

Notes for Roundtable 9 November 2022.

Researching the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902: The Practice and the Future.

Organizers: The Centre for History and Cultural Anthropology and the Centre for Southern Africa Studies, Institute for African Studies (IAS), Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow.

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When I was invited by South African and Russian colleagues to participate in this seminar, I chose to join in after some consideration. It was a chance to delve deeper into the Scandinavian engagement around England's annexation of the Boer republics. The topic is on the periphery of my research field, but I found there was something to learn. A complication was that the Danish government had put pressure on the universities to avoid contacts with Russian state institutions because of the Ukrainian situation. Now, I am not formally attached to the university at the moment, and I have had good experiences with the collaboration with Russian (and before that Soviet) Africa researchers. Especially around South African historiography, since the Soviet Union had a hand in the struggle for Southern Africa's liberation from colonialism. I visited Vladimir Shubin (SUKP's Africa expert and subsequently leader of the IAS) in Moscow already in the late 1980s and IAS again at a conference in 2002.

Although, I have limited admiration for the current national-conservative politics of the Russian government or for revanchist foreign policy, there could be reasons to participate. As an activist of the anti-apartheid movement, I supported the academic boycott of South Africa. However, in reality that did not mean that we severed all intellectual connections. On the contrary; the alliance with progressive academics in the country constituted a significant factor in the work to change the régime.

So, even if I did not submit a paper, I decided to take part in the event. The following is simply some discussion notes.

The Boer War as a subject holds many analogies to current conflicts: Great power rivalry, revanchism and annexation; imperialist dispute over raw materials, export and markets; the necessity felt by the weaker part in a conflict to strike first; support for minorities outside own borders; the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war; the persistence of national identity; lasting public awareness of history as collective memory; the use of monuments and memorials for personal and collective identification with a higher cause or for reconciliation, just to mention a few.

Also, I was interested in learning more about the war efforts of volunteers. An uncle of mine was killed during the Spanish Civil War as a volunteer in the International Brigades. As a Danish communist, he was staying at the Comintern party school in Moscow at the outbreak of war and decided to go directly from there to Spain. He became a lieutenant in the Scandinavian company in the Thälmann Battalion, but fell quite early in the war during the battle of Guadalajara. Could I find any parallels to the case of the Scandinavian Corps in the South African War? Not many similarities as it turned out.

The Scandinavian angle to the history of the Boer War also interested me of another reason. I have been researching the history and historiography of the Nordic anti-apartheid support to South Africa (Nordic Solidarity with South Africa: A Danish perspective, *South African Historical Journal*, Volume 71, 2019, Issue 1). There have been disagreements between Swedish and Danish researchers over the role of the Scandinavian countries. Some Swedish colleagues have (in my interpretation at least) claimed that Sweden ought to have a special (historical) place in the hearts and minds of South Africans. Mostly because of their government support to the ANC in exile, but also because of threads drawn as far back as to the engagement of Swedes in the Boer War (Håkan Thörn, *Anti-Apartheid and the*

Emergence of a Global Civil Society, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 78-79). Personally, I do not think that this historical link has had any current importance and that the claim has probably mostly been about furthering Swedish goodwill, influence and export in the post-apartheid situation.

The Scandinavian Corps was a volunteer corps that fought on the side of the Afrikaners against the British empire during the South African War (S. Bojerud, Scandinavian volunteers in the Anglo Boer War, 1899–1902, *Military History Journal*, 14, 2009; Christian Gerdov, *De kunde icke vika, blott falla kunde de*, *Militärhistorisk tidskrift*, 2017). Close to half of the approximately 50 corps members fell during the Battle of Magersfontein on December 11, 1899 and most of the remaining were taken prisoners. The way the prisoners of war were treated stirred anti-English feelings in some circles in Scandinavia.

I have taken a rather preliminary look at the public opinion in the Nordic countries and the views of the Danish press and Danish politicians on the Boer War, and have also read some of the contemporary Danish literature.

As far as I can tell, no volunteers travelled from Denmark to South Africa in sympathy with the Boer republics. Only Danes, who already lived in South Africa, took part in the war. More Swedes and Norwegians participated than Danes. General migration during the 1800s were less comprehensive from Denmark due to better social conditions for farmers and workers. Poverty was historically more widespread in Norway and Sweden. Most migrated to the Americas, but some ended up in South Africa.

There were at least six Scandinavians who came to South Africa as military observers, attaches or war correspondents during the conflict. Some historians have maintained that Boer strategy was to have an effect on both Sweden and Norway's defensive planning in World War I and II and that the Norwegian underground in the latter war used some of the Boer tactics against the Nazis. I have to say, I see that mostly as post-rationalisation.

When the war broke out in 1899, there was considerable sympathy towards the two Boer republics in the Nordic countries according to Alan Winquist (*Scandinavians and South Africa: Their Impact on the Cultural, Social and Economic Development of pre-1902 South Africa*, Cape Town & Rotterdam, 1978). The war was by many considered to be an obvious example of a great power trampling on the rights of a numerically small people whose only desire was self-determination. Also, in the Netherlands and Germany there were strong feelings of support. Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands sent a Dutch warship to bring Paul Kruger, the Afrikaner president, to Holland after he had to flee from the South African Republic in August 1900. Speakers well known from press and culture, including South Africans, gave talks on the importance of aid. However, no prominent Boer leader visited the Scandinavian countries.

In Denmark there were divided opinions. Many people saw the British Empire as the guarantor for stability and order, and as a counterbalance to the growing Prussian power, with which Denmark had been at war in 1864, when the Germans occupied parts of southern Denmark. Also, some people motivated by a modernisation mindset tended to support the British.

However, Denmark had (like Russia during the Crimean War) actually been at war with England in the 1800s (during the Napoleonic Wars, where we were also formally at war with Sweden and lost control over Norway).

The Danish Social Democrats' sympathies toward the Boers were seen in their main newspaper, *Social Demokraten* (at this point in time still more revolutionary than reformist). The paper viewed the conflict as an unequal struggle between small nations simply striving for their independence and the British world power. The motive was seen as simply capitalist robbery; desire for gold. The liberal-radical paper, *Politiken*, also was pro-Boer, at least in the beginning of the war.

In the other Scandinavian countries, there was even more support for the brave, downtrodden Boers as reflected in inputs by the Nobel prize winning Norwegian writer, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. The Swedish editor and politician, Branting, wrote long series of articles and letters describing the conflict. His paper also condemned the English labour movement for not applying enough pressure to change this "*chauvinism and war-mongering*". A number of Swedish liberal and conservative newspapers were also pro-Boer. The country's largest newspaper, pictured the Boers in a romantic vein, calling them "Africa's Dalkarlar" (independent freeholder farmers from the Swedish hinterland).

In Norway, the conservative Oslo newspaper, Aftenposten, was sympathetic to the Afrikaaner cause. In the Scandinavian press, much attention was placed on the prisoner issue. Letters appeared in the newspapers from Scandinavian prisoners of war. This issue caused hard feelings between Scandinavians and Britons until the prisoners were released at the end of the war. Many of them chose to return "home" to Scandinavia.

As mentioned, most of the Danish volunteers already lived in the Boer republics at the outbreak of war. However, many Danes in the British colonies were pro-British. Members of the Cape Town Danish Society and Scandinavian businessmen felt that many of the newspapers in their old countries were much too pro-Boer. In March 1902, fifty Scandinavians in Cape Town protested against the anti-British articles appearing in Nordic newspapers.

Also in Sweden, a number of the largest newspapers were actually pro-English. Stockholm's Dagblad, the conservatives' main organ, was from the beginning clearly pro-English. Sweden's renowned liberal newspaper, Dagens Nyheter, was also friendly to the British. One of the largest papers, Stockholms Tidningen, appears to be more or less neutral. Sydsvenska Dagbladet had a hard time deciding, which foreign event in 1899-1900 that deserved most attention; the Boer War or the Boxer Rebellion in China.

Little by little, the support for the Boers decreased. A letter written by Wilhelm Webber, a Dane and resident of the Transvaal for eight years, declared that he was forced to take up arms to help the Boers against his will and that he was not alone. In January 1900, the Times reported a gift of 12,000 packets butter from Danish farmers for the British soldiers in South Africa, mirroring that the English market was of growing importance for Danish agricultural export. Many Scandinavian businessmen in South Africa, believed an English victory would ensure better possibilities for increased trade. The Cape Times reported a meeting of the Cape Town Danish Society attended by some seventy people protesting the anti-British statements appearing in the Danish papers.

According to Tore Furberg (The Swedish Missionaries and Home Opinion During the Boer War, Svenska Missionstidskrift) and Professor Sven Lundkvist, Uppsala University, there was a definite split in Nordic public opinion at the time.

I can only agree. And the war was not high on the public agenda in Denmark. The newspapers here were more marked by the 1899-1900 struggles on the labour market, which laid the foundation for the Danish labour market model, and by the dawning transition to parliamentarism after a period of limited democracy and provisional legislation. The importance of the Boer War for the Nordic countries and the Scandinavian effort in the conflict definitely needs further research.

МИНИСТЕРСТВО НАУКИ И ВЫСШЕГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ
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[The Centre for History and Cultural Anthropology](#) and the [Centre for Southern Africa Studies](#) are holding an on/offline round table:

Researching the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902: The Practice and the Future

Date: 9 November 2022

Venue: Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, with an optional online attendance (by Zoom).

The round table marks the 120th anniversary of the end of the first major armed conflict of the twentieth century.

The current attitudes of South Africans towards this war seem ambiguous. It was fought predominantly by European settlers for sovereignty over territories that had been taken over from African peoples. The collective memory of this conflict was long cultivated for political purposes by the National Party. It is believed that the causes of this war, as well as its military and international aspects, have been exhaustively investigated. Studying, let alone commemorating, this war is not a priority in South Africa, where the attention of scholars and the public has been drawn to the history of African peoples and their liberation struggle. The notion that this war shaped the South African nation ('the War for South Africa', to use Bill Nasson's expression), has not been entrenched in popular consciousness.

However, over the past decades, the historiography of the war has expanded. The military aspects, such as strategy, tactics and the outcome of hostilities, have become less prominent. Instead, cultural history has come to the foreground: the significance of the Anglo-Boer War for international relations; lived experiences of combatants and civilians; wartime violence and its victims; the influence of the attitudes, which were formed during and as a consequence of the conflict, on social change in South Africa. The participation of Africans, both on and off the battlefield, has been diligently researched.

Public interest in this war has not disappeared. Boer War groups are active in social networks. Leading publishers in South Africa bring out works of popular scholarship on this war. The conflict is still regarded as a crucial event in the history of Afrikaners, which contributed to the strengthening of their ethnic consciousness.

Moreover, an interest in the Anglo-Boer War still exists outside South Africa. In Russia, the past decades saw the publication of popular books, chapters in academic books (for example, by the prominent historians Apollon Davidson and Irina Filatova) as well as articles in magazines and scholarly journals. Besides, Gennady Shubin (Institute for African Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences), in collaboration with his colleagues from the Institute of World History, brought out a 13-volume collection of documents on the Russian involvement in the war.

Although the Anglo-Boer War occupies an insignificant place in the historical consciousness of Russians, it has been rediscovered by bloggers. On Russian online platforms, there have been lively discussions of the support for the Boer republics by the Russian Empire as well as of the participation of Russian volunteers in the hostilities on the side of the republican forces. Russian politicians, diplomats and public figures have appealed to the memory of the Anglo-Boer War.

Our round table will help to stimulate dialogue between Russian and international historians who study the Anglo-Boer War.

The following themes will be discussed:

- The main aspects of the historiography of the Anglo-Boer War
- The Anglo-Boer War studies in Russia and South Africa
- The Russian involvement in the Anglo-Boer War in the context of the Russian volunteers' participation in military conflicts.

As a result, we would like to discern possible routes to solving the following problems:

- Is there potential for a more robust study of the Anglo-Boer War and for exploring new themes?
- What are the most promising directions in the Anglo-Boer War studies?

The round table will be held in a mixed mode (online and offline).

Papers are welcome. Please, submit an abstract by **01 October 2022**.

Your application should include:

- Your details: name and surname, affiliation, academic degree
- Contact details: email and telephone number.
- The topic of your presentation, with a brief abstract.
- Technical requirements.

Email for submissions: vgribanova@mail.ru

If you would like to take part in the discussion or watch the event, please, email for a Zoom link: vgribanova@mail.ru

Working languages: English and Russian.

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