

REPORTS OF NEUTRAL MILITARY OBSERVERS DURING THE ANGLO-BOER WAR

(The Reports of two Russian Military Attachés, 1899-1900)

Introduction

The outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa on 11 October 1899 drew the attention of the general staffs in several neutral countries. They sent together no less than nineteen military observers to the armed forces engaged in South Africa; ten to the British army and nine to the allied forces of the Boer republics.¹

During the last quarter of 1899 and the first quarter of 1900 several military attachés arrived in South Africa, eager to report to their superiors at home. Some of them were already attached to embassies abroad, while others were professional officers on service in their neutral home countries, receiving for the occasion the diplomatic status of a military attaché in order to give them the necessary facilities expected from the governments at war in South Africa.

One of the attachés with the British army was Colonel Stakhovich, the military attaché domiciled at the Imperial Russian embassy in London. One of the attachés with the Boer army was Lieutenant-Colonel Romeiko-Gurko, an officer in the Russian army. Mrs Elizabeth Foxcroft, senior lecturer in Russian language and literature at the University of South Africa in Pretoria, has received microfilms of the confidential despatches sent by these Russian observers to their general staff, from the State Library of the Soviet Union in Moscow as a special favour. These microfilms are extracts from a book containing the reports of the Russian military attachés in South Africa and Europe during the Anglo-Boer War. This book was available only to army officers, not to the public.

Mrs Foxcroft has translated the despatches into English as far as they are of historical interest to South Africans. The translation is printed in this and in the following issue of this journal. An introduction to this translation and explanatory notes have been added by a colleague of Mrs Foxcroft at the University of South Africa, Dr C. de Jong.

It is fortunate that Mrs Foxcroft has obtained despatches from Russian observers on the British side as well as the Boer side. Thereby the reader gets a critical view of both parties at war. But how different was the treatment they received from the respective general staffs to which they were attached! Colonel Stakhovich and his colleagues from other neutral countries were treated by the British Headquarters very hospitably and courteously; they had their special British liaison officer of high rank — first Colonel Ivor Herbert, then Colonel Sir Hugh Downe. They were well cared for, received by the highest British authorities and entertained lavishly with dinners, parties and excursions. But they were not permitted to go to the front and to see any war operations as long as the luck of war was against the British. They had to stay in their expensive hotel at Cape Town. They protested and at last received permission to travel to the front in Natal. There they did not go farther than Pietermaritzburg because the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Redvers Buller, refused categorically to admit them to the Tugela front. All kinds of silly pretexts were invented to keep the attachés away from the front and to prevent them from seeing, hearing and reporting things that would be unpleasant to the damaged prestige of the British army and government. We read the frustration and anger

felt by the attachés in Stakhovich's despatches, who considered his position as a would-be tourist ridiculous.

When Lord Frederick Roberts, the new Commander-in-Chief, arrived in Cape Town the attachés were obliged to return from Natal to that city. At last, after another protest, they were admitted to the front because there the tide had turned to the advantage of the British army. The attachés were allowed to travel to Paardeberg to be present at the expected surrender of the besieged Boer army commanded by Piet Cronjé, but emphatically requested not to follow the Commander-in-Chief, in other words to keep out of his way. No wonder that they felt the British considered them as a nuisance.

The visit to the camp of the British besiegers of Cronjé did not increase British prestige in the attachés' eyes. Stakhovich paints a lurid picture of the Augean stable in which the besiegers had to live, but he ignored their extreme difficulties. As a good neutral observer, he does not spare his criticism of both parties at war, but his mind becomes more and more anti-British, and his sympathy is clearly on the Boers' side. This is specially evident in his narrative of the white flag incident at Abrahamskraal, exploited by British propaganda but according to him an invented story.

The plight of the attachés with the British army is humourously and possibly with some exaggeration described by the unknown author of a historical novel about a Russian woman doctor who volunteered for the Boer army dressed like a man. This author was possibly an eyewitness of the war, because the background of his story gives an impression of authenticity. The heroine was looking for the Russian military attaché in Bloemfontein because she wanted his help. She tells: 'I found him after a time but in what a piteous condition! He and the other attachés were housed on one small place and were all of them under the vigilant supervision of an English colonel. One could not possibly see any of the attachés without first consulting and giving particulars to this colonel. This was no Transvaal, where all the attachés were welcome and honoured guests, free to move about as they pleased. Needless to say our meeting led to no positive results of any kind.'²



Foreign military attachés with the British army in South Africa. Sitting from left to right. Captain Slocum (USA); Commandant D'Amade (France); Captain Baron von Lüttwitz (Germany). Standing from left to right: Major Gentilini (Italy); Colonel Stakhovich (Russia); Captain Robert Trimmel (Austria-Hungary)

Most military attachés followed the British army on its victorious march from Bloemfontein to Pretoria and then further to the frontier of Mozambique. Later we find them again in Pretoria where they stayed for several months during the ensuing guerrilla war. There is a photo of seven of them — among them Stakhovich — in the company of their liaison officer, Colonel Lord Doron, shortly after the death of Queen Victoria on 22 January 1901; the black band around the left arm of Lord Doron is a token of mourning assumed by the British officers for a few weeks. These attachés intended probably to observe guerrilla warfare which was in full swing over the whole of the Boer republics.

No details of Stakhovich's life and career are available because in the Soviet-Russian general encyclopaedia of 1974 no volumes after the letter M have been published, and because Mrs Foxcroft's repeated requests to officials in the USSR to send these details have remained unanswered.

Lieutenant Colonel Gurko

The other Russian military attaché in South Africa was Lieutenant Colonel Vassili Iossifovitch Romeiko-Gurko, then an officer of the

Imperial General Staff with the Commander-in-Chief of the Warsaw Military Region (Poland was in 1899 a Russian province). The official encyclopaedia of the USSR, **Bolshaya Sovietskaya Entsiklopedia**, volume 7, Moscow 1972, page 454, contains an article on him which has been translated by Mrs Foxcroft. He was the son of Field-Marshal Iosif V. Romeiko-Gurko who commanded the Russian army which invaded Turkey in 1877. He was born in 1864 and educated at the military school of the Corps des Pages until 1885. He entered the Academy of the General Staff and finished there in 1892. He was military attaché with the Boer forces in South Africa and took part in the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-05. In October 1905 he was appointed chairman of the commission entrusted to write the history of the Russo-Japanese War. From 1911 he was in command of the First Cavalry Division, from November 1914 commander of the Sixth Army Corps, later of the Fifth, and from August 1916 of the Special Armies. From October 1916 to February 1917 he was chief-of-staff to the Russian commander-in-chief. Upon his initiative regiments consisting of four battalions were changed into three. After the February Revolution in Russia (1917) he was in command of all the armies on the western front. On May 23, however, he was demoted to commander of only a division for making statements favourable to the monarchy and unfavourable to the Provisional Government. In July 1917 he was arrested for corresponding with Tsar Nicholas II and deported. In 1919 he refused the command of the White Russian armies of the north and north east of Russia. He died in Paris in 1937.

He wrote a confidential report on the Anglo-Boer War for the General Staff with the title **Voina Anglii s Uzhno-Afrikanskimi respublikami 1899-1901**, published by the Military Topography Section of the General Staff in St Petersburg in 1901, running to 335 pages with maps of military operations. He showed his warm feelings for the Tsar in his book **Tsar i Tsarina**, published in Paris, after the Revolution (123 pages).

The experiences of the other Russian military attaché in the Anglo-Boer War are of an entirely different nature. The republican governments and general staffs granted the military attachés complete liberty to travel where they

liked and even gave a second welcome to Gurko and his Dutch colleague, Lieutenant L. W. J. K. Thomson, after they had let themselves be taken prisoner by the British at Abrahamskraal, and returned to the Boer forces via Lourenço Marques. The neutral military attachés each received from the Boer government two horses, a mule cart with mules, a black driver and a tent, all free of charge. Occasionally they received official permission to travel by train when transport by rail was restricted for military purposes, and were lodged in houses or hotels commanded by the republican governments. But for the rest they had to fend completely for themselves and to seek their own transport, food and lodgings.

Like the British general staff the republican governments appointed a kind of liaison officer for the military attachés to take care of them. He was Percy Fischer, son of Abraham Fischer, member of the Volksraad and the Executive Council of the Orange Free State. Percy let himself be photographed with six of them in March 1900, sitting in homely fashion flat upon the grass. But in the same month his father was sent with two other Boer officials on a desperate help-seeking mission to Europe, and in the turmoil of the Boer army's retreat in the following months no official or officer was available to take special care of the foreign attachés.

They joined the commandos in the front line and accompanied various Boer generals like Christian de Wet, Koos de la Rey and Louis Botha on their strenuous campaigns. For this reason the life of these attachés was much less comfortable, harder and more adventurous and dangerous than the life which their pampered colleagues on the British side led. As stated before, two of them were captured by the British and sent to Cape Town, where they were placed under pressure to return to Europe, but at last allowed to rejoin the Boer forces via the neutral port of Lourenço Marques. The Dutch attachés Ram and Asselbergs fell ill from typhus or dysentery, the Dutch attaché Nix died from a wound caused by British shrapnel and the French attaché Raoul-Duval was thrown off his horse and had to recover from a concussion of the brain and to return to France. Captain Demange escaped with a flesh wound which healed in a few weeks.

Their adventures and impressions of the South African theatre of war inspired several of them to write lively military reports and fascinating journalistic work.

Gurko and the remaining attachés followed the retreating Boer commandos, often in the rear of the Boer rearguard and pursued by British cavalry, from Bloemfontein to Pretoria and eastward to the Portuguese frontier. They left the Transvaal after the last pitched battle of the war at Dalmanutha on 26 August 1900 and the British march to the Portuguese frontier. For them the war was at its end and they returned via Lourenço Marques to their home countries where they wrote their final reports.

As we in South Africa are far from the military archives in the USSR we have little data about the lives and careers of the Russian attachés in the Anglo-Boer war. I have found occasional references to Gurko in books on this war. The 'Bittereinder' Ronald William Schikkerling from Johannesburg mentioned him when he described the battle of Dalmanutha in his war diary: 'A Russian attaché, on a gaily caparisoned horse, rode up from some adjoining position and hailed us in German. Liepoldt, with Harry, an artillery man, was just at that moment busy backing the wheeled Maxim into shelter, when a shrapnel exploded over our heads and sowed the bulk of its leaden contents over the Maxim, striking three of the mules, the attaché's horse, and smashing a ramrod in Harry's hand and several spokes in the wheels. The Russian's horse was struck on the nose, the bullet passing through the tongue and chin. The animal plunged, but the rider remained quite calm, asking us in an ignorant sort of way whether his horse was "kaput" (finished).'³ This story is a proof of the calmness of the attachés as professional soldiers shown under the enemy's fire.

The Dutchman C. G. S. Sandberg, General Louis Botha's adjutant, who took special notice of the attachés, wrote of Gurko in

the campaign from Pretoria to the Portuguese frontier: 'Lieutenant-colonel Gurko, small and frail, always neatly and correctly dressed, could even manage in a mysterious way and to our amazement and admiration to keep his long light blue-grey overcoat in which he enveloped himself as his only cover by night, spotlessly clean, as clean as his uniform, although he had to sleep like us for the last few days in the veld on the naked earth. I must add, however, that we had no rain in those days.'⁴

Sandberg tells that Gurko succeeded in escaping from the Russian port at Port Arthur when the Japanese laid siege to it during the Russo-Japanese war in 1904.

NOTES:

1. The ten military attachés with the British army were, in alphabetical order: Commandant d'Amade (France); Major Estéban (Spain); Major Gentilini (Italy); Captain Hiraoka (Japan); Captain baron van Lüttwitz (Germany); Captain Slocum (USA); Colonel Stakhovich (Russia); Captain Robert Trimmel (Austria-Hungary); Captain Arvid M. Th. E. Wester (Sweden), not on the official list of military attachés because he was not admitted in this capacity by the British authorities before the arrival of Lord Roberts in Cape Town; he is the author of the strictly professional military work *Krigserfarenheter fraan Boerkriget*, Gustaf Lindströms Boktryckeri, Stockholm 1902, 234 pp; Enver Bey (Turkey). The nine military attachés on the Boer side were, in alphabetical order: Captain Julius Allum (Norway); Lieutenant C. J. Asselbergs (Dutch East Indies); Captain M. G. Demange (France); Lieutenant R. Raoul-Duval (France); Lieutenant-Colonel V. I. Romeiko-Gurko (Russia); Lieutenant M. J. Nix (Dutch East Indies); Lieutenant J. H. Ram (Netherlands); Lieutenant L. W. J. K. Thomson (Netherlands); Captain Reichman (USA). Previously Mrs E. Foxcroft published translations in English of despatches sent by other Russian military attachés, reporting on the Anglo-Boer War, but they were domiciled in Europe and did not visit South Africa. They were Colonel Ermolov of the Russian embassy in London, probably the successor of Colonel Stakhovich who had left that post for South Africa, and Lieutenant-Colonel Miller of the Russian embassy in Brussels. The translations are in the article by Mrs E. Foxcroft, "The Anglo-Boer War in the despatches of Russian military attachés", in *Historia, Ampelike Orgaan van die Historiese Genootskap van Suid-Afrika* volume 8, Nr. 1, 1963, pp 13-44.
2. E. Williams-Foxcroft, "How I was a volunteer in the Transvaal — uit Russies vertaal"; in *Hertog-Annale van die Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns*, Jaarboek XI, Desember 1964, Pretoria 1965, pp 118-119.
3. R. W. Schikkerling, *Commando Courageous, A Boer's diary*. Hugh Keartland Publishers, Johannesburg 1964, p 49.
4. C. C. S. Sandberg, *Twintig jaren onder Krugers Boeren in voor- en tegenspoed*. Amsterdam 1943, p 309.

**'DONESENYIA GENERALNOGO SHTABA
TPOLKOVNIKA STAKHOVICHА КОМАНДИ-
ROVАННОГО НА ТЕАТР ВОЕННИХ
ДЕИСТВИИ В УЖНУИУ АФРИКУ.'**

**'THE DESPATCHES OF COLONEL STAKHOVICH,
OF THE GENERAL STAFF DESPATCHED TO THE
THEATRE OF MILITARY OPERATIONS
IN SOUTH AFRICA.'**

**[First despatch dated October 27, 1899 (new
style); last May 8, 1900].**

London, October 27, 1899

The officers appointed to accompany English troops are: From France Major d'Amade; from Germany the resident Attaché Militaire here; from the USA their military attaché in Portugal; and myself.¹ We are all leaving on Saturday, November 6th . . . together with a squadron of the Scots Greys — the regiment of His Majesty Our Emperor.² We will be accompanied everywhere and placed under the charge of Colonel Herbert, the former English Military Attaché in St Petersburg.

The English government has kindly given us the opportunity to purchase a horse, each at the local price paid by the army, £65 . . . We are also given an orderly each and both they and the horses (the second horse we will buy on the spot) are to be kept at the State's expense.

Many small favours are bestowed upon us, but I fear that we will be deprived of the most essential — the possibility of seeing military operations at close hand. It looks as if we are going to be kept in the distance. That is, naturally, very unpleasant . . .

In conclusion I consider it imperative to mention that public opinion and the press here are awaiting, with an extraordinary nervous-

ness, hostile and decisive actions both from us and France. The Persian Gulf is indicated as a possible locality for future developments.

That is the only explanation for the start of mobilisation of the reserve squadron here.

London, November 6

I do not consider it possible to inform you about current events in the theatre of military operations — mainly because in London, less than anywhere else, is one in the position to gather correct information concerning the war.

The whole of the press, including the liberal and the radical organs, wholeheartedly supports the government in its desire to hide the truth. The opposition press attacks the government (in quite a sharp manner) for the very fact of the war and the insufficient state of preparedness; as for criticism of military operations, that is very limited on account of the lack of factual material, because all information coming from the theatre of war is subjected to most stringent censorship. Serious protests have been made lately against this restricting measure.

Public opinion in England is very much more upset by the latest failures in Natal than would appear from the newspapers.³

November 14 (1899) on board the 'Bavarian'

The ship is roomy and excellently appointed... One half of it is given over to one battalion and a company of medical orderlies, and the other to the second battalion and a company of sappers...

Each half of the ship has its own kitchen... Although these are very small — 12 by 15 square arshins (1 arshin = 28 inches) — food is prepared for 1 200 men in each of them. Order and cleanliness in these kitchens are quite exemplary. It is worth drawing attention to the depth of the cooking pots, which are up to 2½ arshins (70 inches) deep. The stores and refrigerators are arranged in a most practical way, so that the overall impression is that not even a tiny corner is wasted in this huge ship. Everything is put to good use...

The discipline on board is excellent. The relations between the lower ranks and the officers are very simple and natural. Men have the freedom to go about as they like, even on the officers' deck, and do not abuse the privilege.

26 November, on the 'Bavarian'

The Lee Metford rifle is unsatisfactory from the point of view of loading. Cartridges are put in one by one, slowly, and often get jammed which slows down the operation even more...⁵

Cape Town, December 11

Yesterday on 10 December we arrived in Cape Town... From the newspapers we learnt that General Buller is in Natal, and because of that we insistently asked Col Herbert to arrange that permission should be given to us to proceed there. However, he soon informed us that our requests could not be satisfied under any circumstances and that we must await General Buller's return to Cape Town, as he has gone to Natal without his General Staff but only with his personal secretary and aide-de-camp and will be back here shortly.⁶ All our protests and our efforts of persuasion were of no avail...

Rooms at the best hotel here, and in no way inferior to the best hotels in Europe.⁷

Today we made a few necessary calls, and signed our names in the guest book of the Governor, (Sir Alfred Milner) on whose behalf we had already yesterday received invitations to dinner this evening...

In spite of the rumour that 2 300 Hollanders have joined the Transvaal forces,⁸ and of the difficult situation caused by the tenacious resistance offered by the Boers, the English have maintained absolute calm and their former unshakable assurance in victory...

The second impression which has struck me is the light effect produced by the small calibre Mauser bullets. The wounds from them are not serious on the whole. I met several officers, wounded 8 days ago, who had already recovered sufficiently to join the ranks again. This fact has been confirmed by every person I have spoken to...

5 December

My first week's stay has not been satisfactory from the point of view of my mission here. From morning to night we (that is the Military Attachés) are forced to make official and sometimes unofficial calls, participate in dinner functions given in our honour, reciprocate them, make excursions and give little time to military occupations and even then we see what we are shown rather than what we would like to see.

In one word, we are made to feel that we are wanted, but they do not want to show us what matters most to us...

I doubt if our governments will be particularly pleased to hear that we are just enjoying life here instead of attending to the task for which we were dispatched.

Now (at midnight) we have just been told that we will probably go to see the battlefield of the Modder River...⁹

[On the way they visit a prison where Boer Prisoners of War are housed.]

The upkeep of prisoners, from the point of view of air, surroundings and food, is quite remarkable — luxurious one might say. I attribute this treatment not to the magnanimity of the English, but to political considerations; the desire (with view to the future) to dispose Boer public opinion in their favour.

The prisoners of war behave with great dignity . . .

9 December

(The proposed trip to De Aar never materialised . . .)

We received the following reply to our enquiry (concerning this matter) from General Buller: 'I have agreed to the Military Attachés taking part in the forthcoming general advance of the army, but cannot allow them to follow isolated flying columns . . .'

When the English Government agreed to allow me to be attached to English forces, it was stated that I was receiving permission to watch the operations of English forces in South Africa. There was no indication made then as to the kind of operations — defensive or offensive ones. When starting the war, a government cannot state with certainty, in advance, whether a war will be defensive or offensive; so it might happen that allowing Military Attachés to be with the forces only during offensive actions, they might be deprived of the chance of seeing anything at all. The question of officers attached to the fighting sides, and of their rights, should, it seems, be based on international precedent. As far as is known to me our government gave foreign Military Attachés great freedom during the last Russo-Turkish Campaign (1877-8), allowing them to attach themselves to and follow detachments of any size. On account of that I consider that I am entitled to expect similar treatment . . .

Colonel Herbert has told me that he had asked the Commander-in-Chief's permission to charge all our living expenses in Cape Town to the English government, because of our having to stay here longer than was anticipated to begin with and the cost of living is very high . . . This is a very strange proposition, it looks as if we are offered board and lodging at a luxurious hotel, as a compensation for not being allowed to join the troops. I replied with a categorical refusal, adding that the question of costs does not arise for me, as my government having foreseen all eventualities, has amply provided me with material means . . . Generally speaking, the position of the English army on the theatre of military operations does not appear to be

favourable. One fee's — as one cannot know for sure, seeing that everything is concealed — that things are going badly . . .

17 December

[After seeing Port Elizabeth on the way to Durban the author was told about the mule depot which he did not have time to see himself].

There were more than 4 000 mules, which were kept and given exercise here after arriving in SA. The mules brought here from Italy, Spain and America, turned out to be very wild, particularly the American ones. Many of them ran away. Notices were put up that all hooved and branded mules are the property of the government and must be returned accordingly.

18 December from Pietermaritzburg

We hoped to proceed immediately to the Chieveley camp . . .¹⁰ but did nothing. First stop was made under the pretext to get us some horses as ours were left behind in Cape Town. When that question had been settled, we were told of the following telegram from General Buller: 'Categorically refuse to allow foreign officers to stay in camp, on account of the lack of water and of the necessary comforts permit them to come and inspect the camp for the duration of twenty-four hours only.'

Our collective protest, pointing out that we needed no comforts and that 8 persons do not use much water, remained unanswered.¹¹

It is clear that General Buller stubbornly does not wish to allow us to see anything at close range . . .

If I do not succeed in seeing what I must and would like to see, I intend having a few serious words again with Colonel Herbert. I wish to inform him that my Government has sent me here as an observer of military operations — whereas I do not even see any troops and their life in the field: If this continues in the same fashion, I shall be forced to suggest to my superiors to recall me since my remaining here under the present circumstances is quite futile.

They did show us a few things in Pietermaritzburg (entertaining us as if we were children); we saw a hospital (excellently ap-

pointed) were present at a review (not a genuine one, but a put up show) of a volunteer company of mounted infantry, and we inspected the main base military camp. But most of our time is spent in endless calls, dinners and lunches given in our honour and which we must reciprocate. All that is so dull that I do not consider it worthwhile describing . . .

All the English are full of admiration at the activity of the Boers and say that they have made remarkable use of defence. I consider this activity unsatisfactory. Admitting that for many reasons, they cannot carry out offensive operations, one must not forget either that positive results cannot be achieved with passive actions only. As it is they who began the war, they should take the risk of more decisive, action steps (if only against communication lines).

They should have taken better and fuller advantage of their superiority of numbers and the unpreparedness of the enemy at the out-

set. Now time has already been lost (or almost lost) . . .

2 January 1900. Estcourt

Having been promised by General Buller that we would be notified in advance of any forthcoming battle, we were sure that we would have the opportunity to be present at the second attempt of forcing the Tugela. However, our hopes were not justified.

9 January

The Fifth Division moved forward to Frere. We asked to be allowed to follow it. Colonel Herbert went to see General Buller and, having returned from him, brought us the following message: this is only an outflanking movement which is proposed now, in which General Buller will not allow us to take part under any pretext, but should there be a frontal attack at Colenso, we shall be told in time.¹²



Foreign military attachés with the British army. Front row, sitting on chairs, from left to right: Captain Hiraoka (Japan); Major Estéban (Spain); Captain Slocum (USA); Colonel Ivor Herbert (British Staff officer); Colonel Stakhovich (Russia); Major Gentilini (Italy)

Second row, with helmets, from left to right: Captain Robert Trimmel (Austria-Hungary); Captain Baron von Lüttwitz (Germany); Commandant D'Amade (France)

10 January

We have just heard about the movement of the forces in the direction of Springfield, and this morning we were told that General Buller has undertaken an outflanking movement with all his forces (five infantry brigades, 58 guns . . . about 20 thousand men in all) against the right flank of the Boer positions, leaving only 3½ batteries with four guns at the Chieveley and 1½ batteries with two guns at the Frere camps . . .

It is clear that nothing can be undertaken with the remaining forces at Colenso. Therefore we shall again see nothing.

I considered it my duty to have another discussion with Colonel Herbert and tried to prove to him that military attachés have the right to take part in such an important operation as the advance towards Springfield, that our presence would in no way impede military operations, that we would only take the things which could be fixed to our saddles and that it is humiliating for an officer, accredited by his government to watch all military operations, to find himself some 30 versts (20 miles) away from the general battle, in the rear, when newspaper correspondents are allowed to follow the troops anywhere.

When Colonel Herbert told me that the decision of General Buller was inflexible, I requested him to send me a written confirmation of this, which I could at least send on to my Government, as a proof that I had done everything in my power in order to fulfil the mission with which I had been entrusted . . .

I feel it my duty to add that all this has in no way affected my relations with Colonel Herbert; they have remained very friendly. Colonel Herbert is doing all he can to get us out of our present strange predicament, but on account of General Buller's obstinacy, has not achieved much . . .

General Buller issued the following order today (dated 9 January, 1900 at Estcourt, signed by Colonel Herbert): 'The Commander-in-Chief wishes to give the Military Attachés the opportunity of watching action along the main communication line and will offer them all the facilities for doing so, but in the case of auxiliary operations cannot

allow them to take part, and cannot assume the responsibility for the security of their supplies. In making this decision the Commander-in-Chief is acting according to precedent adopted by European armies.' . . .

3 February, Cape Town

Instead of awaiting the result of the outflanking movement of General Buller in Estcourt, we were forced to leave earlier than was desirable, because on 13 January we received an official instruction from Colonel Herbert to go to Cape Town.

The reason put forth was the fact of our being attached to the General Staff of the supreme Commander-in-Chief, who had just arrived in Cape Town.

Naturally we had no choice but to submit.

Yesterday afternoon we were introduced first to Lord Kitchener and later to Field Marshal Lord Roberts. Both were very affable, but neither dropped any hint as to their intentions regarding us.

Our position is very irregular and vague. Conceding to our requests, promises were made to us, which later on, under various pretexts, were never fulfilled.

As a result of all this up to now (after a whole two months' stay here) we have not seen any military operations yet.

It is clear that it will go on the same way in the future. As for ourselves, we have done everything in our power, but have achieved nothing . . . As far as I know some of my colleagues (the Military Attachés of France, Germany, Austria and the USA) have made remonstrances to their governments asking them to take action and to bring pressure in order to find a more satisfactory solution to this question.

I, on my part, having lost faith in the success of all our requests, have asked Colonel Herbert one thing only — to clarify the position and to inform me officially of the attitude of the new Commander-in-Chief towards us, i.e. how and where we must remain and what he considers it possible to show us . . .

I think that we will have to remain in Cape Town for a rather long time . . .

9 February, 1900

As a result of my request to clarify the position of military attachés, Colonel Herbert has received the following official letter from the Secretary of the Commander-in-Chief:

'Dear Sir, The Commander-in-Chief has requested me to send you the enclosed instructions for the Military Attachés to whom you are attached . . .

Instructions

1. The military attachés of the Russian, German, Austrian and French armies are officially considered as a special Department, making up a section of the personal General Staff of the Field Marshal Commander-in-Chief.
2. Their place of abode is decided in the normal manner, but the Field Marshal can make any changes required by circumstances.
3. All arrangements as regards their living quarters, provisioning and transport, of their servants, grooms and horses, will be made, as they have been up to now, by the officer attached to them, and receiving instructions from the Commandant of the General Headquarters.
4. According to instructions received, and given through the military secretary the officer attached to the Military Attachés will give them information and reply to their questions concerning the organization and the operations of the army.
5. He is given full powers to send their letters and telegrams directly to avoid the possibility of letters being opened on account of insufficient postage payment.
6. All communications which the military attachés would like to make to the Commander-in-Chief must be presented through the officer attached to them.

signed The Military Secretary,
Major General Nicholson . . .

I cannot say that the above instructions raise hopes for the future improvement of our position.

Making use of them, one can always find a pretext to keep us behind and to show us nothing. It means that everything rests with the personal views and intentions of the

Commander-in-Chief. It seems that Lord Roberts is more favourably inclined towards us than General Buller . . .

Today we heard that Colonel Herbert will no longer be attached to us . . . The reason given for this change is that being an experienced staff officer, he is needed at the staff headquarters . . .

The aide-de-camp of the Commander-in-Chief, Colonel Sir Hugh Downe, has been (temporarily) appointed to be attached to the military attachés.

4 February, Cape Town

Lately the censorship of the press has become still more severe: now the papers do not write anything. It is difficult to surmise anything from conversations, as the majority know nothing and those who know anything, carefully conceal it. The official communiqués issued to us concerning military actions have shrunk to a minimum. We hear that General Buller's advance is proceeding satisfactorily, but that 'the details received about the actions of the column are insufficient . . .' Finally we were informed about the failure of General Buller's column.¹³ This is the verbatim report received. 'The Commander-in-Chief has received information from Natal, that the troops moved for the relief of Ladysmith have met with a reverse, which, however, it is assumed is of a temporary nature only.'

Later descriptions of the battle begin to appear in the press . . . but one can get no real impression from them. For instance, there is a detailed description of an officer killed 'as he stood looking through his binoculars'. Meanwhile one cannot understand where exactly the battle was taking place (the name Spioenkop does not mean much, when there are no maps and no indication in what direction and at what distance from some well-known point these mountains are, what troops took part in the engagement, what were the losses and finally what was the outcome of the battle). This is the sort of report we get: 'The troops fought heroically, our artillery pelted the enemy with masses of lyddite, doing splendid work; nevertheless, the forces had to retreat a little. The army is in excellent spirits.'

Many times I asked Colonel Herbert to show me at least the place where the battle was fought and to tell me what troops took part in it. Each time his reply was that no information had been received from General Buller . . .

To conceal the true state of affairs has become common practice, particularly to withhold information about losses . . .

While I was at Estcourt I heard a person close to General Buller say that 'the Boers are doing the right thing by concealing their real losses. We will do the same, but not wanting to deceive anyone, we will do the simplest thing; we will either not speak of the losses at all or will announce them when everyone has already forgotten about the battle and it will no longer be a matter of such burning interest.'

And that is just what they are doing now. However they do not dare to treat the colonial forces in this manner: with them they give the lists of casualties . . .²⁴

Generally speaking, one must draw attention to the wooing of colonial troops. Statesmen in England and the generals here, beginning with the Commander-in-Chief himself, make flattering speeches about them, the local newspapers inflate these further and affirm with great assurance that the reason for all the military reverses is to be found in the insufficient use being made of colonial troops.

These reasons plus the fact that these troops receive much higher daily pay (a colonial soldier gets 5 shillings per day, whereas his equivalent in the regular army only get 1/3 to 1/6) have aroused envy of them in the regular troops. Undoubtedly there is serious antagonism between them . . .

6 February, 1900

I had occasion to converse about the art of war with a general closely associated with Field-Marshal Roberts. He said: 'Modern weapons make war almost impossible and offensives unthinkable . . . Two new factors have made their appearance: (1) the terrible force of firing, (2) the significant weakening of the impulse in the soldier to go forward, as he becomes better educated and more cultured. What can force him to overcome the awful danger? It is quite understandable if

during the frightful moments of the advance he thinks only about how to best take cover, and afterwards how to get out safely from that hell?' Later he asked me: 'What feeling forces your soldiers to advance towards the enemy under a hail of bullets and how is it instilled?' I replied: 'The feeling of duty. As to how it is instilled in the soldier that is a complex question. First of all the basic feeling in our Russian soldier is an utter, whole-hearted devotion to the Tsar and the Fatherland. It is easy to build the rest on such a foundation. Military training, tradition, the whole cycle of army life cultivate this feeling and give it its outward form. I am certain that our soldier has remained just as he was in 1855, 1877 and even during the Napoleonic wars . . .'²⁵ Besides that we have that peculiarity — that our wars are always popular among the people . . .'

I had occasion to speak to many English officers. One of them, wounded at Magersfontein, questioned me closely about our army, and full of enthusiasm for everything I told him, he exclaimed with bitterness in front of all the others: 'Yours is quite a different way to ours. With us everything is bad — both the way of replenishing and of arming the forces. Our generals do not know the troops they are commanding, seeing them for the first time on the battlefield. The troops, whether infantry, cavalry or artillery, do not know each other and have no idea of combined action. We are ruled by different parliamentarians, who have no inkling of the art of war. We are neglected, nothing is done for us, and they dare to reproach us that we do not know how to fight.' Another officer from the Scots Greys Regiment complained about the generals' lack of knowledge as to how to deal with the cavalry. Thus for instance, upon the third day of the regiment's arrival in the country, when the horses were in a terrible condition, they were forced to make a long march, which had a particularly detrimental effect on the horses . . . Another one, the commander of a battery, was saying that the officers who are now being sent out here are inexperienced and that the reservists arriving on the spot are too — the majority of them being so old that they are not even acquainted with modern weapons, horses are untrained etc. What if they have to fight, before they have had time to learn? . . .

The mention of colonial troops at that point caused a burst of indignation. The general opinion is that they are useless idlers and wooing them is the policy of the war minister who is only a civilian. Meanwhile the military authorities are aware of their real worth, so they are only used for the protection of communication lines. The artillerist added: 'If our regular troops were given five shillings per day for each man in the lower ranks, we could get a very different type of man in the army — not the likes of what we have at present!'

28 February; from the Paardeberg camp

During a certain stretch of time I shall be unable to send despatches because the conditions of life make the task of writing anything quite impossible. We have to live without tents under the open sky. The rainy season has set in, and we have to remain wet day and night. Besides this we are in the saddle up to ten hours each day and from about six p.m. it begins to get dark. Our lanterns are flooded and there is no light . . . The living conditions of the troops in the field are truly terrible . . .

10 April, Bloemfontein

First of all I must report the reasons for my inability to send descriptions of an operation which ended almost a month ago. For that I must say a few words about the setting and the condition in which we found ourselves.

Although we were attached to the General Headquarters of the Commander-in-Chief, nevertheless our relations with persons who were in a position to give us any of the needed information were made very difficult. We were always kept out of the way and during the marches requested by the Commander-in-Chief not to follow him and his retinue. We were told to ask everything through Colonel Sir Hugh Downe — attached to us.

It must be stated that one could hardly imagine a worse choice. Downe is a man of too prominent a social position (a member of the House of Lords, a millionaire), too old to be in charge of our field comforts and to be responsible for the difficult task of getting us information. Besides, the level of his military

education is also not in keeping with the assignment entrusted to him. As a result of this we hardly ever got any information through him . . . During the whole campaign (march) we were not once told of any of the army orders or of a single disposition of troops. The whole time one had to get everything oneself and to ride about all day, from fear of missing anything, to question, to beg for information from people who were in no way obliged to reply to us, and who were extremely busy, into the bargain.

The only factor which made our work a little easier was the fact that most of the military attachés were on excellent terms with each other and willingly shared the information they had managed to extract . . . slightest of all information was that received from the General Headquarters, a source from which it would seem only natural for us to expect most.

Another unfavourable circumstance must be mentioned: the forces do not keep any detailed diaries of events and do not collect documentary evidence. For that reason we often had to make use of fragmentary, and frequently contradictory, information and it took a long time to check each single fact by questioning several persons about it . . .

Description of operations of the army of Lord Roberts from 11 February to 13 March 1900

The new Commander-in-Chief, Lord Roberts, arrived in Cape Town on 10 January. It was impossible for him to undertake any decisive steps immediately for the following reasons: (1) He had no free troops at his disposal as all the troops arriving . . . during the second part of December and beginning of January, were sent either to Lord Methuen, whose position after Magersfontein was deemed very serious, or to Natal for another attempt to relieve Ladysmith. Further reinforcements only began to arrive in Cape Town in mid-January (6th Division). (2) A big job of organisation had to be performed . . . for the newly arrived troops had been sent without any co-ordination, in separate battalions, and were forwarded to the theatres of operations which needed reinforcements, regardless of their attachment to certain divisions or brigades. In this manner all the organization which had been improvised before the outbreak of war

was disrupted. It took exactly one month to concentrate and organize the troops, so that on 11 February the new Commander-in-Chief began the operation which led to the lifting of the siege of Kimberley, the taking captive of the greater part of Cronje's forces and the occupation of the capital of the Orange Free State . . .

Many factors led to the assumption that the offensive would take the direction Colesberg-Norvalspont-Bloemfontein, i.e. the plan of campaign decided upon before the start of war.¹⁶ As a proof that this was also the intention of Lord Roberts the fact can be pointed out that General French, who was for a long time inactive near Colesberg, made a reconnoitering trip in that direction. He came to Cape Town on 25 January to make a personal report to the Commander-in-Chief. None of the newspapers made any mention of this, but I know, for certain, that the plan was seriously envisaged. Stubborn resistance was met with, which showed that the forcing of the Orange River at this point would be no light undertaking . . .¹⁷ The fear of another failure forced Lord Roberts to give up this convenient operational path (being the most direct road to the capital, all the way along a railway line) and to look for a different path, where one could expect to encounter least resistance . . .

[There follow details about supplies being left behind not to clutter up the moving army so that nobody had tents.]

What each soldier would carry

Infantryman on the march: A rifle with a bayonet, 150 cartridges, a haversack with food supplies (rusks 1½ lbs), two days' rations of groceries, tea, coffee or chocolate, sugar, salt, pepper, rice (½ lb in all), a tin of three quarters of a lb emergency ration, a change of clothes (woollen socks, a towel, a flannel shirt, a night cap), a blanket, a flask (of tin covered with felt), a knife, spoon and fork.

Each infantryman wears (lower rank) a flannel shirt, woollen socks, a flannel stomacher¹⁸ and a uniform made of a good cotton cloth, khaki coloured (khaki means dirty in Hindustani), puttees and lace-up boots, on the head a helmet made of cork with 3 openings on top for ventilation.

The cavalrymen's clothing resembles the infantrymen's but they wear shoulder protectors made of steel net, which are part of the prescribed uniform but are not worn by many, as they are useless in this war since the Boers do not use swords . . .

Analysis of the first stage

Analysing this stage one first of all asks oneself the question why the army moved East during the first two days and only after that turned in the Northerly direction, instead of going North East to begin with, through Jacobsdal and Klipdrift. In that case the objective would have been reached 24 and may be even 36 hours earlier.

The only explanation of this may be Lord Roberts' desire to hide the real objective. And indeed judging by the first two marches one could well surmise that the army was moving towards Bloemfontein. Cronjé himself must have been supposing only this, for otherwise how could he, usually so well informed about enemy movements, remain inactive for three whole days and begin his retreat only in the evening of February the 14th?

On the other hand had the English taken the direct route to Klipdrift they might have cut off Cronjé's path of retreat to the East, whereas in the present set of circumstances he had every opportunity to retreat with all his troops towards Bloemfontein, had he been prepared to sacrifice his supply train. The fact that he was surrounded and forced to surrender was the direct result of his own subsequent mistakes.

[There follows a detailed description of action each day. The military attachés were allowed to accompany the Commander-in-Chief on this occasion.]

16 February

Events of the preceding day have made the Commander-in-Chief decide on a new and energetic course of action.

His objective now is to capture Cronjé's army. Operational direction changes from North to East.

To execute this during the night of 15-16 February General French is ordered to move

to bar the way to Cronjé in the direction of Kudoosrand Drift. The 6th Division must try to take Brand valley and to prevent the Boers crossing on the South bank of the river etc; all troop dispositions given in detail . . .

18 February

The attack began at ten in the morning and was conducted in the usual British manner, in a disjointed, halfhearted (not to say fearful) way, without reserves, without concentrated effort on any one sector.

The Boers started firing back, allowing the first line of troops within a distance of about 1 200 paces. The advancing battalions stopped and lay down and after that the battle assumed an immobile character, but for heavy gunfire. No battalion approached nearer to the Boer camp than 1 000 paces . . .

The whole day was spent in this way. Towards evening the battalions were taken out of firing range and bivouaced on the battlefield . . . The cavalry was quite inactive on this occasion. General French received reinforcements from Kimberley. The English losses were quite heavy, about 1 300 men killed and wounded.

As a result of that day's actions the whole Cronjé camp was surrounded, but all attacks were repulsed at every point.

19 February

During the morning General Cronjé asked Lord Kitchener for a 24 hour truce. The latter consented until the arrival in camp of the Commander-in-Chief. Lord Roberts left Jacobsdal at 4 a.m., spent one hour at Klipkraal and arrived at Paardeberg at 11 a.m. (The military attachés were in his retinue. They were allowed to leave Cape Town only on the 12th after energetic protests and insistent demands.) He decided to attack the Kitchener Heights . . .

Shortly after the artillery had started firing in the new direction . . . it had to stop upon receiving orders motivated by the supposed news of a Boer surrender. This news caused exultation among the troops. However it was not prolonged as Lord Kitchener arrived soon and ordered a renewal of fire, saying that the

news of surrender was the result of a misunderstanding. Note: As has been said above negotiations were taking place in the evening of the preceding day concerning a truce. When the English renewed their fire Cronjé probably sent an envoy for explanations. The English thought that he was surrendering and sent their conditions to him. In reply to these he answered that while he remained alive he would not consider surrendering himself.

The firing was renewed.

The Boer camp presented the following picture: about a hundred wagons or so stood scattered about in a space of about 10 thousand square Sazhens (a sazhen is 7 feet). A few hundred sazhens from there oxen and horses were grazing. Looking through a powerful pair of binoculars one could distinguish something like trenches, where the Boers had taken cover, as well as in the deep river bed. There was no motion whatsoever in the camp itself and no human being was to be seen.

The bombardment went on until dark. The following results were achieved: the only stone house, standing in the camp, was badly damaged, some of the wagons had caught fire and one of them containing ammunition had been blown up.

In the beginning I was on the emplacement of a mortar battery, which, it seemed to me, was firing well, but at about 4 p.m. when a 12 lb naval gun was moved to the right flank, I went over to it. I made the following observations: Having occupied the position, the naval officer in charge did not ask the distance from the neighbouring batteries and began firing independently, having fired at least 8 shells. Then he fired shrapnel without any system, constantly changing his aim, at the fortifications, the wagons, then the house, then the trenches and he finally began to fire at the grazing oxen and horses. As a result of all this I could not spot a single successful shot . . .

20 February

The morning was spent in inactivity. In the afternoon it was decided to shell the camp from two positions . . . The shelling was done in a very strange manner: not only had

different batteries different aims, but from the same battery different guns were firing at different objects, changing their aim several times. The river bed where the Boers must have taken cover was not fired into at all, and during two days I never saw a single shell hitting the river . . . It is difficult to imagine that such bombardment can have a moral effect or can do much harm to the opponent . . .

21 February

After the English had taken Kitchener's Height, the Boers had to retreat, the English taking 16 prisoners.

At about 1 a.m. Lord Roberts sent an envoy to Cronjé warning him that he would renew the bombardment and offering him to take women and children to safety. The Commander-in-Chief also enquired if the besieged were in need of doctors. Cronjé sent back the following reply: The women and children are perfectly safe; as for doctors they are needed and we will be grateful to have them, provided they stay with us till the end of the siege. Naturally the doctors were never sent.

22 February

During the night the front line battalions have brought their trenches about 200 paces closer to the camp . . .

23 February

During this day a Boer detachment of about 1 500 men strong with 2 guns quite unexpectedly attacked the farm Osfontein and the Kitchener Height. The Boers probably did not know that these places were already occupied by the English . . .

Eventually they had to retreat and 87 men were taken prisoner . . . During the Boer retreat there was a perfect opportunity to have all the artillery firing; meanwhile the firing was no more intense than while the enemy was under cover.¹⁹

24 February

The trenches have moved another 100 to 150 paces closer.

25 and 26 February

Nothing new; trenches have moved still a little closer during the night. Four mortars have arrived on the 25th and are now taking part in the bombing.

Conditions in the bivouacs, and the English camp at Paardeberg

There was no overall supervision whatsoever. Each detachment chose its own camping site, receiving only the most general kind of instructions such as 'go North' or 'go South' of the river.

Use of water

Conditions in the camp were particularly hard in this respect. Higher up the river were the besieged Boers, whose only way of getting rid of all their waste as well as carcasses of dead animals was to throw them into the river. They used this means especially after 23 February when as a result of rain the water level rose considerably in the river. On 25 February no fewer than five hundred horse carcasses were disposed of in this way. Some of them floated past the English camp, but a great many got caught in shallow places and were rotting in the river. I counted forty three opposite our camp. No measure were taken to pull them out of the water, and only once, as a result of our insistent demands, a few workmen were brought who pushed the carcasses down the stream.

Meantime the troops were using this river water, which was naturally not even boiled. It is obvious that in these circumstances there was no need to instruct men where they could get drinking water for themselves or for their mounts. The following scene gives an idea of the daily sight before our eyes: A dead horse is lying in the river; five or six paces further barrels are being filled with drinking water for the troops, close by a native is driving six mules tied up together, between the barrel and the dead horse. These mules wading in stir up the water, which is already of a dark brown hue; next to them some soldiers are washing themselves in the same water . . .

Animal slaughter

There was no place set aside for slaughtering animals. The killing was done anywhere in a haphazard way. The hide and intestines were left lying on the spot. They were never cleared away. Twenty paces from our camp was the fenced-off space with about one hundred and fifty cattle waiting to be slaughtered. People came at all hours of day and night, picked any animal and killed it on the river bank almost next to our beds.

The burying of dead animals

Because of the forced marches and the lack of fodder there was a vast quantity of dead animals in the camp. They lay about everywhere among camping soldiers, close to the hospital and even near to the Commander-in-Chief's quarters. Nobody covered them with earth, and nobody shifted them from the spot where they had died. Thanks to this and to the presence of all kinds of waste, there was such a stench in the camp, that I had not only never experienced personally but had never even suspected that such a smell could be present in a camp which was not being besieged.

The sanitary conditions of the camp were of the worst too, yet far from having any outbreak of epidemics, the physical condition of men, both during the camping and the subsequent march was very satisfactory. (It was only after the arrival in Bloemfontein after 13 March that there were quite a few cases of typhoid fever.) It seems to me that this must be attributed to the amazingly healthy climate here.

[The author continues with the surrender account and his reflections concerning it.]

27 February

At 3 a.m. the whole camp was awakened by intense rifle shooting which lasted about a quarter of an hour. Then all was silent. At 6 a.m. it became known that Cronjé had surrendered with his detachment. 38 officers, 4010 men (among them 161 wounded) were taken prisoners; four guns and much ammunition were taken as well.

It is very odd that Cronjé should have chosen the anniversary of the surrender of the English army at Majuba in 1881, to surrender himself as he had been one of the active participants on that day so memorable to the Boers.²⁰

Analysis of the second stage from 16 to 27 February 1900

The surrounding of the enemy who halted at Paardeberg on February 18 was done quickly and resolutely. As for the English attack it was unnecessary and unsuccessful. The following delays are justifiable on the grounds that there was no need to hurry to get possession of the Boer camp, as the English could not have continued their offensive, anyway not until they had collected enough provisions at Paardeberg to ensure their further march on Bloemfontein.

Discussing Cronjé

Cronje's actions during this period were criminally faulty. His chief and unforgivable blunder was his remaining at all at Paardeberg. I am quite sure that he could have retreated farther. I doubt if the single cavalry brigade which appeared on his flank (almost in his rear) would have been strong enough to bar his way. Finally, in an extremity he could have sacrificed his supply train and some of his heaviest guns to get away. Had he done that the way would have been open before him and he must have been aware of that fact. His refusal to move would have been justified only in the event of his deciding to sacrifice his troops in order to hold up the English advance, and to give the Boers time to rally to defend Bloemfontein.²¹

But, as has since transpired, there was no intention to defend the town. Therefore his stopping was a grave mistake.

Having decided to stop he chose a very unsuitable place, his encampment was in a dip and surrounded by heights on all sides, which made it an excellent shooting target.

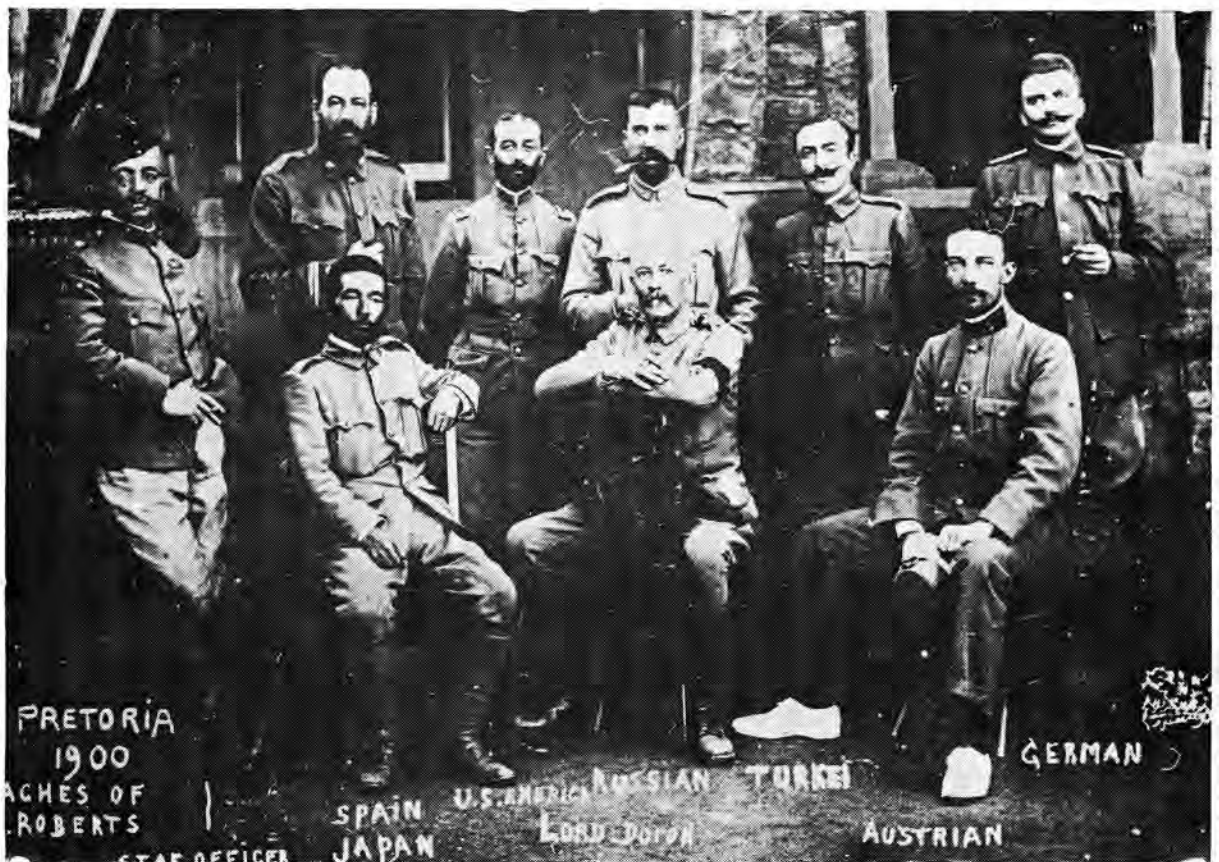
The Boers conducted the passive defense of the camp very successfully as is always the case with them when they are defending a position. However one cannot abstain from blaming them for not even attempting to make a sortie or trying to break through.

I believe that had they tried to break through (naturally leaving behind their supplies) in the Easterly direction on February 19, 20 or 21, they would have undoubtedly succeeded, suffering almost no losses. Everything was in their favour . . .²²

Yet they did nothing at all, but surrendered with large quantities of cartridges and shells, disgracing the Majuba anniversary whose memory meant so much to each Boer . . .

I have heard it said that many Boers are convinced that Cronjé had been bribed by the English.²³ Although I personally do not believe it, I must admit that some of his actions do appear to be suspect. Indeed one can but wonder at his choice of the day to surrender, when circumstances did not force him to do it on that particular day. It also appears strange that there should have been several exchanges of envoys on both sides, especially as there was no real need for these negotiations.

Besides the above mentioned envoys there were more: on 22 February, after Lord Roberts' refusal to send Cronjé doctors on his terms, the latter again asked not only for doctors, but for a hospital to be sent to him — without changing his original conditions of keeping the doctors till the end of the siege. Naturally Lord Roberts refused. On 23 February Lord Roberts dispatched someone to find out the number of English prisoners in the Boer camp. Cronjé sent him a list of names (16 men). Lord Roberts made him the proposal to exchange prisoners. Cronjé agreed and the exchange took place . . . We see from the above that there was daily intercourse between the besieged and the besiegers. Many of these must be acknowledged to be quite superfluous — that is if other secret negotiations were not taking place at the same time. It is also very odd that Cronjé agreed to the exchange of prisoners — for by doing so he was revealing camp conditions and the defence situation.



The military attachés with the British army in South Africa, photographed in Pretoria during January or February 1901 (not 1900)

Standing, from left to right: A British staff officer; Major Estéban (Spain); Captain Slocum (USA, military attaché in Lisbon); Colonel Stakhovich (Russia); Enve Bey (Turkey); Captain Baron von Lüttwitz (Germany).
Sitting, from left to right: Captain Hiraoka (Japan); Colonel Lord Doron (British liaison officer); Captain Robert Trimmel (Austria-Hungary)

March to Bloemfontein

The army was moving through countryside very poor in provisions. The only thing which could be found on the way was livestock, and everything else had to be brought from the rear. The farms we passed never had big stocks of grain; the average was about two hundred bushels (pockets) — mainly of maize. The great majority of farmers had left their homesteads at the army's approach. Lord Roberts' proclamation to the Free Staters (to lay down arms and return to their homes and peaceful occupations) did not lead to the desired results. During the whole campaign we came across only three farms which had not been abandoned by their owners (two of them belonged to Germans and one to a Boer — the brother of President Steyn).

The English made clumsy and wanton use of the meagre resources of the country. There was no military organization in charge of abandoned farms, responsible for the protection of property and prevention of plunder. All this was planned on paper (the order of 18 February, No 27) but never applied in practice. The firstcomer to an abandoned farm pillaged it in a most barbaric manner. Everything was stolen, spoilt or destroyed, often being of no benefit to the plunderers. The worst offenders in this field were the colonial troops.

To stop this pillage the Commander-in-Chief issued two orders on 15 and 16 of February. In the first Lord Roberts, trying to appeal to the spirit of rivalry in different sections of the army, asked the commanders to take energetic measures to stop this disgrace. The second order threatened with the gallows any person accused of plunder and the sector to which the culprit belonged with being struck off the roll of the active army . . .

But even this menacing order did not stop the shocking abuses because the problem of requisitioning was never properly dealt with and remained just a dead letter of the law.

Following the advance troops most of the time, I was on several occasions the eyewitness of the most disgusting scenes of plunder and did not on any one occasion see any officer intervening and saying even one word to put an end to this disgrace.

Moreover, certain orders were issued which actually encouraged this plunder. Thus the chief army supply officer (Commissary) let it be known (he told me this himself) that when there was a shortage of cattle for slaughtering at Poplar Grove on 8 March, that each person bringing him an ox or a sheep would receive £1 for the former and 1/- for the latter. As a result of this within two days more than 600 head of cattle were provided (the daily need of the army is about 100 head). I must add in all fairness that as soon as the Commander-in-Chief heard about this the offer was withdrawn and Colonel Richardson received a severe reprimand . . .

Having finished one operation (the surrender of Cronjé) Lord Roberts did not embark on the following one until he had gathered enough provisions to ensure the success of the next move — the march on Bloemfontein. One is struck by the great caution he exercised in all his calculations. Being only some five or six marches away from Bloemfontein, and forced to break its contact with its rear because of its advance, the army began to move only after it had a supply of almost a month of provisions with it.

The same feeling of caution was responsible for the army still being kept on three-quarters sometimes or only on half rations in spite of the abundant supplies.²⁴ This measure did not have any effect upon cavalry activity . . .

10 March. Incident with White flag at Abrahamskraal

On the 10th an incident took place which is of interest only because it proves how little credence must be given to all the complaints against the Boer abuse of the white flag.

In the morning of the next day I met Captain Morris of the Staff of the 6th Division. Telling me about various episodes of yesterday's battle, he said among other things: 'At the time of the advance of the Welsh battalion, still at the beginning of the fight the Boers must have meant to surrender and put out a white flag. What a shame that no one in the fighting line noticed this flag, the battalion did not cease either its fire or its advance. The Boers, having waited for a while, removed the flag, and opened fire once more.'

The tale of the eyewitness has the ring of truth about it. A few hours later I was joined by the American military attaché, who gave the following account of the same incident, which he heard from one of the officers from General Headquarters. 'When the Welsh battalion was advancing, the Boers hung out a white flag and raised their arms as a sign of surrender. The Welsh battalions moved out of reach of their defences and without firing moved to take their prisoners of war. At that moment the Boers met them with a hail of bullets. This was seen by one of the aide-de-camp of the Commander-in-Chief'. (He did not name him.)

Next day Colonel Chamberlain, the personal secretary of Lord Roberts, repeated the same version to me but with this difference: that Lord Roberts himself had been the eyewitness. As a matter of fact he was 3 to 4 versts (each verst is 3 500 feet) away from the spot where the incident took place. I happened to be on the same heights as he and not only did not see any such thing but did not even hear it mentioned at the time. This version was obviously the latest fabrication.

Piecing these stories together, it is easy to decide which one of them was the true story; nevertheless I am quite certain that the very next day idle newspaper correspondents notified the whole world about this shocking deed of the Boers . . .

English entry into Bloemfontein

All the numerous English population of that city (which controls all its commerce) rushed into the streets and staged a big welcome. The Dutch population, with a very few exceptions, has left the town. The English found everything in a very satisfactory condition. Nothing had been taken away or destroyed.

The retreating Boers have not even removed the rolling stock of the railway and have kindly left the victors eight locomotives and up to 200 railway carriages.

20 April: Bloemfontein. After the occupation of Bloemfontein on 13 March

News was coming from all sides concerning the demoralization of the enemy, and it was

said that the Orange Free Staters, weary of war and affected by the occupation of their capital, were ready to go back on their alliance with the Transvaal and were leaving the army and returning to their farms. Although one could not wholeheartedly believe this news, because it emanated from the few burghers who had remained in the town and were seeking the favour of the English, the English were willing to believe it because this news pleased them.

Provisions were requisitioned and very high prices were paid for them. Markets were opened, but the local inhabitants were not keen to use them. Provisions such as milk, green vegetables, and potatoes were sold there but the forage, which was needed most of all, was unobtainable . . .

After a time the frame of mind in high administrative circles had radically changed. The period of very humane treatment of the population gave way to a period of excessively severe measures. Vast numbers of arrests were made in the town. Everyone realized that the war was far from being finished . . .

© MAY 1900. THE ORGANIZATION OF THE MEDICAL AND SANITARY SERVICES IN THE ENGLISH ARMY FROM THE BEGINNING OF FEBRUARY TO THE END OF APRIL

The water supply of the army

Regular supplies of fresh water are most important for the maintenance of good health.

Means used to supply water were: (1) wells. (2) pumps. (3) water containers. The Engineer of the army has all the necessary utensils to dig wells and pipes and different kinds of pumps to supply the water to a certain distance.

Each sapper company (one to each division) has ten pumps for pumping the water from streams and wells without spoiling or clouding the water. Each one of these pumps can fill a pail of water in one minute, lifting it to a height of more than two yards.

Medical services and the material aspect of the medical organisation

- (1) Bell tents were widely used for 4 to 6 patients on stretchers or 8 lying on the ground. There were also:
- (2) hospital marquees for twelve patients on stretchers or 16 on the ground;
- (3) operational marquee with two doors, two windows;
- (4) tortoise tents square shaped for 12 patients.

Faris stretchers (named after their inventor) all the same, made of thick waterproof material fixed to two poles joined by metal plates made in such a way that the stretchers can fold up. Also carriages for 12 sitting or two lying down and four sitting patients.

These were provided with good springs and cushions, and blankets.

Hospital trains

At the beginning of the war there were only two such trains: one for Natal and one for the Cape Colony. In December another train was arranged for the Cape Colony. No 1 held 86 patients, No 2, 92, and No 3, 74. Each of them has 8 carriages (1 first class for officers and nurses, 1 for the kitchen and stores, pharmacy etc), five carriages for patients and 1 for other needs and the lower ranks working on the train.

All the fittings are simple and solid, and the bunks are of the same kind as in ships. All patients are issued with hospital clothing.

Hospital ships

At the beginning of war there were only two but later a third was added, equipped by the Red Cross. The first two are used to transport patients from Durban to Cape Town and the third one to take them to England. (The first two hold about 131 patients, the last about 200). Ordinary boats, returning home empty, were much used as well.

Each soldier carries a first-aid kit on him.

The organization of medical services in war time

1. **Field doctors**, with the help of a warrant officer and a private, give first-aid as close as possible to the battle field. 32 porters are sent to collect the wounded. Each battalion, cavalry regiment and artillery division have their own doctor.
2. **Brigade hospitals (or lazarettoes)**, or Bearer companies of porters, have the duty of transporting the wounded from the battle field to the dressing station and from there to the field hospital. 3 doctors.
3. **Field hospitals**. Each hospital has 4 doctors and about 30 helpers. They are supposed to have 20 tents for about a total of 100 men. Having given first aid and performed the most urgent operations the doctors send the patients further to the **4 and 5 local and main hospitals**. These are very similar, only the first are for 100 and latter for 500 beds. Each local hospital has 4 doctors and the main hospital, 20 doctors.
6. Besides the above named there are also **two private hospitals**: One of the Duke of Portland and one of Langman. They are of the same size as the local ones but differ from them by their luxurious fittings.
7. **Convalescent camps for those returned into ranks**. As there were not enough army doctors ordinary civilian doctors have had to be used.

The present campaign has supplied little information of an instructive nature to form a correct judgement as to the medical needs of the army in present times of modern warfare.

This is accounted for by two circumstances. (1) The English, afraid of large-scale losses, have consistently avoided decisive actions; up to the present time there has been no big battle and the losses have been negligible, no more than 5% of those taking part in the engagement. (2) The absolute passivity of the Boers, thanks to which there have always been large intervals of time between the battles. The English could therefore tell in advance when there would be a battle and

could prepare for it accordingly. They did not have to hold themselves constantly in readiness to receive vast numbers of wounded people at the same time, which naturally greatly facilitated the work of the medical services.

1. These are only 4 military attachés. Photographs of the attachés with the British army in South Africa show 7 or 8.
2. Apparently the Emperor of Russia, Tsar Nicholas II was an honorary officer of the Scots Greys regiment.
3. These failures were the repulse of the British sortie from Ladysmith leading to the disaster at Nicholson's Nek on 30 October 1899, and the ensuing encirclement of Ladysmith by the Boer forces.
4. The 'Bavarian' was a passenger ship that belonged to the British Allan Line; see Marischal Murray, **Ships and South Africa, A maritime chronicle of the Cape**; Oxford University Press, London 1933, p 74.
5. General criticism of the Lee-Metford rifles stated that the magazine could contain 10 cartridges but that the loading went too slowly. The magazine of the Boers' Mauser rifle could contain only 5 cartridges and the bullets were somewhat small (as Stakhovich remarks), but a clip holding 5 cartridges could be inserted in one moment, so the loading went quicker.
6. The imminent return of the Commander-in-Chief, Buller, from Natal to Cape Town was of course an obvious pretext to keep the military attachés in Cape Town.
7. This hotel is probably the Mount Nelson, the stateliest hotel in Cape Town.
8. Rumours exaggerating the number of Dutch (and Germans) enlisting in volunteer corps to support the Boer forces circulated in the press. They culminated in the notice in the **Standard and Diggers News** of 11 September 1899 (p 5) that 4000 Dutchmen in and around Pretoria had volunteered.
9. The reason why military attachés were pleased with the promise of going to Modder River was that Lord Methuen had advanced to that river and had pressed the Boer army back to Magersfontein. His serious defeat at Magersfontein on 11 December 1899 took away the attachés' chance to be admitted to this front for two months.
10. Chievely camp was General Buller's headquarters facing the Tugela front in Natal.
11. These 8 persons are the 4 attachés mentioned before by Stakhovich plus their 4 orderlies or possibly other military attachés who had joined Stakhovich later. I am sure that among the last-mentioned was the Austrian military attaché, Captain Robert Trimmel, of whom I have read an unpublished letter to his general staff with a description of his visit to

the military hospital in Pietermaritzburg; Stakhovich also refers to this hospital.

Apparently Buller had allowed the attachés to travel to Natal because he had great confidence in his attempt to relieve Ladysmith. As his attack on Colenso on 15 December 1899 resulted in a defeat he kept them away from his camp and the front.

12. Buller decidedly did not intend a second frontal attack on Colenso because he wished to outflank or penetrate the right wing of the Boers west of Colenso. Therefore the promise made to the attachés was again a hollow promise.
13. The failure was the withdrawal after the battle on Sploenkop on 24 January 1900 which ended a week of heavy fighting on the western wing of the Republican forces facing the Tugela River in Natal.
14. The colonial troops were the troops from the Cape Colony and Natal, all being white soldiers.
15. The Russian wars of 1855-57 against Britain, France, Sardinia and Turkey, the Balkan War 1877-78 against Turkey and the war against Napoleon I in 1812-14.
16. This was the plan of campaign drawn up by General Headquarters in Britain in which General Buller as an expert in war in South Africa had a large part. See F. M. Maurice and H. M. Grant, **History of the war in South Africa**; London 1906-10, Volume I, p 40.
17. French's strong opponent must have been General J. H. de la Rey, for the other Boer generals on the front in the Cape Colony, Schoeman and Olivier, were no dashing warriors.
18. Stomacher is a kind of waistcoat.
19. This was the attack by a relief force of Boers under General Christian de Wet. In contrast to Stakhovich's supposition they knew very well that they stormed positions occupied by the British. They were repulsed. The number of 87 men lost by them is a British exaggeration.
20. Cronjé did not want to surrender but his burghers and many of his officers refused to continue the fight and showed the white flag in spite of Cronjé's attitude.
21. Certainly the Boers' intention was to defend Bloemfontein. At least one fierce battle, that of Abrahamskraal was fought before the Commandant-General decided to leave Bloemfontein as an open, undefended town to the British army.
22. Colonel Stakhovich and other critics who reproach Cronjé that he did not attempt to break out, forget that Cronjé would not abandon the noncombatants in the besieged camp at Paardeberg and that he had far too few horses left to undertake a sortie; a sortie by unmounted Boers was practically impossible.
23. After Cronjé's surrender there were many rumours among the Boers that certain of their military leaders had been bribed by the British to give up well-prepared positions and to retire. These leaders under suspicion were Commandant-General Piet Joubert and Generals Lukas Meyer and Piet Cronjé. Needless to say that there is not the slightest proof for these accusations.
24. The simple explanation of this meanness of the British headquarters is that General Christian de Wet had seized a large convoy when it crossed the Riet River on 15 February 1900, so that provisions were very short for the British army and its animals at the Paardeberg siege and the subsequent march to Bloemfontein.