

## ANTHROPO-GEOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS OF THE GREAT TREK, 1836-1863

The Great Trek denotes more than the literal departure from the Cape Colony. It also denotes the settlement in the interior, the organization of a state and community, the resultant political movements and the structure or pattern of the new state. The Great Trek extended over a long period, and must be viewed in that light. It must be considered up to the stage when it came to a more or less definite end and a new and different phase set in. To my mind the years from 1836 to 1863 constitute the Trek period—the life span of about one generation. In that period the Trek entered maturity.

It is the Trek period taken as a whole that we now wish to illustrate from a geographical point of view. One should bear in mind that man is closely bound up with his environment and that the political institutions and the movements or activities of human groups are influenced in various ways by their physical environment. When considering the political life, we might first of all determine the part played by geographical features in the causes of the Trek, then investigate the movement itself, and finally consider the settlement and the forces arising therefrom.

### *Frontier Situation and Motives*

A few brief comments concerning motives: the Great Trek originated in a region where Bantu and white settlers had clashed, i.e. where there were *frontier difficulties*. People in areas with no frontier problems did not take part in the Great Trek, e.g. the people of the Western Province. The reason for their not participating in the Great Trek was that they were not subjected to the continual provocation of Bantu invasions, the uncertainty of existence, insecurity and material losses that fell to the lot of the frontier farmers. The eastern frontier was a line dividing two racial groups moving from opposite directions towards each other and displaying a constant tendency to *overlap*. This overlapping led to friction and conflict over *land* and finally to war. We think here of the eight Frontier Wars waged in this area from the time of the East India Company up to the 'fifties of the 19th century. The movements of both the Bantu and the white colonists were arrested. The boundary was, however, of such a nature that its security could not be guaranteed. The colonists felt that their government did not give them adequate protection and that they were rendered unnecessarily defenceless. The frontier was so remote, however, that it was difficult to ensure effective protection at all times and in all circumstances. When the Dutch colonists realized that they had to fight for their survival, or perish, they started organizing themselves to leave the Colony to seek a new home somewhere in the interior where they could defend themselves and live in security according to their own lights, and where they could preserve their way of life. In the Colony they had had no say in their own affairs. It was almost as if the embankment of the Eastern frontier was suddenly swept away before the surging flood of the Great Trek flowing ever north-

wards into the unknown hinterland. The Emigration was a safety-valve to the Colony.

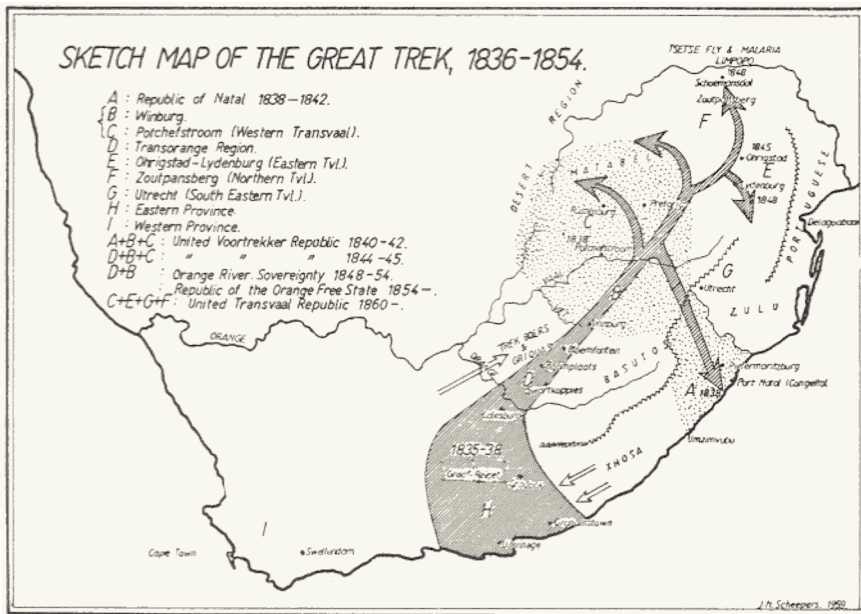
#### *Direction and Destination of the Trek*

What direction would the Trekkers choose? Because of the hazards of the *mountainous* country which teemed with indigenous people they could not trek along the east coast. *Desert conditions* prevented them from trekking west. And so they were attracted by the summer-rainfall area of the north, where they could practise stock-farming. To reach this destination they had to cross the Orange River and trek through the present Free State. Because of their need for grazing for their cattle, they could trek only in *small groups* and at intervals, so as to enable the grass to recover; they trekked in groups so as to be better able to withstand attacks by the Bantu. The organization of the groups was in the hands of local leaders and order and unity were ensured by the commando system. It is noteworthy that the first Voortrekker territory should have been the country between the Vet and the Vaal Rivers which united the "arms" of Natal, the "head" of the Transvaal and the "body" of the Cape into a single entity — the *heart-land* of South Africa. Here the big decision had to be made — whither now?

Because of the geographical features of the country the Trekkers split up into *two* sections. The Colesberg people, Potgieter's supporters, preferred the sweet-grass region of the Highveld to the enclosed mountainland of Natal. The Highveld was ideal for sheep-farming and an open country, far removed from the English government, whereas Natal with a port so close to the Colony might be an easy prey for a British invasion. Retief and his people preferred Natal to the Highveld, which has been described as "a cold and barren country devoid of wood or running water" and was reputed to be ravaged by a deadly fever. Perhaps the Natal landscape reminded them of the Eastern Province which they knew so well. The port, too, played a decisive role, for they could not be truly independent if there were no contact with the outside world.

Dangers awaited the Trekkers on both routes. In the country beyond the Vaal the powerful *Matabele tribe* held sway, and in Natal the mighty *Zulu*, who had forced the smaller tribes to seek shelter in mountains or on the edges of the desert. After heavy fighting, the Matabele were driven out, and the Transvaal was opened to white settlement. Because of the greater safety resulting from this, Potgieter preferred to settle in the Transvaal. Retief and most of the Voortrekkers moved to Natal. Their progress was, however, stopped by the Zulu, and the success of their venture, indeed their very survival, was threatened. The technique of the civilized white man, however, triumphed over the assegai of the primitive aborigine — and thus the power of the Zulu was broken and Natal made secure. The outcome of the Battle of Blood River was affected by weather conditions — the timely dispersal of the mist and the fact that there were no heavy or continuous downpours on the day of the battle. Whether guns and gunpowder would have been effective against assegais in wet weather is a moot point.

After subjugating the Bantu, the Voortrekkers were able to institute their



own government. Owing to geographical factors, however, *two de facto* independent Republican communities arose at the very outset — *west* of the Drakensberg, on the Highveld, were Potgieter and his men, and *east* of the range were the Natal Voortrekkers. In 1840, unity was achieved, but the territory covered so vast an area, and the distances were so great that the union could not be a very close one. For this reason the community west of the Drakensberg was allowed a form of local government. Geographical considerations also played a role in the British annexation of Natal. The contact of the young Republic with Dutch and American ships and the fear of French influence, turned the scales. We see, therefore, that the settlers were actuated by strategic motives. After the annexation, most of the Voortrekkers began a second trek, which took them to the territory west of the Drakensberg. This brought into play various geographical factors, which we shall examine at a later stage.

#### *The Orange Free State as a Gateway and an area of overlapping Claims*

We shall now consider how the political structure in the territory of the present Free State was influenced by geographical features. As we have seen, the trek routes passed through it, since it formed a *gateway* from South to North. Even before the Great Trek, so-called Trekboers had settled in these regions. Unlike the Voortrekkers, they had no political grievances against the government; spiritually they remained part of the Cape Colony, and they were loyal to the remote British government. When the Great Trek came, it also involved the people who, for economic reasons, had settled to the north of the Orange.

We have seen that the Voortrekkers settled to the north of the Trekboers, between the Vet and the Vaal Rivers. Because of this the region between the Vet and the Orange became a type of *no-man's-land* between the Cape Colony and the Voortrekkers who regarded the Vet River as their southern boundary. The northward movement of the Trekboers and a southward movement by the Voortrekkers now resulted in a new overlapping region in this no-man's-land, where various conflicting elements emerged. The situation was aggravated by the Griquas who lived in the territory. To end the disturbances and to safeguard the northern frontier against unrest, the British government created *frontier buffer states* (treaty states) thereby committing itself to assist the Griquas against the white inhabitants. The creation of these states was the beginning of a gradual expansion of British influence into the interior. Whereas the advance into Natal had taken place by sea, here it was to take place by land.

In the process of expansion to the North, the *rivers* running more or less parallel in a westerly direction could be used effectively as *boundaries* to divide opposing groups. So, for example, the Riet and Modder Rivers were used as a boundary between Kok's alienable and inalienable territories (1845). In 1846 the Modder River became the northern boundary of Warden's area of jurisdiction. In 1842 the Republicans attempted to make the Orange River the boundary of the Republican North, but it was not officially recognized by Potgieter's Raad before 1844. The old Voortrekker boundary was the Vet River. Potgieter did his utmost to maintain this boundary and arrest the northward march of the British there. Sir Harry Smith proclaimed the Vaal River the boundary in 1848, thereby splitting the old Voortrekker Republic into two parts. We shall see, however, that his action had serious political repercussions.

The British policy of following the Voortrekkers also determined the *political pattern* of the Republican North. In 1848, for example, the Voortrekker territory up to the Orange was annexed to fix *definite boundaries* for the Cape Colony — the Orange, Vaal and the Tugela Rivers. For the Voortrekkers this meant that the sphere of British influence now partially extended into their territory, i.e. *cut it off* from the original whole. The consequences were threefold:

1. The people beyond the Vaal realized that the Trek had come to an end. They could not continue the Trek to the west, for their movement in that direction was restricted by *desert regions*. They could not press on to the north, because of the *malaria mosquito* and the *tsetse fly menace*. The territory to the east was already occupied by the *Portuguese*. Thus natural boundaries brought the Trek to a close. If the Voortrekkers could not continue the trek to the north, and the British government continued to advance from the south, what was left for them to do? They could only *fight*. Andries Pretorius saw this as the only alternative, but Potgieter did not agree with him. The result was the battle of Boomplaats and the retention of the Vaal as the *political boundary*; this *divided* the Voortrekkers on an *artificial* basis.

2. As was only natural, a desire for *unity* arose. This desire represented the first marked political activity of the Voortrekkers.
3. Once the *gateway* was thrown open, a considerable number of Englishmen settled in the Sovereignty and this complicated matters still further. Voortrekkers who had no permanent interests, moved across the Vaal, and so the region that had remained "free", was populated by various groups. We shall examine this aspect more closely.

### *The Political Groups of the Transvaal on a Regional Basis*

We have seen that Potgieter with his people settled in the Potchefstroom region of the *Western Transvaal* in 1838. When the English began to penetrate from the south, they moved away and settled at a place closer to Delagoa Bay so as to conduct free trade with the outside world. Here once again, geographical factors were to determine the movement of the settlers. The Natal Voortrekkers who had left that country after the annexation in 1843, joined Potgieter at Ohrigstad in the Eastern Transvaal. Finding that this was a fever-stricken area, they moved on to Lydenburg. But Potgieter clashed with the men from Natal on matters of governmental organization, and moved to Zoutpansberg, i.e. the *Northern Transvaal* (1848). The annexation of the territory between the Vaal and the Orange induced the Voortrekkers south of the Vaal to trek to the north where, under the leadership of Andries Pretorius, they settled in the *Western and Central Transvaal* (Potchefstroom-Rustenburg).

It is clear that the settlement of the Transvaal Voortrekkers was greatly affected by the northward British penetration, and that the people settled together in groups. Soon the territory was divided into *geo-political* groups. Potgieter's "people" lived in the north in the Zoutpansberg, the former Natal Trekkers at Lydenburg in the east, and the followers of Andries Pretorius in the Western and Central Transvaal. Thus the political division had a geographical basis. This could easily give rise to regional disunity, particularly if unanimity could not be attained in certain political matters. This mode of settlement, the result of geographical factors, disrupted political developments in the Transvaal until 1864.

The fact that the various communities were subject to the same *external pressure* led to co-operation between them. For example, after the battle of Boomplaats (1848), the different communities in the Transvaal formed a union. Potgieter kept aloof at first but later joined the other groups (1852). The physical features of the country were also a determining factor in the foreign policy. Potgieter and the Voortrekkers of Lydenburg sought to safeguard their independence by *isolation*; Pretorius, on the other hand, favoured *negotiation* with the English whose territory abutted on his. It was not before the Bantu — the Xhosa, Basuto and Zulu — turned against the British government in 1851, that Pretorius succeeded in convincing the British that co-operation with the Voortrekkers was preferable to co-operation with the Bantu who were a common enemy. Difficulties in Europe were a further factor in persuading the British government to recognize the inde-

pendence of the Republic of the Transvaal (1852). Shortly afterwards, in 1854, the independence of the Free State was also recognized. Thus the British created two *frontier buffer states*, the Transvaal and the Free State, to assist in effectively securing the frontiers of the Cape Colony.

#### *Political Oscillations in the Free State*

With the attainment of independence, the ideal of the Great Trek was realized. We have seen that the Vaal River became a dividing line between the Voortrekkers in 1848. In 1854, when the Free State gained its independence, this political boundary was retained, thus creating an artificial barrier between people who had jointly participated in *one* Great Trek. It is understandable why they wanted the barrier to be removed and the two Republics merged into one. In this we see distinct signs of the *aftermath* of the Great Trek. Until 1863 the aspirations towards *unity* dominated the political scene. These aspirations should therefore be viewed against the geographical background.

The Free State — the heart of South Africa — was an interjacent region and was so situated as to form part of the Colonial and part of the Republican spheres of influence. The Orange and the Vaal were artificial boundaries. Whereas Colonial influence extended to the Vaal River from 1848 to 1854, Republican influence extended to the Orange from 1842 to 1848. The independence of 1854 aroused a desire among the Republican elements for a *Union* with their brothers *beyond the Vaal*, and offended the loyal British elements in the Southern Free State who were in favour of federation with the *Cape Colony*. Political life in the Free State was therefore like a *pendulum* swinging from north to south, — from unification with the Transvaal to federation with the Cape. This placed the Free State on a very precarious footing in its early years, and after the First Basuto War, the process of division between North and South was accelerated. The problem confronting the Free State was how to keep together the centrifugal elements. Stability was not attained before 1863.

#### *Civil War in the Transvaal on a Regional Basis*

When Marthinus Pretorius claimed the Free State in 1857, the desire for union almost led to a civil war. Here, too, geographical features played a part. Because of Marthinus Pretorius's intention of enforcing a central government in the Transvaal, his own territory fell apart into the *geo-political groups of which it was composed*, i.e. into *de facto* independent Republican communities. A temporary alliance between the Free State and the Zoutpansberg and Lydenburg communities came into being against the Western Transvaal and Pretorius. Fortunately the dissension was ended in 1860, with the reunion of the Eastern and Western Transvaal.

Meanwhile the *Basuto War* had again driven the Free State into the arms of the Transvaal, but the proposed union was prevented by the Governor of the Cape, Sir George Gray. The anti-unionists then approached the Cape for *federation*, but this was not conceded by the British government which was opposed to any expansion of territory. Thereupon the unionists

elected Pretorius, the then president of the Transvaal, as president of the Free State. Thus, Pretorius temporarily united the Republican North into a single unit — thereby coming as close to the attainment of his ideal of a united Voortrekker Republic as he ever would.

His acceptance of the presidency of the Free State threw the Transvaal into *confusion*. Once again the old geo-political division of the community came to the fore in the division of the country into an *eastern* and *western* group. *Civil war* was the outcome; union, the great political ideal which had developed from the Great Trek, was a lost cause. For the Free State, a new period of independence and consolidation dawned under the able leadership of President Brand.

After the civil strife of 1862 and 1864, order was eventually restored in the Transvaal and the country could be built up. The Great Trek had ended; fresh avenues had to be found. The aftermath of the Great Trek was no longer felt, and new interests emerged.

The foregoing clearly reveals the important part played by boundaries in the life of human communities. The Orange and the Vaal Rivers gave rise to strong political movements. It would be impossible to grasp the significance of the Great Trek in all its varied aspects without appreciating the part played by geographical features.

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