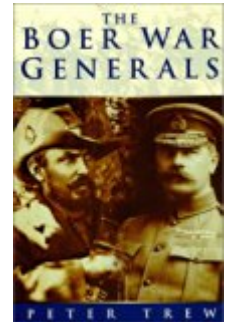


Peter Trew. *The Boer War Generals*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999. xiv + 274 pp. \$36.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7509-2294-4.



Reviewed by Christoph Marx

Published on H-SAfrica (June, 2000)

Peter Trew's book on the Boer War Generals is only one in a whole range of new publications which came out on occasion of the Centenary of the South African War in 1999. In contrast to many others, it focuses exclusively on the main military leaders and is therefore a contribution to the purely military side of the history of the war. The title makes clear that it concentrates even on certain limited aspects of the war, namely military leadership at the very apex of the military hierarchy on both sides: the commanders-in-chief. There is no discussion of theoretical or methodological questions; the book is a narrative account of the war in nine chapters, containing the biographies of seven generals.

The first chapters deal with the British side, containing the military biographies of Sir Redvers Buller, Lord Frederick Roberts and Lord Herbert Kitchener, successively the commanders-in-chief of the British troops in South Africa. The careers of the two last-mentioned generals cover two chapters for each of them, the first one on the early careers, the second one on their contributions to the South African War.

Then follows a description of the military biographies of the Boer commanders Louis Botha, Christiaan de Wet and Koos de la Rey, the last one not formally but de facto a second commander-in-chief of the Transvaal army in the operational area of the western Transvaal. Finally, a short postscript deals with the remarkable career of Jan Smuts.

The main focus of these biographies is on the generals' activities during the South African War, so that we find a detailed account of military engagements and of the role the generals played in them. However, Trew manages to avoid the danger of personalistic reductionism when he describes the different battles, emphasizing the contribution of the commanding general towards its course and result, but without reducing the battles to individual achievements.

The form of presentation Trew decided to use contains a problem, which is the reason for my reluctance to recommend this book as an introduction to the history of the South African War. Notwithstanding all the merits of this book, the reader must already have a basic knowledge of the

war. Although the book contains a chronology of the major events, the orientation will be rather difficult. By following the biographies of his protagonists, Trew paints a kaleidoscopic picture of the war, but he does not provide the reader with a continuous narrative. Some of the battles are even described more than once -- each time from the point of view of a different commander in the contest. But the narrative is so well written, that even those repetitions don't appear as redundant or boring.

One of the merits of this book is undoubtedly that the military activities of the generals during the South African War are put into the larger context of their careers. Most books on the War do not go into these details. Especially in the case of the British generals this extension is welcome for readers who are not familiar with the military and career patterns in the British army during the age of imperialism. For me as a historian not specialised in military history, the chapters on the British generals were the most interesting.

The weakest of the chapters is the "postscript" on Smuts, falling back behind the considerable research literature on his biography. This is also the only chapter in which Trew goes beyond the purely military side of biography and includes Smuts' numerous activities in a whole range of fields: politics, philosophy, science. He is obviously walking on thin ice, his biographical account bordering on an eulogy of Smuts, which is in the light of critical reappraisals by Bernard Friedman from 1975 and numerous other biographical approaches rather outdated. This is especially true when it comes to Smuts' segregationist attitude towards Africans, which Trew does not deny, but which he nevertheless downplays. So why he wrote this chapter at all did not become clear to me. He gives as a reason Smuts' "remarkable postwar career" (xi), but this would have been true as well for General Hertzog, who was "a comparatively junior general", too.

Trew, who is not a professional historian, has drawn mostly on published material, only in some cases, f.i. in the biography of de la Rey, he included unpublished archive material as well. Nevertheless, within these limits the book is well-researched and brings a lot of details on the war, in some minor questions he even contributes to clarification.

The introduction already reveals the limitations of a purely military historical approach: whereas it covers the political developments leading to the outbreak of war in October 1899 in some detail, no mention is made of the economic and long-term structural causes. Anyone, who expects this book to be a contribution to the social history of the South African War, will certainly be disappointed. All the recent approaches of the last years and decades have not been integrated, though sometimes at least they have been taken notice of by the author. This is especially true for the involvement of Africans in the War, a topic which since the pathbreaking studies by Peter Warwick and Bill Nasson more and more came into the centre of historical interest. Trew, who only mentions them occasionally, could be accused of not having emphasized the role of Africans adequately; but, on the other hand, he does not tell very much about the common soldiers on both sides or about the white population either. Here the limits of a military historical perspective come to the fore, especially when this is narrowed down to a biographical narrative. Therefore, when measured against the often methodologically innovative approaches to the social history of the South African war, this book remains a rather conventional war-history "from above". Neither does the author contextualise the War within the economic development of South Africa, so that aspects well researched by Diana Cammack (*The Rand at War*) are not mentioned.

It is regrettable that he did not realise his original plan to include some of the Generals who had subordinate commands. Most of them still re-

main a bit shadowy figures, even if there is the occasional biography. But to learn more about the careers of Generals Beyers, Kemp or Maritz, who played a considerable role in subsequent politics and in Afrikaner nationalist mythography, would have been most welcome. This is also true of a prominent Boer commander like Piet de Wet, who disappears from the historical record after the war. The limitations of this book make it clear that we still have to wait for a social history of the military commanders, especially on the Boer side. Back in 1972 Donald Denoon directed the attention to the intricate relationship of political and military leadership, the importance of patron-client-relationships within the social fabric of the Boer republics; this still remains a challenge.

But in order not to do him injustice: Trew never proclaims any ambition to go beyond a purely military history. In contrast, therefore, to Thomas Pakenham, who announces a lot and delivers little, the reader will not drop Trew's book disappointed. If one keeps in mind the self-imposed limitation of this book, one can appreciate the advantages of this account, which are undoubtedly to be found. The foremost one is the very sober and matter-of-fact way of the narrative. In contrast to many other military histories, Trew's is devoid of any hero-worshipping, war-glorification or fetishization of military detail. If one contrasts his narrative of one of the great battles of the War, like Spioen Kop, with the one in Thomas Pakenham's much acclaimed bestseller, I certainly would prefer Trew's book. Moreover, he does not -- like Pakenham -- start a literary crusade to rehabilitate certain generals by heaping derogatory remarks on others. Instead, he tries to give an account as balanced as possible without being partisan in one way or the other.

Given the restricted range of a purely military history of the War, this biographical approach is certainly interesting and enjoyable as a well-written book, but it is not a significant contribution to innovative research.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Christoph Marx. Review of Trew, Peter. *The Boer War Generals*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4287>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.