

THE BRUTALITY OF WAR: A PERSPECTIVE ON THE ACTIONS OF OLAF BERGH'S BLACK SCOUTS AT SMALDEEL DURING THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR (1899-1902)

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Abstract

The intensity of the South African War (1899-1902) escalated sharply during the guerrilla phase in the rural areas outside the conventional theatre of operations. The conflict, which already resembled a total war, had a devastating destabilizing effect on the socio-economic stability and internal security in the rural areas of the two Boer Republics. The resulting lack of internal or domestic security in the rural areas eroded internal control by the Boer community and giving rise to a power vacuum. This development put the black population in the position to challenge white rule. This challenge took the form of armed black units under the command of either 'joiners' or British officers that started to operate in the unregulated and unsecured space. The black units committed tasks in the power vacuum that varied from spying to assisting the British forces to transport Boer women and children from their farms to concentration camps. In some cases armed blacks also operated as a military unit to challenge small pockets of Boers. The Boer population reacted with bitterness against these armed units. The expressed animosity even surpassed the adverse feelings they had for the British. The aim of the article is to investigate this phenomenon, with specific focus on the actions of Olaf Bergh in the Free State,

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who commanded a Winburg unit consisting of 500 armed blacks. Bergh's actions at Smaldeel station in the central Free State caused anger and bitterness that lingered for decades after

the War. The focus of the article is to explain why the reaction against Bergh and his black unit was so strong and bitter, and also disproportionately stronger than the general feeling of animosity toward the British.

Introduction

The formation of black men in armed units during the South African War (1899-1902) added an additional dangerous spin to the conflict. The actions of the black units, which often operated under the command of ‘joiners’, very quickly instilled fear, uncertainty and insecurity in the hearts of the local Boer community. The task of these units was initially to spy and to remove and transport women and children to concentration camps. They also engaged small groups of Boers in the field when an opportunity presented itself. The actions of these units progressively fuelled an already escalating conflict.¹ This juxta-positioning of ‘joiners’ and black units in a meta-war, parallel to the main conflict, ignited intense feelings of bitterness in the Boer community. This strong feeling of animosity toward the ‘joiners’ was encapsulated in a poem that was sent anonymously to members of the National Scouts during the war:

*Verraders! Monsters! Vloek der Aarde:
Verneerde schepesels der natuur:
Gods waken die u tot heden spaarde:
Verdelg u eens door Helsche Vuur. ²*

Focus of the article

The geographical context of the article is the theatre of operations of the ‘joiner’ Olaf Bergh, who led a unit of black scouts during the War. The outer limit of his theatre of operations was a triangle bordered by the Free State towns, Ventersburg, Winburg and Brandfort in the south. The specific focus of the investigation will be on the centre of the triangle, namely the surrounding area of the small Smaldeel siding.³ The siding forms the pivotal point of an investigation into a

case study relating to the killing of three burghers just south of Smaldeel (Theunissen). The Boers were killed on 31 March 1901 by Bergh's scouts and the reaction of the community after the killings reverberated through the district for decades after the War.⁴ However, the article will also discuss similar events in other parts of the theatre of war.

The focus of the article is to conduct a case study to explain the high level of animosity that was felt after the War towards the 'joiners' who commanded these black units. However, the underpinning question investigates why the reaction was so intense in spite of the low number of Boers killed in the area as a result of the actions of these units.

A strong visual indication of the high levels of animosity is the wording on a small memorial in Theunissen's local cemetery. The memorial was erected in 1927 to commemorate the death of the three local Boers who were killed by Bergh's scouts during the War. In spite of the fact that the memorial was erected more than two decades after the War, the sharp and bitter wording is an indication that the ill feelings toward Bergh and his unit had not subsided. The underpinning hermeneutics of the wording on the memorial is explicit and uncompromising and leaves no doubts as to the intensity of the feeling.

A memorial is not a monument

In a general sense a memorial differs from a monument because the fundamental reasons why they are erected differ. Memorials are not erected to remember heroes, but primarily to honour the dead, while monuments are erected to honour heroes. Memorials have a deeper imbedded meaning and are backward looking; commemorating an incident that happened in the past. The embedded message of memorials is that it is important *not to forget*.⁵ Monuments are forward looking to reflect the heroics of the dead into the future.

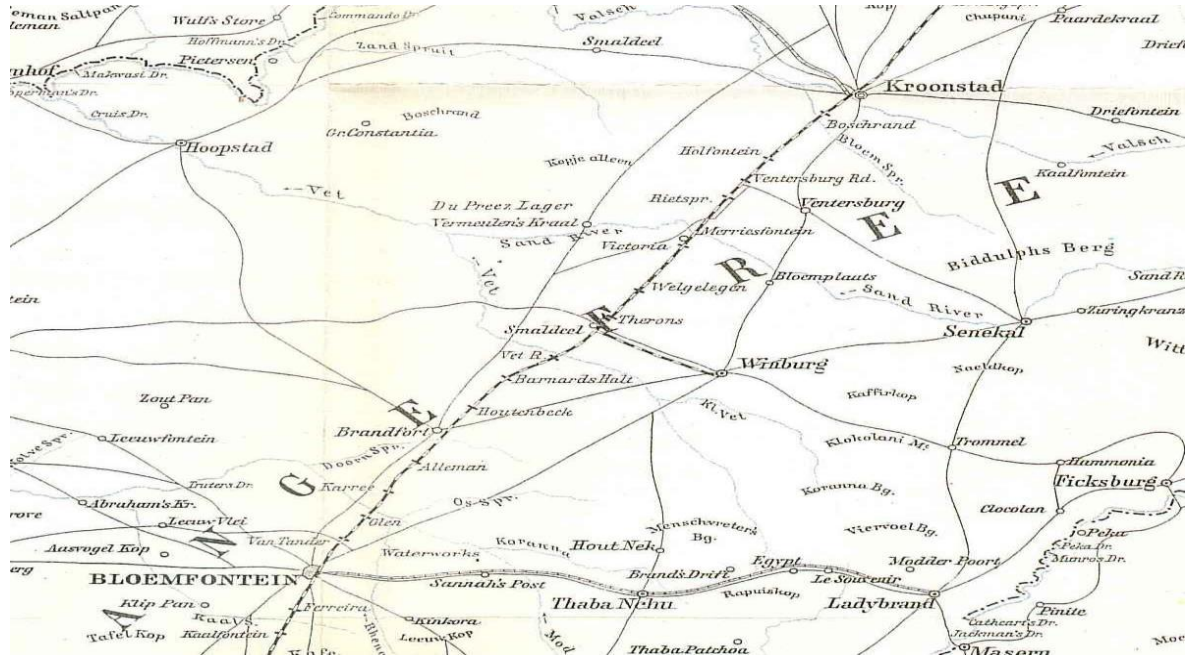


Figure 1: The geographical area showing the Smaldeel siding located at the point where the secondary railway line from Winburg connected with the main railway line between Bloemfontein and Kroonstad⁶

The monument in Winburg with the names of the Boers who died during the South African War was erected to commemorate their heroism. The monument therefore honours heroes, with the focus on the people who fought, and aims to remember their heroics in perpetuity.⁷



Figure 2: The Boer memorial in the Theunissen cemetery (Photo: Author)

The memorial (displayed above) in Theunissen was erected almost 26 years after the South African War to commemorate the death of three local Boers at the hand of Bergh's black unit. The three Boers were killed just south of the town, near the Vet River bridge close to the old pump station. The inscription on the monument contains the names of the three burghers and a reference to the incident. The reference is that the Boers were murdered (not killed) by a horde of armed barbarians under the command of a 'joiner'. The word 'murdered' on the memorial had been underlined to accentuate the atrocity and the reference to the command of a 'joiner'

was indicated by an arrow.⁸ The message on the memorial is uncompromising and strong and *demand*s that the deed by the ‘barbarians’ should never fade from memory and that future generations should be aware of the treason committed by the ‘joiners’ who commanded a black unit. The imbedded meaning of the memorial is the message that it is important *not to forget*.⁹ (Emphasis added)

The uncompromising bitterness that radiates from the memorial insists that this incident should be remembered for generations to come. The intriguing reality is that the memorial and its underlying message do not align with the reality of the War. The relatively small number of Boers who died at the hand of black units is disproportionately small compared to the total number of Boers killed in the area, and even more so to the total number of deaths on the Boer side during the War. In order to understand why, it is important to understand the phenomenon of ‘handsuppers’ and ‘joiners’ during the War.

The phenomenon of ‘handsuppers’ and ‘joiners’

Albert Grundlingh in his seminal work *Die ‘Hendsoppers’ en ‘Joiners’: Die Rasionaal en Verskynsel van Verraad* initiated research on the phenomenon of the Boers who swore the oath of neutrality (‘handsuppers’) and those who actively joined the British forces (‘joiners’). Arthur Blake in a later publication also highlighted the phenomenon of treason during the South African War in his work *Boereverraaier – teregstellings tydens die Anglo- Boereoorlog*. Blake provided an additional focus on the executions of so-called traitors who joined the British forces.

Among the Boers who refused to fight the British were those who laid down arms and stayed out of the conflict. These pacifists were known as ‘handsuppers’. The others were those who, for a variety of reasons, decided to join the British forces as spies, guides and to assist in a military capacity. These ‘joiners’ were regarded as repulsive and their actions created a sharp division between them and the diehard Boers, known as ‘bittereinders.’ In a military context the ‘joiners’ went a step further than the ‘handsuppers’, who simply laid down their arms and did not partake any further in the War. The ‘joiners’ actively assisted the British forces in various

capacities. As Warwick indicated, there is little doubt that in legal terms the ‘joiners’ became war-traitors.¹⁰

The reason why large numbers of Boers decided to lay down their arms and swear the oath of neutrality is complex. There was certainly a strong notion amongst some of the Boers that to carry on with a seemingly fruitless war against an overwhelming enemy was pointless, because it had only one logical outcome. Commandant Vilonel wrote a letter to President Steyn on 11 January 1902 in which he referred to the continuation of the war as needless and devastating. Vilonel warned Steyn that he and other officers would be compelled to take up arms against the Boers in a civil war if the war continued.¹¹

There is some uncertainty about the exact number of Boers who laid down their arms in the Transvaal and the Free State. Grundlingh calculated that between March 1900 and July 1900 a total of between 12, 000 and 14, 000 men laid down their arms. Based on these numbers, he estimated that the Boers who laid down their arms comprised 22% to 26% of the total armed force in the two Republics. Grundlingh ascribed the laying down of arms to the demoralization that followed the breakthrough of the British forces at Paardenberg and the occupation of Bloemfontein (13 March 1900) and Pretoria (5 June 1900).¹²

However, some of the Boers went further than just laying down their arms and actively joined the British forces. At the end of the War more than 5, 000 Boers became ‘joiners’ and assisted the British forces in a number of ways. In the Transvaal the ‘joiners’ formed the National Scouts under the command of General APJ Cronjé the former Boer general and the unit operated as an auxiliary force with the British. In the Free State the ‘joiners’ were known as the Orange River Colony Volunteers and their commander was General Piet de Wet, the former Boer general. De Wet was stationed with 248 ‘joiners’ at Heilbron¹³ and further south-east Olaf Bergh operated from Winburg with a smaller group of ‘joiners’ and a substantial unit of armed black men.¹⁴

Bergh's unit was strengthened by a group of local 'joiners', including Mike Geldenhuys, Kort Mike Schimper, Boy Tricardt, Salomon Ferreira, Jan Feireira, Jan Eksteen, Machiel Eksteen, Johannes Kok, Albertus Kok, Frederick Viviers and Phillip Viviers. Bergh was the overall commander, but a black officer with the name Malap commanded the black unit under him.¹⁵ Bergh's actions made him notorious and he quickly became the most hated person in the Free State during the War and after the conclusion of the peace treaty.¹⁶

Olaf Bergh

Who was Olaf Bergh and why was he so hated by his fellow Free Staters? Jan van Wyk wrote in the *Volksblad* of 16 June 2000 that Bergh was the most hated man in the Boer community after the War. Van Wyk wrote that Bergh was responsible for the killing of Boers, the burning down of farm houses and the molesting of women and children.¹⁷

Olaf Martin Bergh was born in the Cape Colony on 1 November 1865. Bergh joined the Cape railway service and was transferred to the Free State in 1889. He married a Boer woman from the Wessels family, a well-known Boer pioneer family in the Free State.¹⁸ Bergh became secretary to the Free State Director-General in 1887 and was stationed at Bloemfontein. He served two years later in this capacity in Kroonstad in the Northern Free State, but was pensioned in March 1900 from the railway service. Although he was a Free State burgher, he did not go on commando. After Kroonstad was occupied by the British forces on 24 March 1900 he was paroled to the Cape Colony.¹⁹

Bergh subsequently returned to the Free State and became a store keeper near Trommel. He settled on a farm between Ventersburg and Winburg, ironically named Spytfontein. He never associated with the Boer cause, which explains why he never joined a Boer commando.²⁰ Bergh initially joined the British forces as an officer attached to military intelligence. He was put in command of 400 blacks who acted predominantly as spies and guides before the scorched earth policy was implemented. Colonel JS Barker, stationed at Winburg, had overall command of the

unit of 'joiners' and armed blacks. There is evidence that Bergh's scouts must have been in existence and operational since early January 1901.²¹

Bergh progressed from his role as intelligence officer to a more active role as commander of a black unit known by the local people as the 'Winburg kaffir commando' (sic). The unit consisted of 400 – 500 armed blacks who operated in the broader Winburg district. It appears that the Bergh scouts had a roving commission. The unit broadened its scope and helped to round up the civilian population, raided livestock, looted farm houses and clashed with Boer guerrillas.²²

The unit committed a series of atrocities against women and children in the process of rounding them up for transportation to the Winburg and Brandfort concentration camps.²³ The manner in which the removal was done created a lot of bitterness in the Boer community around Smaldeel. However, it was predominantly two incidents that elicited the strongest reaction in the district during and after the War. The community never referred to these incidents as the killing of Boers in a battle or war, but as 'an act of murder committed by barbarians under the command of joiners'.²⁴

The background to the incident at Smaldeel was similar to that of other atrocities committed in the Winburg district. Commandant Haasbroek's commando was surrounded by Bergh's scouts on 17 August 1901 on the farm Welgevonden, south-west of Winburg, and four burghers died in the ensuing battle. They were Johannes du Preez, Phillippus Potgieter, Abraham (Ampie) Potgieter and his uncle, Ampie van Schalkwyk. The last three Boers were hacked or bludgeoned to their deaths in a manner that Gert van den Heever described as murder.²⁵

Van den Heever referred to this incident in a letter dated 27 October 1949, which is housed in the Renier collection in the Free State Archives.²⁶ Van den Heever described in his letter the gruesome details of the killing of Potgieter, Botha and Van Schalkwyk, who were all part of Commandant Haasbroek's commando. Haasbroek's men were surprised by Bergh's unit because they had apparently not posted guards. Twenty-four Boers were captured and four were killed. Van den

Heever got his information from his brothers, who buried the Boers afterwards, and he gave a graphic description of their corpses. Van den Heever reported that Potgieter's brains lay scattered on the ground after the black soldiers attacked him with sticks and that most of the men had broken arms from trying to defend themselves. Van Schalkwyk was shot execution style through his eyes from a very close range.²⁷

There were also other incidents in the area closer to Smaldeel. Joseph du Plessis was killed on the farm Rietfontein 15 kilometres south-east of Theunissen by armed blacks of Bergh's unit led by Jan Vivier, Stoffel Heinecke and Carl Tempelhof.²⁸

In total it seems that there was evidence of 13 deaths in the district that occurred as a result of encounters with Bergh's scouts. These incidents were always referred to as acts of treason or as murder. In a number of cases extreme brutality was alleged, but often the evidence was contradictory. None of the accounts referred to the incidents as killings that took place in the heat of battle.

Placing the deaths in perspective

It transpires that the number of Boer deaths in the district that resulted directly from the actions of a black unit commanded by 'joiners' was comparatively low. Boje and Pretorius calculated that a mere 19 burghers died in the Winburg district during the three years of the War in skirmishes with black units under the command of 'joiners'.²⁹ In the Smaldeel area the number of burghers who died was less than ten. In contrast, Commandant Sarel Haasbroek of Winburg executed 18 black soldiers of Bergh's unit in one single incident as retribution for their earlier killing of four burghers.³⁰ It is therefore difficult at first glance to understand the disproportionately bitter reaction of the community to the low numbers of Boers killed.

It is important, however, to put the participation of these black units and the individuals who belonged to them in perspective. The active participation of black

people in the War was shrouded in controversy. From the outset, both the Boers and the British were concerned that the participation of blacks in the South African War could broaden and escalate the conflict. The Boer commander, General JC Kemp, protested to Lord Kitchener that the War was being fought contrary to the rules of civilized warfare on account of it being carried on in a great measure with 'Kaffirs'.³¹ Kitchener in September 1901 lodged a complaint with General de Wet, stating that he had received numerous reports that the Boers had been fusillading unarmed blacks. De Wet in reaction pointed out that he had already protested to the British authorities on 18 March 1901 that armed blacks under command of Olaf Bergh were molesting women and children on farms and in the open veldt in the Free State. De Wet also mentioned that Bergh's scouts had killed a number of Boers in a gruesome manner.³²

Armed black units commanded by 'joiners' did in fact contribute to the escalation of the conflict. The black units operated predominantly in a peripheral zone adjacent to the theatre of conventional war between the Boer and British forces. The atrocities and counter-actions that spilled over from the main battle to the secondary 'peripheral war' pushed the war well beyond the 19th century notion of a 'gentlemen's war.'

The South African War had a destabilizing effect on broader society on various fronts and at different levels. The black population's socio-economic status in the two republics was historically characterised by subordination within a paternalistic relationship with the white community, predominantly as farmworkers or as mineworkers.³³ This subordination pacified the black community and helped maintain internal stability and security.

The escalating conflict between the Boers and the British forces had an invasive impact on this domestic stability and on the status quo of society. The deterioration of the internal security of the two Boer republics reconfigured the existing political, socio-economic and security situation. The deterioration of the formal regulating presence of the Boers in the rural areas in the two republics was exploited when black men formed armed units and joined the battle during the

guerrilla phase. The destabilizing effect of the war and the dispersal of substantial Boer forces allowed the black community the opportunity to assert themselves within this space and challenge their existing social and subservient status in the Boer republics.

When the power balance in the rural areas shifted it eroded the existing paternalistic relationship between the white community and black workers. The Boer community became progressively alarmed when large numbers of blacks shook off their subservience and challenged the existing hegemony and control over their political and socio-economic status. The shock increased when blacks in some instances moved from being passive observers to playing a more active, armed role. They did this by supporting the enemy and operated within the 'liberated zones' carved out by British military actions after the Boers had been subdued.

The scorched earth policy left large areas in the Free State and in the Transvaal without proper internal control. Thousands of blacks were sucked into the vortex of destitution and in some instances they took action to avoid it. The subsequent killing of Boers by armed black units occurred in peripheral zones in a secondary meta-war that spilled over from the original or primary battle. This spill-over denied the Boers the peace of mind that their families were safe on the farms. The Boers felt betrayed by the rebellion of their former subjects and the threat that they presented to their vulnerable families and their security. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the armed blacks became dominant in some areas and also because they were commanded by 'joiners'. The Boers, who were progressively unable to protect their women and children, suddenly had to deal with the War on two fronts. The removal of women and children from farms to concentration camps by black units added insult to injury. The Boer community perceived the combination of 'joiners' and armed black soldiers as a repulsive concept. The union of these two adversaries, both viewed as traitors by the Boers, heightened the animosity that the Boer community felt towards their foes. Alie Badenhorst wrote in anguish about the combination of the British forces and black units; in particular of the latter arriving on the farm and, with rifle in hand, demanding what they wanted

of the defenceless women, who had no choice but to comply.³⁴ There is documented evidence given under oath by women who had been molested by members of the armed black units who threatened them with death unless they gave in to their demands.³⁵

Mrs A Meyer wrote after the War about the actions of a black unit commanded by Olaf Bergh, detailing that women were molested by the black soldiers on the farm while the 'joiners' lurked at the periphery of the group, too embarrassed to be identified.³⁶

The Renier collection on the South African War in the Free State Archive in Bloemfontein contains many accounts from Boer men and women who had been embittered by the actions of black units under the command of 'joiners'. Boje and Pretorius made the observation that the concentration camp writings display in some instances more negative reaction towards blacks than towards the British.³⁷

General de Wet's son, Izak, wrote in his memoirs that the 'joiners' were 'the froth, debris, vagabonds and traitors' who joined the enemy.³⁸ De Wet wrote that the highest form of treachery was to assist with the 'kaffirs' and 'hotnots'³⁹ to capture Boer women and children to put them in concentration camps. Emanoel Lee in *To the Bitter End* stated that the 'joiners' amongst the Afrikaners were remembered to this day with such hatred that it is almost impossible to get any information about them.⁴⁰ Perhaps the best description of the 'joiners' was contained in the one-word description of Johanna Brand in *Die Kappie Kommando*, who referred to the 'joiners' as 'Judas-boere'.⁴¹

When compared to the total number of Boers killed during the War, this bitter reaction to the comparatively low number killed by black units seems disproportionate. In the Winburg district only 19 Boers were killed by black units during the War.⁴² In comparison, the casualties of the War in its entirety numbered 22, 000 British soldiers and 7, 000 Boers, which makes the number of deaths at the hand of the armed black units seems almost insignificant.

In addition, the number of armed black units under the command of ‘joiners’ or British officers was rather insignificant in comparison with the overall numbers of the Boers and the British forces in the field. This was especially true in the Free State where the total number of ‘joiners’ and armed black soldiers was not very high. The Orange River Volunteers (ORC) in the Free State were never able to recruit the high numbers that the National Scouts in the Transvaal were able to attract. According to British reports the official number of ORC members was only 248 men.⁴³ The ORC was commanded by the former Boer general Piet de Wet at Heilbron and the former Boer captain Fanie Vilonel at Winburg.⁴⁴ (The latter was reinforced by an additional 500 black troops.⁴⁵)

The murders at the Vet River bridge near Smaldeel

On 21 March 1901 the 17-year-old Hendrik Bresler of Mooimeisiefontein and Matthijs van Wyk of Paardenvallei were killed by ‘those who helped the English’. The reference is clearly to ‘joiners’ and black auxiliary troops. Although the reference in the sources is to two burghers, Van Wyk and Bresler,⁴⁶ the memorial in Theunissen includes the name of a third burgher, Mathys Willems.⁴⁷ The farm Paardenvallei where the incident took place was well known to the locals and to the local ‘joiners’.

Witnesses to the incident stated that the killing happened when Bergh’s scouts trapped some Boers at Vredeplaats south of Smaldeel station (Theunissen).⁴⁸ The killings took place about six kilometres south of the siding near the old bridge close to the railway crossing over the Vet River.⁴⁹

According to the testimony of Willem and Jeremias Cronje the bodies of the Boers who were killed were horribly mutilated.⁵⁰ Mrs A Meyer wrote after the War that the two (three?) Boers who were shot at the bridge over Vet River south of Smaldeel were mere boys.⁵¹ She stated that their bodies were pulverized by concentrated shooting in an apparent case of overkill. According to Meyer’s account Bergh proudly displayed the two Boers’ blood-soaked jackets in the Winburg

magistrate's office for everyone to see⁵² as evidence of the sharp shooting prowess of his black unit.⁵³

The reaction to the killings was memorialized as described above and corresponded with the then prevailing attitude towards these killings, which was that the Boers were murdered, not killed in battle.⁵⁴ Even though the memorial was erected 26 years after the incident, it is clear that the intensity of the reaction had in no way subsided over the years.

Hatred and bitterness: 'handsuppers' and 'joiners'

In light of the accusations and counter-accusations that were made as the brutality of the War escalated, it is almost impossible to ascertain 'who did what to whom' and to assign guilt. This is even more difficult given what Boje and Pretorius refer to as the tyranny of available evidence, since the accounts contained in the archives are almost exclusively from a Boer perspective.⁵⁵

It would therefore be an act of impossibility after all these years to establish guilt based on the weight of evidence. The focus of the article is therefore not to assign guilt, but to explain why the hatred elicited by the actions of black units commanded by 'joiners' lingered in Afrikaner society for so long. The contours of bitterness eventually underpinned the formation of political parties such as the National Party, which capitalised on these incidents for decades to ignite patriotism and to boost their support. These sentiments also formed the bedrock for the success of the National Party in later years and contributed to their victory in the 1948 election.⁵⁶

The 'handsuppers' who resided in concentration camps and/or on farms were despised by the Boers, but they were tolerated to a certain extent. However, this same tolerance was not extended to the 'joiners', especially when they commanded a black unit or were part of such a unit which committed atrocities against small groups of burghers and/or women and children. (See the earlier comment by Izak de Wet, who

wrote that the highest form of treachery was to assist the ‘kaffirs’ and ‘hotnots’⁵⁷ to capture Boer women and children to put them in concentration camps.)

Olaf Bergh was assisted by a small group of local ‘joiners’ during the War, such as Viviers and Du Bruyn. They were outcasts in the Smaldeel (Theunissen) community for decades after the War. One of the elderly local residents, Hendrik Gutter, recalled how his father’s car broke down close to the Viviers residence almost 30 years after the War and they needed to call on him for assistance. Gutter recalls how clandestinely his father approached the Viviers residence, remarking that he hoped nobody from the town would spot them entering the homestead of a former ‘joiner’.⁵⁸

Hendrik Jeremia du Bruyn farmed with his parents next to the Taaibosch Spruit about 18 kilometres from Smaldeel. He joined the Burgher Police, which consisted of local ‘joiners’, while he was in a concentration camp as a ‘handsupper’. He and four other ‘joiners’ were captured by the Boers and tried by a military court. They were found guilty and were executed on 29 October 1901.⁵⁹ His family in later years remained aloof from the local community.

The article has already detailed the strong adverse feelings of the Boer community against black participation in the War. In his biography on the War, Revd RDM McDonald, a parson in the field with one of the commandos, wrote that if a black spy was caught no mercy was shown. In defence of this policy McDonald stated that it was construed as barbaric that black men were deployed in such a capacity and that the blacks should have realized that the War had not been declared against them.⁶⁰

SB Spies in his work on the South African War, *Methods of Barbarism*, also refers to the strong resentment felt by the Boer forces against the deployment of armed black during the War: ‘Boers capturing armed blacks in the service of the British in the field often shot them without compunction.’⁶¹

These killings must be seen in the context of the brutalizing effect of war. British records list 235 incidents of unarmed blacks being killed by Boers in the field.

As one burgher wrote, no meeting of the Krygsraad was necessary if an unarmed black was caught; he was summarily shot as a spy. On June 1901 Commandant Sarel Haasbroek reported to De Wet that the Winburg commando which he commanded shot blacks on a weekly basis.⁶²

Mrs AC Meyer wrote on 24 October 1949 to *Die Volksblad*, recounting some of the incidents during the War when women on farms were molested by black soldiers while the local 'joiners' hid on the fringes of the unit, too ashamed to be recognized by the women.⁶³ This sheds light on the treatment of the 'joiners' after the War and the deep contempt and resentment towards them. They were very rarely accepted as equals back into the community. There are reports of incidents where 'joiners' were attacked and in some instances they were afraid for their lives.⁶⁴

Olaf Bergh was a hated man after the War when he returned to his farm Spytfontein. The farm was located near Ventersburg close to Doornberg near the present-day Allemanskraal dam. Bergh lived outside his house in a rondavel with firing holes and kept his revolver close by. He once arrived at the farm of a Dr Vogel where the latter's mother pulled him off his horse and thrashed him with a sjambok, asking 'how dare you put your foot on our farm?'⁶⁵

Murdered and not killed

Although the impact of the black units at a military level was relatively insignificant, their impact at a psychological level was substantial. Grundlingh points out that the 'atrocities' of the black units were given as one of the six main reasons by the Boer deputation to Vereeniging for deciding to lay down their arms and negotiate for peace. It was specifically mentioned at the conference that the 'arming of the blacks who committed grievous atrocities and murders' was one of the main reasons for deciding to negotiate for peace.⁶⁶ The danger presented by the black units under the command of 'joiners' in the vacuum left by the disintegration of security and stability in the farming community was a strong deciding factor to end the War.

The second plausible explanation for the bitter reaction was that the manner in which the Boers were killed by the armed blacks was regarded as repulsive. The killing with sticks, spears and even stones at close range was morally, socially and politically unacceptable to the Boers and contrary to their perception of the nature of warfare. The unwritten rule of the 'gentlemen's war' was that the enemy must be killed from a long range.

It was not only in the Boer Republics that this notion was prevalent. The methods employed by the black units were also regarded as repulsive in the neighbouring Natal and Cape colonies. The government in Natal clearly stated its objections to black participation in military operations before the outbreak of the South African War and argued:

- (i) *That the methods of native warfare are barbarous at all times*
- (ii) *...that if the Natives should act in accordance with their methods of warfare they would mutilate the dead, kill the wounded men.*⁶⁷

The killing of Boers with knobkerries and with assegais had a specific negative connotation in the Boer community dating back to the battles in the Eastern Cape and the Great Trek in the 18th and 19th centuries. This previous experience explains their aversion to acts of mutilation. It should be remembered that many Boers did not regard the black community as civilized and on equal footing with them. This is reflected in the view of a Boer related by Schikkerling in his diary on the South African War. The Boer explained to Schikkerling on 3 February 1901 how to shoot a native and warned that the vulnerable parts of a black man are smaller than those of a white man, especially the heart, brain and vital parts.⁶⁸

In a skirmish at Gatberg near Ugie on 20 November 1901 Commandant Bezuidenhout's small force of 53 men was repulsed by an armed black unit under command of Captain Elliot. Four Boers died and the local farmers, who buried the bodies and witnessed the skirmish from a distance, declared in written statements that they had found the actions of the black soldiers brutal. The farmers stated that the black soldiers were also armed with assegais and knobkerries.⁶⁹ They further

stated that the bodies of the burghers were mutilated during and after the battle and that their bodies were cut open with assegais. One burgher's head was in pieces and his brains were spilling out. Another burgher had his lower lip and the skin of his forehead cut off.⁷⁰

After the War Bezuidenhout lodged an official complaint with the Attorney-General of the Cape, not about the killing as such, but the manner in which his men were killed.⁷¹ Bezuidenhout specifically stated that the four men were 'murdered' and not 'killed in battle'. The small memorial that commemorated the battle and the fallen burghers in Ugje carried the following inscription on the lower section: "Wreed vermoor deur gewapende kaffers (sic) naby Gatberg⁷² (Viciously murdered by armed kaffirs (sic) near Gatberg."⁷³

There are many accounts of killings with sticks, blunt objects and other methods even after the Boers had surrendered. During the War a 'joiner' who was stationed at Holfontein, between Smaldeel and Kroonstad, commanded a substantial number of armed black soldiers. When two Boers of the area, Frikkie Botha and Kotie van der Westhuizen, decided to ambush the unit they were trapped and wounded. The black soldiers then tied the two wounded Boers to two horses and the unfortunate men were pulled to pieces.⁷⁴

Van den Heever also described the deaths of Boer burghers Potgieter, Botha and Van Schalkwyk near Doornberg, not as killing, but as murder.⁷⁵

The inscription on the memorial in the Theunissen cemetery referred to the three Boers as 'viciously murdered by black barbarians under the command of a white traitor.'⁷⁶⁷⁷ It was the method that was used and *who did the killing and the manner of killing*, rather than the killings *per se* that was despised.

The third explanation for this intense hatred was the combination of two concepts that were both regarded as repugnant to the Boers; namely 'joiners' and armed black militia. Olaf Bergh's unit reflected these two focal points of hatred. When Bergh's unit killed Boers in the area it invoked that hatred, because it was

contrary to the Boers' belief that the black community should stay out of the war. The fact that these units threatened the vulnerable Boer women and children further exacerbated the reaction.

Conclusion

The article aimed to contextualize and explain the disproportionate reaction to the substantial number of Boers killed by British forces versus the smaller number killed by black units, which elicited a much more intense reaction. The discussion predominantly referenced the killing of a small number of Boers by Bergh's scouts near the small Smaldeel siding. The article attempted to put the events in perspective to explain why the relatively minor incidence of Boer killings by these units elicited such bitter and adverse feelings within the larger ambit of the War.

On the face of it this reaction does not appear logical or even plausible. However, this phenomenon cannot be fully understood by adopting a logical approach. There is a very strong emotional and subjective dimension to the response. Applying an objective test is therefore inappropriate, because the reactions came from a very personal angle and viewpoint. It will be much more appropriate to apply a subjective test from the viewpoint of those who were closest to the events in order to get a clearer understanding.

Endnotes

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- ¹ A joiner was a burgher from either the Transvaal or Free State Republic who laid down arms and switched sides to the British armed forces.
 - ² Ploeger, J. *Die Lotgevalle van die Burgerlike bevolking gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902*, Pretoria, Departement van Nasionale Opvoeding Staatsargief en Heraldiekdiens, Deel 2, 1985, 16:12.
 - ³ The siding was later proclaimed as a town, Theunissen, named after the local commandant Helgard Theunissen.
 - ⁴ Renier collection accession no 8669, National Archive Bloemfontein, VAB / A 119.
 - ⁵ Snyman, J. The suffering and the politics of memory, *Filozofskivestnik* XV11, 1996, 118.

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- ⁶ Maps relating to The German Official Account of the War in South Africa. Published by Scripta Africana, Melville, 1988. L.S. Emery *The Times History of the War in South Africa (1899-1902)* Vol II. London: Sampson Low, Marston and Company, Ltd., 1905, 56.
- ⁷ In loco inspection, the monument is situated in the old Winburg town square.
- ⁸ The memorial is currently located in the newer Theunissen cemetery and was obviously relocated from its earlier position at the Dingaan's 'feeshuis'.
- ⁹ Snyman, J. *op cit.*, 118.
- ¹⁰ Warwick, P. *Black People and the South African War*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983, 269.
- ¹¹ Grundlingh, A. *Hendsoppers en Joiners, die Verskynsel en Rasionaal van Verraad*, Pretoria, Protea Uitgewers, 2010, 257.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 37.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ¹⁵ Women's Memorial, Bloemfontein, Boer War collection, accession no 5316/1, 7. Bothma, L.J. *Rebelle spoor*. Bloemfontein, Eie Uitgewer, 115.
- ¹⁶ *Volksblad*, 16 June 2000 *ABO: Olaf Bergh was 'n baie gehate man onder the Boere het talle vermoor*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*;
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Women's Memorial, Bloemfontein, Boer War collection, accession no 5316/1, 7. Bothma, L.J. *op cit.*, 115.
- ²² *Ibid.* The word 'kaffir' is used with full knowledge of its derogatory nature but in terms of historical accuracy it was retained.
- ²³ The Human family, Bettie Human with her six children from the farm Landdrosmeite was removed from their farm by Bergh and his unit consisting of a number of 'joiners' and black soldiers. Information obtained from her youngest son Phillip Human in 1952.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ FPSA, A 119:1099 Herhinneringe van GJS van den Heever 1944, 60-62 and Venter, W.H. *Die Geskiedenis van Winburg tot 1902*, Unpublished MA dissertation, Free State University.
- ²⁶ Renier collection, accession number 9769, National Archive Bloemfontein, VAB / A 119.
- ²⁷ Renier collection, accession number 9769, National Archive Bloemfontein, VAB / A 119 and Grundlingh, A. *op cit.*, 217.
- ²⁸ FPSA, A 119. 1060, Marx 'Vryheidsoorlog herrinneringe, 23 – according to NASA RS 13,155.
- ²⁹ Boje, J. & Pretorius, F. Black Resistance in the Orange Free State during the Anglo-Boer War, *Historia*, Vol 58, No 1, 2013, 15.
- ³⁰ Van Schoor, M.C. E. *Christiaan de Wet, Krygsman en Volksman*, Pretoria, Protea Uitgewers, 2011, 161.
- ³¹ Warwick, P. *op cit.*, 6.

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- ³² Van Schoor, M.C.E. *op cit.*, 161.
- ³³ Boje, J. & Pretorius, F. *op cit.*, 15.
- ³⁴ Rothmann, M.E.R. *The Diary of 'Tant Alie van Transvaal'*, Kaapstad, Nasionale Pers, 1939, 176-178.
- ³⁵ Women's Memorial, Bloemfontein, Boer War collection, accession no 5316/1, 7.
- ³⁶ Renier collection accession no 8669, National Archive Bloemfontein, VAB / A 119.
- ³⁷ Boje, J. & Pretorius, F. *op cit.*, 15.
- ³⁸ De Wet, I. *Met De Wet op commando*, Kaapstad, Volkspers (1957), 6.
- ³⁹ The reference is used with full knowledge of the derogatory nature of the words. However, for historical accuracy the reference was used as it appeared in the original text.
- ⁴⁰ Lee, E. *To the bitter end*, Middlesex, Penguin Press, 1985, 172.
- ⁴¹ Brand, J. *Die Kappie Kommando*, Amsterdam, J.H. de Bussy, 1913, 394.
- ⁴² Boje, J. & Pretorius, F. *op cit.*, 14.
- ⁴³ Warwick, P. (General Editor) *The South African War – The Anglo Boer War*, Essex, Longman, 1980, 269. The book mentioned 448 men who served in the ORC at the end of the War.
- ⁴⁴ Grundlingh, A. *op cit.* 257.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ FPSA, A 119. 1060: Marx 'Vryheidsoorlog herinneringe', 11.
- ⁴⁷ Memorial in the Theunissen cemetery.
- ⁴⁸ FPSA, A 119. 1060: Marx 'Vryheidsoorlog herinneringe', 11.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with Magdalena du Plessis, whose grandfather A.S. du Plessis was the owner of the farm, the place where the killing took place was pointed out.
- ⁵⁰ FPSA, A 119. 1060: Marx 'Vryheidsoorlog herinneringe', 11.
- ⁵¹ Interview with Magdalena du Plessis whose grandfather A.S. du Plessis was the owner of the farm and away from the farm at the time of the incident it was stated that Van Wyk was a landless farmer who resided on the farm and that he was a young boy who did not joined the war.
- ⁵² Blake, A. *Boereverraaier – Teregstellings tydens die Anglo-Boere Oorlog*, Kaapstad: Tafelberg Uitgewers, 2010. 195.
- ⁵³ Renier collection, accession number 8669, National Archive Bloemfontein, VAB / A 119.
- ⁵⁴ Memorial in the Theunissen cemetery.
- ⁵⁵ Boje, J. & Pretorius, F. *op cit.*, 15.
- ⁵⁶ Geyser, O. & Marais, AH. *Die Nasionale Party Deel I*, Pretoria, Academica Pers, 1975, 15.
- ⁵⁷ 'The reference is used with full knowledge of the derogatory nature of the words. However, for historical accuracy the reference was used as it appeared in the original text.
- ⁵⁸ Interview with Hendrik Gutter, 5 October 2015.
- ⁵⁹ Blake, A. *op cit.*, 160-163.
- ⁶⁰ MacDonald RDM. *'n Terugblik op my oorlogsjare*. Johannesburg, Voortrekkerpers, 1949, 49.
- ⁶¹ Spies, SB *Methods of barbarism*. Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2007, 307.

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- ⁶² Macdonald, R.M. *op cit.*, 21.
- ⁶³ Renier collection, accession number 8669, National Archive Bloemfontein, VAB / A 119.
- ⁶⁴ Van Wyk, J. *op cit.*,
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁶ Grundlingh, A. *op cit.*, 34.
- ⁶⁷ Warwick, P. *op cit.*, 16 & 17.
- ⁶⁸ Schikkerling, R.W. *Commando Courageous*, Johannesburg, Hugh Keartland Publishers, 1964, 141.
- ⁶⁹ WCRC CA ND Sworn affidavit attached to the letter J Bezuidenhout to TL Graham, 27 October 1902.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁷² The derogatory word is reflected as it appeared for historical accuracy.
- ⁷³ WCRC CA ND Sworn affidavit attached to the letter from J Bezuidenhout to TL Graham, 27 October 1902.
- ⁷⁴ Serfontein, D. *Keurskrif vir Kroonstad*, Perskor, Pretoria, 1955,194.
- ⁷⁵ FPSA, A 119:1099 Herinneringe van GJS van den Heever 1944, 60-62 Venter, W.H. *op cit.*,115.