gave his title as “Voorzitter der Centrale Commissie v.d. Scandinavische Organisatie”, although the official seal of that body refers to a “Committee”, not to a “Commissie”.<sup>30</sup> The detailed records Uggla kept at his office in Pretoria’s National Hotel, chiefly in Dutch but also using many English loan-words, of receipts and disbursements shed considerable light on how the Corps was organised, financed, and equipped, and how it grew, as well as on some of the difficulties it experienced well before it was decimated at Magersfontein.

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26. TA, KG 386, 7920, Johs Flygare, Erik Stålberg and W. Bærentzen (Pretoria) to Zijn Hoog. Ed. Den Staatspresident en De Hoog Ed. Regering der Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek, October 1899.

27. TA, KG 386, 7920, Minute Paper, “Dr W. Bidenkap wenscht zich bij het Scandinavische [*sic*] Korps aan te sluiten”.

28. GUSTAVSSON and VIKLUND, *Boerer och engelsmän*, p. 14.

29. TA, KG 385, 7848, De Nationale Bank der Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek Beperk (Pretoria) to Commandant-Generaal, 17 October 1899.

30. See, for example, the seal on TA, C3 4, 854, C.M. Uggla (Pretoria) to Proviand-Commissie te Pretoria, 15 November 1899.



The government of the South African Republic initially awarded the Scandinavian Corps £1200 on 14 October to defray its expenses. Private individuals eventually contributed over £300, giving the Corps credits totalling £1544.2.6. Uggla began to draw on these funds before they had been formally received, writing cheques amounting to nearly £16 on 13 October for “reisekosten, 18 man”, “diverse voorschotten”, and “uniformteekenen”. The following day was much busier for the treasurer, who rushed to equip the volunteers. He wrote 30 cheques totalling approximately £500, chiefly to acquire 28 horses, saddles and bridles for those mounts that lacked them, and forage. Other purchases that day included *inter alia* trousers (£1.7.6), a whip (7/6), and tobacco (£5.11.6). In another questionable move, Uggla reimbursed Wilhelm Bidekap £35.7.6 for “verbandartikelen” two days before the Norwegian doctor received permission to join the Corps. On 16 October the Swedish treasurer paid for more horses, forage, cooking utensils, clothing, and other items as the Corps prepared to depart for the Northern Cape. During the remainder of October he purchased additional mounts, paid the travel expenses of volunteers who had not been in Pretoria when the Corps was formed, and bought such militaria as a telescope and bullets for an officer’s revolver. When the Scandinavians returned briefly to Pretoria in November, they acquired additional supplies for their fateful journey through the Orange Free State to Magersfontein. Even after they departed, however, Uggla continued to purchase matériel and pay the expenses they incurred.<sup>31</sup> He also covered the travel costs to the front for occasional late volunteers. Einar Olsen, the Norwegian mine worker who had served in the Irish and American Brigade and suffered multiple wounds at Ladysmith, was one such individual. On 23 November he wrote some of his last words, a receipt for £1 Uggla had given him for

reisonkosten [*sic*] als vrijwilliger van Pretoria naar het lager v/d Scand. Corps in de Oranje Vrijstaat.<sup>32</sup>

On a few occasions Uggla managed to procure horses and equipment gratis from the government. In mid-November, for instance, he requested four mules, ten additional mounts for new volunteers who supposedly increased the Corps to 88 men, and 18 oxen, arguing that the Corps had only one ox-wagon, and that it was part of Bidekap’s ambulance.<sup>33</sup> All 32 animals were delivered within two days.<sup>34</sup> Less than a week later, however, Uggla had to inform the Proviand-Commissie that two of them had disappeared:

Tot mijn leedwezen moet ik mededeelen dat niettegenstaande er een kafferwacht geplaatst was om op de mij verstrekte ossen, muilen en paarden te passen, twee

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31. TA, C3 4, 854, Afrekening van door de Regering der Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek verstrekte voorschotten aan het Scandinavische Corps.
32. TA, C3 4, 854, Receipt signed by Einar Olsen, 23 November 1899.
33. TA, C3 4, 854, C.M. Uggla (Pretoria) to Proviand-Commissie te Pretoria, 15 November 1899.
34. TA, C3 4, 854, Receipt signed by C.M. Uggla, 17 November 1899.

muilen in de nacht van den 17den op den 18den dezer te Pretoria zijn ontsnapt ....

The chagrined Swede explained that he had immediately reported the theft to the police but that the animals had not been found. Since the Scandinavian Corps was then in Klerksdorp, he requested that two additional mules be given to them there.<sup>35</sup>

The first errand on which the Corps was sent almost immediately was to aid General A.P. "Piet" Cronjé in the siege of Baden-Powell's trapped force in Mafeking. After being reviewed by President Paul Kruger, who delivered a brief laudatory address to them, they travelled by rail from Pretoria to Johannesburg on the evening of 15 October. There they found residents packing themselves "like herrings" into countless trains to leave the South African Republic. Early the following morning they themselves boarded first-class rail carriages for their journey to Klerksdorp, which they reached that afternoon. Disembarking, they rode to Hartbeestfontein but, in the words of one, lacked the equestrian experience which characterised the Boers, and some initially had difficulty in staying in their saddles. After spending their first night sleeping under the stars, they continued towards the border of the Cape Colony, which they crossed on 23 October *en route* to Mafeking.<sup>36</sup>

Along the way some of the curious Scandinavian warriors impatiently tested their Mausers on birds without, however, reducing the avian population of the Western Transvaal. Humour helped to keep their spirits up as they gave all of the oxen drawing their four wagons names. Resentment of the British played an onomastic rôle. As one Norwegian recalled:

The worst ox in each yoke was usually called 'Englishman' and received the most beatings from the driver.

He also recorded that the Corps was hospitably greeted along the way by Afrikaners, not all of whom were familiar with northern Europeans.

One woman expressed some surprise at seeing us, for she had thought that Scandinavians were as brown as Hottentots.

Amusing episodes of this sort helped to alleviate the discomfort brought on by inflexible saddles and inclement weather. Lacking tents, the neophyte soldiers slept, or tried to, under blankets that soon were drenched.<sup>37</sup>

The Corps eventually arrived at Cronjé's laager, bringing along a Long Tom gun capable of delivering a shell weighing 43 kilogrammes. Most of the Scandinavians saw little action at besieged Mafeking, however, where boredom seemed to be the most constant enemy. Some of these Nordics discovered and coolly deactivated

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35. TA, C3 4, 854, C.M. Ugglå (Pretoria) to Proviand-Commissie, 20 November 1899.

36. GUSTAVSSON and VIKLUND, *Boerer och engelsmän*, 15-8.

37. *Aftenposten*, 16 July 1901 (memoiristic article).

landmines the British had laid around the perimeter of the city.<sup>38</sup> Their casualties were minimal. A bullet apparently fired from the side pierced both lungs of a Finn, who survived both it and Bidekap's treatment. After three weeks, according to the Norwegian doctor, he was healed. The other members of the Corps initially had little about which to complain. Provisions arrived daily from Pretoria; fresh meat was served in abundance, though milk and eggs were rare on that front.

Soon, however, monotony began to take a psychological toll. "The sedentary life at Mafeking did not please the Scandinavians," wrote Bidekap. "They became highly dissatisfied and wanted to storm [the town] by themselves." Kruger had ordered Cronjé not to waste his strength on the invested town, though, which had little military significance, despite the extensive attention it received in the British press. In November the weather in the northern Cape became stiflingly hot, so the frustrated Scandinavians were overjoyed to receive orders to accompany Cronjé's forces when they left Mafeking on 19 November for operations near Kimberley.<sup>39</sup>

Flygare's men rode from Mafeking to Klerksdorp, where they and their horses were loaded into railway trucks for the journey to Edenburg, south of Bloemfontein.<sup>40</sup> There they remounted and continued to Fauresmith and Jacobsdal, receiving in the former town generous meals from appreciative Boer families but being attacked by swarms of mosquitoes in the latter. With difficulty the Nordic warriors then forded the Modder River and proceeded north to a farm south of besieged Kimberley.<sup>41</sup> Their elation at quitting Mafeking proved premature. The corps camped at a farm called Magersfontein, a name none had probably heard before but which was to become permanently associated with the image of Scandinavian immigrants in South Africa. In the historiography of the war Magersfontein symbolises a spark of Boer genius in which a simple change of strategy staved off a major British effort to relieve Kimberley and sent General Paul Methuen's battered troops reeling back after suffering nearly 1000 casualties. For the Scandinavian Corps, however, the battle was a horrendous and unmitigated disaster which broke the back of this irregular military unit.

The details of the battle have been summarised in several standard histories of the war and need not be repeated at length here.<sup>42</sup> Abandoning their customary and

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38. B. WILLIAMS (Ed.), *The Times History of the War in South Africa 1899-1902*, vol. IV (S. Low, Marsten and Company, London, 1906), p. 582.

39. *Aftenposten*, 16 July 1901 (memoiristic article).

40. H.P. JANEK, *Bland boer och briter. Skildringar från kriget i Sydafrika* (Schmidts Boktryckeri, Hälsingborg, 1901), p. 17.

41. *Ibid.*, Chapter III.

42. Convenient synopses are given in T. PAKENHAM, *The Boer War* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1979) pp. 208-214; FARWELL, *The Great Anglo-Boer War*, (Harper & Row, New York, c.1976) pp. 101-113; and R. KRUGER, *Goodbye Dolly Gray. The Story of the Boer War* (J.B.Lippincott, Philadelphia, 1960), pp. 124-132.

previously quite devastating strategy of perching in the hills to shoot down at unsuspecting British troops on the march, the Boers heeded General J.H. de la Rey's innovative scheme of digging trenches along a line in front of Magersfontein Hill. From this horizontal plane they could fire their deadly Mausers directly at the advancing khaki-clad Britons with an even greater chance of hitting either the front rows or the men behind them. The genius of this ploy lay in its simplicity, and it worked admirably. On Sunday, 10 December, the unwitting British approached Magersfontein from the south-west in pouring rain. In better weather they would have sent up their observation balloon and possibly noticed the entrenched Boer units and their Scandinavian allies, who had quietly dug in near the left flank. According to one contemporary report, 58 members of the Scandinavian Corps had actually gone to Magersfontein, but eight of them were placed several hundred metres behind the trenches to attend to the horses.<sup>43</sup> Their less fortunate comrades began to suffer before the first shots had been fired. "All night it rained without respite", wrote one Norwegian, Hjalmer Kielland, "and lacking any shelter on the open field we became completely soaked".<sup>44</sup>

Before dawn the British advanced to take the hill. When they were within a few hundred metres of the camouflaged trenches the bullets began to fly. Some units, most notably the Gordon Highlanders, suffered heavy casualties almost immediately and fell back. Belatedly the British balloon was sent aloft; it confirmed what the men in the front lines, many of them now dead, had learnt early in the day.

At midday various counter-offensives, most of little effect, had been launched. The Scandinavians, occupying a relatively vulnerable forward position, bore the brunt of one of them. A battery of the Royal Horse Artillery pounded them relentlessly; Seaforth Highlanders then charged, surrounding the softened Scandinavians. The resulting carnage devastated whatever romantic notions of war the latter may still have harboured at that point. "The fire was terrible", wrote one survivor. "Each of us sought cover wherever we could find it, none of us expected to escape alive."

The horror of it multiplied when the scant protection proved wholly inadequate:

We did not know how many of our comrades were dead or wounded. One could hear only wailing, screams, and prayers for help, which unfortunately were impossible to answer.

The feeling of helplessness as numbing. Several of the Scandinavians who lived through the battle commented on how their inability to aid fallen comrades in the closely-knit unit had affected them. One spoke for many:

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43. *Standard and Diggers' News* (Johannesburg), 29 December 1899 (letter). Helge Fägerskiöld, a Swedish member who survived the battle, stated when interviewed as a prisoner of war in January 1900 that the Scandinavian Corps numbered fifty-seven men at Magersfontein, seven of whom tended the horses; see *Dagens Nyheter* (Stockholm), 20 February 1900.

44. *Drammens Tidende*, 1 March 1900 (letter).

I shall never forget that day.... Every single man simply had to shoot as fast as he could and at the same time cover himself and retreat.

It proved an impossible task. Ambulances finally arrived late in the afternoon but could not reach many of the dead and wounded. Only seven of 50 men emerged from the battle unscathed. The following day they returned to wipe up the blood. The evidence of the slaughter was, to say the least, unsettling, as reported by one Norwegian soldier in a letter to a newspaper in Norway:

Many had fallen in desperate hand-to-hand combat. They had flailed away holding the barrels of their rifles in the final, desperate struggle of death. The weapons lay splintered beside the corpses. We found eighteen dead and two wounded whom the British had left to die on the field. Twenty-three men had been taken prisoner.... We buried the eighteen men in three graves where they had fallen and said a prayer there. I can assure you it was the most sorrowful and gripping event I have ever attended. It was almost a worse sight than the day before when the battle was in progress.<sup>45</sup>

Their ranks decimated and their field cornet Flygare dead, the survivors in the Scandinavian Corps were initially at a loss as to how to proceed. There was a consensus to continue the struggle, though placing their diminished unit under the leadership of a Boer commando. The unexpected arrival of twenty-some additional Scandinavians from Johannesburg and Pretoria in late January brought about a momentary crisis which prompted them to change their plan, however, because one of the new arrivals, a Danish immigrant chemist from Pretoria named Jens Friis, had been chosen before leaving Pretoria to succeed the fallen Flygare. This was initially unacceptable to many in the remnant, however, especially the Swedes from Finland, but after a vote was taken which confirmed his choice they relented and accepted him as their new commander.<sup>46</sup>

As an active fighting force, the Scandinavian Corps was nearly at the end of its existence. At Paardeberg in the Orange Free State the British won a Pyrrhic victory and took most of the remaining Nordic soldiers prisoner. After the capitulation, the Norwegians and their Boer allies were compelled to march for three days to a railway station, where they were packed into railway carriages for a journey to Cape Town, which they reached on 4 March. In the Mother City these captives were initially accommodated in a prison with each cell holding no fewer than twelve men. Matts Gustavsson, one of the Swedes from Finland, recollected

During the next few long and difficult weeks we worked at trying to escape, but it became clear that it was nearly impossible to scale the prison walls, which were guarded by English sentries. We thus had to accept our fate.

He added that at the end of March he and his fellows were led out of this prison and herded to an unspecified beach, where they were taken aboard a large steamship

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45. *Morgenbladet*, 26 February 1900 (letter).

46. GUSTAVSSON and VIKLUND, *Boerer och engelsmän*, p. 67.

which would eventually take them to St. Helena.<sup>47</sup> Public reactions to the proposal to ship the republican captives to that island more than 2 000 kilometres out in the Atlantic varied, but the pro-British Cape Town daily *The Cape Argus* insisted that these captives had sealed their fate when some of them had attempted to escape from Simon's Town by digging a tunnel beneath their place of incarceration.<sup>48</sup> On board the prisoners found life trying. Their testimonies, though brief, corroborate other accounts of shipboard misery, such as one which appeared in the anti-war Cape Town daily newspaper *The South African News*, whose readers were informed in late March that typhoid and measles had broken out amongst the prisoners and at the beginning of April that sickness amongst the prisoners had recently increased "to an alarming extent" so that during the previous week no fewer than twelve of them had succumbed to it.<sup>49</sup> "If I wrote about how conditions were for us, this letter would never get past the censors," claimed a Norwegian, Adolf Hansen.<sup>50</sup> One of his compatriots in captivity agreed fully, adding that the men had to spend most off their time in the cramped hold of the vessel and that burials at sea occurred daily. He had later spent 10 days on the ship that brought many of the Scandinavians, and Cronjé, to St. Helena. That period was enough to sap their strength, making the march from Jamestown, where they disembarked on the island, to Deadwood Camp an ordeal of over four hours.<sup>51</sup>

Accommodation on St. Helena was basic and crowded. Initially most of the captives lived in round tents, which for many of the Scandinavians seemed to be babels linguistically. One Norwegian wrote that he had shared such modest quarters with five Germans, four Netherlanders, an Afrikaner, and two fellow Norwegians. Eventually he emulated many of the other prisoners and erected a tin shack for himself.<sup>52</sup> Another native of Norway complained that he and his 11 tentmates had to perform "all possible mathematical calculations" to shoehorn themselves into their humble abode. However confining the tents were, at least they offered shelter from the rain and cold weather which added to the inmates' misery.

It is a moving sight to see the rags in which the prisoners must walk around, so tattered and worn that they are completely useless as protection against the severe climate.

If water was copious when the heavens opened, it was in too short supply at the camp's one pump to allow the prisoners to wash either themselves or their ragged clothes regularly. At times, the same Norwegian wrote, there was not even enough

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47. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

48. *The Cape Argus* (Cape Town), 14 March 1900.

49. *The South African News* (Cape Town), 28 March and 2 April 1900.

50. *Aftenposten* (Kristiania), 13 February 1901 (letter).

51. *Aftenposten*, 1 April 1901 (letter).

52. *Aftenposten*, 1 February 1901 (letter).

to drink or for preparing meals.<sup>53</sup>

If space and water were in short supply, time seemed more than abundant. After seven months in captivity, five of them on St. Helena, a Norwegian from Sunnmøre who had written several letters to friends there sat at his desk – a biscuit box – and penned an epistle describing the leaden boredom of it all and painting the island in drearier colours than those which many subsequent tourists would experience:

We are tired of this life, cooped up behind a barbed wire fence without anything to ease the monotony. Now and then we can go out for a walk ... but St. Helena is a rather desolate place, and it is not very large.

Brightening his bleak portrayal of Deadwood Camp, he assured readers that its residents had used no mean amount of ingenuity and entrepreneurship to make their existence less stupefying:

It can be quite amusing for an outsider to visit the camp, especially that part of it called "Tin Town". That part of town consists of small houses made of carpets and tin plates taken from biscuit boxes. All of the businessmen have settled here. One carves out sticks and pipes, another makes rings of bone, and still others are shoemakers or barbers. Some make pancakes for a penny each, and they do a thriving business. Others are cabinet-makers, photographers, etc. etc. Almost every trade is represented here. The town isn't exactly picturesque, but it is nevertheless rather pretty. Besides, it has all kinds of domestic animals.<sup>54</sup>

There is evidence that the Norwegian and other Scandinavian prisoners of war participated in well-documented efforts to make life on St. Helena tolerable and bear some resemblance to that they had known before the war. Matts Gustavsson wrote shortly after the conclusion of the war that at a fairly early stage the Nordic inmates, who represented a broad range of trades, began to smuggle into the camp tools and other items which they used to manufacture various items. Another Finnish Swede, Nils Viklund, established with the approval of the British camp officials a smithy which the latter admired. He and other Scandinavian captives eventually arranged an exhibition of their wares which the governor of St. Helena officially opened with a speech lauding the multiple talents of the Nordic peoples. Prizes were awarded in several categories. Other veterans of the Scandinavian Corps employed their creativity to the glory of Bacchus by producing a variety of alcoholic beverages. Part of the relief from the boredom of camp life came through employment on farms nearby after farmers received permission to hire inmates to work for them for ten or twelve hours daily.<sup>55</sup> Through these and other means, the survivors of the Scandinavian Corps endured months, and in some cases, more than two years, of captivity. They did not, of course, act alone in coping with their plight. One Norwegian who commented at length on the subject deferentially gave

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53. *Aftenposten*, 11 April 1901 (letter).

54. *Søndmøre Folketidende* (Ålesund), 21 November 1900 (letter).

55. GUSTAVSSON and VIKLUND, *Boerer och engelsmän*, pp. 84-85, 88-89, 92.

the credit entirely to the Boers, “this singular, somewhat introverted *volk* from the sandy plains of Africa,” for the survival of many other prisoners. The mortality rate was initially high, he lamented, but conditions had improved markedly by 1901. He explained

The reasons why conditions are physically and mentally relatively good, considering our surroundings lies in the practical sense of the Boer people, who have only modest needs but as strong and sincere faith in God.<sup>56</sup>

Some of the Boers at St. Helena reportedly had just as keen an admiration for their Nordic allies as *vice versa*. One Norwegian prisoner found the degree of adulation almost embarrassing and commented that

it is perhaps somewhat exaggerated when they say that in this war the Scandinavians have done things they themselves were not in a position to do.

This made him certain the

the Scandinavians will forever have a good reputation among the Boers in South Africa.<sup>57</sup>

The Norwegian survivors of the Scandinavian Corps did not languish forgotten on St. Helena. Their plight became a matter of journalistic and popular concern in Norway, and attempts were made through diplomatic channels as well as by private citizens to gain their release. In January 1901, nearly a year after the capitulation at Paardeberg, the Swedish-Norwegian ambassador in London pleaded with the British government to place them on a troop-ship bound for Great Britain to ensure that they would not participate further in the war. His appeal was rejected; the British made it clear that only serious illness was sufficient grounds for release before the conclusion of hostilities. The ambassador made a similar request a few months later after four Norwegian and twenty Swedish prisoners had given their word of honour not to return to southern Africa while the war was still in progress. Again the British authorities answered negatively.<sup>58</sup>

Late in 1901 the *Charles Racine*, a ship of Norwegian registry, had to call at St. Helena because some members of its crew were suffering from beri-beri. The captain approached the governor of the island and requested him to liberate several of the Norwegian prisoner so that his ship would be completely, and thus safely, manned. The colonial official predictably replied that he had no authority to grant their release, however, so the Norwegians there remained in custody for another half year.<sup>59</sup> In terms of the length of their incarceration, they were relatively

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56. *Aftenposten*, 11 April 1901 (letter).

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Det Kgl. Udenrigsdepartements Aarsberetning for 1901* (Kristiania: S. & Jul Sørensen's Bogtrykkeri, 1902), pp. 36-38.

59. *Aftenposten*, 25 February 1902.



fortunate; some of their erstwhile comrades-in-arms were not released until November 1902, some six months after the Treaty of Vereeniging officially ended the war.<sup>60</sup>

The short-lived Scandinavian Corps, like so much else in the annals of the Second Anglo-Boer, was unquestionably of little military significance, yet it nevertheless merits scholarly attention as an expression of minorities within certain European immigrant groups who felt strongly enough about the republican cause to risk, and in many cases, lose, their lives for it. In terms of their varied and inconsistent attitudes towards the Boers and British alike, as well as their accounts of their lives as combatants and prisoners, the Nordic pro-Boers left their mark on the ethnic and military history of the pluralistic society of which they chose to be a part. The Scandinavians in question entered the war from an oblique angle, and their saga is thus but one of the many perspectives which must be included in historians' ever-widening perception of that conflict.

### *Opsomming*

#### ***De Skandinawiese korps in die Tweede Anglo-Boereoorlog***

Die rol van Skandinawiërs in die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899-1902) word dikwels uitgesonder as een van buitengewone betekenis in die stryd tussen die twee Boererepublieke van Transvaal en die Oranje-Vrystaat. In die studie voer die skrywer aan dat die Skandinawiërs in Suid-Afrika nie dit almal eens was oor wie hulle moes steun nie. Tog het die Nordiese pro-Boere – die Skandinawiese korps – wat hul lot saam met die Boere ingegooi het, 'n bepaalde stempel op die etniese en militêre geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika afgedruk. Die betrokke Skandinawiërs het bykans onopsigtelik tot die oorlog toegetree en hul sake is een van vele wat in historici se evaluering van die oorlog in ag geneem behoort te word.

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60. GUSTAVSSON and VIKLUND, *Boerer och engelsmän*, p. 92.