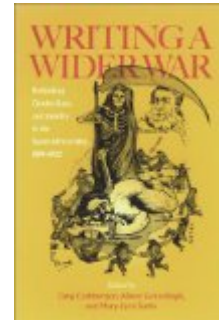


**Greg Cuthbertson, Albert Grundlingh, Mary-Lynn Suttie, eds..** *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking Gender, Race, and Identity in the South African War, 1899-1902.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002. xix + 345 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8214-1462-0.



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## Rethinking the South African War

More than twenty years ago, in the introduction to his edited collection *The South African War*, Peter Warwick challenged readers to investigate new fields of historical research including the effects of the war on social formation in South Africa, the experiences of Black and White communities throughout the region, community responses to the war, and soldiers' interpretations of the issues at stake in the war. Historians have responded to many of these challenges. *Writing a Wider War: Rethinking Gender, Race, and Identity in the South African War, 1899-1902*, a collection of fifteen of the papers presented at the centenary conference held at the University of South Africa (UNISA) Library, represents a welcome response to Warwick's call. The contributors (including Andrew Porter, Fransjohan Pretorius, Bill Nasson, and Albert Grundlingh, all represented in Warwick's book) address a wide variety of topics which push the limits of historiography from where *The South African War* left off to recognize new trends in social and cultural history.

In chapter 1, Bill Nasson explores the difficulties and contradictions engendered by the centenary committee's attempt to capitalize on the common experience of the war in the service of forging a common national identity for post-apartheid South Africans in the 1990s. The committee sought to turn Afrikaner losses into national losses, in order to emphasize the shared suffering of both Blacks and Whites in the concentration camps. Indeed, "virtually all ethnic groups" found their unique roles in the war redefined by the terms of this new national impulse. Nasson's analysis provides a fascinating look at the struggle over history and the future. In chapter 2, Albert Grundlingh looks at the National Women's Monument in his exploration of Afrikaner memory. Completed in 1913, this monument was envisioned by the British social reformer, Emily Hobhouse, as a symbol of the tragedy of "broken hearted womanhood" and "perishing childhood." Gradually, however, it became a potent instrument of Afrikaner male nationalism. Unlike the Voortrekker Monument, the National Women's

Monument had to "grow" into the movement and its meaning had to be reassigned.

Helen Bradford offers perhaps the most provocative essay in this collection in her attempt to challenge what she refers to as the "Real Man Theory of History." The British advance into the Orange Free State in 1900 transformed the nature of the war with General Fredrick "Butcher" Roberts's version of Sherman's March, an assault on "feminized spaces"—the home, the field, and the family. Rather than as a response to guerrilla activity, Bradford sees Roberts's actions as a pre-determined policy shaped by his military experiences in Afghanistan and by imperial masculinity in general. She reminds us that in this earlier war Indian agriculture was destroyed, Afghan villages were razed, and rebels were routinely hanged. Nevertheless, Roberts became a national hero. The South African War, the "last of the gentleman's wars," followed this model, yet historians continue to characterize it in terms of masculinity and chivalry. Bradford calls for a feminist analysis of the war, which would pay adequate attention to the ways in which gender informs both contemporary and historical narratives.

In chapter 4, Fransjohan Pretorius traces the development of a potent Afrikaner nationalism to the emergence of a new Afrikaner elite after the first year of the war. Most burghers were not affected by "intellectual" nationalism, nor did their communal vision extend beyond their Republic at the start of the war. Rather, as the war continued, and those burghers who did not surrender were forced to make greater sacrifice, they formed a shared identity. The British scorched earth policy and their use of concentration camps only increased Boer resolve, thus strengthening their common bond. As the ranks of the rural elite were thinned by age, lack of conviction, and exile, a strong new elite of landowners and professionals emerged from within the commando. This elite came to dominate politics in South Africa in the years to come.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 focus on African participation in the war, which has seen a growing interest among historians in the last two decades, although most scholars and virtually all popular accounts of the war continue to focus on the male Anglo-Boer confrontation. Bernard Mbenga examines the motive for Bakgatla participation in the war and their role in the Western Transvaal. Although the British did not want to arm Africans in general for fear of upsetting White settlers at the Cape, they gradually became dependent on the Bakgatla in the Pilanesberg district. Mbenga traces the decision to support the British to Boer aggression, the opportunity to seize land and cattle, and historical memory, notably the public flogging of Chief Kgamanyane by then Commandant Paul Kruger in 1870. John Lambert focuses on African participation in Natal. There too, the British were reluctant to use armed Africans to fight the Boers. But because of the initial Boer successes in Natal and the threat to Zululand, the British changed their attitude. Because of their history with the Boers and anticipated financial rewards, a number of chiefdoms were willing to assist what they considered to be the lesser of two evils. Lambert particularly emphasizes the role of the African Christian elite, *kholwa*, and what they saw as an opportunity to prove their loyalty to the British. Menelisi Genge looks at similar themes of motive and participation among the EmaSwazi. All three authors, by emphasizing the proactive role of Africans in this conflict, provide important additions to the historiography of the war.

Women and medicine are the subjects of chapters 8 and 9. Shula Marks reminds us that the South African War was the first of its kind to employ large numbers of female nurses in the field. Many women in Great Britain, driven both by patriotic sentiment as well as a desire for adventure and escape, were eager to participate in the South African War. They successfully overcame great opposition to their employment by the Royal Army Medical Corps and filled a large gap in the medical services. In "Women and Disease," Eliza-

beth van Heyningen posits a fascinating theory to explain the high mortality rates among Boer women and children at the concentration camps. The few modern historians who have examined the camps in detail have stressed material conditions to explain why so many died between late 1900 and the end of the war. Van Heyningen emphasizes the clash of cultures. British doctors and Boer women came from entirely different traditions of healing. They held different beliefs regarding the role of the physician and the hospital, diet, medicines and remedies, and the nature of disease. The failure to understand one another only made the material situation worse.

Keith Surridge and Alan Jeeves reassess two figures closely associated with the war: Lord Kitchener and J. A. Hobson. In chapter 10, Surridge criticizes those who suggest that Kitchener was driven only by military expediency and failed to consider the political ramifications of his actions. Surridge presents a Victorian officer whose colonial experience had made him very aware of the difficulties of occupation and its aftermath. In stark contrast to Alfred Milner, Kitchener believed that peace could only come to South Africa if the interests of the Boers were safeguarded from the interests of the capitalists. Unconditional surrender, he believed, was never an option which could produce lasting peace. Surridge's Kitchener is a soldier guided by political foresight with a firm grasp of the situation in South Africa. In chapter 11, Jeeves re-examines one of the first critical assessments of British war aims, J. A. Hobson's *The War in South Africa*. Jeeves notes its crude anti-Semitism, its unfounded conspiratorial nature, and its many errors, yet he still demonstrates its value as a text. In offering his cheap-labor thesis, Hobson correctly identified, according to Jeeves, that race was based on economic sentiment and that the position of Africans would only get worse as the mining industry got stronger. This link between the modernity of South African

racial policies and industrial development has become a touchstone for many modern scholars.

Chapters 12 and 13 take fresh looks at two British communities during the war. Richard Mendelsohn investigates Jewish involvement and sees the South African War as the first war in which British Jews gained "full membership in the national community." In the anxiety caused by the accusations of a number of politicians and critics, notably Hobson, blaming them for the war, Jews seized upon the war to display their loyalty. Jewish businesses donated goods and money, Jewish community leaders gave pro-war speeches, and the Jewish press joined the propaganda campaign. But nothing did more to illustrate Jewish patriotism and to dispel stereotypes of frailty and cowardice than active service in the war. David Nash examines the Secular Movement which, with few exceptions, opposed the war. Nash is careful to demonstrate the complex nature of the movement with its members taking a variety of stances that sometimes changed over the course of the war. Although not successful in preventing or stopping the war, Nash sees the movement, with its emphasis on the destructive nature of war, as having a major impact in shaping the language of twentieth-century peace campaigns.

Two pertinent criticisms of this collection of essays can be found in its concluding two chapters. In chapter 14, "The South African War and Imperial Britain: A Question of Significance," Andrew Porter acknowledges that absent from this collection are the "big" or "important" questions which historians at one time asked about the war. Why did it occur? What were its main consequences? And so on. Although these are questions the historian familiar with the South African War has certainly considered, they are questions which the general reader would almost certainly ask.

A second criticism stems indirectly from a remark Andrew Thompson makes in the introduction to his essay on the relationship of pro-war as-

sociations, the British government, and public interest, entitled "Imperial Propaganda during the South African War." Thompson correctly states that the so-called "pro-Boers" in Britain have received more of the historical community's time and ink than the supporters of the imperial idea, and as a result their contemporary significance has been exaggerated and attention has been diverted away from those who supported military intervention. Likewise, several of these essays, although extremely valuable and well-crafted, perhaps would be better suited for other collections. Indeed, in Chapter 14, Porter suggests that many of the issues explored in this book come from other debates and were originally set outside the discussion of the war itself.

*Writing a Wider War* is a valuable resource for historians engaged in the study of the South African War.

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