

## The white concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A debate without end

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From time to time the debate on white and black concentration camps in the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 flares up, and it seems that there is no end in sight. In the past three to four decades the discussion on the black camps that have been undisclosed for so long has come to the fore, which in itself sheds a very interesting light both on the suffering of black people in the Anglo-Boer War and the political and historiographical climate of the period in which they are studied.<sup>1</sup> The battle lines are, however, still drawn from time to time on the white camps, and the writings of Afrikaner and English-speaking (both South African and British) historians still persist in presenting viewpoints that range from attempts at objectivity to blatant subjectivity and plain bad history.

Apart from the availability of (unpublished) archival material in among others the British National Archives in Kew, the South African National Archives in Pretoria and Bloemfontein and the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein, some important source publications on the Boer as well as the British side became available in the 40 years after the Anglo-Boer War. On the British side there were in particular the official publications, the so-called Blue Books, which dated from during the war itself and are indicated by the letters Cd. This series includes: Cd. 35, *Correspondence with the Presidents of the South African Republic and of the Orange Free State Respecting the War* (1900); Cd. 426, *Proclamations Issued by Field-Marshal Lord Roberts in South Africa* (1900); Cd. 524, *Return of Buildings Burnt in Each Month from June 1900 to January 1901, including Farm Buildings, Mills, Cottages and Hovels* (1901); Cd. 582, *Correspondence between the Commander-in-Chief in South Africa and the Boer Commanders so far as it Affects the Destruction of Property* (1901); Cd. 819, *Reports, etc., on the Working of the Refugee Camps in the Transvaal, Orange River Colony, Cape Colony and Natal* (1901); Cd. 853, *Further Papers relating to the Working of the Refugee Camps in the Transvaal, Orange River Colony, Cape Colony and Natal* (1901); Cd. 893, *Report on the Concentration Camps in South Africa by the Committee of Ladies Appointed by the Secretary of State for War containing Reports on the Camps in Natal, the Orange River Colony and the Transvaal* (1902); Cd. 902, 934 and 936, *Further Papers relating to the Working of the Refugee Camps in South Africa* (1902); Cd. 939, 942 and 1161, *Statistics of the*

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1 See for example P Warwick, *Black People and the South African War 1899–1902* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983); J S Mohlamme, “African Refugee Camps in the Boer Republics”, in F Pretorius (ed), *Scorched Earth* (Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 2001), pp 110–131; S Kessler, “The Black Concentration Camps of the South African War, 1899–1902”, PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2003; B E Mongalo and K J du Pisani, “Victims of a White Man’s War: Blacks in Concentration Camps during the South African War (1899–1902)”, *Historia*, 44, 1, 1999, pp 148–182; Liz Stanley, “Black Labour and the Concentration Camp System of the South African War”, *Journal for Contemporary History*, 28, 2003, pp 190–213

*Refugee Camps in South Africa* (1902); Cd. 979, *Return of Farm Buildings, etc., in Cape Colony and Natal Destroyed by the Boers* (1902).

Like the source publications on the Boer side, the British Blue Books obviously provide a mass of invaluable material. However, the historian should treat them critically. Historians do not appear to take the methodological questions “Who drafted the document?” and “Did the author have any ideological interest in the events?”, into account in all instances.

On the Boer side, there are the well-known publications by Emily Hobhouse defending the Boer cause. In *The Brunt of the War and where it Fell*, published in 1902,<sup>2</sup> she alternated the fresh memories of her camp visits with quotations from contemporary documents. This was followed in 1924, by her *War without Glamour*,<sup>3</sup> in which she included diary entries and statements (written during or shortly after the war) by several Boer women. Hobhouse also acted as translator and editor of the diary of Alie Badenhorst of Hartbeestfontein in the western Transvaal, entitled *Tant Alie of Transvaal Her Diary 1880–1902*.<sup>4</sup> Much later, in 1984, Rykie van Reenen edited a number of Hobhouse’s letters from the Anglo-Boer War under the title *Emily Hobhouse Boer War Letters*.<sup>5</sup>

After the end of the Anglo-Boer War and particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, a surge of reminiscences and diaries on the camps appeared, written by Boer women. The publication of these ego documents went hand in hand with the rise and flourishing of Afrikaner nationalism. The first was the book by Mrs E. Neethling, the widow of Ds H.L. Neethling, a Dutch Reformed minister in Utrecht in the Transvaal. In 1902 she published *Should we Forget?*,<sup>6</sup> a record of her own reminiscences on the British scorched earth policy and the concentration camps, together with the reminiscences of other Boer women that she and her daughter had written up. In 1917, she followed this with a totally new publication which appeared in Dutch, with the same (translated) title: *Vergeten?*<sup>7</sup> This book included a number of concentration camp statements collected in about 1904 by Fred Horak, editor of a sheet called *Transvaaler*. In 1938, *Vergeten?* was published in Afrikaans with the title *Mag ons Vergeet?*, as part of the strongly chauvinistic series, *Ons Geskiedenis*.<sup>8</sup>

In 1925, Mrs M.M. Postma privately published *Stemme uit die Vrouekampe*,<sup>9</sup> a collection of statements, some of which were sworn statements, made between 1916 and 1923 by Boer women who had been in the concentration camps. Significantly, this book was published in Afrikaans in the year that Afrikaans replaced Dutch as one of the country’s two official languages. It saw a second edition fourteen years later with the title *Stemme uit die Verlede*.<sup>10</sup>

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2 E Hobhouse, *The Brunt of the War and where it Fell* (Methuen, London, 1902)

3 E Hobhouse, *War without Glamour* (Nasionale Pers, Bloemfontein, 1924)

4 E Hobhouse (ed), *Tant Alie of Transvaal: Her Diary 1880–1902* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1923)

5 R van Reenen (ed), *Emily Hobhouse: Boer War Letters* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1984)

6 E Neethling, *Should we Forget?* (HAUM, Cape Town, 1902)

7 E Neethling, *Vergeten?* (Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1917)

8 E Neethling, *Mag ons Vergeet?* (Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1938)

9 M M Postma, *Stemme uit die Vrouekampe* (Privately published, Middelburg, 1925)

10 M M Postma, *Stemme uit die Verlede* (Voortrekkerpers, Johannesburg, 1939)

Other sworn statements by Boer women about the brutality they and their children had suffered in the camps were collected by General J.B.M. Hertzog and published by Andries Raath in 1993 as number 4 of the *Konsentrasiekamp-Gedenkreeks*, entitled *Vroueleed*.<sup>11</sup> The other four issues in the same series comprise quotations from original reminiscences and diaries from the camps, including the diary of Ds A.D. Lückhoff in the Bethulie camp.<sup>12</sup> Lückhoff's diary was published in 1901 with the title *Woman's Endurance*, and a facsimile edition appeared in 2006.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from many unpublished diaries, reminiscences and letters in local archives and museums, particularly in the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein, various diaries and reminiscences appeared in print. As early as 1905 Johanna Brandt-van Warmelo published *Het Concentratie-Kamp van Iréne*.<sup>14</sup> Another edition of her diary appeared in 2007 with Jackie Grobler as editor.<sup>15</sup> In 1905, J. van Helsdingen's *Vrouwenleed: Persoonlijke Ondervindingen in den Boerenoorlog* was published.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear that the rise of Afrikaner nationalism led to the surge of publications on reminiscences of the concentration camps. This is evident not only from the title, but also the Preface of Hendrina Rabie-van der Merwe's *Onthou! In die Skaduwee van die Galg*, where she writes that the symbolic ox wagon trek during the centenary of the Great Trek and the laying of the cornerstone of the Voortrekker monument in 1938, had "roused" her to compile her collection. "Mag my boek daartoe bydra", she declared, "om nasieliefde in die boesem van ons opkomende geslagte aan te kweek, totdat hulle die toppunt bereik het en ook bereid is om hul lewe neer te lê, soos ons voorgeslagte gedoen het, vir VADERLAND, VRYHEID en REG."<sup>17</sup>

Other camp diaries and reminiscences appeared in print after the zenith of Afrikaner nationalism. They included *Tant Miem Fischer se Kampdagboek*, in 1964,<sup>18</sup> and *Dagboek van 'n Bethulie-Kampdogter*, edited by Kezia Hamman, in 1965.<sup>19</sup> In 1980, Thariza van Rensburg edited the *Camp Diary of Henrietta E.C. Armstrong* in the source publication series produced by the Human Sciences Research Council.<sup>20</sup>

The debate between Afrikaans and English speaking historians on the white concentration camps started at least as early as 1941 with the publication of Ewald

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- 11 A W G Raath, *Vroueleed* (War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, 1993)
  - 12 A W G Raath, *Bethulie* (War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, 1991); A W G Raath, *Springfontein* (War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, 1991); A W G Raath, *Vrededorweg* (War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, 1992); A W G Raath, *Bloemfontein* (War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, 1993)
  - 13 A D Lückhoff, *Woman's Endurance* (SA News Co., Cape Town, 1904); and A D Lückhoff *Woman's Endurance* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2006)
  - 14 J Brandt-van Warmelo, *Het Concentratie-kamp van Iréne* (HAUM, Amsterdam, 1905)
  - 15 J Grobler (ed), *The War Diary of Johanna Brandt* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2007)
  - 16 J van Helsdingen, *Vrouwenleed: Persoonlijke Ondervindingen in den Boerenoorlog* (HAUM, Amsterdam, 1905)
  - 17 H Rabie-Van der Merwe, *Onthou! In die Skaduwee van die Galg* (Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1940), pp 4-5 and 6
  - 18 *Tant Miem Fischer se Kampdagboek* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1964)
  - 19 K Hamman (ed), *Dagboek van 'n Bethulie-Kampdogter* (NG Sendingpers, Bloemfontein, 1965)
  - 20 T van Rensburg (ed), *Camp Diary of Henrietta E.C. Armstrong* (HSRC, Pretoria, 1980)

Steenkamp's emotional *Helkampe*.<sup>21</sup> In the same year, Napier Devitt reacted with his *The Concentration Camps in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902*. In his Preface he explained clearly: "My object has been to counteract some of the wild statements and wrong conclusions made and published about these Camps", and he referred specifically to Steenkamp in his text.<sup>22</sup>

From the 1950s, several works appeared that took a standpoint on the concentration camps. In 1957, A.C. Martin reacted in his *The Concentration Camps 1900–1902 Facts, Figures and Fables*, to J.C. Otto's animated and sometimes vicious *Die Konsentrasiekampe*.<sup>23</sup> In 1958, Edgar Holt (*The Boer War*) missed, or perhaps sidestepped, the terror of the scorched earth policy by stating: "The British purpose was to save women and children from almost certain death on the open veld".<sup>24</sup> The first balanced view came in the 1960s with J.L. Hattingh's academic treatise on the Irene concentration camp.<sup>25</sup> This was followed more than 25 years later by the academic works by Johan Wassermann and Annette Wohlberg on the Pinetown and Merebank concentration camps respectively.<sup>26</sup>

Although Byron Farwell revealed great sensitivity for the topic in his *The Great Anglo-Boer War* in 1976, he far too readily equated the British scorched earth policy with the Boers' decision to burn down the homes of "handsuppers" so as to render them homeless.<sup>27</sup> Thomas Pakenham presented a colourful yet balanced account of the concentration camps in *The Boer War* (1979), and revealed Lord Kitchener's steely heartlessness over the loss of human lives in general, without recognising Lord Roberts's lion's share in the origin and execution of the scorched earth policy.<sup>28</sup>

However, no work on the scorched earth policy and its influence on the white and black civilians has achieved the academic standing and balance of S.B. Spies with his scholarly *Methods of Barbarism?* in 1977.<sup>29</sup> For the South African English-speaking Spies there are no simple explanations, and yet he shows understanding and empathy beyond measure for all parties involved. As a colleague of his it always struck me that his aversion to the Afrikaner's implementation of apartheid in the second half of the twentieth century did not prevent him from looking dispassionately and objectively at the experiences of Boer women and children in the Anglo-Boer War.

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21 E Steenkamp, *Helkampe* (Voortrekkerpers, Johannesburg, 1941)

22 N Devitt, *The Concentration Camps in South Africa* (Shuter & Shooter, Pietermaritzburg, 1941), pp 7 and 50

23 A C Martin, *The Concentration Camps 1900–1902: Facts, Figures and Fables* (Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1957); J C Otto, *Die Konsentrasiekampe* (Nasionale Boekhandel, Cape Town, 1954)

24 E Holt, *The Boer War* (Putnam, London, 1958), p 268

25 J L Hattingh, "Die Irenekonsentrasiekamp", *Archives Yearbook for South African History, I*, (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1967)

26 J Wassermann, *The Pinetown Concentration Camp during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902)* (Privately published, Durban, 1999); A Wohlberg, "The Merebank Concentration Camp in Durban, 1901–1902" MA dissertation, University of the Free State, 2000

27 B Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War* (Harper & Row, London, 1976), p 392

28 T Pakenham, *The Boer War* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1979)

29 S B Spies, *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer Republics January 1900–May 1902* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1977)

A relatively unknown contribution is the five-volume *Die Lotgevalle van die Burgerlike Bevolking Gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899–1902*, by the former state historian, J. Ploeger, published in 1990 by the South African State Archives.<sup>30</sup> Although an official publication and forming part of the Afrikaner literature that condemned the concentration camps, it is not without merit and deserves wider acknowledgement because of its sober discussion on the development of the scorched earth policy and its consequences.

At the time of the centenary of the Anglo-Boer War, I was editor of *Scorched Earth* (also published in Afrikaans as *Verskroeiende Aarde*), which enjoyed wide interest that was fanned by the TV documentary of the same title.<sup>31</sup> Both white and black camps came under scrutiny and Afrikaans and black authors alike contributed to the project. It struck me that Afrikaner interest came from three areas: Those who were delighted that the suffering of the Afrikaner at the hands of the British had been raked up again to carry over to the next generation; those who became aware of the suffering for the first time and were somewhat surprised at its intensity; and those who saw the Afrikaners and black people, as common victims of a domineering colonial power, something which they felt could contribute to nation building. Also striking was Afrikaners' realisation that their ancestors had also been exposed to crimes against humanity during the Anglo-Boer War – this directly in the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission where the atrocities of some Afrikaners in the police and other services in the apartheid era were exposed.

In the wake of the centenary, Andries Raath was commissioned by the Volkskomitee vir die Herdenking van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog, to write two volumes on the Boer women in the Anglo-Boer War with an Afrikaner flavour. The emotional subtitles of the volumes (*Moederleed* and *Kampsmarte*), point unmistakably to a strong focus on Afrikaner suffering at the hands of British imperialism.<sup>32</sup>

Paul Alberts acted as compiler for *Die Smarte van Oorlog* (2005), a publication which was the first contribution in the Die Erwe van Ons Vaad're series – already an emotionally charged name. It is a translation of Emily Hobhouse's *The Brunt of the War and where it Fell*. The subtitle, *Verontregting van Boerevroue en Kinders tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899–1902)* puts it in the same emotional category as Raath's above-mentioned publication. However, in the Preface I make the point that the suffering in the Anglo-Boer War was not in all ways unique: "Miskien moet ons hierdie lyding wyer bekyk, en besef dat ander volkere ook in hulle oorloë lyding ervaar het".<sup>33</sup>

In the past decade British and South African English-speaking historians, notably Liz Stanley of the University of Edinburgh and Elizabeth van Heyningen of the University of Cape Town, have tried to put the concentration camps in a new light, or emphasise aspects other than the suffering and deaths. Stanley reveals an

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30 J Ploeger, *Die Lotgevalle van die Burgerlike Bevolking gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899–1902*, 5 Volumes (State Archives Service, Pretoria, 1990)

31 Pretorius (ed), *Scorched Earth*

32 A W G Raath, *Die Boerevrou, 1899–1902, Deel 1: Moederleed, Deel 2: Kampsmarte* (Volkskomitee vir die Herdenking van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog, s 1, 2002 and 2003)

33 P Alberts (compiler), *Die Smarte van Oorlog* (Kraal, Brandfort, 2005), p 8

annoyance with the subjectivity of Afrikaner reminiscences, particularly those in the 1930s and 1940s, while Van Heyningen concentrates on the medical aspects linked to the deaths in the camps.

Recently I was approached by two Afrikaans newspapers to comment on the publications by these two historians – the book by Stanley entitled *Mourning Becomes... Post/memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War* (2006, with a first South African edition in 2008),<sup>34</sup> and an article by Elizabeth van Heyningen, “A Tool for Modernisation? The Boer Concentration Camps of the South African War, 1900–1902”, published in a 2010 issue of the *South African Journal of Science*.<sup>35</sup> The questions I asked throughout were: How objective are these publications, and how prudently and objectively do the authors explore their sources?

I read Stanley’s book with fluctuating sentiments of approval and rejection. It is based on a mixture of academic research and findings in which she has allowed herself to become personally involved. Academic, because Stanley has done some praiseworthy archival and secondary research and has made a number of good points. Involved, because she cries over deceased Boer children and confesses that the deaths should not have happened, but simultaneously embarks on a mission to point out the exploitation of post/memory by Afrikaner nationalist opinion makers (cultural entrepreneurs) for the sake of Afrikaner dominance – and in the process, she draws some blatantly subjective, incorrect conclusions.

The book is about the process of “post/memory” but also the convenient “forgetting” by the Afrikaner of certain aspects of the Anglo-Boer War. “Post/memory” in this context is explained as the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, or that these narratives or reminiscences later undergo appropriate changes to promote Afrikaner nationalism.<sup>36</sup>

Let me begin with the positive aspects of the book.

Probably Stanley’s most important verdict, one that cannot be faulted, is that “nothing about the concentration camps should be accepted on trust, for so much of it has been reworked and overworked for political purposes and has post/memory qualities”.<sup>37</sup> However, it is amazing that she accepts this verdict as applicable to the reminiscences of Afrikaner women but does not question the veracity of the British documentation as published in the official Blue Books. Nevertheless, she rightly points out the subjectivity of E. Neethling’s *Should We Forget?* (1902) and calls it an example of the “testimonios genre”. And I fully agree with her about the subjectivity of Rabie-Van der Merwe’s *Onthou!* (1940).<sup>38</sup> But surely the statements (some of which are sworn) that Neethling published in *Vergeten?* (1917 and in 1938 in *Mag Ons Vergeet?*), and M.M. Postma’s *Stemme uit die Vrouekampe* (1925), cannot be

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34 L. Stanley, *Mourning Becomes... Post/memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2008)

35 E. van Heyningen, “A Tool for Modernisation? The Boer Concentration Camps of the South African War, 1900–1902”, *South African Journal of Science*, 6, 5/6, 2010

36 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 21

37 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 164

38 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, pp 102–114

rejected completely as inventions, notwithstanding Stanley's impressive application of literary theory? The fact that Stanley is correct that these publications were intended to promote Afrikaner nationalism does not make the content, stripped of its emotive language, completely unacceptable evidence. Were all these women evil liars?

A second praiseworthy contribution is about "forgetting": Stanley shows us that where initially the historiography only focused on white camps and ignored black camps, there is now also a focus on black camps. What has been forgotten as well, she claims, is what lay between – the fate of black people in the white camps and the fate of Boer men ("handsuppers") in the white camps. She points out correctly that the convenient "forgetting" was committed by Afrikaner cultural entrepreneurs to remind the *volk* of their own dead and to ensure that "the others" do not count.<sup>39</sup>

A third aspect in which she is probably correct is her viewpoint that the lists of names of the dead on memorials at concentration camps are not about individuals, but that they became a public remembrance of "our dead" that are commemorated by "the *volk*" – a cry for national sentiment par excellence.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps Stanley should also bear in mind that thousands of amateur genealogists nowadays find the individual names very useful.

In the fourth place, we should take note of Stanley's findings on the deaths in tents and hospitals. Afrikaner tradition tells us that the women refused to allow their sick to be admitted to hospitals because they experienced that no one ever came out of these hospitals alive. However, Stanley has found that the documents of the Springfontein and Merebank camps indicate that many more people died in their tents than in the hospitals. She tells us:

Regarding these camps at least, then, the "truisms" about murdering doctors and the hospitals as places where children almost inevitably died contained in women's testimonies and enshrined in the post/memory of the concentration camps are demonstrably untrue.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, Stanley is correct in dismissing Neethling's idyllic description of the "harmonious relationship" between Boer and black as folly.<sup>42</sup> That relationship was harmonious because generally the arrogant Boer preferred it this way and the black man from an inferior position realised that the Boer demanded it should be like that.

For the rest, Stanley's book is a mixture of subjective, faulty and ignorant viewpoints and remarks that reveal her prejudice against the Afrikaner – the Afrikaner she alleges has misused the suffering and deaths in the concentration camps to promote nationalism, with which he (the masculine "he") came to power and applied apartheid. Towards the end we see her leitmotif – where she directs her commentary to Johan van Rooyen, author of a book on the Afrikaner diaspora: "It took your lot four hundred years to mess it up, so it'll probably take their lot four hundred years to put it right."<sup>43</sup>

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39 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, pp 172 and 213

40 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 61

41 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, pp 154–155

42 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 112

43 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 263

The reason why I put the book down very soon after my initial attempt to read the first edition in 2006, was Stanley's personal involvement with her topic. It is not clear to me whether it is because she is a sociologist or a postmodernist. However, she is quite comfortable to quote James Young, a writer on the Holocaust: "I become part of their performance ..."<sup>44</sup> Goodbye objectivity. She tells us of her morose reception by an Afrikaner woman in the library in Brandfort and how a photograph of Dr Verwoerd against the wall upset her.<sup>45</sup> Clearly she did not realise, or perhaps it did not matter to her, that Verwoerd grew up in Brandfort. The acid test would have been whether she would have objected if a photograph of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who was confined to Brandfort by the apartheid government, had hung there instead.

One of the most irritating mistakes is Stanley's accusation that Afrikaans writers "have implied or stated" that the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War were direct precursors of the Nazi concentration camps.<sup>46</sup> Besides the fact that she confuses two of J.H. Breytenbach's works from 1949 in her bibliography (and which she obviously has not consulted) I could not find either there or in the other works that she provides in her endnote – J.C. Otto, Ewald Steenkamp, M.C.E. van Schoor and D.H. van Zyl – any comparison between the two kinds of camps. These writers were too subjectively involved with the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War to pay any attention to the Nazi camps. Photographs, says Stanley, were interpreted by Afrikaners "through the lens of the Nazi future".<sup>47</sup> The problem is that Stanley completely over-estimates the Afrikaners' awareness of the Nazi camps. The Second World War was in Europe, far away, and the Nazi camps did not concern them. The only South African author listed in Stanley's bibliography that draws this parallel is Owen Coetzer, who as an English-speaker, probably with a family who were involved in the war, might have been closer to events in Europe. It is *Stanley* who interprets events through the lens of the Nazi future.

Stanley almost has a mission to denigrate the Afrikaner's admiration for Emily Hobhouse. She does not fully acknowledge Hobhouse's role in Britain to expose the suffering in the camps and basically to force the government to appoint the Ladies Commission (whose recommendations led to a dramatic drop in the number of deaths). Stanley indicates that Hobhouse's memoirs of 1924 admit to some factual errors that she made in her reports and her book in 1901/1902.<sup>48</sup> In this way, Stanley casts suspicion over all Hobhouse's earlier findings. When she quotes Hobhouse as requesting the Secretary for War to act immediately because 3 245 children had died in three months, Stanley asserts that Hobhouse wrote the letter because Brodrick had failed to act and that she was probably annoyed at not being included in the Ladies Commission. I do not read any love of fame into Hobhouse's life. She was probably more afraid that the pro-government ladies would put the Salisbury government in a good light.

On the actions of N.J. Scholtz, superintendent of the Irene camp, Stanley again renders herself guilty of uncritical subjectivity. She testifies that an Afrikaans sociology colleague told her that Scholtz had put ground glass into people's food and

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44 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 19

45 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 22

46 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 7

47 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 134

48 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 92



ordered their children to hospital where they were killed, “and he [Scholtz] was universally hated for his cruelty”. No, says Stanley, she has traced a petition in the William Cullen Library in Johannesburg, signed by several hundred Boer women from Irene camp, who bless him “for saving many lives and regret he is leaving”.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps Stanley should (as she pleads for, and is fitting for a historian), be more critical of her source. Yes, the “glass” was sugar crystals and the British authorities did not murder the inmates, but has Stanley ever given it a thought that the “several hundred Boer women” who signed the petition, were probably the wives of “handsuppers”, or, as she dismisses on p. 30, that the petition might indeed have been propaganda? The reason why I state this is because the fiery Johanna (Brandt) van Warmelo – a nurse in the camp – was extremely critical of Scholtz in her diary inscriptions of 25 May, 11 June and 13 July 1901. On 21 December 1901, she even remarked that she would thank God if she heard that he had been murdered!<sup>50</sup> Most importantly, the petition on the many lives that Scholtz ostensibly saved is incorrect, because Scholtz departed on 8 July 1901, and for June the number of Irene deaths was 131 – the highest after Potchefstroom, Middelburg and Bloemfontein.<sup>51</sup> Although Stanley lists Brandt’s diary as a source, she obviously did not read it carefully.

Stanley complains about the complete anonymity of the black dead in the concentration camps in comparison with the white deceased whose names have been inscribed on graves and marble slabs.<sup>52</sup> The Afrikaner nationalist governments or cultural entrepreneurs surely cannot be blamed for this different treatment. At no time, even in the very early stages of the war, were the names of the black deceased recorded on gravestones or elsewhere. Neither the British camp authorities nor the black people whose family members had died, elected to record such deaths. At the time, black people generally were illiterate and did not record the names of their next of kin themselves, as was the practice in white camps.

There are examples of condemnation for Boer action where Stanley fails to understand the circumstances. To her, the main objection voiced by the Boer women in the camps was that they were treated like (or lower than) black people. This is a misinterpretation of the real Boer objection – that they had been removed by the British from their burnt homesteads in a humiliating manner, and that the British were responsible for the suffering and the deaths. The question is: Was the average Briton of 1901 less of a racist? Stanley transposes her own 2006 consciousness of black people’s twentieth-century humiliation onto 1901 – this is ahistorical.

One of Stanley’s major objections is that the rhetoric of the Boer post/memory is one-sided and mainly concerns their removal from the farms and the journey to the camps, rather than everyday life in the camps. She asserts that the scorched earth tactics are presented not as a part of war, but as the unaccountable punishment of innocents.<sup>53</sup> Let us agree that everyday life is not emphasised in these writings, and

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49 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 29

50 Brandt-van Warmelo, *Het Concentratie-kamp van Irène*, 25 May 1901, pp 41–52; and 11 June 1901, p 63; Grobler (ed), *The War Diary of Johanna Brandt*, 13 July 1901, pp 280–281; and 21 December 1901, p 416

51 E Hobhouse, *Die Smarte van die Oorlog en wie dit Gely het* (Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1941), p 417

52 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 56

53 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 109

the descriptions are indeed full of emotion and subjectivity. But is Stanley unable to realise that highly traumatic experiences tend to engulf any thought of writing about the daily grind of humdrum, ongoing events? For those Boer women the traumatic experience of losing their homes literally before their eyes; the destruction of all their accumulated property; the forced removal to the concentration camps; the suffering and deaths; all of this loomed far larger in their memories than the everyday existence of religious meetings, the visits from friends, the gossiping, the children playing. The highly traumatic experiences are what the indignation of the Afrikaner women was all about; this was why they considered them worthy of being written down. It is noticeable that Stanley does not subject the biased and jingoistic evidence of British medical staff and camp superintendents to the same critical analysis. On this her analysis remains exceedingly subjective and disappointing. And as for her remark that the Boer women did not present the scorched earth “as a part of war, but as the unaccountable punishment of innocents”, I dare to state that with the British officers taking the law into their own hands, as S.B. Spies clearly indicates they did, most farms were burnt down *not* because there had been incidents of women’s assistance to the Boers, but because they were potential shelters for the Boers. Therefore one *can* state that these women saw the scorched earth as unaccountable punishment of innocents.

On the incidence or absence of trauma among camp inmates, Stanley writes without understanding or empathy. She reckons that some inmates were possibly traumatised, but immediately rejects this by stating that existing testimonies do not provide any signs of an inability to “speak”, nor that there were things deemed unspeakable.<sup>54</sup> She is clearly unaware of the reluctance of most camp inmates, with their Calvinist background, to talk or write about their experiences, at least until the 1930s. Many Afrikaners can testify that for many years Ouma was not prepared to talk about the camps – this only came in the 1960s and 1970s. And then Stanley is at it again about the racial prejudice of the Afrikaner by claiming that insofar as trauma *is* discernible in the texts, this “lies in the palpable gulf between the writers’ assumption of innate racial superiority and the uncivilised British treating them as the same as or even inferior to black people”. White settlers in colonies all over the world saw themselves as superior, and so did British doctors and camp superintendents. Stanley merely settles the matter by writing that “in wartime such things happened” – an easy way to explain British actions against black and Boer women and children.

Stanley, following Elizabeth van Heyningen, makes an error of reasoning when she remarks that the death rate of rural Boer children before the war did not differ much from the death rate in the concentration camps.<sup>55</sup> The number of deaths of white children (22 000) was probably a quarter of the number of white children in the camps. And it is true that from a family of say ten Boer children, perhaps two did not reach adulthood before the war. But these two deaths occurred over a period of ten to twenty years, and the parents had the opportunity, over time, to accept the loss, whereas most deaths in the camps were in a few dreadful months – and that under the British authorities who were promptly, and understandably, blamed by the Afrikaner.

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54 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, pp 113–114

55 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 113

Stanley's criticism of the post-war presentations by Neethling, Postma and Steenkamp should be measured against diaries that were published without any changes. If she had used Brandt-Van Warmelo's diary properly, and had consulted, for example, Kezia Hamman's *Dagboek van n Bethulie Kampdogter*; *Tant Miem Fischer se Kampdagboek*; and A.D. Lückhoff's *Woman's Endurance*, she would have had a more nuanced understanding of the circumstances than she presents in her simplistic "alternative" views.

Her prejudice goes further. When a group of Boer women thank Superintendent Henry Kemball Cook for his presents to a few orphans, they write that the youngest is very proud of her nice dress and pinafore "and as soon as her face is quite well she will wear them". Thereupon Stanley declares: "Indicating she might have been hit [by one of the women]."<sup>56</sup> Can you imagine. Wasn't there perhaps something wrong with her face because of the poor quality of food, or am I making the same kind of mistake as Stanley does?

There are other examples of Stanley reading more into the text than the author clearly intended. She maintains: "Generalisations about women and children recur across both popular and academic writing about the camps, giving the impression, albeit by implication, that it was mainly women who died."<sup>57</sup> I have checked four of the six sources she provides. For Mohlamme and Spies she gives the wrong page references, because on the page numbers she gives there are no references to the number of deaths. Kessler states: "... the total deaths in all the camps for whites ... were 27 927", and Jackson says: "Almost 28 000 white women and children died in the concentration camps." I do not read in either of these statements that the two writers suggest, even by implication, that deaths of women were in the majority. Even Steenkamp's *Helkampe*, which Stanley correctly identifies as a post/memory book that aggressively promotes Afrikaner nationalism, acknowledges the suffering of the children in his Preface by remarking that he wants to do homage to "daardie heldinne en heldjies wat in die konsentrasiekampe gely en gesterf het". Two pages further down, Steenkamp gives the number of deaths – even he does not attempt to create the impression that the women were in the majority.

In the same vein, Stanley wants to know why there was a shift from local mourning for children in 1906 that became, in 1913, a commemoration of women as "mothers of the fatherland", embodied in the Women's Memorial. The explanation probably lies in the fact that President Steyn declared during course of the Anglo-Boer War that a monument to the Boer women should be erected after the war. This was probably the reason why it was felt that the 1906 decision was out of line.

Stanley decides that the words "Dit is ons erns", carved into the path leading to the Taalmonument, in the literal sense have little meaning. In her view, their meaning only becomes clear when one looks at the immensity of the Taalmonument and its citing atop the mountain.<sup>58</sup> In doing so, she reveals her ignorance of the history of Afrikaans and of the *Tweede Taalbeweging*. Between 1905 and 1908 J.H. Hofmeyr, Gustav Preller and D.F. Malan debated these very words on the recognition of Afrikaans.

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56 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 158 and note 108 on p 170

57 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 127

58 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, pp 269–270, note 23

The word “commando” is consistently used incorrectly. A commando was a Boer fighting unit, comparable with a British regiment or battalion. Stanley, however, uses it for a member of an attacking force (which has been the meaning since the Second World War). She should have used “burgher” or Boer.

It is irritating to be quoted incorrectly. Stanley reckons that it is debatable whether the ordinary burghers (“commandos”) knew the full extent of what was happening in the camps. She adds: “Pretorius suggests there was little awareness until the war ended.”<sup>59</sup> No, I said that no evidence could be found that the Boer leaders and burghers were aware that the mortality rate in the camps had *declined* after October 1901.<sup>60</sup>

Elizabeth Stanley undoubtedly has contributed to our knowledge of the Anglo-Boer War with her study on post/memory. On this she is an excellent theoretical expert, but in this particular publication I do not find her a successful, critical, or objective historian.

The article by Elizabeth van Heyningen, researcher in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Cape Town, in a recent edition of the *South African Journal of Science*<sup>61</sup> took me somewhat by surprise, because I have always regarded her as a balanced historian. In this article, however, she makes a number of contentious statements on the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War that cannot go unchallenged. In particular, she claims that after the high mortality rate in the second half of 1901, a modern public health system was introduced that taught Afrikaners for the first time to make use of a toilet system. The camps were therefore, in her opinion, a tool of modernisation in early twentieth-century South Africa.

At least two serious objections can be brought against Van Heyningen’s presentation. My major objection is that she does not look at the camp inmates in a nuanced way. She maintains that bywoners (landless paupers) were in the majority in the camps and that (all) the Boer landowners were peasants. She makes no provision for educated large-scale landowners and for middle class or even lower middle class values among the Boers.

Secondly, Van Heyningen’s use of sources on the alleged lack of knowledge on sanitation and hygiene by the camp inmates is particularly one-sided. She basically accepts only the version presented in the British Blue Books, the official British government publications, and statements in the archives written by camp officials. It is therefore hardly surprising that her presentation is one-sided. Add to this that she *uncritically* accepts these British sources. She does not take into account that British camp superintendents would probably have generalised about the hygiene of the camp inmates, just as they would have put the entire blame on the Boer women for the suffering and deaths. Note what Emily Hobhouse had to say about the reaction of the camp superintendents to the deaths: “Their way out of it is to abuse the Dutch as a

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59 Stanley, *Mourning Becomes*, p 75, note 88

60 F Pretorius, *Life on Commando during the Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1999), p 340

61 E van Heyningen, “A Tool for Modernisation? The Boer Concentration Camps of the South African War, 1900–1902”, *South African Journal of Science*, 6, 5/6, May/June 2010

whole, and these mothers in particular, as brutal, heartless, ignorant people who deliberately murder their children with foolish remedies.<sup>62</sup> Such subjective judgments by the camp officials show that the sources should be approached with caution. There is more than one side to the issue, and the historian has to consider them all.

I have singled out a number of Van Heyningen's statements that require reaction.

In the first place she claims: "Boer farms often lacked any form of sanitation. Accounts of Boer sanitary practices ... are so graphic and so frequent that there can be no doubt that most of the Boers in the camps, who were bywoners rather than middle class, lived in comfortable association with human and animal excrement."<sup>63</sup>

It is not true that bywoners formed the majority of camp inmates – there were not that many bywoners before the war. Can the sons (who are still in their twenties) of a man of means who are farming on their father's property, be classified as bywoners? Surely not. Furthermore, Van Heyningen provides no proof that any form of sanitation was "often" lacking on Boer farms.

Cultural historians do not agree with Van Heyningen's point of view. Mauritz Naudé of the Cultural History Museum in Pretoria reckons that although there is no archaeological proof of shaft toilets on farms before the war, to trace shaft toilets archaeologically is extremely difficult. Annemarie Carelse of the same institution declares that oral evidence indicates that the Pioneer House in Silverton and the Willem Prinsloo farm in the Pretoria district, for example, both had outside shaft toilets before the war.<sup>64</sup> Claudia Gouws, who completed a Masters dissertation at North-West University on water and sanitation in the rural Highveld homestead between 1840 and 1940, points out that prior to the war, when a white family settled at one place long enough, a shaft toilet was often dug outside the house, three metres deep and below the drinking-water line. Naturally one has to distinguish between various social classes, because this habit was surely not a general practice. It also happened that men would seek out the hills to perform their body functions, while many women used the well-known porcelain chamber-pot that was emptied in the morning in a hole some distance from the house.<sup>65</sup>

Van Heyningen quotes from the reports of camp superintendents and the Ladies Commission when she writes that camp inmates had to be prevented from fouling the ground around their tents, from throwing out slops and rubbish and, with more difficulty, had to be persuaded to use the communal latrines.<sup>66</sup> This might well have been the case among some of the inmates – probably some bywoners, but might also have included people who were too ill to go to the toilets, or, as the Ladies Commission recognised, children who were incapable of reaching the high toilets. In addition, according to the Ladies Commission, the trench type of toilet made it difficult for children and the elderly to use. Moreover, one should not discount the

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62 Van Reenen (ed ), *Emily Hobhouse: Boer War Letters*, p 93

63 Van Heyningen, "A Tool for Modernisation?", p 6

64 Telephonic interviews, 28 June 2010

65 Telephonic interview, 28 June 2010

66 Van Heyningen, "A Tool for Modernisation?", p 6

traumatic effect the destruction of their homesteads and farms; the often harsh removal to the concentration camps; and the suffering and deaths in the camps. All this must have preyed on the minds of the inmates. Correctly, Dr Jak van den Bergh's letter in *Beeld* of 22 June 2010 states that there were many noble and cultivated Boer women who went to rack and ruin under these circumstances.

Incidentally, Emily Hobhouse warned against making generalisations on the camps in a letter of 10 March 1901 to her brother: "I wish you could impress on the English public that one can't speak generally about these camps or the condition of the women therein".<sup>67</sup>

A second point (which links up with Stanley's) is Van Heyningen's objection that most of the written material on the concentration camps in the Anglo-Boer War is limited to the suffering and deaths of the Boer women and children.

My reaction: Understandably there is a negative feeling among English historians that Afrikaner leaders in the 1930s and 1940s used and misused the suffering in the camps to promote Afrikaner nationalism. But Van Heyningen should bear in mind that this suffering was indeed the experience that made the greatest impression on their minds. The facts that there *was suffering* and that this was subsequently mythologised, should not be confused.

A third point. She claims that the British found it necessary in the camps to utilise the preventative health care that was available by the end of the nineteenth century, including the use of statistics, clean water, and effective sanitation. Ration scales were adapted to provide enough nutrition and to expose the Boer women to modern nursing and infant care practices. Together with this comes her statement that once Lord Milner finally grasped the dire nature of the health situation in the camps, he swiftly recruited properly qualified staff from Britain.<sup>68</sup>

My comment: Van Heyningen jumps too easily to the improved position in the camps in 1902 – improvement came only after Emily Hobhouse's unpopular exposure in Britain of conditions in the camps, whereupon the government at last sent out the Ladies Commission in August 1901. The commission made recommendations for improvement and simultaneously Milner took over the administration of the camps in November 1901, ensuring that the recommendations were implemented. *That* is why there were improvements in 1902. This does not come to the fore in the article. Big deal – the surviving civilians benefited from a laudable British administration.

Fourthly, Van Heyningen makes the statement that the British nurses were seen by the Boer women as "models of ideal British womanhood, examples of gentility and femininity to the Boer peasantry". Equally uncritically, Van Heyningen accepts the standpoint of the Transvaal director of the burgher camps, who wrote to Governor Maxwell:

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67 Van Reenen (ed), *Emily Hobhouse: Boer War Letters*, p 86

68 Van Heyningen, "A Tool for Modernisation?", pp 1, 5

## Concentration Camps

The moral effect of the association of these earnest noble-minded and cultivated ladies, with the people of the veld ... cannot fail to be productive of much good in many ways, and especially in softening the bitter feelings of enmity... of the Boer women against the British name<sup>69</sup>

Can anybody (and this includes Van Heyningen) be more out of touch with reality?

Finally, Van Heyningen states: “An infrastructure was established in the camps that familiarised the Boers with modern sanitary routines ...” And:

Whatever [the Boer women] learned in the way of sanitation of infant care, was reinforced after the war by the emergence of [Afrikaans] women’s organisations and journals that attempted to inculcate middle-class values as they strove to unite Afrikaner women under the umbrella of the *volksmoeder* ideology<sup>70</sup>

It is clear that she gives the “lessons learnt” by the Boer women about sanitation in the concentration camps far too much credit. It was rather these Afrikaner women’s organisations such as the Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie and the Afrikaanse Christelike Vrouevereniging, and periodicals such as *Die Huisvrou* that educated Afrikaner women on these issues. One would expect a more circumspect approach from Van Heyningen.

In conclusion, it seems to me that there are historians who hurriedly acknowledge that the suffering and deaths in the camps were regrettable, only to launch an attack against the misuse of this suffering by Afrikaner nationalists of the thirties and forties. In the process, they cast suspicion on testimonies by Boer women, as if nothing they said was true. It is far too convenient to shift the blame away from the neglect and poor administration of the British authorities. Significantly, the contents of the British Blue Books or other archival documents by superintendents who were obviously covering for themselves, are not scrutinised. The truth about the camps is much more complicated and nuanced than the portrayal presented by these writers.

### Abstract

This article gives an overview of some of the most important historiographical contributions on the white concentration camps the British erected during the Anglo-Boer War. This is followed by a criticism of two recent publications – Liz Stanely’s book *Mourning Becomes... Post/memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War* (2006, with a first South African edition in 2008), and Elizabeth van Heyningen’s article entitled “A Tool for Modernisation? The Boer Concentration Camps of the South African War, 1900–1902”, in the *South African Journal of Science* (2010). Despite quite some merit, both publications are criticised for their subjectivity. It is concluded that the truth is much more complicated and nuanced than the portrayal provided by these writers.

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69 Van Heyningen, “A Tool for Modernisation?”, p 5

70 Van Heyningen, “A Tool for Modernisation?”, pp 1, 10

### Opsomming

Hierdie artikel verskaf eers ’n oorsig van die belangrikste historiografiese bydraes oor die blanke konsentrasiekampe wat die Britte tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog opgerig het. Dit word gevolg deur kritiek op twee onlangse publikasies – Liz Stanely se boek *Mourning Becomes... Post/memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War* (2006, met ’n eerste Suid-Afrikaanse uitgawe in 2008), en Elizabeth van Heyningen se artikel getiteld “A Tool for Modernisation? The Boer Concentration Camps of the South African War, 1900–1902”, in die *South African Journal of Science* (2010). Ten spyte van heelwat meriete word albei publikasies gekritiseer vir hul subjektiwiteit. Daar word besluit dat die waarheid veel ingewikkelder en genuanseerd is as die uitbeelding deur hierdie skrywers.

### Keywords

Afrikaner nationalism; Anglo-Boer War; British Blue Books; concentration camps; Elizabeth van Heyningen; Emily Hobhouse; E. Neethling; Liz Stanley; post/memory; sanitation.

### Sleutelwoorde

Afrikaner-nasionalisme; Anglo-Boereoorlog; Britse Blouboeke; Elizabeth van Heyningen; Emily Hobhouse; E. Neethling; konsentrasiekampe; Liz Stanley; post/memory; sanitasie.