

## Book Review

# Work or Starve: Black Concentration Camps & Forced Labour Camps in South Africa, 1901–1902

Garth Benneyworth

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Bloemfontein: War Museum of the Boer Republics  
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The individual and collective war experiences of those affected by the Second Anglo-Boer War (also called the South African War) (1899–1902) continue to draw the attention of researchers. As a result, a sizeable amount of literature has been published over the last two decades alone. The most recent addition to this growing pool of knowledge has been the book by Garth Benneyworth, titled *Work or Starve: Black Concentration Camps & Forced Labour Camps in South Africa, 1901–1902*, a work commissioned by the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein. The title further represents the consolidation of most, if not all, of Benneyworth's former research outputs about the topic.

In positioning his work, Benneyworth, following a thorough scanning of the historiographical field, states that the aim of his work is to contribute to capturing the unique internment experiences of black internees (his preferred term), whether refugees, detainees or labourers. This alone makes this book a worthwhile contribution given the relative neglect and under-researched nature of the topic. To achieve his objective, Benneyworth declares upfront that his reading of the evidence suggested that the black internment experience was not only qualitatively but also quantitatively different from that of white internees. For the first group detained in the different camps around Kimberley and parts of the Free State and North West, the choice was simple: collaborate or starve. This stood in contrast to the treatment meted out to those in the white camps. Against this background, Benneyworth rejects any attempt to group the black experience under the umbrella of 'mutual suffering'<sup>7425</sup> and therefore equal to the suffering of whites, as argued by Kessler.<sup>426</sup>

The above-mentioned position is a bold and admirable but flawed attempt, given the significant consensus within international literature that prisons and internment camps, at their most basic, are instruments of social suffering. Further, given their connection to involuntary incarceration and the strategic agenda of those in control of these institutions together with the employment of various technologies, as punishment to enforce compliance, internment inflicts indiscriminate and lasting pain – physically and psychologically. It is therefore incumbent upon historians to be cautious in their assessments of suffering and to avoid any suggestion that it may be possible to distinguish

between different degrees of suffering – in this case, encapsulated in the objective formulated as ‘to separate their narrative from that of mutual suffering while disentangling it from a narrative which originated during the apartheid era’.<sup>427</sup> Against this background, Benneyworth’s proposition that one should distinguish between ‘sole suffering’<sup>428</sup>, ‘mutual suffering’<sup>429</sup> and separate or independent or ‘standalone’<sup>430</sup> suffering when interpreting internment or concentration camp experiences, is therefore a contentious one. Despite its foregrounding of the common utilisation by perpetrators of different sets of punitive technologies for different race groups, from the perspective of this reviewer, *Work or Starve* fits comfortably into the broad paradigm of ‘mutual suffering’. This criticism notwithstanding, the book makes a fundamental contribution to our understanding of the black war experience and should therefore become an integral part of any coursework on the topic. Benneyworth’s combination of methodological tools also sets an important precedent and raises questions about a range of matters for others to follow and investigate.

Thirteen years before the publication of *Work or Starve*, leading historian Fransjoan Pretorius, while lauding the sustained interest and growing number of publications about the South African War, also lamented a creeping methodological laziness on the part of some historians of the war. Key problems identified were, among other things, a lack of rigour and the inability of some historians to interrogate both the available archives and the creators thereof properly. From Pretorius’s perspective, this lack of prudence was at the heart of a crop of historical output that was not only blatantly subjective, but also poor and ‘bad’ in quality.<sup>431</sup> Whether this assessment had anything to do with Benneyworth’s decision to follow an integrated approach, or his choice to employ a combination of written or documentary archives, evidence from material culture, and oral testimony skilfully to reconstruct the black internment camp experience is not clear. This notwithstanding, Benneyworth produced a ground-breaking narrative, a book that is both rich and multi-layered in its analysis and which provides compelling evidence to back his key arguments. From this perspective, and thanks to the conscious decision to move beyond the written archive and to employ a combination of methodological tools to write a ‘holistic penetrative history’,<sup>432</sup> *Work or Starve* substantially enriches South African historiography and sets a new standard for all South African historians. It moreover gives impetus to ongoing efforts to demythologise the history of the concentration or internment camps as advocated by the work of Elizabeth van Heyningen more than two decades ago.<sup>433</sup> *Work or Starve* further supplements studies such as those that have approached the topic in the intervening years and their subsidiary aspects from the vantage point of the war as a humanitarian crisis<sup>434</sup> or as genocide.<sup>435</sup>

Overall, the richly illustrated 12-chapter book is an easy read. Each chapter is dedicated to a central topic and its existing documentary archive, both in South Africa and abroad. Following a proper mining of the available official record, the author employs both oral history and the tools of archaeology to systematically fill the gaps encountered within the paper archive.

The narrative starts with a thorough historiographical overview (Chapter 1) to position the book appropriately and to indicate its contribution to the further expansion of the pool of knowledge about concentration, refugee, and labour camps clearly. With Kimberley De

Beers Consolidated Mines and its close mining compound management system as his point of departure (Chapter 2), the author proceeds to discuss the characteristics of total war and the push and pull factors that effected the rapid redistribution of the black population from their original places of residence in the various Northern Cape and Orange Free State towns and villages (Chapter 3). Thereafter, the key role of the alliance of the colonial authorities and mining capital in fashioning a distinctive, discriminatory and exploitative camp system (Chapters 6–10) receives attention. In order to promote the reader’s proper understanding of the notion of “degrees of suffering”, the author makes a concerted effort to document and contrast both the key differences and the minute details of the different racial camp regimes. Throughout, the agency of black individuals and communities – including their employment of everyday tools of resistance, such as desertion and a continuous search for alternative accommodation and livelihoods – is acknowledged. The only aspect that needs attention is the correction of a typographical error on page 11 (a piece of orphaned text that appears out of place) that needs to be rectified.

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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>425</sup> G Benneyworth, *Work or Starve: Black Concentration Camps & Forced Labour Camps in South Africa, 1901–1902* (Bloemfontein: War Museum of the Boer Republics, 2023), 17
- <sup>426</sup> SV Kessler, ‘The Black Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902: Shifting the Paradigm from Sole Martyrdom to Mutual Suffering’, *Historia*, 44, 1 (1999), 110–147.
- <sup>427</sup> G Benneyworth, *Work or Starve: Black Concentration Camps & Forced Labour Camps in South Africa, 1901–1902* (Bloemfontein: War Museum of the Boer Republics, 2023), 17.
- <sup>428</sup> G Benneyworth, *Work or Starve: Black Concentration Camps & Forced Labour Camps in South Africa, 1901–1902* (Bloemfontein: War Museum of the Boer Republics, 2023), 17
- <sup>429</sup> Benneyworth, *Work or Starve*, 17
- <sup>430</sup> Benneyworth, *Work or Starve*, 24
- <sup>431</sup> F Pretorius, ‘The White Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Debate without End’, *Historia*, 55, 2 (2010), 34–49.
- <sup>432</sup> Benneyworth, *Work or Starve*, 15.
- <sup>433</sup> E van Heyningen, ‘The Concentration Camps of the South African (Anglo-Boer) War, 1900–1902’, *History Compass*, 7, 1 (2009), 22–43.
- <sup>434</sup> See for example E van Heyningen, ‘The South African War as Humanitarian Crisis’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97, 900 (2015), 999–1028.
- <sup>435</sup> H Ribeiro, ‘Did the Confinement of Boer Civilians in Concentration Camps by the British Army during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) Constitute an Act of Genocide?’, *Sprawy Narodowościowe*, 52 (2020), 1–12.