

Natal Afrikaner women and the South African War (1899-1902)

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Abstract

In this article, the variety of experiences of Natal Afrikaner women as British subjects who were related by blood and culture to the Boers of the Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, with which the British Empire was at war with, are analysed. This is done in a blended, thematic, and chronological manner. Drawing on primary and secondary sources, the encounters of Natal Afrikaner women with the Boer commandos, the British Army, the Natal colonial authorities as well as other wartime encounters are scrutinised. For the period of the South African War from 1899-1902, as per social history, this paper attempts to give an authentic voice to Natal Afrikaner women in what is a gendered history. In so doing, the article contributes to the neglected historiography of the unique war experiences of Afrikaner women. More specifically, the difficult relationships of Natal Afrikaner women with both the invading Boer commandos and the British Army as well as the Natal colonial authorities are laid bare. At the same time, economic and other hardships, removals, imprisonment in concentration camps, and general physiological and physical hardships are investigated. The end result was an alienation of Natal Afrikaner women from the Natal authorities and a drift towards an emerging post-war Afrikaner Nationalism.

Keywords: Natal Afrikaners; South African War; Women; Gender; Natal.

Introduction

The role and plight of republican Afrikaner women form an integral, and sometimes even central part of the historiography of the South African War. The emphasis in the large number of academic and popular works and published memoirs invariably falls on the suffering of Afrikaner women and children in the concentration camps. This is in itself, a diverse and contentious historiography.² Despite this volume of

1 Orcid number: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9173-0372>.

2 For general works from various historiographical perspectives on the concentration camp system, see, among others, the following: E van Heyningen, *The concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A social history* (Johannesburg, Jacana, 2015); N Devitt, *The concentration camps in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War of 1889–1902* (Pietermaritzburg, Shuter & Shooter, 1941); AC Martin, *The concentration camps 1900–1902: Facts, figures and fables* (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1957); JC Otto, *Die konsentrasiekampe* (Kapaapstad, Nasionale Boekhandel, 1954); SB Spies, *Methods of barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and civilians in the Boer Republics, January 1900–May 1902* (Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1977).

work, Helen Bradford maintains that one of the seminal questions faced by the historiography of the South African War is the neglect of the unique war experiences of women.³

One group whose war experiences were previously neglected was Natal Afrikaner women, that is, women who were citizens of the Colony of Natal but who were, by dint of culture and blood, related to the Afrikaners of the Cape Colony and the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State. In contrast to Cape Afrikaners who constituted a large majority when compared to English-speakers, Natal Afrikaners were a minority group and totalled about 5 000. Many of these families resided on farms north of the Tugela River and had close ties with the Afrikaner populace of the two Boer Republics bordering Natal and with whom the British Empire was at war.

Natal Afrikaner women formed a stratified and diverse group. Some, like MJ Zietsman of the farm Snelster, near Estcourt, whose daughter, the widow Wallace, had been to England and who kept thoroughbred Pointer dogs, were wealthy and sophisticated.⁴ Another, like ME Kock, read Tennyson and Shakespeare,⁵ while Emily Pieters owned 20 bound music books for playing the piano and harmonium.⁶ At the other end of the socio-economic spectrum were women like Annie Katrina Slabbert of Dundee who sewed and took in laundry to survive.⁷ These socio-economic differences were underpinned by the patriarchal system under which Natal Afrikaner women functioned. Married women had the least amount of power and received little support or recognition from the Natal colonial authorities. By contrast, widows and unmarried women seemingly wielded much more economic and political power. However, regardless of their educational, social, economic, or marital status, most Natal Afrikaner women suffered in one way or another during the war.

In this paper, an understanding of the South African War is sought by paying attention to the experiences of Natal Afrikaner women and specifically how the conflict impacted on them. At the same time, as a gendered history, relations between men and women, women and women, and between Natal Afrikaner women and the political and military authorities of both warring parties, will come under the spotlight. This was deemed necessary because the wartime experiences of Natal Afrikaner women, when for example compared to those in the Cape Colony and those who were resident in the Boer Republics, differed markedly and cannot be conflated in a homogeneous and uniform manner. This article, as a narrative history,

3 H Bradford, "Gentleman and Boers: Afrikaner Nationalism, gender, and colonial warfare in the South African War, G Cuthbertson, A Grundlingh, and M-L Suttie (eds.), *Writing a wider war. Rethinking gender, race, and identity in the South African War, 1899-1902* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2002), pp. 37-67.

4 Pietermaritzburg Archival Repository (PAR), Colonial Secretary's Office (CSO) 2911: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by MP Wallace, 6 April 1900.

5 PAR, CSO 2888: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by ME Kock, 24 October 1902.

6 PAR, CSO 2899: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by E Pieters, 18 April 1901.

7 PAR, CSO 2905: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by AK Slabbert, 6 December 1900.

which draws extensively on archival and secondary evidence, aims to fill the gap in the current historiography on women and the South African War. This will be done by focussing on Natal Afrikaner women in a blended, thematic and chronological manner. At the same time, a concerted effort is made, as per the requirements of a sound social history, to give an authentic historical voice to these Afrikaner women and their diverse wartime experiences.

Early months of the war and Natal Afrikaner women

One of the lasting controversies surrounding the South African War relates to the military role played by Boer or Afrikaner women in the conflict. Historian Fransjohan Pretorius de-mythologises claims by American journalist Howard C Hillegas and other authors who posit that “scores of Boer women” fought in the commandos.⁸ A photograph of 15 women and seven children dressed up in their Sunday best, posing with rifles and bandoliers in front of the Newcastle Town Hall, links Natal Afrikaner women to this myth. The photograph appeared in *A few months with the Boers* by Sophia Izedinova with a caption claiming that these women from Newcastle took up arms.⁹ The original photograph, titled “Dutch Amazons at Newcastle Natal” was taken by RE Gell on 16 December 1899,¹⁰ possibly during commemoration of what was then known as Dingaan’s Day, now the Day of Reconciliation. This, along with it being a Sunday, would explain the elaborate dress and posed nature of the photograph.¹¹ In fact, it must have been a festive weekend in Newcastle since President Paul Kruger, the president of the Transvaal, had declared Sunday 17 December 1899 a day of thanksgiving for the victories of the Boer commandos over the British Army at the battles of Stormberg, Colenso and Magersfontein.¹²

If direct military involvement of a number of women is untrue, how then did Natal Afrikaner women really feel about the outbreak of war in October 1899 and the subsequent invasion of Natal by the Boer Commandos? A glimpse into this can be gleaned from an incident during the visit of General Piet Joubert, the commandant-general of the Transvaal forces, to Helpmekaar in Northern Natal on 13 December 1899. This took place three days before the above-mentioned photograph was

8 F Pretorius, *Kommandolewe tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899–1902* (Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1991), pp. 347-350; and P Marais, *Die vrou in die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902* (Pretoria, JP van der Walt, 1999), pp. 162-167. This book provides a general summary of the work done by Pretorius.

9 S Izedinova, *A few months with the Boers* (Johannesburg, Perskor, 1977), p. 186.

10 PAR, C 1482: Photograph of Afrikaner women taken in front of the Newcastle Town Hall, by RE Gell, 16 December 1899. The photo is of a poor quality and could therefore not be reproduced in print.

11 PAR, Attorney General’s Office (AGO) I/7/5: Regina vs GH Shorter, pp.121-124; *Natal Witness*, 2 November 1900.

12 OE Prozesky (Private Collection), Diary of JJA Prozesky: Diary entry, 17 December 1899, p. 107.

taken. On this occasion, 22 Natal Afrikaner women gave a voice to their feelings by presenting the following address:¹³

Highly respected General, on this occasion of your visit to the laager of the Natal Burghers here, we, the undersigned, female members of the families of these burghers, heartily welcome your Honour to Helpmakaar. We glory [sic] in your material genius again proved in this war and heartily congratulate you on the brilliant victories gained by our people under your direction and with the arms blessed by the Almighty. We pray God's blessing to continue with us and that He may continue to grant you the wisdom and strength to bring under His higher assistance this difficult war to a prosperous conclusion, and that you may be in a position to speedily return to your home as victor, covered with the thanks of the whole Africander people, and we hope that then also will be fulfilled the desire of all true Africanders, namely union of the different states of South Africa into a united South Africa under the Boer flag, so that the ground shamefully robbed from our ancestors shall once more belong to the Africanders. This your obedient servants hope, pray and beseech.

The address, later carelessly left behind by the retreating Boer forces, was discovered by the British military in Pretoria. The Natal authorities made much of the document, especially the part they had underlined. The gist of the address was clear, the republican war effort was strongly supported. Of the 22 women who signed the document, the Vermaaks, Hambridges and Kemps were related, while Mrs Webb's husband was a sharecropper working for the Vermaaks. In all likelihood, the five De Villiers women were also related to each other, meaning that the petition came from a few extended families who constructed themselves as "true Africanders" and not from Natal Afrikaner women at large. Nevertheless, the photograph and petition provide evidence of very strong pro-Boer sentiments among some women during the early phase of the South African War in Natal. However, such support by Natal Afrikaner women was by no means universal in nature and it is fair to say that they, like their menfolk, were divided by the war effort and about direct physical involvement in the war.

Substantial evidence exists of Natal Afrikaner women not wanting the men related to them becoming involved in the war. For example, the invading Boers commandeered the youngest son of Mrs ME de Waal of Carolina, Dundee, in November 1899, against his will and hers. Three weeks later she wrote to him asking him to come home. Only "after considerable trouble" did he manage to get an order from General Louis Botha which gave him permission to return to his mother. Young De Waal handed back his rifle and, despite being commandeered on six subsequent occasions,

¹³ Public Record Office, Kew, London (PRO), Colonial Office (CO) 179/213: Address of welcome to Commandant-General PJ Joubert as well as related correspondence, 23 September 1900 to 25 September 1900. See also PAR, CSO 2874: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by ME de Waal, 27 February 1902. Underlining original.

refused to comply.¹⁴ Similarly, the sister of the Strydom brothers of Dundee, Johanna de Jager, who was married to Fritz de Jager, all of whom remained loyal to Britain, stated that she had tried to convince her husband not to join the Boers but he did not listen to her or her brothers.¹⁵ Furthermore, a young Afrikaner from Weenen, only identified by his Zulu name, Bensela, wanted to join the Boers but his mother forbade him to do so.¹⁶ We also learn that JJ Kemp's wife became hysterical when she was told that the Boers had commandeered her husband.¹⁷

MMCW Kemp of Kempenveldt, near Dundee, in referring to her sons, possibly sums up the views of the Natal Afrikaner women who were either suspicious of or decidedly against all involvement in the war on the side of the republics:¹⁸

I spoke to them [her sons] when there was rumour of war and after war broke out about not joining the Boers. This was about Nov 1899 and January 1900 and on other occasions whenever I had the opportunity. My sons joined the enemy between December 1899 and February 1900. In the month of January 1900, I visited my son Johannes at his house and pleaded with him not to join the Boers and he promised he would not do so but the pressure was too great and he eventually joined the Boers during the month of January 1900. Several times before the commandeering before they had gone to the laager I did my utmost to keep my sons back also after they had gone to the laager.

In light of the above and in the historical context of the war, Natal Afrikaner women were divided on who to side with and were, in all probability, filled with a certain ambiguity. Many of them did not possess the same rabid patriotism as the women resident in the two republics. Despite this, the British military forces regarded Natal Afrikaner women as the most "disloyal" inhabitants of the colony,¹⁹ a view possibly shaped by Lord Herbert Kitchener, the officer commanding for the British Army during the war, when he stated that the women were often more "bitter" than the men.²⁰ The closest any Natal Afrikaner woman came to possible military participation in the war was a Miss L Meyer of Weenen, who was captured at Newcastle together with a large number of Natal Rebels, that is, Natal Afrikaners suspected of committing high treason by, as British subjects, supporting the Boer war effort.²¹ It is not known what became of her. Except for one occasion, no Natal Afrikaner women were charged with high treason. The exception was Annie Catherina Gowthorpe of Newcastle,

14 PAR, CSO 2874: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by ME de Waal, 27 February 1902.

15 PAR, AGO I/8/74: Correspondence regarding the looting of property belonging to J de Jager, 4 October 1899 to 5 January 1901.

16 PAR, Secretary of Native Affairs (SNA) I/7/40: Report of native intelligence officer No. 1, 14 December 1899.

17 Vaal Technorama (VTR), JC Vermaak Collection, 03/14223: Declaration by JJ Kemp, 22 May 1900.

18 PAR, CSO 2888: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by MMCW Kemp, 6 December 1901.

19 PAR, AGO I/8/79: Application by JJ Kemp to return to his farm, 12 April 1901–24 April 1901.

20 P Warwick, and SB Spies (eds.), *The South African War* (London, Longman, 1980), p. 168.

21 *Natal Witness*, 17 October 1900. For her husband, JW Gowthorpe, the shame of being convicted of treason was unbearable and not long afterwards he committed suicide.

who was accused of sheltering, harbouring, and supplying food to the Boers, and of joining and accompanying them to Volksrust in the Transvaal. However, numerous members of the local community testified in her favour. WM Rogers, for example, stated that she had given him £50 to flee to Delagoa Bay in Mozambique, and H Dunn testified that she had even nursed a wounded Hussar of the British Army. All charges against her were eventually dropped.²²

In an incident unconfirmed by any official sources, JH Labuschagne, who was imprisoned in Pietermaritzburg on charges of treason, declared that Mrs Hannie van Tonder had been found guilty of aiding and abetting the commandos.²³ Apparently her two sons, who had joined the invading Boers, had visited their mother at her home near Helpmekaar. When they left, they were spotted by Africans, who reported the incident to the military. As a result, Mrs van Tonder was arrested and sentenced because she had not reported their visit as required by martial law.²⁴ The Natal Government was also (erroneously) under the impression that the wife of NM Dekker of Bloemhof, Dundee, was imprisoned alongside him in Pietermaritzburg. This was, however, denied by the governor of the prison.²⁵ From the available evidence, it is thus clear that no Natal Afrikaner women were convicted for actively supporting the invading Boer forces.

Nevertheless, a small group of Natal Afrikaner women were involved in auxiliary roles as go-betweens, providers of food, purveyors of war news, nurses, and agents in the field of intelligence.²⁶ The widow Jacoba Barrett,²⁷ née Groenewald, was a loyalist Natal Afrikaner woman who did work for the British authorities and was described by Attorney-General Henry Bale as “the only loyal Dutch woman I know of”. Barrett was born in Natal but had resided in the Transvaal for a number of years. Shortly before war broke out, she and some family members returned to Natal.²⁸ It seems that during this time she was recruited into the intelligence department to gather information on Afrikaner attitudes in Umvoti County. To enable her to do this successfully, Barrett managed to move in with a leading Afrikaner of the Greytown, Umvoti area, LL (Lang Lewies) Nel and his family.

Two days after her arrival, on 19 October 1899, she submitted her first report that three people related to the Nels had joined the Boers. The Nel’s youngest son

22 PAR, AGO I/7/46: Lists of Natal rebels captured between 10 May 1900 and 4 June 1900 as well as incriminating documents compiled by Lt-Col AE Sandbach.

23 War Museum of the Boer Republics (WM), Dagboek van Johannes Christoffel Buys: Deel 2, 23 September 1901, p. 30.

24 OE Prozesky (Private Collection), Diary of JJA Prozesky: Diary entry, 22 September 1901, p. 527.

25 PAR, CSO 1648: Passenger account for discharged prisoners, 6 August 1901 to 29 August 1901.

26 P Marais, *Die vrou in die Anglo-Boereoorlog...*, pp. 167-177, for an overview of the spy activities of Boer women during the war.

27 Not to be confused with Mrs Berrett, who is referred to in PHS van Zyl, *Die Heldealbum* (Johannesburg, Afrikaanse Pers, 1944), p. 86.

28 PRO, CO 179/208: Letter from Attorney-General H Bale to Prime Minister AH Hime, 11 December 1899.

was also recalled from school “so that he could ride around and warn the local Natal Afrikaners when they were to mobilise”. On the same day, the eager Barrett submitted a second report notifying the authorities that the local Afrikaners were keeping their wagons back and not using them to despatch wool to the market. The wagons and horses were apparently kept at the ready for the planned arrival of the commandos in Greytown on 25 October 1899. This plan, according to Barrett, was underpinned by boastful talk about taking the magazine in Greytown by force; about teaching England a lesson; about God being on their side; and how they would not hesitate to kill women and children. A very alert Barrett undertook to warn the authorities immediately if danger arose. Barrett also reported that the Battle of Talana dominated discussions among the local Natal Afrikaners, some of whom were criticising the sluggish Boer commanders for allowing large numbers of British troops to escape to Ladysmith. The envisaged Boer invasion of Umvoti remained very much on the cards and Barrett also reported that the local Afrikaners were full of passion and excitement while they waited for any sign of the Boer invasion of Umvoti such as the cutting of the telegraph wires. In preparation for the invasion, they were stocking up on rusks and ammunition.

War talk, however, only took place when the local Englishmen and loyal Afrikaners such as Tony Keyter and “Old Laatz” were absent. Barrett’s overt eagerness and the fact that she was an outsider, seemed to hamper her, for in her report dated 21 October 1899, it became clear that her hosts distrusted her. By now, Barrett had perceived a change in the attitude of the local Afrikaners. This was brought about by the Boer losses at the Battle of Talana and the lack of success around Ladysmith. Barrett’s short mission ended on 22 October, four days after her arrival. She had failed to infiltrate the close-knit Afrikaner community of Umvoti. In her last report, she stated, “I dare not send a wire for the Dutch Boys [messengers] let the news out – they know all the magistrate knows, or how do they find it out”.²⁹ It seems that immediately thereafter she left the Nels to go and reside in Pietermaritzburg.

Jacoba Barrett must have felt that very little had come of her efforts. She attempted to convince the authorities of her worth as a source of information and found a sympathetic ear in the attorney-general, Henry Bale. Barrett repeated the same information she had despatched earlier, but also added some known facts, rumours, half-truths, and gossip. She even offered Bale the services of her son “who knows the Transvaal well”. The encounter with Bale prolonged interest in Barrett’s reports for a few days. Her earlier reports were dug up and she had to confirm their authenticity by signing each of them. Governor Hely-Hutchinson then forwarded the reports to the Colonial Office where they were duly filed.³⁰

29 PRO, CO 179/208: Letter from Attorney-General H Bale to Prime Minister AH Hime, 11 December 1899.

30 PAR, AGO I/7/40: Statements by Jacoba Barrett before SO Samuelson, 22 December 1899.

If Allan Hershensohn, a Natal Afrikaner and intelligence officer for the civil intelligence department, is to be believed, a Mrs Eksteen of Ingogo, who stayed at Pieter Keytel's³¹ home in Pietermaritzburg, was actively involved in the Boer intelligence department. Hershensohn claimed that Eksteen received information from Keytel about the undefended areas along the railway line and an indication that Boer forces might succeed in raiding the line near Ingogo. When Eksteen returned to her farm, she apparently forwarded this information to the Boer forces, possibly using an African runner. As with the reports by Barrett, the military did not see fit to act upon these tales.³²

Natal Afrikaner women also became involved in the South African War by giving logistical and humanitarian support. A certain Mrs Meyer provided logistical support by working in Handley's store in Dundee when it was taken over by the Boer commissariat,³³ while Mrs Arnold Boers of the Klip River district, who had lost a son in the war, baked 14 loaves of bread per week for three weeks for the Boer hospital north of the Tugela River. The hospital authorities supplied the flour and she was allowed to retain a small portion for her services. According to Mrs Boers, who at this stage was cut-off from Ladysmith by the siege of the town, the arrangement was their saving grace. Without it, her children would only have had mealie-meal porridge to eat. Mrs Boers also received medicine for her services.³⁴ Her sister-in-law, Mrs Gert Boers, baked bread for the Boer hospital under the same arrangement, while Mrs CM Vermaak endured comparable support around Dundee.³⁵ Similarly SJ Laas of Paardeberg, Dundee, who eventually had four sons and two sons-in-law convicted as rebels, also baked bread for the Boers. The response of the Natal Government to these actions on the part of the women was to declare that "the baking (of) bread for the enemy" was regarded as "active assistance".³⁶ However there is no evidence that any of these women were, charged with high treason. Within the context of the time, it was not seen as "fitting" to charge women with such an offence.

Several Natal Afrikaner women took to nursing the casualties of war albeit on opposite sides. Nurse SMG Otto, a Natal volunteer nurse and member of a very pro-British Natal Afrikaner family, nursed at Intombi Hospital during the siege of Ladysmith. Lt-Col Hyslop had no hesitation in saying that but for the devotion of

31 The house of the Keytel's seems to have been a hotbed of pro-Boer activities. Mrs Keytel apparently helped Felix Coetzee, a burgher sentenced to seven years' imprisonment with hard labour for executing a "joiner", to make it to the Boer lines once he had escaped from the Pietermaritzburg Prison. Coetzee was arrested ten days later by Africans in Zululand. See VTR, JC Vermaak Collection, 03/2553/1: Memoirs of JC Vermaak, pp. 4-5, 1941.

32 PAR, Minister of Justice and Public Works (MJPW) 117: Report by the civilian intelligence officer, A Hershensohn, 25 May 1901.

33 PAR, CSO 2914: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by LLA Zietsman, 18 March 1901.

34 *Natal Witness*, 9 June 1900.

35 PAR, CSO 2910: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by CM Vermaak, 6 October 1900.

36 PAR, CSO 2888: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by SJ Laas, 11 December 1901.

nurses like Otto, the number of deaths would have been far higher.³⁷ As a result, he recommended her for the Royal Red Cross. Like Otto, Mrs MC (Gert) de Haas also worked as a nurse during the siege. The difference was that she only nursed Boer prisoners-of-war for a brief period before she and her family were removed to the Intombi Camp.³⁸ Medical work was also undertaken by CM Vermaak of Rooifontein, Dundee, who provided medical assistance by nursing an invalid Boer from Pretoria for eight days.³⁹

Nursing the wounded was also undertaken by Lucy Lydia Bester of Fourieskraal, Ladysmith, the sister-in-law of Ds HF Schoon. Lucy left for the Paarl district shortly before war broke out to study organ music. When large numbers of Boer POWs started arriving in Cape Town, many of them severely wounded, Bester abandoned her studies and volunteered as a nurse at the Simon's Town POW Camp. In a letter written in English to her sister, Mary Schoon, she reflected poignantly on the nature of her work.⁴⁰

I have lost 4 patients: oh Mary, the one I shall never forget, he was too sweet a boy about 16 or 17. His eyes looked me full in the face till the end and after his death such a Heavenly Smile... I can never tell you how pleased I am that I have come to nurse them.

Her working conditions were made even more difficult by the animosity which was shown towards her. On one occasion this forced her to decline an invitation to a lunch that had been extended to all the nurses; her reason for not attending was that as an "Africander and especially [at] this time when politics are always discussed" she would not feel welcome. Bester eventually took ill with typhoid in mid-June 1900, but managed to survive. It is uncertain if she resumed her nursing career.⁴¹

Two of Lucy Bester's sisters, Maggie and a Mrs Mandy, also took up nursing during the war. Maggie Bester and her family arrived in the Harrismith area of the Orange Free State in the wake of the retreating Boers in March 1900.⁴² She initially resided on their farm near Elands River Bridge, Harrismith, before she joined her sister in town where the pair nursed for two and a half months.⁴³

37 PAR, Prime Minister (PM) 90: Recommendation by Lt-Col Hyslop, 3 May 1901; Nurse Kate Driver (JJ Boyd) *Experience of a Siege* (a Nurse looks back at Ladysmith. Ladysmith Historical Society, 1978.)

38 PAR, HF Schoon Collection, A 72: Dairy entry, 28 October 1899, p. 35.

39 PAR, CSO 2910: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by CM Vermaak, 6 October 1900.

40 PAR, HF Schoon Collection, A 72: Dairy entry, 16 June 1900, p. 371.

41 A Davey, "Lucy Bester and the nursing of Boer prisoners at Simon's Town, 1900", *Simon's Town Historical Society Bulletin*, 19(1), 1996. In time, Bester followed two of her sisters to the USA where they eventually settled.

42 PAR, HF Schoon Collection A 72: My experiences during the Anglo-Boer War by Maggie Bester, 26 September 1900.

43 OE Prozesky (Private Collection), Diary of JJA Prozesky: Diary entries, 14 October 1899 and 14 November 1899, p. 26 and pp. 84-86.

Natal Afrikaner women and the psychological and physical trauma of war

The general war experience of Natal Afrikaner women in the areas first occupied by the Boer forces and then liberated by the British Army meant psychological or physical harassment at the hands of either the Boer commandos or the British Army or both. One of the first encounters between Natal Afrikaner women and British soldiers proved extremely traumatic for the women involved. Reverend Oscar Prozesky, a German missionary with a station outside Newcastle, noted in his diary that British soldiers violated women in northern Natal from the beginning of the war. The first-mentioned case took place on 14 October 1899, when African women were shamefully treated near Dundee and Ladysmith.⁴⁴ Soon afterwards, a family of Natal Afrikaners experienced similar treatment. According to three unrelated sources, the 17th Lancers visited the De Waal's farm near Ladysmith in early November 1899. The whole family was accused of being spies and were arrested. Mrs de Waal and her two daughters were then raped. On arrival in Ladysmith, Jan de Waal was imprisoned as a spy while his wife, two daughters, one of them a mere 15 years old, and an African servant were kept in military confinement. Here they were allegedly raped on a number of occasions, with one daughter claiming that she was raped by ten "young officers" in one night. The two girls and their African servant eventually managed to escape to the Boer lines. In the meantime, their mother had died as a result of the "outrage and exposure perpetuated on her by Lancers". The two De Waal girls were then sent to Pretoria by the Boers for medical treatment.⁴⁵

Fears of sexual harassment were also expressed by Mrs van Niekerk, whose husband was in the lunatic asylum in Pietermaritzburg where he later died. She lived with her children at Lennoxton near Newcastle and complained that an African had behaved insolently towards her. As a result, she asked the local magistrate for protection. He subsequently ordered the arrest of the African in question. Several nights later, four drunken soldiers arrived at her house and made "shameful suggestions" to her and her daughters, aged 12 and 15 years. The women had to keep them at bay all night. Mrs van Niekerk again complained to the magistrate, who this time would not accept the charge. His reason, according to Mrs van Niekerk, was that the soldiers would be punished too severely. At the same time, he released the African in question.⁴⁶

Natal Afrikaner women also suffered during the first month of the war because of the actions taken by the British Army against their husbands as suspected rebels. A case in point was the arrest of PC Cronjé of the farm Rest in Dundee in October 1899. Three months later, in a letter written on her behalf and signed by her, Mrs

44 OE Prozesky (Private Collection), Diary of JJA Prozesky: Diary entries, 14 November 1899 and 18 November 1899, pp. 84-92; ES Leversage, *Christiaan de Wet Annale*, 10, pp. 135-136.

45 National Archival Repository, Pretoria (NAR), A 739, Vol 5 Book 2: Telegram Roos to Reuter, 15 November 1899.

46 OE Prozesky (Private Collection), Diary of JJA Prozesky: Diary entry, 13 September 1900, p. 298.

EM Cronjé asked the colonial authorities about the whereabouts of her husband. PC Cronjé had, in the meantime, been released on parole on 6 February 1900 with strict instructions to reside in Pietermaritzburg. It is unclear when Mrs Cronjé received this information because letters addressed to areas under Boer occupation were kept back until after the war.⁴⁷

Harsh treatment of Natal Afrikaner women by Boers was almost exclusively reserved for the female family members of loyalists. The treatment of Mrs Liebenberg of Dundee, whose husband Barend remained loyal, was such an example. Liebenberg and her children were given passports to cross into the British-held territory via Pomeroy and Greytown by wagon. When the family reached Helpmekaar, they were stopped and kept prisoner for three days. Guards surrounded the wagon and the Liebenbergs were told that they would be shot should they try to escape. The family was returned to Dundee where the eldest Liebenberg boy was imprisoned, apparently because he was a British subject. On 2 January 1900, Mrs Liebenberg and the rest of her family were banished to Pretoria from where they were eventually allowed to proceed to Durban via Lourenco Marques in Mozambique.⁴⁸

A similar fate befell the widow Emily Pieters, owner of the farm Maxwelton, and her two young sons in May 1900. When the British attacked the Boer positions on the Biggarsberg, she and her children attempted to reach her loyalist uncle, Adrian (AL) Jansen. They were, however, stopped by two Boers who became angry when she told them she was going to the farm of a loyalist. She was subsequently ordered to Dundee under guard. Here her request to proceed to the farm of her father, WS Naudé, was denied. Pieters was then sent to Johannesburg by rail and later to Lydenburg where she stayed with an aunt. Eventually, in September 1900, she received permission to go to Lourenco Marques.⁴⁹ Pieters and her sons could not make their way back to Natal since the military had prohibited the British consul-general from issuing permits to people wishing to travel to Durban because of the overcrowded state of the city. It was only after the intervention of her father, the Dundee magistrate and editor of the *Natal Afrikaner*, Joshua Hershensohn, and testimonies from loyal Natal Afrikaners that Governor Hely-Hutchinson issued a permit to Pieters enabling her to proceed to Durban. A short while later, she and her sons joined Adrian Jansen.⁵⁰

Frequent contact between British soldiers and Natal Afrikaner women in the war zone resumed when the siege of Ladysmith ended. The relationship was, for the most part, problematic and the British Army, smarting from their humiliation at the

47 PAR, CSO 1640: Correspondence regarding the whereabouts of PC Cronjé, 23 January 1900-19 February 1900.

48 PRO, CO 179/211: Letter from Mrs B Liebenberg to PUS, C Bird, 24 April 1900.

49 PAR, CSO, 1659: Documents relating to the daughter of WS Naude in Lourenco Marques, 1 October 1900-11 October 1900.

50 OE Prozesky (Private Collection): Diary of JJA Prozesky: Attached statements, p. 438.

hands of the Boer forces, were looking for rebels everywhere.

There is a snapshot of evidence in this regard which has been raised many-a-time as an example of the experience of Natal Afrikaner women whose husbands were arrested on high treason as rebels, exists. One of the first Natal Afrikaner woman to become the butt of British wrath was the heavily pregnant Mrs SM (Sannie) Colling of the farm Georgina near Ladysmith. Here, husband Fred Colling, was commandeered by the Boers as a smallpox guard responsible for inspecting African homesteads to prevent the spread of the disease. A posse of Natal Police ran into an ambush when they approached her farmhouse on 15 March 1900.⁵¹ Not long afterwards, another group of policemen arrived and proceeded to kill all her poultry and damage the property. Colling and her two children were removed to the farm, Fourieskraal, on the outskirts of Ladysmith. They remained there as prisoners, only receiving porridge for food. After persistent requests, Colling was allowed to proceed to Ladysmith where her child was born.⁵²

The military's attitude towards Colling was expressed by Lt-Col AE Sandbach who stated that no consideration was to be shown to her because her husband was a rebel. Instead, she and her family were to be sent to Pietermaritzburg before the end of April 1900, without expense to the military authorities. Since the Natal Government refused to maintain people deported to Pietermaritzburg by the military, Colling's livestock was sold to pay for her keep in Ladysmith and Pietermaritzburg. The balance was left in credit with the director of supplies.⁵³ When her new-born child was 10 days old, she was deported to Pietermaritzburg. Shortly after her arrival, the commandant informed her that there was no more money and that she had to see to her own needs.⁵⁴ She was obliged to spend some time on nearby Afrikaner farms between Durban and Pietermaritzburg and Greytown.⁵⁵ The physical and psychological trauma suffered by Colling took its toll and she fell very ill after the birth of her child.⁵⁶ Initially she lost her speech but, in time, her health improved.⁵⁷ On 17 August 1900, she was well enough to return to Ladysmith to visit her imprisoned husband.⁵⁸ A week later she was allowed to return to the farm of her mother, Mrs Cronjé. Colling's experiences at the hands of the British caused much bitterness in the area. As a result, she and her mother were suspected of providing accommodation to six members of the party of Boers who had attacked the Wasbank

51 PAR, HF Schoon Collection A 72: Diary entries, 6-7 May 1900, pp. 311-312; PRO, CO 179/213: Statement by Trooper ATS Boyle to Sub-Inspector Hellett, 24 March 1900.

52 PAR, AGO I/7/42: Letter from Lt-Col AE Sandbach to provost marshal, 26 April 1900.

53 PAR, HF Schoon Collection A 72: Diary entries, 6-7 May 1900, pp. 311-312; PRO, CO 179/213: Statement by Trooper ATS Boyle to Sub-Inspector Hellett, 24 March 1900.

54 OE Prozesky (Private Collection), Diary of JJA Prozesky: Attached statements, p. 438.

55 PAR, HF Schoon Collection, A 72: Dairy entry, 29 May 1900, p. 338.

56 PAR, HF Schoon Collection, A 72: Dairy entry, 23 June 1900, p. 378.

57 PAR, HF Schoon Collection, A 72: Dairy entry, 17 August 1900, p. 423.

58 PAR, HF Schoon Collection, A 72: Dairy entry, 25 August 1900, pp. 430-431.

Station in October 1900.⁵⁹

When Buller's Army advanced north, other Natal Afrikaner women suffered a fate similar to that endured by Colling. According to RC Billington, a muleteer with the advancing force of General Redvers Buller, the British force encountered their first three Natal Afrikaner women on 12 May 1900 on the farm Vermaakskraal. These women were immediately arrested and sent under escort to Ladysmith. The same happened a short distance away at the farm of the Kemp family where two more Afrikaner women were taken prisoner.⁶⁰ Approximately one month later, on 9 June 1900, the three women captured at Vermaakskraal (the wives of PR and Coenraad Vermaak and P van Breda) arrived in Pietermaritzburg telling tales of horror, destruction, and the looting of livestock by the military. The wife of Coenraad immediately left to seek shelter with her parents, the Odendaals, at Noodsberg.⁶¹ The others, in all probability, remained in Pietermaritzburg becoming, along with Sannie Colling, the first of hundreds of Natal Afrikaner women to be removed from their homes to the capital. The experiences of the above-mentioned groups of women were repeated in one form or another at almost every Afrikaner farm in Northern Natal as is outlined below.⁶²

The men MC Cronjé of Camelot, JS van Niekerk and LP Adendorff of Welgedacht, and JJ Smit were commandeered by a Boer force when it occupied Northern Natal. With the arrival of the British forces in Newcastle, these men adhered to Buller's proclamation and surrendered. The men were subsequently arrested in Pietermaritzburg or on the *Catalonia* at sea in Durban harbour and imprisoned. On 30 May 1900, some days after the surrender of their husbands, the women were surprised when members of the Natal Police arrived on the respective farms. The police took all Cronjé's cattle and horses as well as a spider and wagon, leaving Mrs Cronje with only three cows and calves. On the same day, they took all the livestock belonging to Van Niekerk, Smit, and Adendorff, leaving Mrs Adendorff completely without means and a baby and blind brother to care for.⁶³ Also, near Newcastle, Mrs Boshoff, whose husband was arrested as a suspected rebel, owned more than 1 300 head of sheep and goats and 80 head of cattle, all of which was taken by the military except for five goats, which the family had to slaughter to survive. Mrs Boshoff

59 PAR, 1/LDS 3/3/14: Correspondence regarding the request by HB Cronjé to be allowed to visit his mother, 31 October 1900 to 7 November 1900.

60 RC Billington, *A mule-driver at the Natal front: Transport experiences in Natal* (London, Chapman & Hall, 1901), pp. 53-56.

61 PAR, HF Schoon Collection A 72: Diary entry, 9 June 1900, p. 354. No amount of research could reveal where the women were kept when imprisoned in Ladysmith and Pietermaritzburg.

62 PAR, CSO 2869: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by AF Byloo, 28 September 1900; PAR, HF Schoon Collection A 72: Diary entry, 16-17 October 1900 and 22 October 1900, pp. 489-490 and p. 493; PAR, CSO 2864: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by JBS Adendorff, 8 October 1902; PAR, 1/LDS 3/1/1/17: Letter from magistrate Klip River district to LW Meyer, 24 April 1901.

63 PAR, PM 18: Request for assistance from the Natal Government in securing cattle removed by members of the Natal Police, 19 July 1900 to 15 August 1900.

had to go into the town to ask the commandant for some food to help her and her children survive.⁶⁴

Similar events occurred near Dundee. Mrs PC Cronjé of the farm Rest near Helpmekaar complained in a letter to the magistrate of Dundee that soldiers of the Imperial Light Horse had taken seven horses, 1 330 sheep and 550 goats. They had also taken her spider and the harness for her oxen. She appealed to the magistrate to tell her what documentation she should send him to obtain an order to stop the looting of her remaining livestock.⁶⁵ Natal Afrikaners not only lost the livestock they had to take care of but, at times, were even turned out of their homes. FAJ van Niekerk, AMJ Cronjé and JC Hattingh, imprisoned rebels, asked that their wives be removed from their farms near Newcastle to the Pietermaritzburg Concentration Camp because they were being intimidated by Africans. Mrs Cronjé and her three children were turned out of her house on the farm Applebloom by an African who took clothes and featherbeds. She joined the other two women on the farm Loskop where they were also intimidated by Africans one night. The government, however, refused to heed the call of the husbands and suggested that they be allowed to reside in a town run by the military.⁶⁶

Verbal insubordination was often the only way in which Afrikaner women could fight back, especially against the military. In the Newcastle district, Mrs O'Reilly, an Afrikaner woman married to an Irishman, was at the forefront of verbal abuse and belittling of British soldiers. When her husband was arrested by the British, she accused the soldiers of being "too cowardly to catch the Boers in the Transvaal for you are too scared, but this you can do, arrest tame people (*mak menschen*)".⁶⁷ Such verbal abuse did not stop the soldiers from searching and looting the houses of Afrikaner women in the area.⁶⁸

Further south in Ladysmith, Mrs MC de Haas also ran into trouble because of her utterances.⁶⁹ The problems for De Haas began when one of the male residents in her boarding house spat at the picture of General de Wet which she had in her parlour. De Haas rebuked him and said the English would be glad to have someone of that calibre.⁷⁰ The outcome was that in January 1901, she was deported to

64 OE Prozesky (Private Collection), Diary of JJA Prozesky: Diary entry, 9 September 1900, p. 292.

65 PAR, 1/DUN 3/1/8: Letter Mrs PC Cronjé to magistrate Dundee, 21 May 1900.

66 PAR, CSO 1688: Application by FAJ van Niekerk, AMJ Cronjé and JC Hattingh for their wives to be removed to the Pietermaritzburg Concentration Camp, 21 October 1901 to 30 October 1901.

67 E Prozesky (Private Collection), Diary of JJA Prozesky: Diary entry, 6 July 1900, p. 238.

68 PAR, HF Schoon Collection, A 72: Dairy entry, 11 January 1902, p. 758.

69 PAR, HF Schoon Collection, A 72: Dairy entry, 4 January 1901, pp. 556-557. MC de Haas was the sister of Otto Krogman the leader of Ladysmith Commando and daughter of the feisty Annie Krogman. See PAR, CSO 2873: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by MC de Haas, 12 September 1900.

70 OE Prozesky (Private Collection), Diary of JJA Prozesky: Diary entry, 12 May 1901, p. 502; OE Prozesky (Private Collection: Letter MC de Haas to JJA Prozesky, 10 July 1901.

Pietermaritzburg under martial law at her own cost.⁷¹ In an open-hearted letter to Prime Minister Albert Hime, De Haas explained her predicament:⁷²

I am a resident of Ladysmith. On the 6th Jan. last (1901) on false reports to the commandant of Ladysmith I was reported by some men who were living in my house as boarders, men of no reputation and who has [sic] bitter feeling and prejudice [sic] against the Dutch nation. I being Dutch myself was cruelly taunted and provoked several times from the men living in my house. I admit I spoke indiscreetly several times of their insolent taints and disgraceful language.

Her explanation fell on deaf ears. Five months after her removal, De Haas felt that the period of separation from her husband and children was sufficient punishment for any discretion she might have been guilty of. She therefore requested permission to return to Ladysmith, but her request was denied by the military. This did not deter her. She opened a boarding house in Boshoff Street in Pietermaritzburg,⁷³ and visited rebel prisoners like the Buys brothers in the local prison, taking them pineapples as gifts.⁷⁴

Almost all aspects of the family and private lives of Natal Afrikaner women were affected by the psychological trauma and disruptions caused by the war. LLA Zietsman of the Dundee district was to have married fellow Natal Afrikaner, Daniel Dekker, in October 1899. The outbreak of war put an end to this dream because Dekker was commandeered and then continued to serve with the Vryheid Commando. By March 1901, Zietsman had still not heard from Dekker.⁷⁵ Uncertainty about the whereabouts of family members and friends during the war was a common occurrence. EM Botha, who went to Rhodesia prior to the war, had no idea what had happened to Gideon Joubert and Coenraad Breytenbach, who had worked on her farm Lekkerwater near Newcastle.⁷⁶ Similarly MMCW Kemp of Kempenveldt, Dundee, did not know the whereabouts of some of her sons.⁷⁷

Natal Afrikaner women in concentration camps

The largest number of Natal Afrikaners to be detained were those in the concentration camps. These camps, erected to pacify and care for the Boer population, resulted

71 AR, AGO I/8/76: Minute paper regarding men to be removed from Ladysmith to Estcourt, 28 December 1900 to 24 January 1901.

71 PAR, PM 22: Correspondence regarding the request by MC de Haas to return to Ladysmith, 11 June 1901 to 24 June 1901.

73 PAR, MJPW 88: Correspondence regarding the application of LJ de Jager to enter the Pietermaritzburg Concentration Camp, 31 October 1901 to 18 January 1902.

74 WM, Dagboek van Johannes Christoffel Buys: Deel 2, 27 Januarie 1901, p. 5.

75 PAR, CSO 2914: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by LLA Zietsman, 18 March 1901.

76 PAR, CSO 2868: Invasion losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by EM Botha, 19 January 1903.

77 PAR, CSO 2888: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by MMCW Kemp, 6 December 1901.

in the creation of several camps in Natal, namely at Ladysmith, Eshowe, Howick, Colenso, Pinetown, Pietermaritzburg, Jacobs, Wentworth and Merebank.⁷⁸

The first concentration camp to be established in Natal was located at Fort Napier in Pietermaritzburg. The camp was officially created in August 1900,⁷⁹ with the first inhabitants arriving on 10 August 1900.⁸⁰ The first Natal Afrikaners to arrive were Mrs JH Breytenbach and her seven children from Newcastle who were described as destitute and accused of hiding dynamite on their farm. After their arrival, a steady trickle of “undesirable” Natal Afrikaners, such as Mrs GF Maritz, Mrs M Botha and her baby, and Mrs JB Louw and her four children, all from Newcastle, joined them. In their wake, on 2 November 1900, the so-called undesirables, namely Mrs Gregory and her governess, Miss Latty, and Mrs ME Kock⁸¹ and her four children, all from Dundee, followed.⁸²

From then on until just before the war ended, hundreds of Natal Afrikaners were deported, especially to the Pietermaritzburg Concentration Camp. The full range of justifications for sending Natal Afrikaner women and children becomes clear when studying the camp registers.⁸³ Reasons offered included: “Anti British”; “For protection”; “Undesirable”; “Destitute”; “Suspect”; “Refugee”; “Husband tried for treason”; “Own request”; “Military reasons, farm had to be cleared”; “No reason given”; “Cattle in the Transvaal”; “Rebel” and “Harbouring enemy”.⁸⁴ Clearly there was a large range of reasons, many punitive as part of the total war waged against Natal Afrikaners, with others humanitarian in nature⁸⁵ or motivated by martial law.

The process of removing Natal Afrikaners to the concentration camps, as explained by CM Meyer of Gladstone, Dundee, was reminiscent of that experienced by their republican kin:⁸⁶

At noon on the 6th of November 1900 some Policemen came to my house and told me that my family and I must all be at the station at 3 o'clock that

78 The history of several Natal Concentration Camps is well documented, see for example: AU Wohlberg, “The Merebank Concentration Camp in Durban, 1901-1902” (MA thesis, UOFS, 2000); AU Wohlberg, “The Durban Concentration Camps: Merebank, Wentworth and Jacobs”, in JM Wassermann and BT Kearney (eds.), *A warrior's gateway: Durban and the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*, (Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2002), pp. 272-303.

79 British Government publication, Cd. 893: Report on the Concentration camps in South Africa by the Committee of Ladies appointed by the Secretary for War containing reports on the camps in Natal, the Orange River Colony and the Transvaal, p. 30.

80 NAR, Director Burgher Camps (DBC) 135: Register of residents M-Z in the Pietermaritzburg Concentration Camp, August 1900-June 1901.

81 PAR, CSO 2888: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by ME Kock, 24 October 1902.

82 J Ploeger, *Die lotgevallen van die burgerlike bevolking gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902*, I (National Archives, Pretoria, 1990), pp. 41.4-41.6.

83 NAR, DBC, 140: Register of residents in the Pietermaritzburg Concentration Camp, August 1900-June 1900.

84 NAR, DBC 134-142: Register of residents in the Pietermaritzburg Concentration Camp, 1900-1902.

85 PAR, PM 22: Letter HE van Vure to Lt CM Threlfill, VIII Hussars, 29 June 1901. Her husband, Stephanus Johannes, spelt his surname Van Vuuren.

86 PAR, CSO 2894: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by CN Meyer, 13 January 1903.

afternoon - I had no opportunity of making any arrangements but had to leave everything on the farm just as it was... We were sent to the Refugee Camp [in] PMB but only remained there 3 days after which we obtained permission to live in town. I went to a boarding House where I remained with my family for two months when I took a house for myself. I was not allowed to go back to my farm till 17th April 1901.

The arrival at the concentration camps of these Natal Afrikaners was an ongoing process which continued until the end of the hostilities. The process of cleansing the northern districts of Natal was aimed predominantly at Afrikaners who were, with a few exceptions, all viewed as disloyal. Under martial law, it was possible for the military to remove people at will, anyone they suspected such as, for example, Piet Conradie and his son from the Newcastle district to the Pietermaritzburg Concentration Camp, while leaving their wives and children behind on the farm.⁸⁷ In this process, the colonial authorities had very little say. They merely had to toe the line and try to influence the process by means of enquiries and correspondence.

Transfers of Natal Afrikaners between the various concentration camps in the colony also took place from time to time. The rationale behind this was that allowing people to join families and friends would alleviate the population pressure in certain camps.⁸⁸ A case in point is the transfers that took place shortly after the creation of the Howick Concentration Camp on 2 February 1901 to accommodate some members of the burgeoning population of the Pietermaritzburg Camp.

The concentration camp experiences of Natal Afrikaners differed very little from those experienced by other inhabitants of the well-managed Natal Concentration Camp system. One aspect of camp life shared by all inhabitants was death. Although the death rate in the Natal camps does not compare to that in the camps in the Transvaal and Orange Free State, a significant number of deaths did occur. Among these were 28 Natal Afrikaners. The majority of the deaths of Natal Afrikaners occurred in the camp which housed the highest number of Natal Afrikaners, namely Pietermaritzburg. The most important causes of the death here mirrors that of the concentration camp system in general: pneumonia, measles, and enteritis. Certain families were also harder hit than others and the Botha/Van Niekerk, Coetzer and Shorter families each lost several members.⁸⁹ These deaths were, to a certain extent, balanced by the births to Natal Afrikaners. Like the deaths, this occurred almost exclusively in the Pietermaritzburg Camp.⁹⁰

87 PAR, CSO 2871: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by P Conradie, 15 October 1902.

88 NAR, A 2030, 81: Besonderhede oor die kamp te Howick, no date.

89 PAR, AGO I/8/85: Minute paper regarding the death of Carl Posselt, 3 June 1902–10 June 1902; PAR, GH 554: Monthly reports for Natal Concentration Camps, 1901–1903; NAR, DBC 110-157: Registers for Natal Concentration Camps, 1900–1903; Nederduiste Gereformeerde Kerk Argief – Pietermaritzburg (NGKA): Doodlyste vir die Merebank en Jacobs Konsentrasiekampe, 1900–1903.

90 NGKA: Doopregister vir die Pietermaritzburg Konsentrasiekamp, *circa* 1900–1902.

The approximate number of Natal Afrikaners who were, at one stage or another, listed in the registers of the various Natal camps were: Pietermaritzburg 537, Merebank 130, Howick 70, Jacobs 43, and Eshowe 1. A further 194 Natal Afrikaners resided at one stage or another in the Volksrust Concentration Camp, and 23 were in the Standerton Concentration Camp.⁹¹ When studying the figures, it must be borne in mind that many individuals transferred between camps and were resident in more than one camp before leaving to live with other members of family or friends. Some were also able to return home.⁹² The approximately 900 to 1 000 Natal Afrikaner concentration camp inhabitants constituted between 20 and 25 per cent of the Afrikaner population of Natal. Amongst them were individuals who fulfilled important roles within the camp system, like Mrs van Schalkwyk who acted as a midwife.⁹³

Although Natal Afrikaners had much in common with their fellow camp inhabitants from the two republics, such as language and culture, they were a sub-group which could be differentiated by the fact that, resident in Natal they were British subjects who had support structures at hand, for they could appeal directly to their government or local politicians. They could also easily call on members of their extended families because they were geographically not far from their homes. At the same time, unlike their republican counterparts, Natal Afrikaner camp inhabitants did not suffer the feeling that they had “lost their independence” or that they were imprisoned in a foreign state. As such, they were, according to Mrs Isabella Grobler in the Pietermaritzburg Concentration Camp, referred to as the “Natal Rebels”.⁹⁴

The economic experiences of Natal Afrikaner women during the war

The psychological and physical hardships imposed on Natal Afrikaner women by the war were amplified by their economic suffering. The large-scale arrests and surrender of Natal Afrikaner men in Northern Natal placed the economic burden of farming and dealing with labour on the women. This generally proved to be very difficult and at times virtually impossible. Relatively simple tasks often proved to be very demanding,⁹⁵ as explained by Vonnie Bester:⁹⁶

I have to clean the horses myself, Mag and I grind mealies & and we have to look after the cattle and I do lots of other rough work. It is not any good telling Mama no to go to the cattle, as she won't listen, every morning she takes the cattle away & at night she & I fetch the cows to milk.

91 NAR, DBC 95-98: Registers of residents in the Standerton Concentration Camp, January 1901-January 1903.

92 NAR, DBC 134-142: Registers of residents in the Pietermaritzburg Concentration Camp, August 1900-December 1902.

93 MM Postma, (versamelaar), “Stemme uit die verlede: ’n Versameling beëdigde verklarings van vroue wat tydens die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in die konsentrasiekampe verkeer het” (Johannesburg, no publisher, 1939), p. 89.

94 MM Postma, “Stemme uit die verlede...”, p. 89.

95 P Marais, *Die vrou in die Anglo-Boereoorlog...* pp. 33-35.

96 PAR, HF Schoon Collection A 72: Letter Vonnie Bester to Mary Schoon, 11 September 1900.

The women were not only burdened by their new economic roles but also had to deal with the looting and confiscation of property by the military, members of the Natal Police, and local Africans.⁹⁷ At the same time, the men, for example, CJ Labuschagne, in a letter from the *Catalonia* in the Durban Harbour to his mother, J Laas of Angora Hill, Dannhauser, placed pressure on the women by requesting them not to let the farming “slip” in their absence.⁹⁸

Many Natal Afrikaner women were unable to deal with these unfamiliar roles. The economic experiences of the following women are cited as examples. One day, the military and police removed all the livestock belonging to Mesdames van Niekerk, Smit, and Adendorff, leaving them without any means of survival. All three women immediately called on their government to intervene and assist them in the return of their property. The Natal Government could not, however, render any support, for, when stock was received from the military by the Derelict Stock Fund – a fund set up for monies earned from selling looted cattle. The curator, an individual called Charles Lloyd was guilty of a complete lack of record-keeping and the hardship this caused families, and the trouble it meant to the government displeased both Attorney-General Henry Bale and Governor Walter Hely-Hutchinson. The governor tried to cover up the administrative bungling by ordering Bale to inform the three women.⁹⁹

... if any of your cattle are amongst those recently taken over by the Commissioner of Agriculture, in his capacity of Curator Bonis, you are at liberty, if so advised, to apply to the Supreme Court for the release and delivery of such stock.

The letter, dated 15 August 1900 and addressed to JJ Smit, was returned unclaimed.

Possibly the most economically opportunistic and astute Natal Afrikaner woman was 74-year-old Annie Charlotte Krogman of Driefontein, Ladysmith. Krogman was forced to leave her farm when it became the scene of hostilities. The Boer forces allowed her to proceed to the farm of her son, Andries Krogman, in the Orange Free State. Krogman maintained that the seizure of her 500 mixed head of cattle, three spans of oxen, 1 600 sheep, 500 goats, 15 horses and two wagons by the military left her destitute. Closer inspection by the Natal colonial authorities exposed Krogman's claim as not entirely true. The British had only taken 281 head of cattle for which a receipt was issued, while the Boer forces had commandeered the horses, one wagon and the greater part of the sheep and goats. Since Krogman owned 16 000 acres, had

97 PAR, 1/DUN 3/1/8: Letter Mrs PC Cronjé to magistrate Dundee, 21 May 1900.

98 JM Wassermann, “Controlling intelligence by means of censorship”, JM Wassermann and BT Kearney (eds.), *A warrior's gateway ...*, p. 345.

99 PAR, PM 18: Request for assistance from the Natal Government in securing cattle removed by members of the Natal Police, 19.7.1900–15.8.1900. For similar examples of suffering see: OE Prozesky (Private Collection), Diary of JJA Prozesky: Diary entry, 20 May 1900; 26 May 1900 and 31 May 1900, pp. 194; 207; 214.

received £250 for mining rights on one of her farms and was awaiting compensation from the military she could hardly be regarded as destitute. Her daughter, who was married to John de Waal, agreed fully with the Natal Government's decision.¹⁰⁰ This did not break the stride of the elderly Mrs Krogman, who now claimed that five of her oxen were running with the cattle of J van der Westhuizen,¹⁰¹ and that the Boers had commandeered nine large oxen from her.¹⁰² She was also quick to intervene on behalf of her imprisoned rebel son, Otto, demanding rent from the Africans placed on his farm Margate, by the military.¹⁰³

The sudden elevation to unaccustomed positions of economic authority of many married Afrikaner women also caused strain and a shift in power relations with African labourers. Ellen Hattingh of Nooitgedacht, Estcourt, whose husband was detained by the military, complained that she was unable to cope with their labourers,¹⁰⁴ while the wife of Izak Meyer, who had to take over the ploughing and stock raising, found the task very demanding since the African labourers did very little in the absence of her husband.¹⁰⁵ Payments and the rent collection from Africans also proved problematic. Mrs Adrian Marais had a dispute with her African labourers. She wanted to keep all the mealies reaped by them because she thought she was entitled to it all, while they claimed half.¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Mrs GP Kemp of Gowrie, Dundee, had to request that the magistrate act on her earlier complaint to collect rent money owed to her by certain Africans.¹⁰⁷ In turn, Alfred Gasa complained to the Umsinga magistrate that Mrs H Strydom of Uithoek owed him £4.10. for work done. To avoid a quasi-criminal procedure, Strydom was advised to pay Gasa if she agreed with his statement.¹⁰⁸ Strydom was later reminded that agreements entered into with Africans prior to the outbreak of war had to be honoured until further notice.¹⁰⁹

The relations between labourers and Afrikaner women, who, as matriarchs, were already in control of farming activities from before the war, were generally different from those described above. The labourers of 73-year-old MMCW Kemp

100 PAR, CSO 1667: Correspondence concerning the complaint of being destitute by AC Krogman, 16 January 1901 to 19 February 1901.

101 PAR, 1/LDS 3/1/1/17: Letter Magistrate TR Bennett, Klip River district, to Sergeant Reynolds, 7 September 1901.

102 PAR, CSO 2888: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by AC Krogman, 5 April 1901.

103 PAR, 1/NEW 3/1/1/9: Correspondence in the matter of the military placing Africans on the farm Margate, 21 August 1902–1 September 1902.

104 PAR, PM 24: Correspondence to and from E Hattingh regarding the detention of her husband, 25 September 1901–2 October 1901.

105 PAR, PM 90: Correspondence regarding the removal of Izak Meyer to Ladysmith by the military, 6 November 1901– 22 November 1901.

106 PAR, 1/LDS 3/1/1/16: Letter Magistrate TR Bennett, Klip River district, to commandant, Ladysmith, 26 November 1900.

107 PAR, 1/DUN 3/1/10: Letter Mrs GP Kemp to magistrate Dundee, 16 June 1902.

108 PAR, 1/UMS 38: Letter from acting magistrate Umsinga to Mrs H Strydom, 14 December 1900.

109 PAR, 1/UMS 38: Letter from acting magistrate Umsinga to Mrs H Strydom, 19 March 1901.

of Kempenveldt, Dundee, remained loyal in their duties.¹¹⁰ In like manner, EEM Meyer of Boschberg, Dundee, maintained the allegiance of her workers.¹¹¹

Married Afrikaner women, especially those whose husbands had been convicted of high treason, also suffered because their claims for war losses were mostly refused. They were ironically disempowered and oppressed by their marital status. The defining decision which illustrates this was the claim by Mrs ME Labuschagne of De Waar, Dundee. Her husband, a convicted rebel, was declared insolvent five months prior to the war. On 14 November 1900, Labuschagne was ordered to Pietermaritzburg by the military. She left all her property on the farm except for the horses which had earlier been taken by the military. Soon after her deportation, all her livestock was looted by the British Army. Labuschagne's claim for compensation from the Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission met with the following response:¹¹²

After full consideration it was decided not to allow damages for property lost by wives and minor children of convicted rebels. It will in some cases mean that innocent persons will suffer thr'o [sic] the act of another if compensation is not allowed it would mean that property really belonging to the convicted person would also be claimed for by the wife. In the present case it is clear that the property belongs to the claimant but the commission is of opinion that it would be a mistake to break the rule even in this case.

In light of the Labuschagne ruling, claims by married women on behalf of their children were also not honoured. As a result, Annie Elizabeth Vermaak's claim on behalf of her son, 13-year-old Andries Cornelius Vermaak (Jnr), for the cattle that he had received annually since he was a baby¹¹³ and a claim by MJ Oosthuysen on behalf of her two stepsons, both imbeciles, aged 31 and 33 respectively, were dismissed.¹¹⁴ All in all, only four of the 13 claims for compensation by married Natal Afrikaner women were processed. Of these, two were from areas outside the war zone.¹¹⁵

In stark contrast were the experiences of Natal Afrikaner widows for whom the lack of a husband proved to be economically beneficial. Economically empowered before the war, these women were generally much more assertive and successful in dealing with the Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission, a fund set up to compensate Natalians who suffered during the war. A case in point was MMCW Kemp who for many years had managed the farming activities because her husband was bedridden. This continued after he passed away in 1901. Since she held the economic power,

110 PAR, CSO 2888: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by MMCW Kemp, 6 December 1901.

111 PAR, CSO 2894: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by EEM Meyer, 5 April 1901.

112 PAR, CSO 2888: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by ME Labuschagne, 25 October 1901.

113 PAR, CSO 2910: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by AE Vermaak on behalf of AC Vermaak Jnr, 9 October 1900.

114 PAR, CSO 2897: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission claim by MT Oosthuysen on behalf of MJ and TJ Oosthuysen, 26 November 1902.

115 PAR, CSO 2864-2914: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission claims.

she was paid £3 735.13.1. in compensation for losses incurred at the hands of the British forces. This happened despite the fact that four of her sons were convicted of treason.¹¹⁶ An equally economically powerful woman was EEM Meyer who managed the farming activities on her farms Boschberg, Dundee, and one near Newcastle. Her livestock was continually raided by the military and their African supporters. Some of the animals were slaughtered at Elandslaagte while others were taken to the derelict stock yards in Ladysmith and the military stock yards at Pepworth and Reid's farm. A determined Meyer, assisted by her labourers, managed to track some of her livestock down and convinced the military to hand them back to her. Meyer was eventually paid £2 447.15.11. for losses incurred.¹¹⁷ The largest amount paid in compensation to a Natal Afrikaner woman was the £5 076.17.9. paid to MJ Zietsman of Snelster, Estcourt, who not only lost all her livestock but also had her house completely ruined.¹¹⁸

Widowed Afrikaner women of lesser economic means also petitioned successfully for compensation. Anna Katrina Slabbert of Dundee, who did sewing and washing and fled Dundee on 16 October 1899 to escape the advancing Boers, received £111.26.9,¹¹⁹ while Susanah Pelster of Bergvliet who farmed with mealies, goats and pumpkins was also fully compensated.¹²⁰

Only 11 out of 39 claims from widows and unmarried Natal Afrikaner women were not honoured. Of those, seven were disallowed because they had followed the Boers into the republics,¹²¹ while the claim of Mrs JM Pieters of Paddafontein, Dundee, was disallowed because she had attended "nachtmaal" at the headquarters of the Natal Commando at Helpmekaar,¹²² and that of Mrs ME de Waal of Carolina, Dundee, because she had sold oxen to the Irish Brigade.¹²³

Correspondence with men in authority

One of the few measures available to Natal Afrikaner women to voice their opinions, raise issues and confront the Natal colonial and British military authorities was by means of letter writing. These letters invariably followed the trials and tribulations of their husbands, sons, fathers, and other male relatives and friends. In the correspondence, the women often tried to convince the Natal authorities of the innocence of their husbands or sons, asked for their release or transfer to a prison

116 PAR, CSO 2888: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by MMCW Kemp, 6 December 1901.

117 PAR, CSO 2894: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by EEM Meyer, 5 April 1901.

118 PAR, CSO 2914: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by MJ Zietsman, 29 May 1901.

119 PAR, CSO 2905: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by AK Slabbert, 6 December 1900.

120 PAR, CSO 2898: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by JS Pelster, 13 January 1903.

121 See for example: PAR, CSO 2899: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by HM Potgieter, 16 April 1901; PAR, CSO 2903: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by JS Schalkwyk, 16 December 1901;

PAR, CSO 2097: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by JMM Coke-Smyth, 11 April 1901.

122 PAR, CSO 2899: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by JM Pieters, 18 February 1901.

123 PAR, CSO 2874: Invasion Losses Enquiry Commission: Claim by ME de Waal, 27 February 1902.

closer to home to prevent economic decline and ruin,¹²⁴ and made other requests to make their lives easier.¹²⁵ Such correspondence, mostly subservient in nature, invariably followed the bureaucratic process but under martial law very few of the requests met with success. Despite this, Natal Afrikaner women persisted with their correspondence simply because that was their only hope of finding favour with the patriarchal government system.

A case in point is the correspondence with the authorities as soon as the British Army started to detain suspected rebels after driving the republican commandos from Natal. Mrs M Scheepers of Wagon Drift, Estcourt, requested the assistance of Under-Secretary Bird in securing the release of her husband and his brother after their arrest and imprisonment in Pietermaritzburg by the military authorities in November 1899. In the absence of the Scheepers men, the family had their horses commandeered and lost some cattle and sheep. Subtle pressure was, however, placed on the military to speed up the process. This does seem to have paid dividends because the Scheepers brothers were not charged and were released on 5 February 1900.¹²⁶

A similar complaint was lodged by Johanna Meyer of Eversholt, Estcourt, in letters to the colonial secretary, Charles Smythe. She complained that her husband and son had been wrongfully arrested seven months earlier and they were still awaiting trial. All their cattle as well as their wagon and furniture were taken by the military. As a result, she and her four daughters were left destitute and had to rely on the charity of fellow Afrikaners. The plight of Meyer failed to generate much sympathy in government circles. Instead, Prime Minister Hime merely pointed out that the Meyers had only been in prison for two months and not seven as claimed. He also questioned their innocence since they were being held for looting and carrying arms and he ordered that the matter be referred to the military. To make matters worse for Meyer, she was informed by the authorities that the military had no record of receiving livestock or furniture from her farm.¹²⁷ No proof could be found that Izak Johannes Meyer was ever convicted of treason vindicating Johanna Meyer's claim that her husband was unfairly arrested.

Not only ordinary Natal Afrikaner women like Scheepers and Meyer requested the release of their husbands and complained about their economic plight, but also the

124 PAR, PM 24: Correspondence to and from E Hattingh regarding the detention of her husband, 25 September 1901–2 October 1901; PM 90: Letter from BA Bester to HD Winter, 22 November 1901; PM 90: Correspondence regarding the removal of Izak Meyer to Ladysmith by the military, 6 November 1901–22 November 1901.

125 PAR, CSO 1663: Correspondence regarding permission for Hendrik Buys to travel to and from Ladysmith to the farm Rietkuil, 28 November 1900–10 December 1900.

126 PAR, CSO 1638: Correspondence regarding the detention of NB and B Scheepers by the military, 17 January 1900–19 February 1900.

127 PAR, CSO 1654: Correspondence between Johanna Meyer and the colonial authorities, 12 July 1900–4 August 1900.

wives of more prominent Natal Afrikaners such as ME Labuschagne, the wife of one of the most prominent Natal Afrikaner politicians of the time, CJ Labuschagne who was a member of the legislative assembly. Mrs Labuschagne complained that after her husband was removed as a suspected rebel, all their horses, livestock, and food were taken by the military. Their position subsequently became so dire that she had to borrow some oxen from a neighbour to transport herself and her two daughters to their family at Chieveley. She claimed that she was promised that her husband would be able to return to his farm after his parole in Durban when the Boers were driven past Colenso. As this had happened in early March 1900, she requested that Prime Minister Albert Hime exercise his authority and have her husband released. Labuschagne's letter posed a predicament for the colonial authorities since there was no military objection to her husband's return but merely a civil question: Was he a rebel or not? As a result, Prime Minister Hime, in a secret despatch to the general officer lines of communication, requested that Labuschagne and another Natal Afrikaner politician, WJ Pretorius, be kept in Durban for a further three weeks to allow the attorney-general to finalise evidence against them. The military granted this request.¹²⁸ As in the case of IJ Meyer, Labuschagne was never charged.

Convicted wives and families of rebels also corresponded regularly and requested the transfer of fathers, brothers, sons, or husbands to prisons closer to their places of residence. Anna Susanna Hogg, originally from Dundee, but residing with her daughter, Mrs TJ Maré,¹²⁹ on the farm Welgevonden near Greytown, applied to have her husband Piet (Peter) Hogg, 73 years of age, with failing eyesight and suffering from debility, transferred from the Eshowe to the Pietermaritzburg Prison. Mrs Hogg had not seen her husband since his imprisonment ten months earlier as she did not have the means to visit him and undertook "not to trouble the gaol officials with frequent visits to my husband" should he be transferred to Pietermaritzburg. Surprisingly her request found favour with the authorities on condition that either Piet Hogg or his wife paid the rail and post car fare for him and his escort for the transfer to the Pietermaritzburg Prison.¹³⁰

The success of Anna Susanna Hogg's dealings with the colonial authorities convinced others such as Annie Vermaak, wife of PR Vermaak of Vermaaks Kraal, Helpmekaar, then residing in Prince Street, Pietermaritzburg, to write a similar letter to Hime.

128 PAR, PM 87: Correspondence relative to the removal of CJ Labuschagne to Durban by the military authorities, 8 March 1900–27 April 1900.

129 Sarie Maré [Marais?], immortalised in the Afrikaans song "My Sarie Marais", based on the American ditty "My Sweet Ellie Rhee", is, according to one theory, one of the most renowned Natal Afrikaner women. The song was apparently composed to honour Ds Paul Nel, her son, who always told stories about his mother. According to Jac Uys she came from Greytown, Natal, and was married to Louis Jacobus Nel. Her grave can be visited on the farm Welgevonden on the D479 road 14 km outside Greytown. See *Natal Witness*, 8 March 1993. For a comprehensive analysis of the various theories surrounding the song see: AC van Vollenhoven, "Die kenmerke en herkoms van die volkslied, Sarie Marais", *South African Journal for Cultural History*, 14(1), 2000, pp. 92-110.

130 PAR, CSO 1683: Correspondence regarding the removal of Peter (Piet) Hogg from the Eshowe to the Pietermaritzburg Prison, 8 August 1901–25 September 1901.

The policy statement issued in response was simple: The principle of allowing rebel prisoners the privilege of moving from one prison to another was wrong. Thus, the rebel prisoners and Annie Vermaak were informed that such requests would not be considered in future.¹³¹ However, this decision did not prevent other Natal Afrikaner women from applying, without success, to have their husbands transferred.¹³² The tough attitude adopted by the prison authorities ended the war-time requests for the transfer of rebel prisoners.

Conclusion

Natal Afrikaner women were not archetypical *volksmoeders*, as embodied by AP van Rensburg,¹³³ because they did not share the tradition of militarised citizenship, as embodied by the Boer Republics, in which women were “mirrors to male war”.¹³⁴ In spite of this, they, like the Boer women in the two republics, suffered much during the war and many-a-time saw how the most important cog of Afrikaner life, the domestic domain of the farm household, was destroyed.¹³⁵ As British subjects, however, they suffered because they were of the same ethnic origin as the invading Boer forces.

The reaction to this was two-fold. First, it bred a resentment towards what the British and Natal colonial authorities stood for as can be gathered from the following incident. Mrs Walton who had just returned from Britain wrote to Mary Schoon and her sister-in-law, Nellie Schoon, inviting them to become members of the Guild for Loyal Women. Nellie Schoon’s reply was stinging. She proclaimed that although she knew little of the Guild for Loyal Women she remembered the time when the organisation was simultaneously involved in the applause for the looter and thief Leander Starr Jameson, of Jameson Raid fame, in 1895 at the Ladysmith Station and the booing of the representative of the Crown, the governor. If this was the loyalty the Guild stood for, she did not think highly of it. Nellie Schoon furthermore pointed out they had received the invitation to join with surprise, since they had been branded and treated as rebels since the inception of the war despite the fact that they had done nothing to deserve such treatment. In the process, the hypocrisy of the English, in her view, was exposed “and we will despise them for that for the rest of our lives”.¹³⁶

131 PAR, PM 23: Correspondence regarding the transfer of PR Vermaak from Eshowe to the Pietermaritzburg Prison, 4 September 1901–14 September 1901

132 PAR, PM 25: Correspondence regarding the removal of GE von Benecke and GE Jordaan from the Eshowe to the Estcourt Prison, 20 December 1901–6 January 1902. A similar request by the 76-year-old Mrs AC Krogman for the transfer of her son OW Krogman was also refused.

133 J Elshain, *Women and war* (New York, Basic Books 1987), p. 58.

134 AP van Rensburg, *Moeders van ons volk* (Johannesburg, Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel, 1966), p. 26.

135 B Nasson, *The South African War, 1899-1902* (London, Arnold, 1999), pp. 62-63.

136 PAR, HF Schoon collection A 72: Diary entry, 12 February 1901, pp. 577-578, containing a copy of the letter of Nellie Schoon.

Secondly the persecution of Natal Afrikaners galvanised them into the broader nationalist Afrikaner fold. This is best described by Maggie Bester, sister of Mary Schoon:¹³⁷

How do these people feel who have brought this upon us? Have they any shame? We are staying with relatives and kind Dutch friends, until we have a home to go to. To-day I am proud to be called a dutch girl [sic], and hope no more will take me for an English girl as most of the military did in Harrismith, most of them said: But [sic] you're not Dutch? Most certainly I am, and proud of it.

137 PAR, HF Schoon collection A 72: "My experiences during the Anglo-Boer War" by Maggie Bester, 26 September 1900.