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Introduction

The South African War was a costly and bloody struggle. From the beginning of military operations in October 1899 to the signing of peace in Pretoria on the last day of May 1902 it claimed the lives of 22,000 imperial soldiers and over 7000 republican fighters. Almost 28,000 Boer civilians, most of them children under the age of sixteen, perished in British concentration camps during the war's protracted guerrilla phase. The conflict cost the British taxpayer more than £200 million and laid waste to large areas of the conquered Boer states.

The war owed its origin to the discovery in 1886 of gold deposits on the Witwatersrand in the South African Republic, the independent Boer state beyond the Vaal river. The region of the new mining capital, Johannesburg, thereafter began rapidly to industrialise, attracting international capital and a cosmopolitan immigrant (*uitlander*) population of mining engineers, artisans and fortune-seekers from Europe, America and the rest of South Africa. Thousands of migrant black workers from the subcontinent were also drawn to the Rand. By the end of 1895 the heavily mechanised and expensive extraction of gold from deep levels had begun, and by 1898 the Transvaal accounted for more than a quarter of the world's total gold output, the largest single source of supply.

The development of gold mining and its related industries, the geological and financial difficulties of extracting the Rand's gold deposits profitably, the regulation of the mining industry by the Boer oligarchy that controlled the Transvaal state, and the weakness of the state itself, all had profound political and economic consequences. The shift northward of the centre of economic activity in South Africa, from the Cape Colony to the Transvaal, was perceived as a threat to Britain's pre-eminent imperial influence in the subcontinent. The transformation of the South African Republic from near bankruptcy to prosperity gave new authority to the Pretoria regime; German commercial and political penetration of the Transvaal was a matter of no small concern to the British government; and in the corridors of Whitehall and Westminster there were many who believed the security of Britain's strategically important naval base on the Cape peninsula to be placed at risk. Britain's

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erstwhile colonial ambition in the region, to amalgamate the settler states into a stable, self-governing federation in which British interests would be safeguarded, seemed further away from realisation than ever before.

Although the gold discoveries at once posed a threat to Britain's geopolitical interests in the subcontinent, the successful long-term development of a profitable gold-mining industry in the Transvaal was nonetheless intrinsic to British interests. Between 60 and 80 per cent of foreign capital in the industry was British. During the latter part of the nineteenth century gold came to underpin and facilitate much of the world's expanding volume of international commerce, and by 1890 London had become the financial capital of world trade. A continuing increase in the world's stock of gold was essential to the stable growth of international transactions, and the Bank of England was especially keen to continue to strengthen its gold reserves, which doubled in value between 1890 and 1896.

Gold mining and industrialisation on the Rand were viewed from a different perspective by the regime in Pretoria. The government of President S. J. P. Kruger conceived of industrialisation as primarily serving the interests of a society rooted in the land, not the interests of the international financial community. Industry was therefore controlled and directed by the state on that basis. Concessions governing the railway system and the supply of dynamite raised mining costs, and little substantial progress was possible in reducing industrial labour costs. While a number of members of the Pretoria government supported the need for reforms to assist mining development in the 1890s, it nonetheless became apparent that the Boer regime was incapable of providing the large-scale state assistance that was needed to overcome the technical, economic and labour problems that confronted the gold-mining industry. It was increasingly recognised that Britain's interests, and those of her investors in the industry, could only be protected by the removal of the Boer oligarchy from control of the Transvaal state.

In these circumstances the interests of Britain and the Transvaal mining industry became closely entwined at the highest levels. In December 1895 the Jameson Raid took place, an abortive attempt to precipitate an *uitlander* insurrection that would provide a pretext for Britain intervening directly in the republic's affairs. It was organised by Cecil Rhodes, Kimberley diamond magnate and Cape prime minister whose Consolidated Gold Fields had substantial interests in the Transvaal, and was supported by Alfred Beit of Wernher-Beit & Eckstein, the largest mining group on the Rand responsible for about half the total production of gold. The conspiracy occurred with the connivance of various British colonial officials and, almost certainly, with the prior knowledge and general approval of the Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain. Afterwards diplomatic and political pressure was brought to bear on Kruger's government by sections of the *uitlander* population, by many of the leaders of industry in the Transvaal (especially those committed to long-range mining programmes), by the British government, and by its High Commissioner in South Africa, Sir Alfred Milner, with a view to bringing

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about the almost immediate enfranchisement of the *uitlander* community, and thereby ending the Boer oligarchy's domination of the Transvaal state. The Pretoria government, supported by the government of the sister Boer republic of the Orange Free State, was left with little alternative but to go to war to defend its control over the mineral revolution in the Transvaal.

Although both sides believed the conflict would probably be over by Christmas 1899, the Peace of Vereeniging, which brought the war to a conclusion, was not signed until almost thirty-two months later. During this period Britain mobilised in all 448,000 men and the Boers about 88,000 (including overseas volunteers and colonial rebels). The war passed through three distinct phases. At the start of the war the Boers launched three major offensives: commandos occupied northern Natal and besieged Ladysmith, invaded the Cape, and struck westwards to sever British communications with Rhodesia and lay siege to the British garrisons in Kimberley and Mafeking. On all three fronts – at Colenso, the Stormberg and Magersfontein – the Boers inflicted serious defeats on the British forces during 'black week' in December 1899.

Following the arrival in South Africa of heavy imperial reinforcements, and of Lord Roberts of Kandahar as Commander-in-Chief and Lord Kitchener of Khartoum as his Chief-of-Staff, a second phase of the war began during which the besieged towns of Ladysmith, Kimberley and Mafeking were relieved, the Boer advances beyond their frontiers reversed, and an offensive begun to conquer and occupy the Boer states. On 13 March 1900 Roberts's columns occupied Bloemfontein, and on 24 May the Orange Free State was annexed (to be known as the Orange River Colony). Johannesburg was entered by British troops on 31 May, and Pretoria captured on 5 June. President Kruger left the republic by the railway route to Lourenço Marques (Maputo), from where he sailed to Europe, dying four years later in Switzerland. On 1 September 1900 the Transvaal was annexed to the British crown. The war seemed to many all but won, and Roberts returned to London in triumph before the end of the year.

The period of conventional warfare was indeed over: but the third, more ruthless and prolonged phase of the war in which the Boers resorted to guerrilla tactics was only just beginning. Under the leadership of Louis Botha, Christiaan de Wet, J. C. Smuts and J. H. de la Rey, among many other astute and determined commando leaders, the Boers formed small, mobile military units which were able to evade capture by the British forces, and to continue to harass the imperial army by capturing supplies, disorganising the military's communications system and sometimes inflicting quite startling casualties on the army of occupation. At the end of 1900 and during the rest of the war a number of small-scale invasions into the Cape Colony were launched by the Boers to link up with rebel republican sympathisers. The success of the Boers' tactics enforced draconian methods of reprisal on the British, methods which began during the final period of Roberts's command and were intensified by Kitchener, his successor. To attempt to prevent the commandos from drawing

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shelter and sustenance from sympathetic civilians in the countryside, harsh penalties were introduced for aiding the guerrilla fighters, farms were burned and crops and livestock destroyed, and Boer women and children removed from the land and brought into concentration camps. To complement these tactics of 'scorched earth', 3700 miles of barbed-wire barricades and 8000 blockhouses were constructed to restrict the mobility of the guerrilla units. Finally, following the earlier failure of peace negotiations at Middelburg in March 1901, the war came to an end in Pretoria fourteen months later. The representatives of the Boer governments agreed to accept the British annexations of their states and to recognise the authority of the British monarch, Edward VII.

The impression has been perpetuated in numerous history books that the war was simply an Anglo-Boer struggle. In fact it was very much more than that. In a real sense it was a 'South African war', a conflict that directly touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of black people in whose midst the familiar dramas of the war unfolded. The war was fought in a region where white people made up only a fifth of the total population. In 1899 there were approximately one million whites in South Africa compared to four million Africans (including those living in Basutoland, the Bechuanaland Protectorate and Swaziland). Whites in the Cape Colony were outnumbered by Africans 3:1, in Natal the ratio was almost 10:1, in the Transvaal 4:1 and in the Orange Free State 2:1. South Africa also had a Coloured population of almost 500,000, most of whom lived in the Cape, and an Asian community of 100,000, most of whom lived in Natal. South Africa's majority population could not remain unaffected either by the two-and-a-half turbulent years of warfare or by the issues over which the war was fought and its subsequent implications.

Even before the formal beginning of military operations thousands of men were thrown out of work by the suspension of gold production on many of the Witwatersrand's gold mines, and by the dislocation of the migrant labour system in the subcontinent. Many rural communities whose economic prosperity and self-sufficiency had been undermined during the latter years of the nineteenth century found themselves having suddenly to support large numbers of men normally absent as migrant workers, on whose wages they had come to depend to stave off impoverishment. Black people became embroiled, often involuntarily, in some of the most celebrated episodes of the war, such as the three great sieges of Mafeking, Kimberley and Ladysmith. As the war dragged on into its ruthless guerrilla phase, the scorched earth tactics of the British army destroyed the livelihoods of many black peasants in the former Boer states; by the end of the war almost 116,000 Africans had been removed to concentration camps, in which over 14,000 refugees lost their lives.

But black people were not merely the victims of war. Over 100,000 became directly involved in the struggle as scouts, spies, guards, servants and messengers, and in a wide range of other occupations with the white armies.

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At least 10,000, and possibly as many as 30,000, blacks were fighting with the British army as armed combatants by the end of the war. On a less formal basis, black people took action to resist the Boer invasions of the Cape and Natal and to stem the tide of rebellion, they supplied the British army with invaluable intelligence, and during the guerrilla war they effectively closed hundreds of square miles of the annexed states to commando penetration. Indeed the war often took the form of fierce localised struggles in which landlords were driven from their farms, and their lands systematically occupied and cultivated by their black tenants. Peasants in many regions accumulated capital and extended and modernised their holdings by taking advantage of short-term labour contracts and high wages in military employment, by leasing oxen and waggons to the British army at very favourable rates, and by selling livestock, cereals and other produce at inflated prices.

The economic leverage afforded some sections of the black population during the war did not completely disappear in its immediate aftermath, but Britain's military victory nonetheless represented a significant milestone in the development of social relations in South Africa. The conflict had been fought principally in the interests of mining capital, and it was a world made safe for the profitable long-term development of gold mining that was the overriding objective of British reconstruction after the war, not the engineering of social changes in the interests of South Africa's black population, which many members of the black elite had looked forward to with optimism as the two sides moved towards war during 1899. The extension of the franchise to black people in the former Boer states was effectively precluded by the terms of the peace agreement, the military assisted landlords to reoccupy their farms, and in the industrial heartland the wages of black mineworkers were reduced and labour more closely regulated and controlled. Rural unrest, worker resistance and profound criticism of British policy by black political leaders were the result. The foundations of modern South Africa were successfully laid between 1902 and 1910, the year in which the Union came into being, and in which Britain's attempt to create a stable and modernised state compatible with the needs of mining capital – a campaign that had begun a little over a decade before in October 1899 – finally drew to its close.

The following study seeks to look afresh at the tumultuous events of 1899–1902, not from the point of view of the British army or the Boer commandos, or from the standpoint of either the imperial or republican governments, but rather from a hitherto largely unexplored perspective: namely, by situating the war in the context of a complex and rapidly changing colonial society, and focusing on the involvement in the struggle and the reactions to the war of South Africa's majority black population.

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Myth of a white man's war

At the beginning of the South African War the British and the Boers seemed in agreement on one issue at least: that the ensuing struggle would be a 'white man's war' in which the involvement of black people in the fighting would be confined to non-combatant roles. Until recently it had been generally assumed by historians that the shape this tacit agreement imposed on military operations was maintained throughout the course of the war. Rayne Kruger, in his book *Good-Bye Dolly Gray* (1959), described 'a phenomenon, so singular and astonishing, of a war fought across the breadth of a vast region, the majority of whose inhabitants were mere spectators'.[1] Writing of the war in the *Oxford History of South Africa* (1971), Leonard Thompson concluded that 'By tacit agreement both sides . . . refrained from involving the African peoples in their fighting, except as unarmed servants and scouts and, on the British side, as guards. Bitterly though the war was fought, it was a "white man's war".'[2]

Yet throughout the campaign allegations were persistently made that the opposing army was employing substantial numbers of black people as active participants in the war. In February 1900 General Sir Redvers Buller was informed by one of his officers in Natal that 'most men at the front are aware that there are armed natives fighting with the Boers'.[3] Later in the war a Boer commander, General J. C. G. Kemp, protested to Kitchener that in many instances the struggle was being fought 'contrary to civilised warfare on account of it being carried on in a great measure with Kaffirs'.[4]

In this chapter an examination will be made of white attitudes towards the involvement of black people in the struggle, and a study made of the extent to which the roles performed by blacks in the war differed in practice from those that had been conceived by both sides at the onset of hostilities. But first some consideration needs to be given to the nature of colonial society in South Africa, and an assessment made, related to this, of the roles undertaken by black people in the military systems of the white communities before the outbreak of war in 1899.

COLONIAL SOCIETY BEFORE THE WAR

South African society at the turn of the twentieth century was undergoing rapid and profound change. Thirty years before, in 1870, the majority of

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Africans still lived in independent chiefdoms. Those who did not, and who had become incorporated into the white settler states of the Cape Colony, Natal and the Boer republics beyond the Orange and Vaal rivers, still generally had access to land and control over their own labour.

Society in the Cape Colony had been largely structured by the needs of British mercantile capital following Britain's occupation of the Cape for the second time in 1806. She took over a colonial outpost committed to slavery and serfdom which during the declining years of the Dutch East India Company had been unable to exercise effective control over frontier settlers and African communities along its borders. Britain sought to create a self-supporting agricultural-based colony producing wool and other goods for the British market, and in turn providing a market for British manufacturers, that was based on an ideology of free trade and a relatively unfettered labour supply. African societies along the colony's frontiers were gradually penetrated by missionaries and merchants and begun to be incorporated into the Cape's economic system. During the second half of the century a prosperous class of African peasant farmers grew up in the Ciskei and Transkei, responding to the food needs of the new colonial towns in the region and to the demands of Cape merchants for wool and other animal products for export. Members of this class were able to gain access to the colony's property-based 'colour-blind' franchise. By creating a stronger colonial state with a more efficient military system, Britain sought to secure and then extend in an orderly way the Cape's eastern frontier, especially against the Xhosa. Yet for much of the nineteenth century the achievement of enduring frontier stability proved elusive and the colony remained a drain on the British exchequer. Although the Xhosa were progressively deprived of important agricultural land in a series of frontier wars, and lost much of their wealth in a disastrous millennial cattle-killing in 1856–7, their capacity to resist white encroachment and pressure was not finally undermined until the last quarter of the century.

From the 1830s settler society in the interior remained weak and fragmented for more than a generation. In Natal the Voortrekkers remained in small groups and subsisted mainly by hunting and bartering African produce for cattle. Early British settlement took much the same form, and for most of the nineteenth century the colonial state in Natal was not powerful enough to restructure African society to create a stable and assured farm labour force. Instead Natal's economy was based mainly on plantation agriculture employing indentured Indian workers and on absentee landlordism whereby large landowners and land companies drew rents from African tenants. When Natal was annexed by Britain in 1843 the Zulu king, Mpande, was able to reassert his kingdom's independence from the Voortrekkers north of the Tugela river. The Zulu state remained intact and independent within its new frontiers until 1879.

In the region bounded to the north and south by the Limpopo and Orange rivers, Tswana lands to the west and the Zulu and Swazi states to the east, dispersed Boer communities were forced to compete with African societies for

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control of land, livestock and trading commodities such as ivory and hides. With limited human and capital resources at their disposal, and in constant need of funds for military expenditure yet unable to extract taxes systematically, the Boer states lacked the capacity to extend and stabilise their frontiers. Indeed, the Boers were confronted by new pressures once the African societies recovered from the worst ravages of the *difaqane* wars, which had followed the rise of the Zulu kingdom in the 1820s and had paved the way for colonial penetration south of the Tugela and on the highveld, and once these societies also began to acquire firearms in significant quantities. The Boer republic in the Zoutpansberg, essentially a raiding and hunting community founded in the 1840s, could not sustain itself in the mid-1860s against determined resistance from the Venda and other African groups of the region. On two occasions, in 1852 and 1876, the Boers tried vainly to conquer the Pedi. The overthrow of the Zulu state was beyond the Boers' resources.

The economic and political landscape of southern Africa was transformed dramatically by the mineral revolution during the final three decades of the nineteenth century. Diamond mining in Griqualand West, which had begun in 1867, developed rapidly during the 1870s. By the end of the decade there were 22,000 black workers on the diamond fields; by 1888 diamond production at Kimberley was controlled by a single company, Cecil Rhodes's De Beers Consolidated; and by the outbreak of the South African War De Beers was responsible for half of the Cape Colony's exports. The impact of the Witwatersrand gold discoveries in 1886 was even more profound. The economy of the Transvaal, and of southern Africa as a whole, was revolutionised, and by 1899 Johannesburg and its neighbourhood had attracted a mining workforce of almost 100,000 blacks and 12,000 whites. The mineral discoveries engendered rapid growth in all other sectors of the economy, creating a strong demand for labour in road, rail, harbour and building construction and in a variety of service industries. Industrial manufacturing, at first closely related to mining, began to develop, land values rose (in some districts spectacularly) and the creation of new markets led to an increased demand for foodstuffs and therefore for locally-grown agricultural produce and farm labour.

The political configuration of the subcontinent was transformed during these years by the colonial incorporation of the remaining independent African chiefdoms and states. Basutoland was annexed by Britain in 1868; it was governed by the Cape Colony until the Basotho successfully resisted disarmament in the Gun War of 1880–1, and was subsequently administered directly as a British possession. Griqualand West was annexed as a crown colony in 1871 and in 1880 incorporated into the Cape Colony. The independence of the Zulu state was destroyed first by British arms in 1879 and later by the civil wars that followed in the wake of military defeat. Zululand was annexed in 1887 and incorporated into Natal a decade later. The Pedi were conquered in 1879 during the period of British administration in the Transvaal, which had been inaugurated peacefully two years before and which

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was ended two years later by Boer force of arms. Sekhukhune, the Pedi paramount, was imprisoned, and following his release assassinated in 1882. In 1884 Britain annexed the lands of the Tswana people as the Bechuanaland Protectorate and the Crown Colony of Bechuanaland, the latter being incorporated into the Cape Colony eleven years later. In 1878 the forces of the Gcaleka- and Ngqika-Xhosa had been crushed and in 1894 the last remaining portion of the Transkei, Pondoland, was annexed to the Cape. In the same year Swaziland became, with British approval, a 'political dependency' of the South African Republic.

New colonial relationships were forged in the annexed territories. European officials were appointed, in some cases reserves demarcated, and taxes introduced to pay for the new administration and to provide a stimulus to further African participation in the regional economy, in particular in the labour market. In those regions administered directly by Britain colonial power and authority was largely developed in collaboration with African rulers who consolidated their wealth and influence within the framework of the new colonial order, such as the Koena chiefs in Basutoland and the Ngwato ruler in Bechuanaland, Khama. Other rulers in time came to accept collaboration with the colonial authorities, such as the Kgatla chief, Lentshwe. In those cases where the political independence of African societies had been brought to an end by military force, and when the exercise of colonial power or the major influence upon it rested with a settler state, different patterns of relationships developed. For example, the structure of the Zulu state was undermined by encouraging fragmentation as a means of hastening political and economic dependence; support was given by the colonial authorities to the opponents of the Zulu royal lineage and between 1889 and 1898 the head of the Zulu royal house, Dinuzulu, was exiled to St Helena. In the eastern Transvaal the power of the Pedi state was further weakened after military defeat by land alienation and the demarcation of locations, and by the undermining of the role of the paramountcy in Pedi affairs. Sekhukhune's heir was a small child, and a succession of regents were appointed whose exercise of authority largely depended upon the support of Boer officials.

The social changes throughout southern Africa set in motion by expanding commodity and labour markets on the one hand and colonial incorporation on the other were inescapable and profound. Labour mobilisation for farms, and above all industry, became of paramount importance. Though labour migration had been a feature of a number of African societies before the mineral revolution, its scale, and the means employed by the colonial states to procure labour, increased in scope and intensity thereafter. More and more it was a question of necessity rather than choice that drew men into labour migration. The imposition of colonial taxation followed hard on the heels of colonial incorporation. While those sections of the black population with continued access to land and markets prospered from the increasing local demand for agricultural produce, land dispossession, population growth, soil

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deterioration and changing patterns of agricultural production were already taking their toll on the economic self-sufficiency of increasing numbers of African homesteads in many areas. The rinderpest epidemic in 1896–7, a virulent cattle disease that accounted for the loss of as much as 90 per cent of African cattle in the subcontinent, pushed many homesteads into indebtedness and drove men on to the labour market in unprecedented numbers.

In the late-nineteenth century, therefore, powerful agents of social change were at work in South Africa. Within thirty years of the Rand gold discoveries a single capitalist state dominated by whites was to be created south of the Limpopo from the two British settler colonies and the two Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State. Yet on the eve of war, while the processes of social change created by the mineral revolution were clearly discernible, the structures of a society based on industrialisation were less rigid and secure than they were to become later. The acute shortage of labour in southern Africa during the 1890s bears testimony to the fact that mining capital was only in the early stages of transforming the colonial states of the region. The colonial incorporation of the major African chiefdoms of the region was a relatively recent occurrence. Twenty years before, the Zulu, Pedi, Swazi and the Tswana chiefdoms remained independent. In 1880–1 the Basotho successfully resisted the military forces of the Cape Colony. It was not until 1898 that Venda power in the northern Transvaal was at last defeated by the Boers. Indeed, in the late 1890s it was in the South African Republic, the scene of the gold revolution on the Rand, that the power of the settler state was weakest and relationships in the countryside between landlord and tenant most unstable.[5]

Social changes in South Africa in the late-nineteenth century had important implications for the way black people were regarded by the settler states as military collaborators. Before examining these implications, however, an analysis needs to be made of the ways in which Coloureds and Africans participated in the military systems of the white communities during the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries.

MILITARY COLLABORATION BEFORE 1899

The most distinctive form of white military organisation that evolved in South Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the commando – a body of men raised locally from among the civilian population that was summoned to deal with a particular emergency and disbanded when its task was completed. During the earliest period of white settlement at the Cape the commando originally consisted exclusively of soldiers provided by the Dutch East India Company, but settlers soon became involved directly in defence matters, and as early as 1715 the first entirely civilian commando, led by burgher officers nominated by the Company, was sent out against San groups on the northern frontier. As time passed by the defence of the frontier communities that grew up many miles away from Cape Town increasingly

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