

Chapter V

Regional background to the guerrilla warfare

Not long after the new strategies had been agreed upon – in the last days of October 1900¹ – a planning meeting was held at Cyferfontein in the Magaliesberg, south of Rustenburg. Here certain republican leaders, among them President Steyn, Commandant-General Botha, Generals De la Rey and Smuts, planned their overall strategy for the war that was to follow. It is important to note that the Free State's Chief Commandant De Wet was absent from these deliberations. Scholtz emphasised this fact, claiming that this was one of the important reasons why the plans that were laid did not come to fruition. Smuts, who described the meeting in considerable detail in his memoir, outlined the two major components of the plan.² Firstly, they intended to destroy the gold mines on the Witwatersrand, which would constitute an economic obstacle for the enemy. Secondly they wanted to shift the theatre of war away from republican soil, by invading the two British colonies and simultaneously seeking support from sympathetic colonists. Bill Nasson calls their plan a “grand design”.³ This plan embraced two basic guerrilla essentials. Firstly it would in effect expand the area of Boer activity considerably thereby provoking the enemy forces to spread themselves more thinly over the vast country. Secondly it would help to boost their dwindling numbers by recruiting colonial Afrikaners, thus drawing the local population into the struggle.

This new form of warfare would take the harsh realities of the war into the entire far reaching territories of both the republics, as well as large areas of the Cape Colony and parts of Natal. This meant that the country under consideration is vast, with extremely diverse ecology and also possessing a very varied economy. Any type of war, wherever it is fought, needs to be adapted to the local circumstances. To deal with these dissimilarities, this study of the guerrilla phase of the Anglo-Boer War will thus be presented along regional lines. Seven regions have been

¹ G. Nattrass and S.B. Spies (eds.), *Jan Smuts, Memoirs of the Boer War*, p. 35.

² G. Nattrass and S.B. Spies (eds.), *Jan Smuts*, pp. 128-132.

³ Bill Nasson, *The South African War 1899 - 1902*, pp. 193-195.

selected according to the military structure of the two republics.⁴

During the planning of the guerrilla war the regional or district commandos were for the most part divided under commanders, each responsible for a particular territory. The ZAR State Artillery and ZAR Police were reorganised into commandos and subsequently allocated to particular regional commands.

As in any guerrilla war, the respective operational regions were not demarcated by clear boundaries. The regional guerrilla forces usually operated within the areas allocated to them, concentrating their efforts on disrupting the enemy transport and communication lines, attacking their camps and garrisons and generally aggravating them wherever possible. In other words, they aimed to follow the basic rules of guerrilla warfare, surprise, harass, disrupt and then disappear. Initially they had the extensive areas – so essential to guerrilla fighters – in which to move about. Moreover they were not encumbered with the slow moving supply trains, as was the case during the conventional phase of the war. The intention was that they should be self sufficient as far as arms, ammunition, clothes, food and horses were concerned. At the stage when the guerrilla strategy was implemented in late 1900, it was believed that the rural civilian-population – primarily the women and the older men who were non-combatants – would supply the burghers with most of their daily needs and would also provide the necessary medical care and furnish information about the enemy's movements. However this aspect of the strategy did not realise, because of the British the scorched earth policy.

As the boundaries between these regions were vaguely demarcated the allocated territories were often ignored and sorties frequently took place outside a commando's home domain. A case in point was the aid which De Wet and his Free Staters provided for General P.J. Liebenberg, during the siege of Frederickstad near Potchefstroom. General Ben Viljoen, on his way back after the meeting of ZAR leaders at De Emigratie in the southeastern Transvaal, attacked a British column of about 150 wagons and 850 men at Mooifontein.⁵ These incidents demonstrate that despite the regions allocated to commanders, guerrilla war was waged countrywide. Wherever the Boers could inflict damage on the enemy, it was their duty to do so.

In order to clarify the diversity of the war, the main environmental features (including the

⁴ A. Wessels, *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899 - 1902 'n oorsig van die militêre verloop van die stryd, passim*; P.G. Cloete, *The Anglo-Boer War a chronology, passim*.

⁵ L.S. Amery, *The Times history of the war in South Africa*, V, pp. 10-11, 293.

topography and climate), the socio-economical considerations (the major towns, main roads, railways, population, agriculture and industries) and the military background of the seven regions will be considered below. A map depicting the major features of each region is provided with the discussion of the region concerned. The information in each case is directed specifically to meet the parameters of this study, namely, to investigate the circumstances under which the Boer officers and burghers had to fight. Furthermore it aims to illustrate the conditions which prevailed in the various regions at the time. These would unquestionably have affected the daily life and the hardships that the republicans had to endure. The discussion will therefore provide greater understanding of the stressors that are to be examined in the next chapter, and the coping mechanisms which are dealt with in Chapter VII.

Background information is provided in Table V – 1, a comprehensive analysis of the different types of military encounters during the months of the guerrilla phase in the different regions.⁶ Although the details in the table may not include all the encounters that took place during the guerrilla phase of the war, it does give an indication of the most important battles, ambushes, railway disruptions, towns that were destroyed or occupied and military drives. The overall aim of the table is to illustrate the variety of military engagements that took place in the different regions both on Boer and on British side. Finally it shows how the tide of the war gradually swung away from the Boers in favour of the British, in other words, how the successful British strategies reflected on the entire issue of stressors experienced by the Boers and what the eventual results turned out to be.

Table V – 1 Analysis of military encounters during the guerrilla warfare period - September 1900 to May 1902, per region, per month.

Key: **Boers** = actions initiated by the Boers; **British** = actions initiated by the British; **+** = light contact or skirmish; ***** = major battle; **♣** = ambush; **Dr** = drive; **Ndr** = New model drive; **▲** = railway disruption; **●** = town burning or occupation; **Bh** = attack on blockhouse.

⁶ P.G. Cloete, *Chronology, passim* This table only reflects the encounters reported in this source and does not attempt to show every engagement during the guerrilla phase of the Anglo-Boer War.

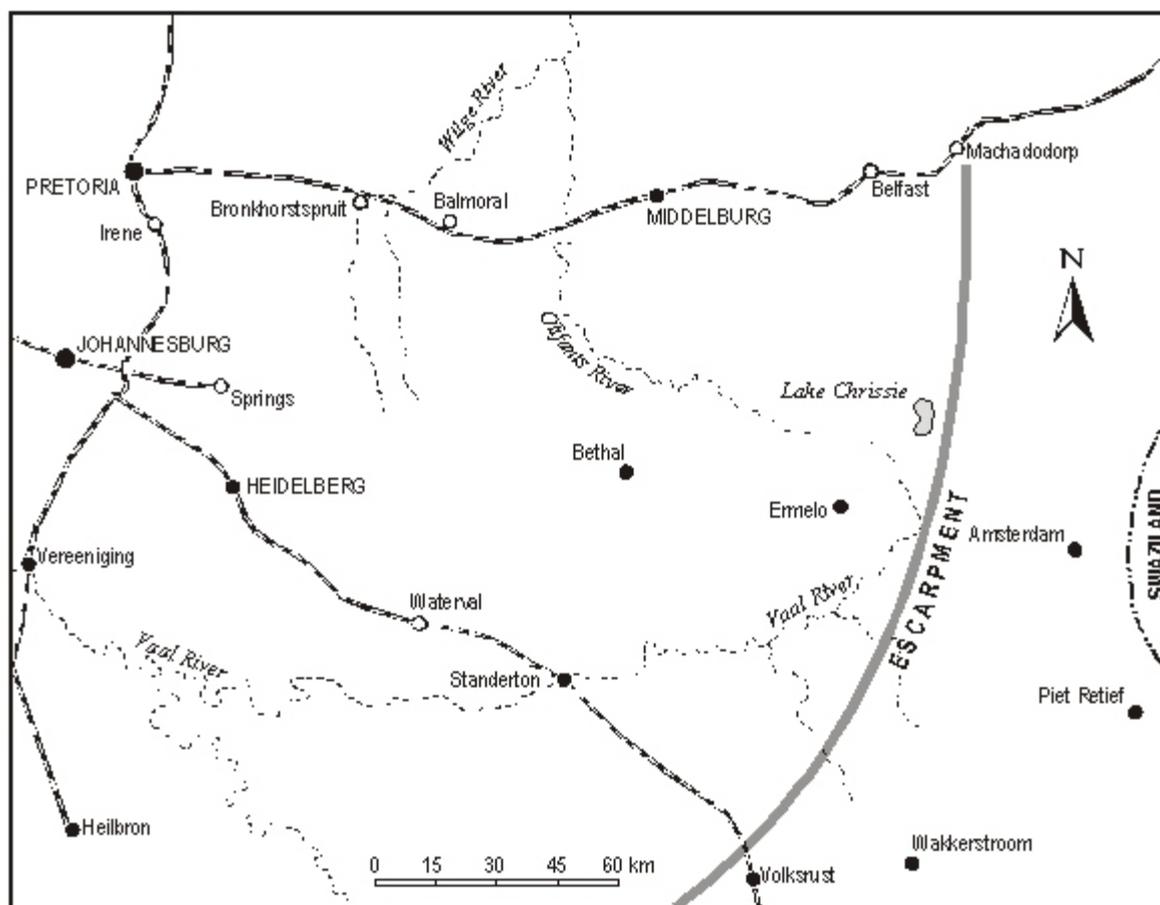
Column 1 SE-TVL : Column 2 NE-TVL : Column 3 W-TVL : Column 4 N-TVL : Column 5 N-OFS : Column 6 S-OFS : Column 7 Cape ■

	Boers	British	Boers	British	Boers	British	Boers	British	Boers	British	Boers	British	Boers	British
Sep 00	+	●●●● ++	+	●●					▲		+●			
Oct 00	▲▲▲+	Dr Dr		++	(+●)++	Dr ++ ●●			▲	Dr	+++++ ++			
Nov 00	■++	Dr ●	+	■+		(+●)			▲+	●+	■+	Dr ++		
Dec 00	+++++ ▲		■		■+++						+	++ Dr	●●+	+
Jan 01	■+++	Dr	▲▲▲		■■+++				+	Dr		Dr	●	
Feb 01	■+	+ Dr Dr ●●	▲	Dr		■+++ Dr					▲▲	++	++	++
Mar 01		+ Dr-cont		+	■+	+						+ Dr	●	
Apr 01		Dr-cont	▲▲+	Dr ●●+	■	+		●●++	+	Dr Dr ●	▲	+	+	
May 01	+			Dr-cont	+ ■	Dr Dr Dr +				Dr			+++	+
Jun 01	■		▲▲		+				+	Dr			(+●) +	+
Jul 01	▲●			++	++	+ Dr	▲		+	■ Dr Dr			+	+++ Dr
Aug 01		++	▲+	+		●				+	+(Bl)	Dr Dr ++	++	+
Sep 01	■+++	+++++Dr Dr			■+			++		++	++	+	+++	+++++
Oct 01	++++*	++++	+		■		+	+		■			●++++ ++	++
Nov 01		+++		+					+	Dr++			++++	++
Dec 01	Bh ++	+++++	■		++	++			■ ++++	Dr		+++	++	+
Jan 02	++	+++++		+		+	++		+	+		+++	+++	+
Feb 02	●●	+		+	■	+++			+	+ Ndr Ndr			▲++++	+Dr
Mar 02		+			■ ■ +	++Dr Dr Dr	●	+++		Ndr				+
Apr 02		Dr Dr Dr Dr				Dr Dr Dr +			++	Dr			+●●	+
May 02		+				Dr							+++++	

*Regional background to the guerrilla warfare***1. Southeastern Transvaal***Environmental features*

This region is situated to the east of the Johannesburg-Durban railway and south of the Pretoria-Delagoa railway lines. The great South African escarpment, forming the watershed between east and west, runs through the region from Machadodorp, east of Carolina and Ermelo into the Free State in the south. West of the watershed it is a high lying area, varying from 1 500 metres to 2 000 metres above sea level,⁷ with sour grass covering the rolling hills and many streams and rivulets. This region, normally called the Highveld, is exposed to extremely low night temperatures in winter and early spring, while enjoying relatively mild summers. To the east of the escarpment the topography is broken by sandstone ridges and bushy valleys and enjoys a considerably milder climate during winter.

Map V-1: The southeastern Transvaal during the Anglo Boer War. (Reproduced from TAB: G 3/257 Kaart van die Z.A. Republiek Oranje Vrijstaat Natal en gedeelte Kaap Kolonie – Landmeter Generaal Pretoria Januari 1 1900.)



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C.F. Albertyn (ed.), *Ensiklopedie van die wêreld*, Indeks/Atlas, p. 279.

By South African standards, the region enjoys a relatively high rainfall, with 600 mm to 800 mm of rain per annum west of the escarpment and 800 mm to 1 000 mm per annum east of the watershed.⁸ The rainy season is normally from mid October until April. The Highveld often suffers a few dry weeks during mid summer, and frequently – as indeed occurred in 1900- 1901 and again in 1901-1902 – it has continual soft rain during the late summer (February to April) This weather is locally known as *geelperskereën* literally meaning yellow peach rain — the time when yellow peaches ripen. Due to the altitude, low temperatures and high humidity, mist occurs frequently, even during the summer months. In the extreme east, that is near the towns of Amsterdam and Piet Retief, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the soft *geelperskereën* and mist and local people often use the Swazi term, *chisa* for this cold, bleak weather. Conditions such as this undeniably made the life of the burghers unpleasant during the war.

There are many pans, natural hollows in the countryside, in the area between Bethal and Middelburg, often retaining water throughout the year. The best known of these, one which had a direct bearing on the guerrilla warfare, is Lake Chrissie (refer map V-1). The fact that these pans form in depressions in the terrain means that the low-lying localities provided concealment for both Boers and British patrols.

Socio-economical issues

By the end of the nineteenth century the area was already comparatively well populated by white settlers, due to the healthy climate, reliable rainfall and the relative absence of belligerent black communities. This statement is borne out by the exceptionally large number of towns that had sprung up in the southeastern Transvaal by the late 1800s. On the railway from Johannesburg to Durban there were the towns of Heidelberg, Greylingstad, Standerton and Volksrust. On the Pretoria to Delagoa line were Bronkhortspruit, Middelburg, Belfast, Machadodorp and Nelspruit. The major towns within the boundaries of the region were Carolina, Ermelo, Bethal, Amersfoort, Wakkerstroom, Piet Rietief, Vryheid and Utrecht. By the time that the guerrilla phase commenced many of these towns had been placed under British control, which meant that the Boer commandos were restricted to the open countryside. The two railway lines essentially formed the western and northern borders of the region.

The northwestern part of the southeastern Transvaal comprised the industrialised and mining

⁸ C.F. Albertyn (ed.), *Ensiklopedie van die wêreld*, Indeks/Atlas, p. 283.

zone of Vereeniging , Johannesburg and Pretoria. The British high command was located in Pretoria which made it the hub of anti-Boer activities. Because of its proximity to the Highveld, the life and military activities of the republicans were severely restricted.

Despite the sour grass, this region is an excellent agricultural area and at the time of the Anglo-Boer War maize farming and cattle and sheep husbandry were the main agricultural activities. The veld to the east of the escarpment, which is still today called the Winterveld by local farmers, has a mixture of sour and sweet grass and therefore provides more suitable grazing for livestock during winter when the sour grass becomes unpalatable for livestock with a lower nutritional value. At the time of the Anglo-Boer War many local farmers owned land on both sides of the watershed to solve this problem.

Military aspects

Commandant-General Louis Botha, who hailed from Vryheid, was the Boer commander in this region, at the same time being the supreme commander of all the ZAR forces. When hostilities commenced in October 1899 there were eleven commandos from the rural parts of this region. Approximately 5 700 burghers between the ages of 18 and 34 years, in other words within the age limit of the first group of men who were eligible for call-up, came from these eleven commandos.⁹ This represented roughly 35% of the total ZAR force. The total number of burghers who were active at the outset of the guerrilla phase is unknown because the numbers captured by the British and abandonments – permanently or temporarily – cannot be gauged. During the guerrilla phase there were at least 15 Boer officers who held the rank of general, Combat-General or assistant general in this region.¹⁰ Several of these officers were killed during combat – among these were Generals C.J. Spruyt of the Heidelberg Commando and J.C. Fourie of the Carolina Commando. A number were captured by the British, including General J.J.C. Emmett of the Vryheid Commando while General Tobias Smuts of the Ermelo Commando was relieved of his rank due to improper behaviour.

The small body of men that functioned as the ZAR government, including the acting president of the ZAR, S.W. Burger, and the state secretary, F.W. Reitz, stayed in the southeastern Transvaal from early April to mid December 1901, frequently moving from one venue to another

⁹ P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 29.

¹⁰ J. Malan, *Die Boere-offisiere van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog, 1899-1902*, pp. 11-58.

in their effort to stay out of the hands of the British.¹¹ Their presence in the region tied down many burghers in secretarial, protection and other government related activities, keeping them from active guerrilla tactics. Because the British were constantly hunting the government, these burghers became the hunted instead of the hunters as befits a guerrilla fighter.

Column 1 of Table V–1 illustrates the monthly encounters in the southeastern Transvaal region during the guerrilla warfare phase. The table also illustrates the impact of environmental features of the region on the military activity.

On the one hand, Kitchener's original strategy to use an extended line of columns over the Highveld in the hope of either annihilating the Boers near Ermelo or driving them against the Swazi and Zulu borders and so forcing them to surrender,¹² miscarried. The inclement weather of the first months of 1901, when the heavy, muddy soils thwarted the movement of artillery and supply wagons, was an unexpected burden.¹³ On the other hand, a number of environmental circumstances such as the cooler climate, the fact that the towns were closer to one another and that there were areas within the region where the local population was largely of British descent, were factors that contributed to make life easier for the British soldier. Furthermore, the undulating, open terrain was largely free of trees and shrubs and consequently the movement of burghers in daytime was greatly restricted. The low frequency of encounters initiated by the Boers during the latter part of the war can probably be regarded as an indication of this environmental feature. At the same time – as it will be discussed later – Colonel G.E. Benson was confronted with the identical problem, which probably led to his well-known night raids in August and September 1901.¹⁴

2. Northeastern Transvaal

Environmental features

The second region under discussion, the northeastern Transvaal, was situated north of the Pretoria to Delagoa railway line and east of the Pretoria to Pietersburg railway, extending towards

¹¹ L.S. Amery (ed.), *The Times history of the war in South Africa*, V, Map at the end of chapter XX; P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, *passim*.

¹² L.S. Amery (ed.), *The Times history*, V, p. 159.

¹³ L.S. Amery (ed.), *The Times history*, V, pp. 176-177.

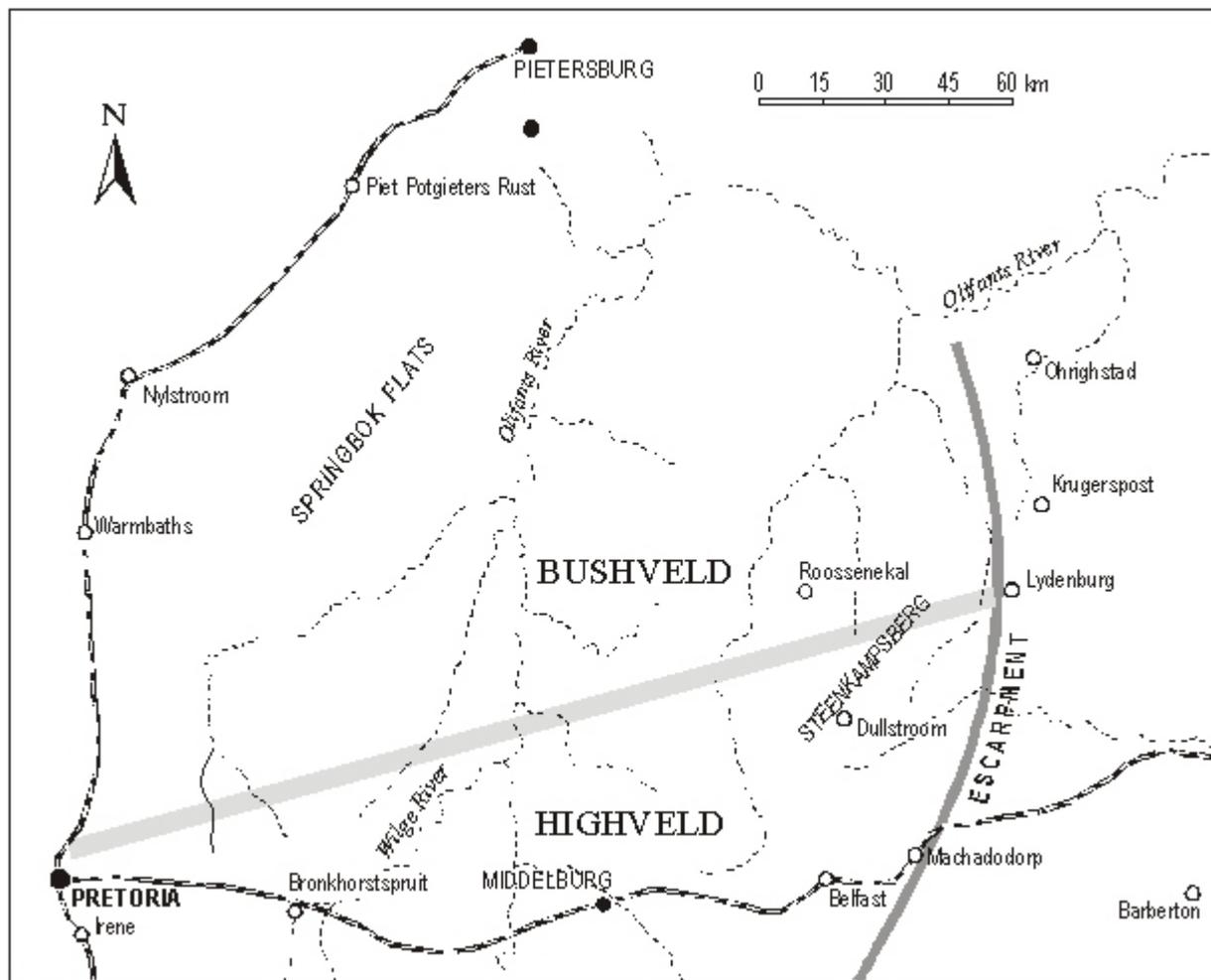
¹⁴ L.S. Amery (ed.), *The Times history*, V, pp. 329-330.

the east over the great escarpment into the Lowveld.¹⁵ Two major ecological systems can be recognized in this area. An imaginary line, running roughly northeast from Pretoria to Lydenburg, divides it into two major zones. Firstly, to the south of this imaginary line there is a high lying region with primarily sour grass as vegetation. Secondly, to the north there lies a vast area at a lower altitude, where the terrain is primarily covered by bush and shrubs with sweet grass. The topography of the region is very diverse. In the southeast it is uneven or irregular terrain, with altitudes ranging from under 1 000 m in the Lowveld east of the escarpment, rising to between

Map V-2: The northeastern Transvaal during the Anglo Boer War (Reproduced from TAB: G 3/257 Kaart van die Z.A. Republiek Oranje Vrijstaat Natal en gedeelte Kaap Kolonie – Landmeter Generaal Pretoria Januari 1 1900)

¹⁵ J.W. Meijer, *Generaal Ben Viljoen 1868-1917*, p. 158.

1 800 m and 2 100 m on the Highveld. Towards the east the land becomes increasingly undulating, and eventually mountainous, until the escarpment is reached. A geographical feature that played an important role during the guerrilla war, namely the Steenkampsberg, is a plateau with an average altitude exceeding 2 100 m. In contrast to this rugged and broken countryside a large part of the northwestern sector is a savanna plain known as the Springbok flats. The transition from Highveld to Bushveld, that is to say along the imaginary line, is generally very broken country with steep declines, many streams and thickly bushed valleys. This area – the Bankenveld – offered ideal terrain for guerrilla activity.



Because of the diverse topography the rainfall of the region also varies considerably. In the high-lying grass veld and the mountainous areas the rainfall is similar to that of the southeastern Transvaal Highveld. Long spells of rainy weather may occur during the late summer. In contrast

the rainfall in the Bushveld sector is less reliable, and declines from east to west. Most of the northeastern Transvaal – the high-lying grassy hills as well as the Bushveld – receives an average of 600 to 800 mm of rain per annum, while in the mountainous east the rain varies from 800 to 1 000 mm.¹⁶ The late summer months of 1900-1901 as well as those in 1901-1902 were extremely wet. The incessant rain for days on end was debilitating and weakened the morale of the burghers, as this will be discussed in the next chapter.¹⁷ In the mountainous areas the altitude, high moisture and low temperatures, often brings heavy mist down like a blanket over the countryside.

Temperatures vary greatly between day and night and from one season to the next; but especially between the high-lying and low-lying areas. The climate on the grassy, moist, mountain sides, which are often shrouded in mist, differs profoundly from that in the humid Lowveld below the escarpment to the east – an area which is furthermore plagued with malaria and many livestock diseases such as redwater fever and horse sickness. Environmentally this region is clearly one of great contrasts; which on the one hand suited the guerrillas, while on the other it led to great hardship and uncertainty.

The major river in the northeastern Transvaal is the Steelpoort River with its two main tributaries, the Waterval and Spekboom Rivers. They eventually flow into the Olifants River, which circumvents the region in the north.

Socio-economical issues

Although the high-lying regions, much as in the southeastern Transvaal, were fairly well populated at the time of the Anglo-Boer War, the Bushveld was sparsely settled. This area of sweet grass veld was primarily used as a winter grazing area. The threat of the Pedi living to the north of the Steelpoort River and the unhealthy climate were among the reasons for the sparse population. Many of the white farmers, who had originally settled in the vicinity of Ohrigstad, had moved to the healthier Highveld areas by the 1890s.¹⁸ This explains why there were few major towns in that part when the war began. Ohrigstad and Lydenburg and the gold mining town of Pilgrim's Rest, lay to the east of the escarpment with Roosenekal and Dullstroom to the west. The British military activities north of the Pretoria to Delagoa railway was controlled from Bronkhorstspuit, Middelburg, Belfast, Machadodorp and Nelspruit and later also from

¹⁶ C.F. Albertyn (ed.), *Ensiklopedie van die wêreld*, Indeks/Atlas, p. 283.

¹⁷ R.W. Schikkerling, *Commando courageous (A Boer's diary)*, 17.2.1901 to 21.2.1901, p. 155.

¹⁸ Personal information: Mr .J. Smit, owner of the farm Goedehoop, Carolina, August 2001.

Lydenburg. These towns were occupied by the British and their troops could therefore penetrate into the region with relative ease. On the railway to Pietersburg were the towns of Warmbaths and Nylstroom. At the time of the war the northeastern Transvaal was predominantly a stock farming region although farmers normally cultivated small areas of grain, vegetables and deciduous fruit, for their own use.

Pilgrim's Rest was originally established as a centre for the alluvial exploitation and also mining of gold. However, after the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886, Pilgrim's Rest, like Barberton, declined rapidly. The unclaimed gold from some mines however still played a small, but romantic, role in the Anglo-Boer War when 986 gold pounds were minted there in February 1902.¹⁹

Military aspects

When the planning and organization of guerrilla forces took place in October 1900 General Ben Viljoen was appointed Assistant Commandant-General in command of the northeastern Transvaal region. His force included his own Johannesburg Commando, the Boksburg Commando, elements of the Pretoria and Johannesburg police force and several members of the ZAR State Artillery. The initial strength of Viljoen's force in this area was 700 men.²⁰ The number increased as members of Pretoria and Middelburg Commandos joined him. Furthermore, J.W. Meijer observes that certain members of the Lydenburg Commando took part in the assaults on the Balmoral and Wilgerivier stations. Based on this information the eventual strength of Viljoen's force was probably somewhat more than 1 000. Meijer also makes mention of a fieldcornetship from Lydenburg when reviewing the battle of Helvitia station.²¹ He contends that Viljoen had a direct order from Louis Botha to improve the morale of his burghers at the onset of the guerrilla phase, to which Viljoen responded by immediately implementing an aggressive strategy that led to a number of confrontations with the enemy.

General G.H. Gravett was appointed as Viljoen's aid. However, he was mortally wounded at Mapochsgronden in the very early days of the guerrilla phase.²² Botha appointed Commandant

¹⁹ E. Levine, *The coinage and counterfeits of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*, pp. 69-70.

²⁰ J.W. Meijer, *Generaal Ben Viljoen*, p. 159.

²¹ J.W. Meijer, *Generaal Ben Viljoen*, p. 166.

²² P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 192.

Chris Muller of the Boksburg Commando to the position of combat-general, to become Viljoen's second in charge.²³ These were the only generals who operated in this sector. When Viljoen was captured by the British near Lydenburg on 25 January 1902, Muller was appointed in his position and Viljoen's brother, Willem Viljoen, took over the Johannesburg Commando.²⁴

Because the British military activities in the region were largely dependent on the two railways, Viljoen's men had no other option but to surprise, harass and disrupt the enemy by focussing on railway targets such as stations, bridges, supply trains and troop trains. The Boers' attacks on the Balmoral and Wilgerivier stations on 19 November 1900 were the first of these assaults. Roberts immediately reacted by ordering a force to punish Viljoen's commandos at their headquarters near Renosterkop, just north of Bronkhorstspuit. However, after a battle on 29 November, Viljoen and his burghers managed to escape entrapment by the British and on 29 December 1900 they once again attacked the British at Helvetia station, won a significant victory and captured the British naval gun, the so-called "Lady Roberts".

Assaults on railway installations and supply trains were an essential part of the guerrilla strategy in the northeastern Transvaal. This is demonstrated in column 2 of Table V-1. The names of the Irish volunteer, Captain Jack Hindon and Captain Henry Schlegtkamp appear frequently in the reports of these assaults on railways and trains. The demand for food and equipment and the fact that there were few other British targets for Viljoen's men to focus on, probably influenced the frequency of these attacks. As the war wore on the British improved their protection of the railways. Consequently the situation changed and assaults became less.

3. Western Transvaal

Environmental features

The third region stretched westwards from Pretoria and Johannesburg to the border between the Cape Colony and the Transvaal and south and west from a broad imaginary line, drawn roughly from Pretoria to Mafeking (refer map V-3). This region once again differs significantly from both those discussed above and includes a number of prominent ecological systems. Firstly,

²³ J. Malan, *Die Boere-offisiere*, p. 46.

²⁴ P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 296.

the Magaliesberg mountain range in the northeast forms the northern ridge of a fertile valley – the so called Moot or Groot Moot – which played an important role during the guerrilla phase of the war. Next is an extended area of broken terrain and low hills, valleys and ridges with scattered thorn bush that covers most of the eastern part of the region. Finally the arid western plains which are crossed by occasional rivers and streams – often no more than dry gullies or sandy river beds – with bush covered banks. This last zone is in fact the beginning of the great semi-desert that covers the western part of southern Africa. In the northwestern sector numerous low mountains mark the transition between the primarily grassy Highveld of the southern part of the region and the Bushveld in the north. There is a significant difference in the altitudes of these two areas – which can be as much as 400 m. This mountainous area has many densely bushed kloofs, that provided good cover, ample grazing and abundant water for the Boers, a feature that played an important role particularly during the latter stages of the war.

The average rainfall of the region drops notably from east to west. The eastern parts, including Krugersdorp and the Moot enjoy an average rainfall of 600 mm per annum. Lichtenburg, which is centrally situated receives an average of 500 mm of rain per year, while still further west Schweizer Reneke lies on the 400 millimetres isohyet. Furthermore, the rainfall in the western Transvaal is unreliable and fluctuates widely. Years of devastating droughts – often two or three years in succession – are frequently followed by seasons of excessive rain when floods cause immense damage. Like most of the southern African interior the summers of 1900-1901 and 1901-1902 experienced unusually long spells of rainy weather that led to countless hardships for the burghers in the veld.²⁵ This was unusual for a region where there were generally concerns about getting a consistent, reliable water supply. Indeed pioneers in the region normally settled at places where they found steady water, and many farm names have the suffix of fontein or “fountain”.

The southern Highveld zone comprises a mixture of sour and sweet grass which is of a mediocre grazing quality while the northern Bushveld has sound sweetveld grazing. However, the Bushveld is prone to many of the subtropical diseases. These differences were significant, and during the summer months the Highveld zone offered better grazing with less danger of disease,

Map V-3: The western Transvaal during the Anglo Boer War. (Reproduced from TAB: G 3/257 Kaart van die Z.A. Republiek Oranje Vrijstaat Natal en gedeelte Kaap Kolonie – Landmeter Generaal Pretoria Januari 1 1900.)

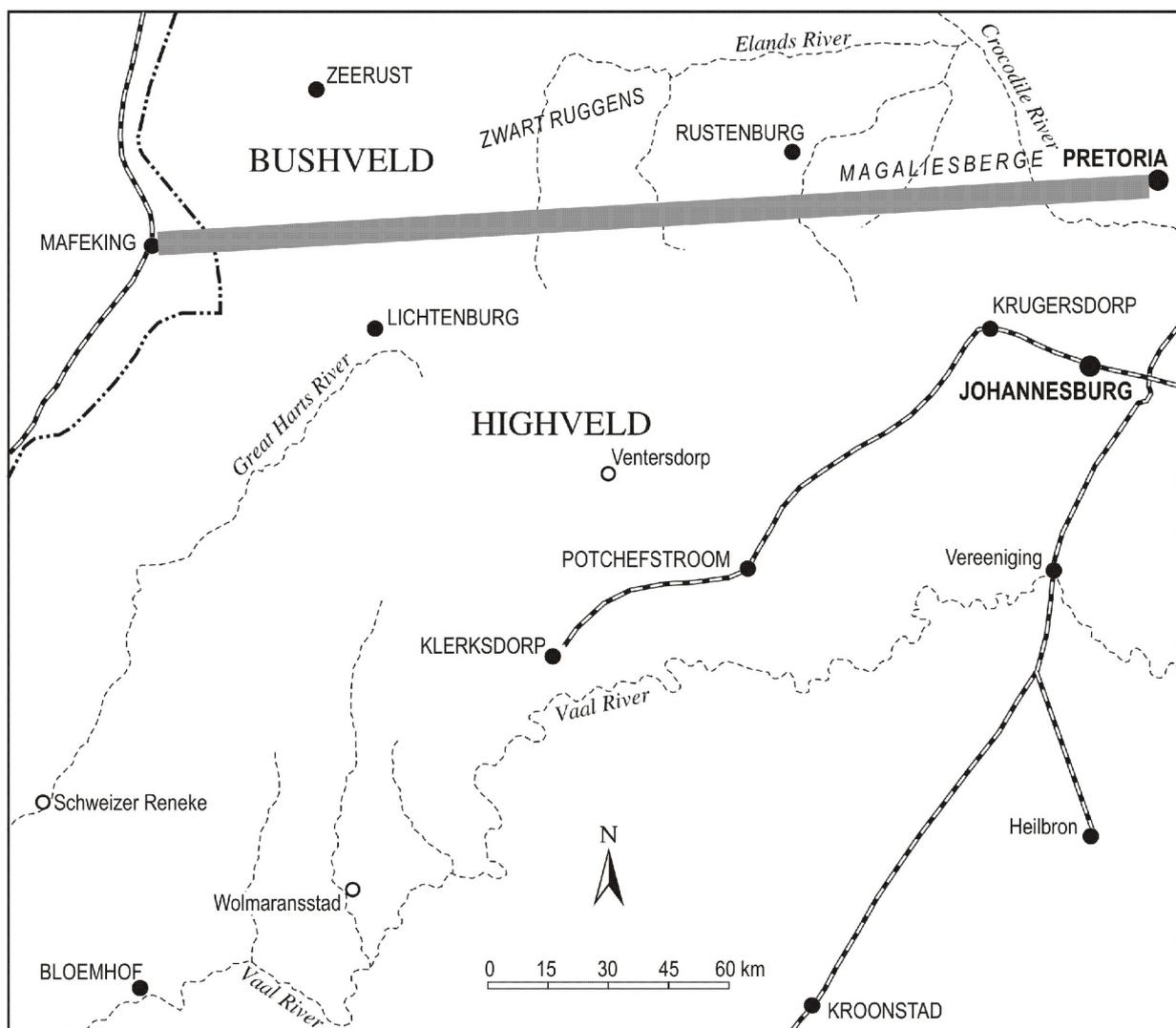
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A.G. Oberholster (ed.), *Oorlogsdagboek van Jan F.E. Celliers*, 3.4.1901 to 4.4.1901, pp. 228-229.

while during the winter the Bushveld offered better grazing and pests were less critical. Horse sickness was one of the major hazards, prompting Boers to move from one territory to the other according to the season.

Socio-economical issues

At the time of the Anglo-Boer War the western Transvaal was comparatively sparsely populated, as is shown by the few towns in the region in the 1890s. In the dry west Lichtenburg, Bloemhof and Schweizer Reneke were the only towns of any significance. Diamond digging had not yet commenced in the area and the towns were founded by and large by agrarian settlers who cared little about the Uitlander problems of the Witwatersrand. Further to the east, along the southern boundary of the region, lay Wolmaransstad, Klerksdorp, Potchefstroom and



Krugersdorp and to the north Rustenburg and Zeerust were situated on the perimeter of the

Bushveld.

Towards the end of the 19th century the land on the southern plain and eastern hilly territory was primarily used for stock farming, with limited grain production where the soil conditions allowed. Towards the northern mountainous parts, fertile soil and plenty of water in the valleys allowed limited irrigated cropping, consisting primarily of wheat, maize and fodder. One such area is the Moot, the fertile valley that Jan Smuts described as: "... the Shenandoah valley of the Transvaal, and De la Rey is its Stonewall Jackson."²⁶

To the north, into the Bushveld area, and to the west, into British Bechuanaland, the region was inhabited by African peoples. Many of these communities saw the Boers as unwelcome settlers who stole their land and their cattle and accordingly they were antagonistic towards the republicans. Although there were some black family groups who were friendly, they were of little consequence during the war. The presence of hostile Africans in the region and the role they played were important during the guerrilla phase in the western Transvaal.²⁷ This aspect will be discussed further in Chapter VI.

There were only two roads of any importance in the region. These were the road running from Kimberley to Johannesburg which passed through Bloemhof, Wolmaransstad, Klerksdorp and Potchefstroom and secondly, the road from Mafeking to Pretoria which went via Rustenburg and Zeerust.

By 1899 there was only one railway in the region, namely the line from Johannesburg to Klerksdorp. The railway from Cape Town to Rhodesia ran along the western perimeter of the Transvaal within the boundary of British territory. It is thus clear that guerrilla attacks on railroads and the disruption of British supplies and troop movements played a much less prominent role in the western Transvaal.

Military aspects

The Boer commander of the area from the beginning of the guerrilla phase in July 1900, right until the very end of the war, was Assistant Commandant-General J.H. (Koos) de la Rey. Although he only commanded six rural commandos, strengthened by the modest Krugersdorp

²⁶ G. Nattrass and S.B. Spies (eds.), *Jan Smuts*, p. 111.

²⁷ P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899 - 1902*, pp. 45-46.

Commando, the number of burghers in the region who were between 18 and 34 years at the beginning of the war in October 1899 was reported as 6 000. This figure represented nearly 38% of the total ZAR force, compared to the 35% from the southeastern Transvaal.²⁸ However more than half of these burghers came from only two commandos; the Potchefstroom Commando and the Rustenburg Commando. Together they provided 3 246 burghers, which demonstrates the low population density in the western reaches of the region. It can perhaps be reasoned that many burghers who reported for duty at the initial stages of the war were older than 34 years because, despite the fact that the reaction to the first call to arms was generally poor, the number of burghers involved in the initial stage of the siege of Mafeking came roughly to 6 000.

Again the tally at the beginning of the guerrilla warfare phase is impossible to determine with any accuracy, but it is known to have been very low. A brief look at the events and the subsequent developments will demonstrate this. Firstly, after the surrender at Paardeberg on 27 February 1900 it was reported that 2 613 of the burghers who were captured were from the Transvaal.²⁹ As most of these burghers would have been members of the ZAR force that was ordered to move south from Mafeking with General Piet Cronjé in November 1899, it seems clear that the majority of these burghers came from the western Transvaal. It then follows that a significant number of the western Transvaal's able-bodied burghers were removed from the war scene by the end of February 1900. Despite this many burghers (including a number from the Bloemhof Commando under Commandant Tollie de Beer³⁰) who escaped the Paardeberg capitulation, returned to the western Transvaal. Secondly, during the British advance to Pretoria and particularly after the relief of Mafeking, many western Transvaal burghers accepted the British claims that the war was over. These men simply laid down their arms and took the oath of neutrality. Although Grundlingh attests to the fact that an accurate assessment of the number of burghers who laid down their arms at this stage of the war is impossible, he nevertheless gives some indication of how prevalent this was. He claims, by way of an example, that when Colonel R.S.S. Baden-Powell occupied Rustenburg on 14 July 1900, 1 000 rifles were immediately forfeited by Boers.³¹ Finally Smuts's statement that it was the explicit purpose of General De la Rey on his return to the western districts early in the second half of 1900, to once more encourage

²⁸ P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 29.

²⁹ J.H. Breytenbach, *Geskiedenis*, IV, p. 423.

³⁰ Written information supplied by Mrs C.M. Combrinck, daughter of Commandant Tollie de Beer, 1959.

³¹ A.M. Grundlingh, *Die "hendsoppers" en "joiners": Die rasional en verskynsel van verraad*, p. 37.

and motivate the region's burghers to return to combat and so to rebuild the republican force, must be borne in mind.³²

It could further be reasoned that if a large proportion of the western Transvaal burghers who were captured at Paardeberg were essentially those in the younger age bracket – in other words those who were called up at the beginning of the war – it seems logical that the burghers who took up arms in the guerrilla warfare stage were either the older men or the young boys or penkoppe,³³ and this situation should be kept in mind in the discussion of the guerrilla phase.

At this stage of the war De la Rey had a total of 10 generals or combat-generals in his command structure in the western Transvaal. General S.F. Oosthuizen of the Krugersdorp Commando died as a result of his wounds in August 1900 and General H.R. Lemmer of the Lichtenburg Commando fell in December 1900. General J.C. Smuts left the western Transvaal late in 1901 to operate in the Cape Colony, and General L.A.S. Lemmer was only promoted from Assistant General to the rank of general during the final months as peace was being negotiated.³⁴

Column 3 of Table V-1 shows clearly how the guerrilla activities in the western Transvaal developed, demonstrating the fact that the Boers of the western Transvaal remained relatively aggressive. This is especially true of the first few months. As time passed the British under General Lord Paul Methuen gradually placed more pressure on the Boers with various military drives. The effect of the scorched earth policy can also be recognized in the table. It is nevertheless clear that the Boers of the region made good use of the broken, bushy terrain in harassing the enemy, and a number of important battles were fought in the final months of the war. Comparable to the situation in the southeastern Transvaal, the Boers derived little benefit from the major towns of the region which were mostly occupied by the British. However the table makes it clear that there were more “significant” offensive actions in the western Transvaal than in most of the rest of the Transvaal. The quality of leadership, the overall commitment of the burghers and the intelligent use of the diversity of the terrain were certainly important reasons for this trend.

³² G. Nattrass and S.B. Spies (eds.), *Jan Smuts*, p. 76.

³³ F. Pretorius, *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899 - 1902*, pp. 256-259.

³⁴ J. Malan, *Die Boere-offisiere*, pp. 17-58.

4. Northern Transvaal

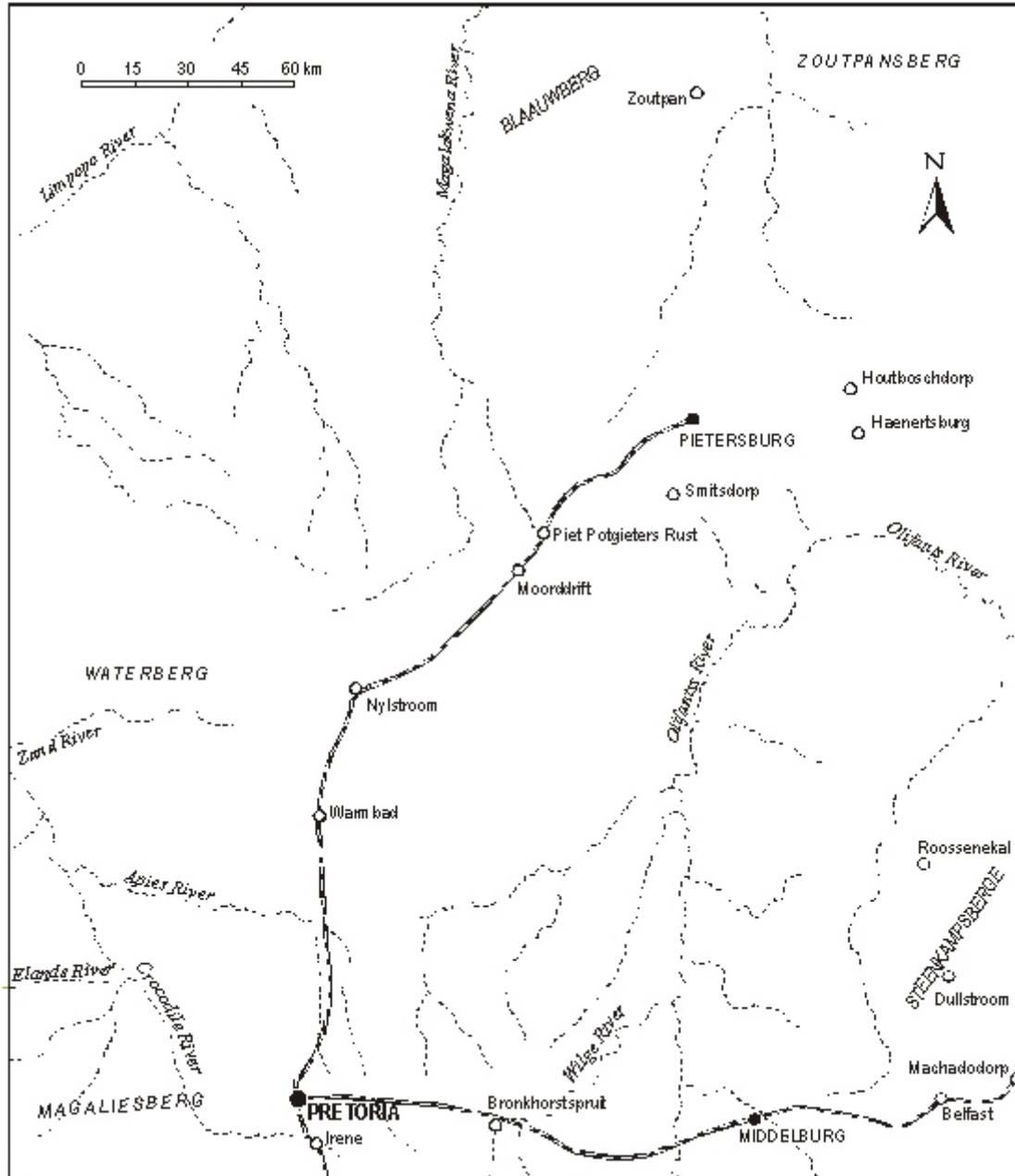
Environmental features

The fourth region, the northern Transvaal, made up the largest area of the Transvaal, yet it was of far less significance in the war than the other three areas. It comprised the vast area to the north of Pretoria, and included two major mountain ranges, which both stretch from east to west. In the southern area the Waterberg range begins to the north of Warmbad and continues westwards for roughly 100 km before diverging into a series of smaller mountains that extend to the Bechuanaland border. In the northern part the Soutpansberg range begins to the northeast of Zoutpan and continues westwards until it breaks up at the Blouberg. There are numerous smaller mountains and hills scattered through the northern Transvaal. There is also a vast plain bordering on Bechuanaland and another north of the Soutpansberg range.

The Tropic of Capricorn lies to the north of Pietersburg, which explains why the climate of most of the region is predominantly subtropical, with mild winters but with very hot and often exceedingly dry summers. The vegetation of the region is predominantly savanna Bushveld, with sweet grass supplemented by browsable shrubs and trees, for example the red bush willow (*Combretum appiculatum*) and the mopane (*Colophospermum mopane*) as well as a variety of thorn trees (*Acacia* spp.). The combination of sweet grass and browsable trees signify that,

Map V-4: The northeastern Transvaal during the Anglo Boer War. (Reproduced from TAB: G 3/257 Kaart van die Z.A. Republiek Oranje Vrijstaat Natal en gedeelte Kaap Kolonie – Landmeter Generaal Pretoria Januari 1 1900.)

from a nutritional point of view, this region is excellent cattle country but, on the other hand, the



subtropical climate causes many pests and diseases which jeopardise the livestock particularly during the summer months. At the time of the Anglo-Boer War the vaccines, tick-control dips and antibiotic medications which today make cattle farming possible in the region, did not exist.

The rainfall of the region is highly variable and unreliable and rain normally falls from the middle of November to the end of March. These are often in the form of thunderstorms in the late

afternoon following a scorching hot day. Most parts of the northern Transvaal receive from 400 to 500 mm of rain per annum, although along the western frontier the average rainfall is below 400 mm.³⁵ Hence few of the rivers in the region enjoy a constant flow of water and many are merely dry sand gullies, periodically washed open by summer flash floods. One important exception to the rule is the Crocodile River, which rises near Pretoria and Johannesburg, crosses the region northwestwards and eventually becomes the Limpopo River. Another notable feature is the elongated wetland which begins east of Nylstroom and stretches northwards to Naboomspruit, forming the origin of the Nyl River and eventually the Magalakwena River before it too joins the Limpopo.

Socio-economical issues

In 1849 a town called Schoemansdal was established to the south of the Soutpansberg where for a number of years hunters and traders made brief stopovers. This settlement never became a permanent feature as it was destroyed in a war with a black clan in 1867. The region remained sparsely populated and in 1899 the main towns were situated along the road and the railway to the north, namely Warmbad, Nylstroom, Naboomspruit, Piet Potgietersrust and Pietersburg. The railway was constructed from Pretoria northwards to Pietersburg because of the discovery of gold at Eersteling south of Pietersburg.

The numerous black people who had been living in the region by the time the white settlers arrived in the mid 1800s remained a stumbling block for the ZAR authority in the northern Transvaal. By the late 1890s, much of the land – primarily to the west and the north – was still occupied by indigenous people. Many of these clans, such as the Kgafela-Kgatla Tswana under chief Lentshwe in the southwestern parts and the Bahananoas of chief Malaboch near the Blouberg in the north, had been in conflict with the ZAR authorities for years before the Anglo-Boer War. It was in these wars, where most of the ZAR burghers' purported military experience was gained. Hence the widespread hostile feelings that the black people harboured towards the Boers is explicable.³⁶

Due to the subtropical climate and the subsequent problems with animal diseases, agrarian

³⁵ C.F. Albertyn (ed.), *Ensiklopedie van die wêreld*, Indeks/Atlas, p. 283; E. Rosenthal (ed.), *Ensiklopedie van Suidelike Afrika*, p. 545.

³⁶ P. Warwick, *Black people and the South African War 1899 - 1902*, pp. 38-41; C. Sonntag, *My friend Maleboch, chief of the Blue Mountains*, pp. 14-21.

activities in the northern Transvaal were poorly developed by 1899. The rinderpest of 1897, which killed over four million cattle in the Transvaal and Free State, was a huge blow to farming ventures in the northern Transvaal, virtually wiping out the backbone of its agricultural industry. Fortunately the savanna Bushveld provided an abundance of game and hunting – by local farmers as well as by hunters from elsewhere – soon became a major enterprise, with skins, biltong and ivory enjoying a ready market.

Military aspects

The commander of the ZAR's guerrilla activities in the region was the young Boksburg lawyer, Christiaan Beyers, who was promoted to Assistant Commandant-General for the districts of Waterberg and Zoutpansberg in September 1900.³⁷ The Soutpansberg Commando, Waterberg Commando and sections of the Pretoria, Rustenburg and Krugersdorp Commandos were assigned to him. Some members of the ZAR Police and ZAR State Artillery were also included in his force and this brought its strength to roughly 1 000 men. No other generals were appointed under his command for the duration of the war.

Initially Beyers was not a popular choice to lead the burghers of the northern Transvaal.³⁸ Firstly, he did not come from the Bushveld, he was a city lawyer, and besides he was considered to be too young. Secondly his roots were in Stellenbosch and he had no experience of the black-wars which the burghers regarded as being a requirement for any leader. He was stern, unyielding and devoutly religious in his approach towards the war and life in general.³⁹ When initially there was open opposition against his appointment he stood firm and soon had the cooperation of the majority of officers and burghers of the northern Transvaal.⁴⁰

Due to the harshness of the nature, its vastness, the low population and the unhealthy features of the region the northern Transvaal was probably not considered of great importance by the British. Column 4 of Table V–1 demonstrates that there were relatively few significant military encounters in the region. Nor was it occupied by the British to the same extent as the southeastern Transvaal or even the western Transvaal. Cloete reported only one attack on the

³⁷ J. Taitz (ed.), *The war memories of Commandant Ludwig Krause 1899 - 1900*, p. 105; J. Malan, *Die Boere-offisiere*, p. 18.

³⁸ J.F. Naudé, *Vechten en vluchten van Beyers en Kemp "bòkant" De Wet*, pp. 171-172; J. Taitz (ed.), *The war memories of Commandant Ludwig Krause 1899-1900*, pp.105-108.

³⁹ D. Reitz, *Commando*, p.129.

⁴⁰ J. Taitz (ed.), *The war memories of Commandant Ludwig Krause 1899 - 1900*, pp. 106-108.

railway, namely the capture of a troop train near Naboomspruit early in July 1901, when nine British soldiers were killed. Naudé recounted that on this occasion the burghers under Beyers found more clothing and food on the train than they could haul away.⁴¹ In the final months of the war the Boers were trounced by Colonel J.W. Colenbrander at Pietersburg and again at Fort Hendrina and at Malepspoort. In the battle of Malepspoort Beyers was wounded and the Boers suffered serious losses.⁴²

During the course of the guerrilla phase Beyers had serious problems of another kind. Naudé maintained that roughly half the burghers were without mounts, which made mobility in the boundless bushveld an enormous predicament. Moreover the unhealthy climate endangered the life of both man and beast. The threat of attack by the unfriendly black population and the treachery and spinelessness of many of the Boer officials were added difficulties. According to Naudé Beyers had to care for the welfare and safety of 300 families.⁴³ Although Beyers' function in the northern Transvaal was primarily of a military nature, he was also involved in the protection and welfare of the civilian population, an issue which often falls within the realm of the guerrilla leader.

5. The Orange Free State

The small republic of the Orange Free State, locked between the horns of the Orange River and the Vaal River is generally fairly homogeneous. Therefore, in order to avoid duplication, the environmental features and socio-economical issues of the northern and southern regions will not be discussed separately. On the other hand the military organisation and the course of events during the guerrilla phase make a division between the northern Free State and southern Free State logical.

Environmental features

The republic of the Orange Free State was a compact, oval-shaped country roughly 1 000 km from south to north and varying between 450 to 700 km from east to west. The eastern

⁴¹ J.F. Naudé, *Vechten en vluchten*, p. 259.

⁴² P.H.S. van Zyl, *Die helde-album*, p. 395

⁴³ J.F. Naudé, *Vechten en vluchten*, pp. 232-233.

off from 800 mm near the mountains in the eastern districts, to below 400 mm on the plains to the west. Naturally the vegetation matches the available rain, with grasslands in the east, where vast fields of Redgrass (*Themeda triandra*), which supplies good grazing veld, cover the flat landscape. As the rainfall becomes lower to the southwest this veld type is gradually replaced by False Karoo veld with Bitter Karoo (*Pentzia globosa*) and Bitter Bush (*Chrysocoma tenuifolia*) being the major vegetation.⁴⁵

The altitude is predominantly 1 200 m to 1 500 m above sea level, which means that temperatures are often extreme with severe short term fluctuations.⁴⁶ In summer the daytime temperatures soar and although the winter days are normally sunny and pleasant, the nights can be bitterly cold, with frequent frost. The late winter and spring are characterised by westerly winds, often blowing for days on end causing blinding dust storms in the dry, western areas.

There are relatively few rivers in the Free State and all of these originate in the wetter, higher lying east and flow either into the Vaal or the Orange Rivers. The Modder River, the Zand River and the Valsch River were important during the Anglo-Boer War. The seasonality of the flow of these rivers and the rush of water following heavy rains have caused steep eroded banks. Along the course of these rivers, and many of the secondary streams the terrain is normally bushy. These two factors – the steep banks and the abundant bushes – made the riverine areas good places for the burghers to hide their animals and other possessions.⁴⁷

Socio-economical issues

Although the Free State had been declared an independent republic as far back as 1854, it was neither densely populated nor very industrialised by the last decade of the 19th century. It was primarily an agrarian society, with towns scattered across the country to accommodate trade and the religious requirements of the farming communities. Bloemfontein, developed around the site selected by the British Resident, Captain H.D. Warden as his headquarters in 1846,⁴⁸ had been the official capital since the proclamation of independence. During the war the seat of the republican government moved first to Kroonstad and then to Bethlehem. Bloemfontein, however, remained

⁴⁵ J.W.C. Mostert *et al.*, *Veldbestuur in die O.V.S.-Streek*, p. 6.

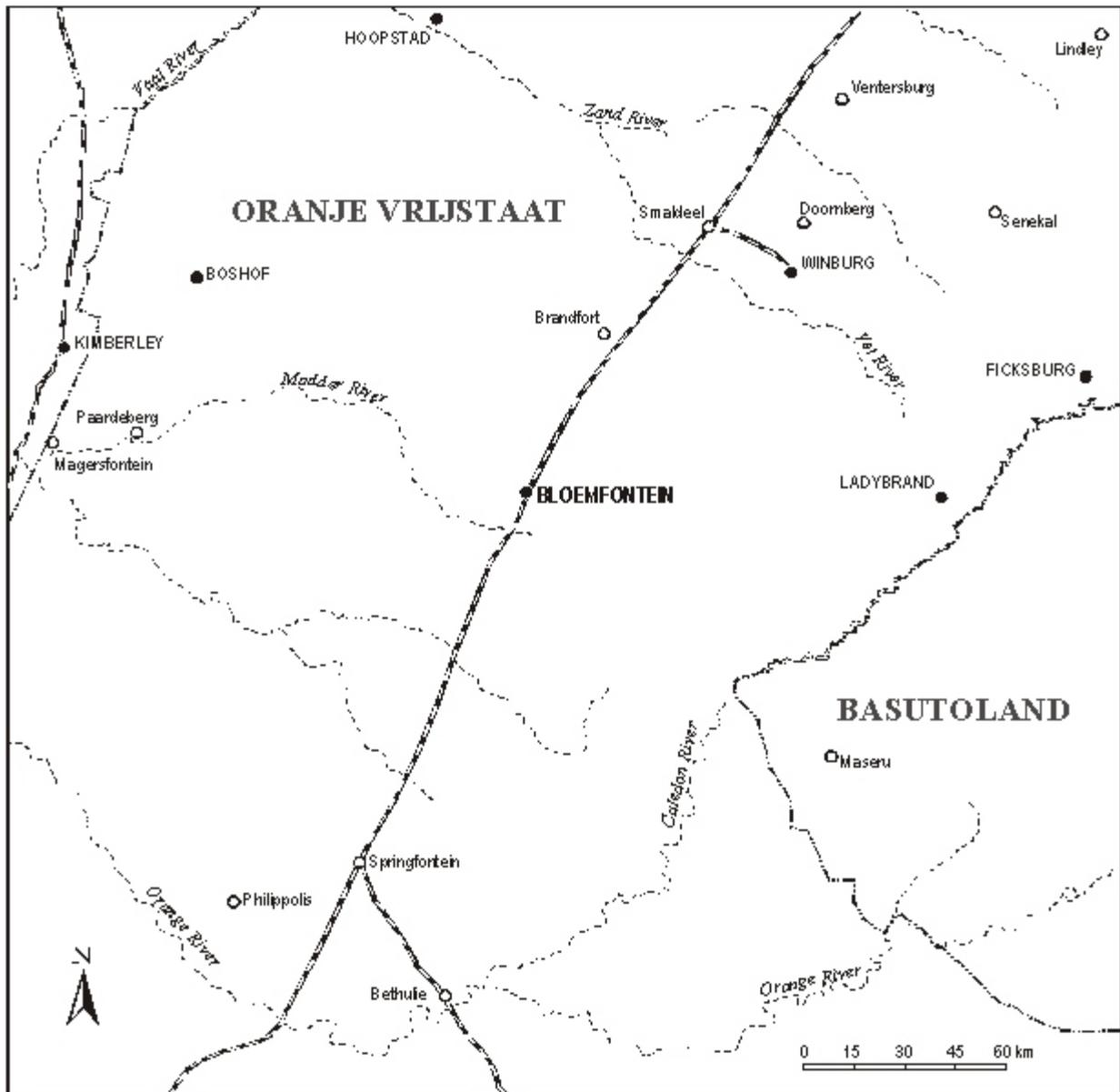
⁴⁶ C.F. Albertyn (ed), *Ensiklopedie van die wêreld*, Indeks/Atlas, pp. 279, 283, 284.

⁴⁷ G.J. Joubert, “‘n ‘Waenhuis’ in die oorlogsjare” in J.C. Steyn (ed.), *Veg en vlug – manne en vroue vertel hulle ware verhale uit die Anglo-Boereoorlog*, p. 54.

⁴⁸ S.M. Botes, “Die stoommeule en bierbrouery op die terrein van Fort Drury, Bloemfontein, 1868-1920”, *South African Journal of Cultural History*, 15(2), November 2001, p. 2.

the capital of the Orange River Colony after the British occupation. The main towns were Bloemfontein, Winburg, Kroonstad, Bethlehem, Harrismith, Heilbron and Vrede.

Map V-6: The southern Free State during the Anglo Boer War. (Reproduced from TAB: G 3/257 Kaart van die Z.A.



Republiek Oranje Vrijstaat Natal en gedeelte Kaap Kolonie – Landmeter Generaal Pretoria Januari 1 1900.)

The rich diamond fields to the west, in the confluence of the Vaal and Orange River were

cut off from the Free State by the 1875 arbitration and thereafter formed part of the Cape Colony. Accordingly the Free State did not have the same problem with fortune seeking immigrants (uitlanders) as their northern neighbour. Small scale diamond mining activities took place near Koffiefontein in the southwest.

The main railway line ran from Springfontein in the extreme southern Free State through Bloemfontein and Kroonstad to Johannesburg. Springfontein was the junction where the lines coming from Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London converged.⁴⁹ A short spur connected Smaldeel (presently Theunissen) on the main line with the town of Winburg, in the centre of the Free State. In the north Wolwehoek – also on the mainline – was connected with Heilbron.

Military aspects

Under the leadership of Chief-Commandant C.R. de Wet the Free State forces were the first to implement guerrilla warfare strategy using small, fast moving units to torment the British and disrupt their organisation and communications wherever possible.⁵⁰ Initially the restless De Wet used the entire Free State countryside as his theatre of war, in accordance with the principles of guerrilla warfare. However, in order to reach a sound understanding of the military situation, the southern and northern regions will be discussed separately.

Northern Free State

Although many of Chief-Commandant Christiaan de Wet's outstanding feats took place outside this particular part of the Free State – notably at Sannaspost and Sprinkhaansnek in the southern Free State and his escape over the Magaliesberg in the western Transvaal – it was largely in the vicinity of Kroonstad, Heilbron and Bethlehem that De Wet and the Free State burghers under his command struck, fought and fled. The Free State Boers' commitment to continue the war after their capital had been occupied initially caught their opponents off-guard, leaving the gate wide open for several of the spectacular Boer successes which are so often quoted.

An analysis of the military actions according to column 5 of Table V-1, indicates that after a number of attacks, primarily rail disruptions, in late 1900, only sporadic aggressive operations

⁴⁹ L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ C.R. de Wet, *Three years war*, p. 135.

were undertaken by the Boers in the northern Free State.⁵¹ Other than the battle at Graspan in June 1901, this remained the case until the last few months of the war. The reason for this slackening of pace can probably be explained by De Wet and his burgher's repeated absences from the area. They were either escorting President Steyn to the Transvaal or attempting to invade the Cape Colony. Then too, the pressures of winter on man and animal should not be forgotten.

The British blockhouse lines also became a serious deterrent to guerrilla actions in the region. From a British point of view events in the northern Free State – or perhaps more correctly the freedom of De Wet and his commandos in this region – were of great importance in their quest to end the protracted war. The blockhouse system became an important tool to reach this goal. Eventually there was a blockhouse line along the railway from Kroonstad northwards and another to the east, stretching from Kroonstad, over Bethlehem to Harrismith. Another stretched along the Valsch River northwestwards to the Vaal River while yet another extended from the railway at Vredefort Road to Vrede in the eastern Free State.⁵²

The various British drives to capture De Wet must also be noted here. De Wet had been operating in the northern Free State since his return from the Waterval discussions in June 1901. He was rebuilding the Free State force and biding his time during the severe winter. By early November he had a commando of seven hundred burghers gathered near Bethlehem. Two successes in quick succession – which will be discussed in Chapter VIII, probably triggered the British drives that followed. Despite the wide international publicity and the growing outcries from Britain following the three previous De Wet-hunts,⁵³ the British had not yet been able to net the elusive De Wet. Pakenham asserts that De Wet's success had depressed Kitchener⁵⁴ and, with the blockhouse system well advanced in the area, he then decided to corner his quicksilver adversary by means of a massive “steam-roller” drive. This was the so-called New-model drive (NMD) that will be dealt with in more detail at a later stage. Twice De Wet and many of his burghers managed to slip through the cordon. But the cost to the Boers, particularly at that late stage of the war, was unduly high.

Southern Free State

⁵¹ Bill Nasson, *The South African War 1899 - 1902*, p. 195.

⁵² L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 179.

⁵³ P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, pp. 170-174, 199-205, 218-229.

⁵⁴ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, pp. 544-545.

Column 6 of Table V–1 shows clearly how the tide in the southern Free State turned in favour of the British as the guerrilla war progressed. During the latter months of 1900 the encounters that were instigated by the Boers were often directed at southwestern Free State towns with British garrisons.⁵⁵ The Boer forces acted under the leadership of General J.B.M. Hertzog, but the outcome was never impressive enough to do more than harry the occupying force, occasionally leading to retributions against the local communities.⁵⁶ Having said that, it was precisely at this time that Roberts ordered the destruction of Boer food supplies and sanctioned the concept of refugee camps that later came to be called concentration camps. This indicates that the situation indeed distressed the British and that a tougher line had to be taken to end the war.⁵⁷

De Wet's occupation of Dewetsdorp in November 1900 did little more than make the enemy aware of his whereabouts and his intention to invade the Cape Colony. It was an act of personal vengeance. His own comment on the matter, namely that it was his reaction to the "thorn" in the his eye which plagued him after the fiasco at Doornfontein near Bothaville earlier in that month, confirms this view.⁵⁸ However, it should be noted in fairness that the guerrilla fundamentals of harassment and fragmenting of the enemy's attention had been well exploited. If the main Boer objective was to reach the Cape Colony then the siege of Dewetsdorp was a pointless waste of time.⁵⁹ De Wet probably realised his mistake and regretted this folly when he failed to cross the swollen Orange River into the Cape Colony.

The British troops were primarily, and conveniently, concentrated in Bloemfontein. This location gave them easy access into most parts of the southern Free State. Distances were not great and although much of the region is semi-desert, the terrain is ordinarily easy to negotiate. This made hunts and drives on Boer commandos relatively simple operations, which meant that one of the main objectives of the guerrilla, namely to retain the initiative, was frustrated. This can be recognized in column 6 of Table V–1

On 19 June 1901 Judge J.B.M. Hertzog, who had been operating as a Combat-General in the southern Free State and the Cape Colony for most of the war, was appointed general and chief

⁵⁵ P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, pp. 193-197.

⁵⁶ Bill Nasson, *The South African War 1899-1902*, p. 193; P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 194.

⁵⁷ P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 190.

⁵⁸ C.R. de Wet, *De strijd tussen Boer en Brit*, p. 235. (This phrase does not appear in the English translation *Three years war*.)

⁵⁹ L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 146.

commandant for the south-western districts by President M.T. Steyn.⁶⁰ Hertzog, who was a trained jurist with no previous military training, had been involved in military matters since the beginning of the war. It was he who had warned Steyn earlier about the danger of appointing “old-school” generals.⁶¹ He also accompanied the visiting German artilleryist Oskar Hintrager to Boer positions near Lindley during June and July 1900, at times discussing issues of discipline, martial law and the Boer’s self interest in protecting his personal property.⁶² He was afterwards involved in several guerrilla strikes in the southern Free State and later in the Cape Colony. It would seem that his appointment to the position of chief commandant for the south-western districts came too late to bring new life into the guerrilla activities in the region. Kitchener’s blockhouse system and the British drives in August and September 1901 were having an affect that could no longer be arrested. The guerrilla warfare in the south was clearly running out of steam.

6. The Cape Colony

Political setting

The Cape Colony had been under British rule since 1806, forming an important part of the growing Empire.⁶³ Nevertheless there were many people in the interior whose allegiance to Britain was dubious. The British influence was well established in the port cities of Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London and their immediate surroundings. This was also true in the eastern Cape interior, where the British settlers of 1820 had established themselves. Further into the interior in the great Karoo and Griqualand as well as parts of British Bechuanaland and along the dry west coast, where the population had divided loyalties, most were descendants of early Dutch and French immigrants. In many cases the republicans across the Orange River were their relatives, binding them to the Boers’ struggle in the sense that blood is thicker than water. Moreover, their attitude towards the British was one of distrust, a suspicion that had developed over years fired by events such as Slagtersnek and the great exodus which became the Great Trek. As time passed this animosity was repeatedly rekindled, for example the British annexation of Natal (1843) after the Voortrekkers had settled there. The same can be said of Shepstone’s annexation of the Transvaal

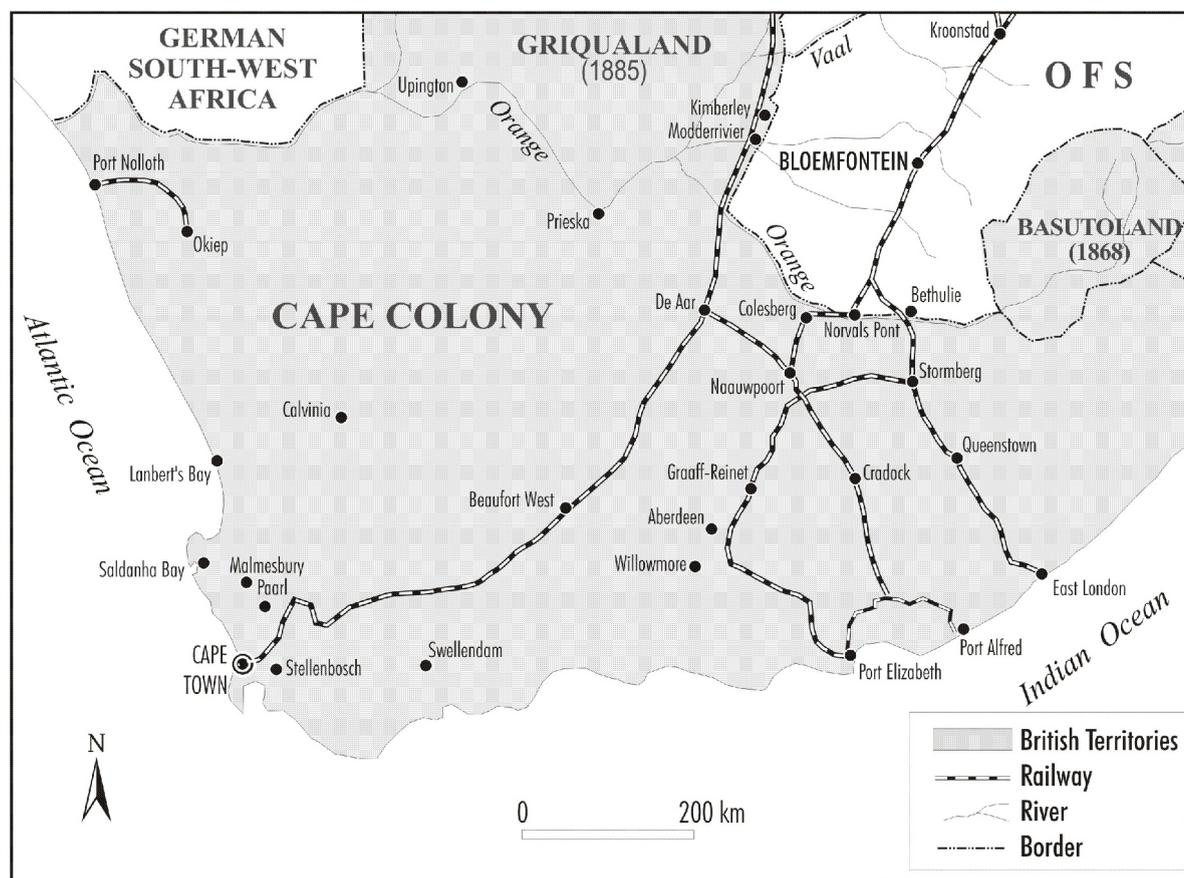
⁶⁰ P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 245.

⁶¹ F. Rompel, *Marthinus Theunis Steijn*, pp. 64- 65.

⁶² J.J. Oberholster, “Dagboek van Oskar Hintrager”, pp.38, 46-47.

⁶³ L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, pp. 11-12.

(1877) and of the Jameson Raid (1895). Despite this resentment there remained a particular sense of respect for the Crown, and for the stability they enjoyed as part of such a great empire.⁶⁴



Map V-7: The Cape Colony during the Anglo-Boer War.

C. Louis Leipoldt (1880-1947), novelist and poet, wrote about this dual loyalty in his English novel *Stormwreck*. Although it is a work of fiction that is set in a small town in the southwestern Cape, the story has a ring of credibility about it, all the more so because Leipoldt himself grew up in the region.⁶⁵ Dr. Radie Kotzé, a retired medical practitioner living at Redelinghuys in the western Cape, whose father was with General Manie Maritz, confirmed in an interview that his mother often told him of their great esteem for Queen Victoria, despite the fact that the family was intensely sympathetic towards the plight of the republics.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ C. Lucas, *A historical geography of the British Dominions*, Vol IV, Part II, p. 53.

⁶⁵ C.L. Leipoldt, *Stormwreck*, pp. 58-64.

⁶⁶ Personal information: Dr. R. Kotzé of the farm Jakkalskloof, Redelinghuys, Western Cape, 20 September 2002.

By 1899 the struggle to develop an Afrikaner or South African Dutch identity, and yet not break entirely from the British empire, reached its peak. The Afrikaner Bond, initiated in 1879, had under the guidance of J.H. (Onze Jan) Hofmeyr become a significant political force. After the Transvaal's victory at Majuba and once again after the ZAR's quelling of the Jameson Raid, the Cape Afrikaner's flame of loyalty towards his northern kinsmen burned brightly. The Afrikaner Bond came to power in the Cape Colony in 1898 with W.P. Schreiner as prime minister at the time when war between Britain and the republics was imminent. The Bond found its support primarily in the platteland or rural territory of the Colony and it was precisely the vast platteland that was the Achilles heel of the British rule.

The fact remains that no matter how strong their family ties were or how strong their anti-British sentiment or pro-republican fervour was, to take up arms in support of their republican kinsmen was an act of rebellion against the Crown. Taffy and David Shearing, authors of several books on the Anglo-Boer War in the Cape Colony, the historian Elria Wessels, as well as Dr. Kotzé all agree that it was principally the young, adventurous and unattached men of between 15 to 22 years of age who responded to the call of their republican neighbours.⁶⁷

Environmental issues

Young Hodge the Drummer never knew –
Fresh from his Wessex home –
The meaning of the broad Karoo,
The Bush, the dusty loam,
And why uprode to nightly view
Strange stars amid the gloam.⁶⁸

The interior of the Cape, comprising the Great Karoo, Griqualand, Namaqualand and British Bechuanaland (refer map V-7) have few features in common with the other regions where the war raged. It is primarily flatland with plains interspersed by low, often flat-topped mountains and koppies or hills. The altitude varies around 1 200 m and 1600 m, except for the eastern zone, which is more mountainous and forms the southern part of the Drakensberg range.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ T. and D. Shearing, *Commandant Gideon Scheepers and the search for his grave*, p. 37; Personal information: Miss E. Wessels, War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, 19 September 2002; Personal information: Dr. R. Kotzé, Jakkalskloof, Redelinghuys, Western Cape, 20 September 2002.

⁶⁸ Extract from Drummer Hodge by Thomas Hardy in G. van Lingen (compiler), *Battlefields of South Africa*, p. 90.

⁶⁹ C.F. Albertyn (ed.), *Ensiklopedie van die wêreld*, Indeks/Atlas, p.279.

Regional background to the guerrilla warfare

118

This enormous area is a harsh, arid country and becomes increasingly desiccated from east to west. It is intersected by streams or dry ravines, that can instantly turn into raging torrents after summer storms. The 400 mm per annum isohyet runs approximately along the 26° eastern longitude through South Africa, which implies that most of the Cape territories under discussion receive less than 400 mm of rain per annum. Moreover, the rainfall, as is normally the case in arid regions, is highly erratic and unevenly distributed, and droughts are common. The temperatures vary markedly, ranging from extremely hot summer days to freezing winter nights. Due to the altitude and the low moisture snow is rare, except over the eastern mountains. During the frequent droughts the lack of water in combination with the high temperatures makes life unbearable for man, beast and vegetation. Yet, if drought is merciless then the breaking of the drought, usually accompanied by heavy lightning and thunder storms and flash floods, can be even more damaging.⁷⁰ The vegetation is largely Karoobush (*Pentzia* spp.) and succulents such as vygie (*Mesembryanthemum* spp.) on the plains and hillsides and hardy trees such as sweet-thorn (*Acacia karoo*) and karee (*Rhus gueninzii*) in the stream beds. There is little or no natural grass vegetation.

Socio-economical issues

Most of the present towns in the region were there at the turn of the 19th century and new settlements are sporadic and often associated with irrigation schemes. However, judging by the size of the churches that were built in the towns during the late 1800s the white population was higher than it is a century later. One such example is the church in Vosburg which was built in 1895 to accommodate 1 200 people. The membership of this congregation in 1984 was 222 and in January 2003 it was 130.⁷¹ The higher population in the region in the late 1800s was probably due to larger families – 10 to 12 children per family was not unusual – and bywoners or tenant farmers and their families who lived on many of the farms. The farms were extensive, generally between 5 000 and 6 000 hectares and therefore the people usually lived in comparative isolation.⁷² The economy of this immense, dry land revolved around animal husbandry, primarily sheep farming. Farmsteads were usually established in or near a kloof or sheltered glen where there was sufficient underground water to be pumped by windmills for animals and used for some limited irrigation. Towns often evolved around churches, thus becoming the centre of religion, education and modest commerce for the

⁷⁰ L.G. Green, *Karoo*, p.17.

⁷¹ Personal information supplied by Rev. J. Oosthuizen on 29 January 2003.

⁷² L.G. Green, *Karoo*, p. 12.

farming communities of the surrounding country.

By 1899 several railways crossed the area (refer Map V-7). There was a line from Cape Town over De Aar to Kimberley and another from Port Elizabeth over Graaff-Reinet, or alternatively over Cradock, to Colesberg. There was also a line from East London to Burgersdorp. Furthermore there were a number of inter-connecting lines. The railway system of the Cape Colony's interior was to be vital for the transport of British troops and equipment from the coast to the war zones.

Military aspects

The guerrilla warfare in the Cape was by and large fragmented and uncoordinated. During the early stages of the war the Boer leadership anticipated that the rural population of the interior districts of the Cape would actively support their effort. At the planning conference held at Cyferfontein in October 1900, it was decided to take the war into the enemy's territory, especially into the Cape Colony.⁷³ That the Boer leadership had high expectations of this strategy, has been substantiated by Scholtz, who claimed that the republicans firmly believed that an invasion would lead to a general insurgence of the Cape Afrikaners, which in turn could lead to a collapse of Britain's forces in South Africa.⁷⁴ The Boers probably also argued that greater military presence in the colony would lead to the disruption of the enemy's transport and communications, thereby alleviating the pressure on the republican forces within the borders of the Transvaal and the Free State and forcing the enemy to spread their forces over the vast Cape Colony.

De Wet was not present at Cyferfontein, but he decided – on the strength of a letter from General Hertzog – that he should personally invade the Cape as soon as possible. Scholtz is critical of De Wet's actions in his discussion of the eventual causes for the failure of the invasion of the Cape.⁷⁵ However, Hertzog with 1 200 men and Commandant P.H. Kritzinger with Captain G.J. Scheepers and a further 300 men, succeeded in penetrating into the colony around 16 December 1900 and for a time they operated in the Karoo areas (Nasson claimed that 2 000 men had crossed on 17 December).⁷⁶ As already mentioned, De Wet's first attempt at invading failed due to the raging Orange River. His second attempt to cross the river succeeded but the operation faltered due

⁷³ G. Nattrass and S.B.Spies (eds.), *Jan Smuts*, pp. 128-129.

⁷⁴ L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 140.

⁷⁵ L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, pp. 144-146.

⁷⁶ A. Wessels, *Die militêre verloop van die stryd*, pp. 36-37; L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 138; Bill Nasson, *The South African War*, p. 196.

Regional background to the guerrilla warfare

120

to the adverse weather conditions and the unremitting pressure applied by the British. Eventually De Wet was compelled to return to the Free State.⁷⁷ Commandants W.C. Malan and S.G. Maritz and a small number of their burghers remained behind and they eventually managed to collect enough rebels to force the British to heed them. Hertzog returned with De Wet on 28 February 1901 to take up his responsibilities in the Free State. Kritzinger continued his harassment of the British through the central parts and into the southern Cape, until April 1901. He later returned for a second and even a third foray into the vast Karoo. Eventually, by September 1901 – nearly a year after the Cyferfontein meeting – General Jan Smuts, at the head of a commando of only 200 men, entered the Cape. They started a long and difficult trek that took them through the eastern and southern Cape, in their quest to recruit the long envisaged support from among the local Afrikaners. In addition to these various invasions into the Cape, there were various groups who roamed the land and harassed the enemy whenever possible. Among their leaders were Commandant B.D. Bouwer, Commandant H.W. Lategan, Commandant J.L. van Deventer, Commandant J.C. Lötter and Commandant H. Hugo.⁷⁸ Many of these officers were promoted to the rank of Combat-General by Smuts when he attempted to systemize the Cape operations at the farm Soetwater near Nieuwoudville on 27 December 1901.⁷⁹ This issue will be further discussed in Chapter VIII.

Even though the presence of these groups was never large enough to precipitate a general uprising of Cape Afrikaners, a number of important goals were achieved, viewed from the Boer's perspective. This becomes evident in column 7 of Table V-1. Firstly, the large number of actions recorded indicate that the Boer forces in the Cape, even though they were highly fragmented, were by no means idle, which can indeed not be said of some of their northern compatriots. Secondly, when interpreting the right hand side of column 7, that records the occasions on which the British were the instigators, it is important to recognize that had the Boers – whether they were republicans or rebels – not been militarily active in the territory, the effort by the British would have been unnecessary. The attention and the resources of the British force were thus successfully distracted from the main theatre of war – the two Boer republics. The British were forced to spread their force more thinly over a vast country, deploying more and more troops, which cost more and more money. This reaction is fully in line with the guerrilla doctrine.

The fact that the British authorities in general, and Sir Alfred Milner in particular, had all along

⁷⁷ L. Scholtz, *Waarom die Boere die oorlog verloor het*, p. 149.

⁷⁸ A. Wessels, *Die militêre verloop van die stryd*, p. 39.

⁷⁹ P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 287.

been wary of the danger of an Afrikaans uprising, becomes clear from Pakenham's frequent reference to Milner's apprehension,⁸⁰ culminating in his discussion of Milner's reaction to Hertzog's and Kritzinger's invasion in December 1900. According to Pakenham Milner wrote in his diary on 31 December: "I managed by gigantic effort to galvanise people to activity today ... finally resulted in a 'call to arms' of all loyal inhabitants issued by the military today. I am also pressing for Martial Law."⁸¹ On 17 January 1901 Martial Law was indeed proclaimed in virtually the entire Cape, with the exclusion of the ports.⁸²

Pakenham's sidelong comment, that the action by the Cape authorities caused Kritzinger's invasion to fizzle out, is unfair. The mere fact that the presence of Hertzog and Kritzinger's commandos forced the Cape authorities to take these drastic and costly steps at such an early stage of the new Boer threat, confirms that a vital principle in guerrilla warfare had already been achieved. One must furthermore bear in mind that the British forces in the occupied Free State were at that very time doing their utmost – without success – to keep De Wet from crossing into the Cape. By and large the eventual combined outcome of the various guerrilla actions in the Cape Colony had been more successful than is commonly acknowledged.

⁸⁰ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, pp. 281, 315, 317.

⁸¹ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War*, p. 486.

⁸² P.G. Cloete, *Chronology*, p. 216.