

# “From spoiling natives to no work, no food”: Food scarcity and the controversy of food rations during the South African War

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## Abstract

Food became scarce during the South African War (1899–1902), which led to large numbers of the population dying from starvation or diseases related to hunger. This was due to certain towns in the country being under siege, while farms and homesteads were burned down. The study on which this article is based, examined three main causes of food shortages during the South African War: the unequal distribution of food rations during the siege of Mafikeng, particularly in the concentration camps; complaints by white communities about the “spoiling of natives”; and the introduction of the “no work, no food” policy. The study further reviewed the use of food during commemorations following the establishment of the so-called relief of Mafeking dinners.

**Keywords:** South African War, siege of Mafikeng, concentration camps, relief of Mafikeng.

## Introduction

The Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), also known as the South African War, is one of the most contested and controversial historical events in South Africa. It is nothing short of a political debate in terms of participation and commemoration. The war played a fundamental role in the history of South Africa and its current political stance. One of the major aspects of this war was how various events have been interpreted, which confirms that history is indeed political, and that there are bound to be various opposing views. Many of the views are often used to serve nationalist, mythological ideologies and political agendas. Black African participation in the war has been questioned and debated over the years, and the significance of the role they played was excluded from historical records and education curricula for a long time. A great deal of the information that we are slowly uncovering is now becoming ‘add-on’ type of information, which results in the war not being properly understood and our knowledge about it having many gaps. Without any doubt, the history of the South African War has been characterised by fragmentation of the knowledge we have on the conflict and the contradictory opinions that have been expressed about this War. One of the controversies and gaps of the South African War is the unequal distribution of food rations during the siege of Mafikeng and the discontinuation of food rations in the concentration camps.

The major focus of the study on which this article is based, was to establish how food was distributed to black Africans during the siege of Mafikeng and in the concentration camps, and to explore the motives that inspired the existence of the “Relief of Mafeking dinners”. The focus on the siege of Mafikeng and the concentration camps is for two reasons. Firstly, the South African War began in Mafikeng, and food supply was affected when the area was under siege, which led to a scarcity of food. Secondly, the concentration camp system and the scorched earth policy aggravated food shortages after farms and homelands had been burned down and people were forced to live in destitute areas. The current study was undertaken to review literature that focuses on the issue of food during the time of the war and to assess how this situation affected black Africans. The main reason for this focus was that the issue has not received much attention, and starvation was one of the main causes of death during the war. It is also relevant to explore how the ‘no work, no food’ policy affected black Africans in the concentration camps. This is key in establishing whether the notion of a ‘shared struggle’ between the Boers and black Africans is accurate. Prior to exploring the reasons behind food shortages and how black Africans were affected by it, it was important to review briefly the history of war in South Africa and how black Africans became involved in conflicts that were not necessarily theirs. More specifically, it was vital to explore the siege of Mafikeng and the establishment of the concentration camps that interned both black and white people.

### **The archaeology and history of warfare in South Africa**

According to LeBlanc, “[h]umans have been at each other’s throats since the dawn of the species”.<sup>2</sup> Archaeologists have always been aware of historical warfare and violence but were oblivious to the revelations regarding past events and people that could be uncovered through the study of warfare.<sup>3</sup>

Colonisation has somehow shaped the entire world through historical actions of politics and war, by either the colonisers or the colonised,<sup>4</sup> and the interpretation of warfare has thus not escaped colonial thought. These global colonial experiences have inspired concepts and systems of power and control through using violence and terrorisation as tools of operation to achieve domination.<sup>5</sup> The use of violence to exert power has been a fundamental part of South African history since 1652, following the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck.<sup>6</sup> It is also worth noting that wars do not just erupt out of nowhere, but result from back and forth contestations, which in most cases result in the issuing of ultimatums. As Stevenson states, “[g]reat wars resemble volcanic eruptions rather than earthquakes: warning signs precede them.”<sup>7</sup> Like any other war that starts anywhere in the world, the reasons for the South African War are usually very similar to other wars. Wars could range from a fight over land and authority to ruling over an area to tensions over raw materials (such as diamonds and gold in the case of South Africa). Some people are drawn into war because of their interest to keep what they consider as belonging to them.

Before the arrival of Europeans to the hinterland of Southern Africa, most black Africans still occupied their ancestral land and lived in independent and self-governing chiefdoms. This changed when the settlers began exploiting the chiefdoms for their benefit. Through this exploitation, black Africans began to lose much of their political independence and

their military dominance.<sup>8</sup> As early as 1659, it was customary for European descendants to recruit certain racial groups to assist them in conflicts against other groups.<sup>9</sup> One such an example is that of the burgher commandos who used the Khoikhoi to fight against the San people.<sup>10</sup> The Khoikhoi also fought against the British in defence of the Cape.<sup>11</sup> This trend of African groups involved in wars against one another when defending the interest of white people was continuously evident in several conflicts that took place in South Africa. Around the 1800s, when the British had fully occupied the Cape Colony, the British continued with this practice.<sup>12</sup> The same trend occurred during the period of the South African War fought between 1899 and 1902.<sup>13</sup>

### **The South African War and the siege of Mafikeng**

Mafikeng owes its existence to the Barolong who had settled in the Molopo plains area in the early nineteenth century. This area forms the modern-day border between Botswana and South Africa. At the time of their settling in the area, there were Khoikhoi and San groups who had been inhabitants for many years prior to the arrival of the new settlers.<sup>14</sup> Chief Montshiwa of the Barolong did not want to serve under the Boers who had arrived in their area. As a result, he fled with his people to a place called Moshaneng,<sup>15</sup> which is in modern-day Botswana. According to Matthews, he was “proud of his tribal affiliation” and did not like white Europeans.<sup>16</sup> While in exile, Chief Montshiwa ordered his brothers to create settlements with the aim of obstructing expansion by white groups.<sup>17</sup> One of the brothers formed a settlement close to the Molopo River and named it Mahikeng, which means a place of rocks/stones due to its topographical features.<sup>18, 19, 20</sup> Today, this is the capital city of North West, a province in South Africa.

Over time, another residential area by the name of Mafeking was established by the Europeans who had settled in the area.<sup>21, 22</sup> The name ‘Mafeking’ was perhaps a matter of the Europeans misunderstanding the original name, Mahikeng. To provide insight into the history of the different names used for the same area, Hopkins and Dugmore put it clearly and bluntly, “Mafikeng was originally Mahikeng, the British changed it to Mafeking and Bophuthatswana, the short-lived apartheid puppet state, decided on Mafikeng, which remains.”<sup>23</sup> In the dialects of the Setswana language, **h** is often used in place of an **f** but in some cases, the pronunciation is the same. The author uses ‘Mafikeng’ in this article to refer to the siege. It must further be indicated that most publications have maintained the name of Mafeking when referring to the siege, despite the fact that the name has officially been changed to Mahikeng. Even though the name has been officially changed to Mahikeng, most still refer to the area as Mafikeng, perhaps because of the similar pronunciation or because the latter has been in use the longest. The use of the name Mafeking also creates the wrong impression, namely that only the European locality occupied by the British and named as such was affected by the siege. Instead, the entire geographical locality was affected by the war, including the settlements of the Barolong boo Ratshidi. It could be argued that the preference for the word ‘Mafeking’ is a deliberate act of continuously writing black Africans out of the history of the South African War. Other than the names discussed thus far, the area in Mafikeng in which the Barolong boo Ratshidi and other African groups had settled was also known as the *Stadt*.<sup>24</sup> ‘Stadt’ is a German phrase meaning ‘town’ or ‘city’ (see Figure 1).

Over years, the Barolong boo Ratshidi allowed the Boers, who were led by Andries Potgieter, to settle on a piece of land within their area. Doing so strengthened the bond between the two groups, which led to a beneficial alliance.<sup>25</sup> Through support given by the Boers, the Barolong boo Ratshidi were able to defeat other tribal groups and could thus reoccupy their ancestral land in the Molopo plains.<sup>26</sup> The Barolong boo Ratshidi were active participants in the war during the siege of Mafikeng, in which they supported the Boers. Disagreements over land ownership between the two groups led to the end of the alliance between them.<sup>27</sup> One could thus argue that the Barolong boo Ratshidi were betrayed by the Boers to whom they initially gave residence and whom they later supported in their conflict with the British.

The South African War was a conflict between the British colonial government and the Boer republics. At the time, the British led the Cape Colony and Natal, while the Boers had authority over the Orange Free State and Transvaal. According to Swart, “the South African War was the biggest and most modern of the numerous precolonial and colonial wars that raged across the southern African subcontinent”.<sup>28</sup> The war was meant to be a “white men’s war”, fought to determine which white group had power in South Africa.<sup>29</sup> This has been shown to have been an incorrect assessment of the conflict, because black Africans were not pushed aside, as argued by Heale.<sup>30</sup> Instead, they were active participants who fought on both sides of the conflict.

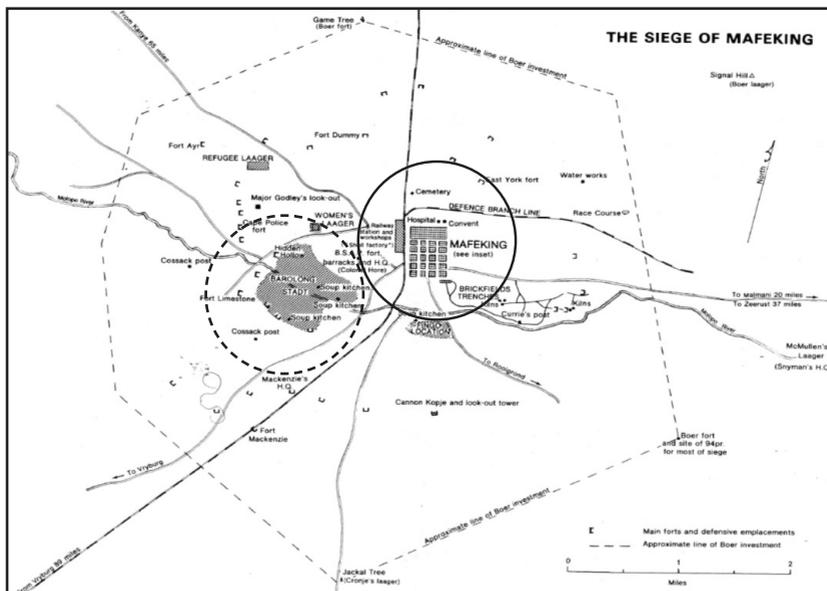


Figure 1: Map of Mafikeng, with the *Stadt* that was occupied by the Barolong encircled in the dashed line, and the British Mafeking encircled in the solid black line<sup>31</sup>

Three main sieges took place during the South African War, namely –

- the siege of Mafikeng (13 October 1899 to 17 May 1900);
- the siege of Kimberley (15 October 1899 to 15 February 1900); and
- the siege of Ladysmith (2 November 1899 to 28 February 1900).<sup>32</sup>

Of the three, the siege of Mafikeng was the most important and the longest, lasting 217 days.<sup>33,34</sup> It was in Mafikeng that the first shots of the war were supposedly fired during the Battle of Kraaipan on 12 October 1899.<sup>35</sup> The siege of Mafikeng was a historical event during which the town was surrounded by the Boer army, who were attempting to capture it. When the war began, the Boers surrounded the town of Mafikeng and held it under siege.<sup>36</sup> It has been reported that the siege consisted of several skirmishes and attacks rather than full-blown fighting.<sup>37</sup> Supplies and lines of communication were cut off to force the town to surrender.<sup>38</sup>

Besides the fact that Mafikeng was occupied by the British, who were in conflict with the Boers, according to Warwick,<sup>39</sup> there were other reasons why the area of Mafikeng was attacked. Firstly, the British area of Mafeking, as opposed to the entire area of Mafikeng, was the capital of the Bechuanaland Protectorate (modern-day Botswana). Secondly, it was a railway junction to Rhodesia (renamed Zimbabwe in 1980). Thirdly, the area served as a trading and market centre for the surrounding regions. Fourthly, British military supplies were stored in the area. The siege of Mafikeng had a devastating effect and caused starvation due to food shortages. Mafikeng was relieved on 16 May 1900, with some literature reporting the relief as being on 17 May 1900. Most importantly, the relief of Mafikeng did not mean the end of the war; instead, the war began to spread out and intensified throughout the country. One such event that affected the broader population during the South African War was the establishment of the concentration camps, which is reviewed later in this article.

### **Starvation and the establishment of soup kitchens during the siege of Mafikeng**

Prior to the war, Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, the commander of the British military base situated at Mafikeng, stored provisions and fortified the town to prepare for a siege.<sup>40</sup> British authorities had thus anticipated the siege and ensured that the food supply was sufficient for them.<sup>41</sup> During the siege, the Boer soldiers burned down the homesteads of the Barolong boo Ratshidi, as well as the defences that were set up by the British.<sup>42</sup> A variety of literature has established that black Africans took part in the war, not only as labourers as argued in earlier research but also as combatants. As the siege continued over six and half months, food supplies became an issue. Black Africans complained about the manner that food was distributed to them, the number of deaths caused by starvation, and diseases related to famine.<sup>43</sup> Young black African children in the villages suffered from malnutrition. While black Africans became the victims of food shortages, the same was not encountered by the white communities in Mafikeng. Most black Africans either succumbed to starvation or stole food. Those who were caught stealing were apparently shot.<sup>44</sup> According to Willan, a case of cannibalism had even been reported.<sup>45</sup> This has, however, not been supported by any evidence and no literature discusses this incident in

Mafikeng. The quality of food had deteriorated towards the end of the siege.<sup>46</sup> This may have been due to no supplies making it into the town.

According to Ramoroka, Baden-Powell issued instructions to cut off all food rations that were given to black Africans.<sup>47</sup> Horsemeat and soup were instead offered to black Africans. According to Willan, the horsemeat that was served was not from healthy horses, but from the carcasses of dead horses. White starch was added to thicken the soup.<sup>48</sup> Hopkins and Dugmore mention that in some instances, dog meat was also mixed into the soup without black Africans' knowledge.<sup>49</sup> In such instances, the consumption of dog meat was not based on the willingness of black Africans to eat it. However, this view is contradicted by Ramoroka, who argues, "some of the Barolong ate dog carcasses after the administration of the material law issued an order that dog tax should be paid".<sup>50</sup> Comaroff *et al.* support this viewpoint by arguing that dogs were intentionally killed and their meat consumed by the Barolong.<sup>51</sup> Willan indicates that the soup was not given for free but sold to the black Africans in order to generate profit.<sup>52</sup> Black Africans could only afford to purchase enough food to keep themselves alive.<sup>53</sup> It could be argued that selling food to black Africans was an attempt by Baden-Powell to force them to leave the town of Mafikeng in search of food.<sup>54</sup> He knew very well that most would be shot by the Boers if they attempted to leave the secured area. White people who were sympathetic of the black Africans saw Baden-Powell's methods and treatment towards them as very cruel.<sup>55</sup>

Ramoroka discusses that cattle meat was given to the British but not to the black Africans.<sup>56</sup> This was because the British regarded themselves as being better humans than the black Africans – a view that is rooted in social Darwinism. Social Darwinist theory regarded black Africans as the lower class or the weaker race and was responsible for much existing racism.<sup>57,58</sup> Black Africans were also regarded as sub-humans without intellectual capacity and not worthy of freedom.<sup>59</sup>

Ramoroka<sup>60</sup> argues that historians, such as Warwick<sup>61</sup> and Willan,<sup>62</sup> omitted the fact that the British also consumed horsemeat when the struggle for food intensified. The only difference was that black Africans were given meat from horses that had died due to diseases. Evidence for this comes from war diaries by Charles Bell and Major Baillie. The historians probably omitted this knowledge because they did not want to reveal the real plight experienced by the British during the siege, as it was beneath them to struggle.<sup>63</sup> Like black Africans, the British would not have consumed such meat under normal conditions.<sup>64</sup> The view that the British struggled for food is contradicted by Willan, who argues that even after the town had been relieved, there were still adequate food supplies for the British.<sup>65</sup> This was due to efforts made by Benjamin Weil, a British businessman and government contractor, to supply large quantities of food and essential supplies to the town before it was besieged.<sup>66</sup> It would seem that while both black Africans and whites experienced food shortages, the former were significantly more negatively affected by the lack of fresh and healthy meals than the British. The British were also responsible for food provision to the black population, which they followed based on colour lines.

## No celebration without food: The Relief of Mafeking dinners

After the siege had ended in 1900, Benjamin Weil went back to London and celebrated the anniversary of the relief of Mafikeng with the so-called ‘Relief of Mafeking dinners’.<sup>67</sup> According to information sourced from the Mafikeng Museum, the Relief of Mafeking dinners were formal occasions and were celebrated annually on 17 May at various locations in South Africa and England to commemorate the Relief of Mafeking (see Figure 2). Political dinners have taken place in Britain since the 1810s.<sup>68</sup> According to Brett, political dinners served the purpose of public meetings, press agitation, and petitioning for politicians, while in some cases they served to commemorate events.<sup>69</sup> The dinners were private events limited to the elite men and were attended only by military leaders with high rankings. They were made public through advertising via posters and newspapers, but the general population was not invited; they were only notified in order to render an audience.<sup>70</sup> The Relief of Mafeking dinners can therefore be regarded as political dinners because they were established to serve or celebrate a political event. The lack of substantial information on the Relief of Mafikeng dinners makes it difficult to establish their history and significance clearly. It is also not evident whether these are still taking place or whether they had ceased to exist.

The celebrations were based on the experiences of lack of food in the town during the siege and the view that the British were regarded as the “defenders of Mafikeng”.<sup>71</sup> This viewpoint conveniently forgot the valuable contribution made by the Barolong booi Ratshidi. The relief of Mafikeng became a legendary story in Britain, and Baden-Powell was regarded as a hero.<sup>72</sup> There is not much available information regarding these dinners to commemorate the relief of Mafeking, except some information sourced from an exhibition at the Mafikeng Museum.

Although little information is available on these dinners, it can be argued that food was an important symbol of commemoration due to the suffering experienced during the siege. Issues of famine and starvation experienced during the siege and the efforts made by the British officials to prevent their combatants from starving to death highlight the significance of food during the conflict. Suffering because of food shortages that led to starvation and deaths meant that commemoration activities needed to feature food actively.



Figure 2: One of the Relief of Mafeking dinners held at Café Royal in London<sup>73</sup>

The author's research on the Relief of Mafeking dinners led to the discovery of a menu printed on silk (see Figure 3). The content of the menu is not, however, clear.

According to a menu published in Young (see Figure 4), it appears that a dinner party was held in Mafeking, but whether black Africans took part in this dinner party is unclear.<sup>74</sup> Based on the menu found at the Mafeking Museum of the dinner that took place at the Marine Hotel in Durban in 1900, it included dishes or courses named after prominent British leaders, such as "crumbed fillet steak à la Baden-Powell" (see Figure 5).

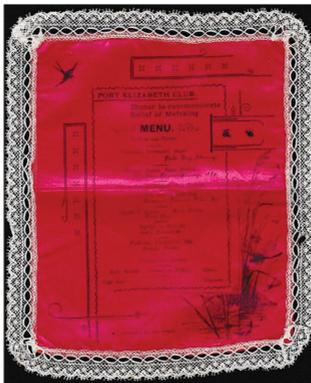


Figure 3: A Relief of Mafeking dinner menu printed on silk<sup>75</sup>

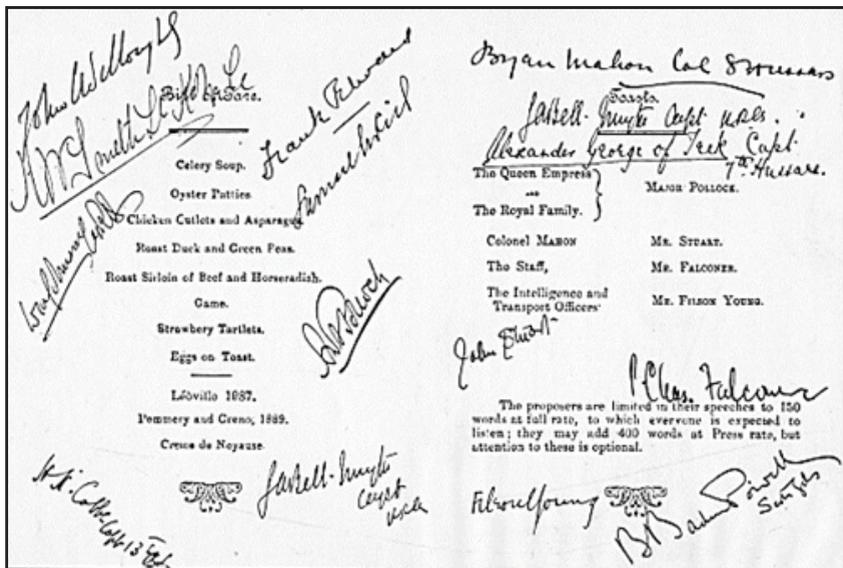


Figure 4: Facsimile of a signed menu of a relief dinner at Mafeking<sup>76</sup>

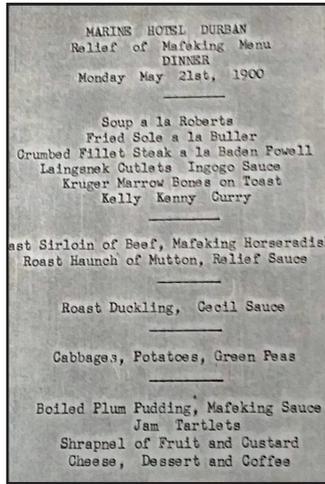


Figure 5: Menu for the Relief of Mafeking dinner held at the Marine Hotel in Durban in 1900<sup>77</sup>

### **Establishment of black concentration camps**

An understanding of the South African War cannot be complete without studying concentration camps. These were established during the war by the British government as part of its military campaign against the two Boer republics.<sup>78</sup> Both Boers and black Africans were interned in these centres, even though allegations are that they were mainly established for the internment of Boers.<sup>79</sup> All concentration camps, whether for Boers or black Africans, were partly an outcome of the scorched earth policy through which farms were destroyed to create food shortages and dependency. Burning of farms owned by black Africans was against the instruction of Lord Roberts.<sup>80</sup> Access to food for those who were interned in the camps, as illustrated later, was also racially motivated.

There is a great deal of ambiguity regarding the establishment of the camps, with contrasting arguments made for their existence. This has led to academics interpreting concentration camps in very limited ways.<sup>81</sup> According to Porter, concentration camps were established to confine and isolate Boer commandos from other combatants.<sup>82</sup> For some, these camps were established for the protection of the Boers who were left behind on the farms during the war.<sup>83</sup> In this sense, concentration camps were described as “refugee” camps established by the British for the Boer women and children who were affected by the war.<sup>84</sup> According to Van Heyningen, those who considered these so-called ‘refugee camps’ through more humane lenses have argued that the term “concentration camp” is not appropriate and carries negative undertones.<sup>85</sup> Such scholars thus prefer the term ‘refugee camp’. To illustrate their argument further, scholars such as Van Heyningen<sup>86</sup> and Pretorius<sup>87</sup> argue that the motives behind the establishment of the concentration camps during the South African War were not the same as those that led to the establishment of

the same facilities during the Second World War. The ones established by Nazi Germany were defined as “death camps”, implying that the so-called ‘refugee camps’ were not death zones where many lost their lives.<sup>88</sup> In fact, the term ‘refugee’ is confusing considering the conditions at the camps, which were less than ideal. This description of concentration camps through humane lenses has rightly been challenged by other researchers such as Jewell,<sup>89</sup> Grundlingh,<sup>90</sup> and Turner.<sup>91</sup> They argue that calling such camps areas of refuge is a misrepresentation of history. As such, they consider this term to be deceptive and ambiguous as it implies that people entered these camps voluntarily to seek refuge. The reality is that people were forced off their farms and into these camps. The term internment camps has thus been considered by most researchers as more appropriate to define the camps.<sup>92</sup>

The camps where black Africans were interned were also known as ‘refugee camps’ established by the British to seem humane and to tone down the suffering experienced by this vulnerable group during the war. It is alleged that they also kept black Africans in these camps to avoid being known as the regime that “allowed black people to starve”.<sup>93</sup> The word ‘refugee’ in this context is problematic. According to Turner, “a refugee is someone who lacks a home, a nation and citizenship.”<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, those kept at refugee camps were considered as excluded from society.<sup>95</sup> Refugees are basically regarded as foreigners. Therefore, for a government to describe black Africans whose homes had been taken away by the same institution as refugees is quite problematic. Refugee camps are meant to be temporary.<sup>96</sup> Perhaps it was intentional to call black camps refugee camps, so that when their purpose was served, they could cease to exist, together with information about them. This could be the reason why it is difficult to find information on black concentration camps that existed during the South African War, or any information about the few that are known. Black concentration camps had been concealed from historical records for many years, and some researchers have gone to the extent of denying their existence.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, in cases where the camps were acknowledged, it was argued that the living conditions in the black camps were more “humane”.<sup>98</sup> Apart from the black African camps being regarded as refugee camps, Nasson mentions that camps for black Africans and those for the white population differed, as the black camps were actually labour camps established to provide labour during the war, as discussed later.<sup>99</sup>

To emphasise the distorted history of the South African War of 1899 to 1902, it is important to note that, while a great deal is known about white concentration camps and the living conditions experienced by the Boers during that time, very little has been presented on the concentration camps occupied by black Africans. Such disparity in information is caused by the various opinions on the black concentration camps and the way this population was involved in the war. Information regarding black concentration camps and conditions of life experienced by black Africans during the war has largely been concealed. This makes this part of history flawed.

The establishment of concentration camps for both black Africans and white Boers can be attributed to the failures of what was called the neutrality oath. This was a conditional contract issued by Lord Roberts. This neutrality oath had two specific purposes: firstly, it was aimed at enabling Boers who did not want to participate in the war to stay on their

farms and away from the war;<sup>100</sup> and, secondly, to allow those who had been involved in the war but wanted to stop fighting, to do so. Some Boers took up the offer and in return were given protection, which led to them being called “protected burghers”.<sup>101</sup> The first two camps were established in Pretoria and Bloemfontein during 1900.<sup>102</sup> Lord Roberts apparently saw the need to “protect” Boers who had taken the neutrality oath by placing them in camps.<sup>103</sup> This was a strategy to ensure that they were not enlisted back into war.<sup>104</sup> Others failed to abide by this neutrality oath, and launched guerrilla war. This is a military tactic practised by one party when they are outnumbered.<sup>105</sup> Guerrilla warfare usually involves petty warfare strategies, such as ambushes and raids.

In reaction to the guerrilla attacks on railway lines, a proclamation was issued that stated that for every attack made by the Boers, homesteads would be burned down.<sup>106, 107</sup> This was the establishment of what came to be known as the scorched earth policy – which involved burning down farms in order to eliminate sources of accommodation and food.<sup>108</sup> This practice of burning down farms and the “clearing the country” initiatives were launched as a drastic war strategy against the Boers to deny them all provisions.<sup>109, 110, 111</sup> The implementation of the scorched earth policy was a deliberate act to cause destruction of property and food supplies on Boer farms,<sup>112, 113, 114</sup> and to literally “scour the landscape, remove all life-sustaining means and flush out the Boer commandos into forced engagements”.<sup>115</sup> As a result, the Boers could not make good use of their farms.<sup>116, 117</sup> Harvests and storage facilities were burned down, animals were killed, and settlements became depopulated.<sup>118</sup> This led to starvation and a crushed economy.<sup>119</sup> As a result of the devastation caused by the scorched earth policy, more Boer women and children were left homeless and had to fend for themselves, while some of those who had financial means moved to cities due to food shortages and the fear of living close to black Africans.<sup>120</sup> Those who could not afford to move to the cities were declared “undesirables” and were forced into concentration camps.<sup>121, 122</sup>

The scorched earth policy not only destroyed farms owned by the Boers, but also those owned by black Africans. The destruction of black African farms was against the instruction issued by Lord Roberts, who had decided that the “kafir locations” be left alone.<sup>123</sup> As the war continued and many black Africans became destitute and homeless, the solution was to provide separate “refugee” camps to restrain them.<sup>124, 125</sup> It was also assumed that, if black Africans were not restrained in the so-called ‘refugee camps’, they would take advantage and “prey upon vulnerable white families”.<sup>126</sup>

### **Unequal food rations and “no work, no food”**

According to historical records, the distribution of rations in the concentration camps followed a system of inequality. The availability – or lack – of food in the concentration camps caused starvation and death. Food rationing in the concentration camps was determined by military doctors who had knowledge of nutrition.<sup>127</sup> Emily Hobhouse, an Englishwoman sent as part of a humanitarian group from England to assess the conditions of the concentration camps, wrote extensively about the horrific conditions and the death toll in the white concentration camps.<sup>128</sup> A report she wrote during her visits to the concentration camps mentioned that the camp system was “wholesale cruelty”.<sup>129</sup>

As a result, she was labelled a traitor by the British government for exposing the real conditions of the war and the concentration camps.<sup>130</sup> Lord Kitchener apparently called her “that bloody woman” because of the trouble she caused for them in England.<sup>131</sup> The report also detailed some of the rations that were received in one of the concentration camps that housed white civilians, as illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Indication of the food rations documented by Emily Hobhouse at one of the concentration camps in the Orange Free State<sup>132</sup>

Daily measures of the rations	Conversion to kg	Food rations
½ lb	0,2 kg	Meat (with bone and fat)
2 oz	0,5 kg	Coffee
¾ lb	0,34 kg	Wholemeal (wheat bread)
1/12 lbs	0,038 kg	Condensed milk
½ oz	0,14 kg	Salt
2 oz	0,5 kg	Sugar

It is not suggested whether these rations were per person or for a family in one tent. The statement, “[o]nce they sometimes had potatoes, seven potatoes for seven people, but that has long been impossible”, may suggest that the rations were given per family staying in a tent.<sup>133</sup> Those with money could purchase more essentials from the shops that were available in the camps, but these were apparently very expensive.<sup>134</sup> The rations were insufficient, which led to deaths, especially among babies and young children.<sup>135</sup> Some military doctors had apparently suggested to the camp superintendent that milk, oatmeal and fine mealie meal be added to the rations, but these calls were ignored.<sup>136</sup> Some of the Boers in the camps believed that most of the deaths were caused by the British adding ground glass to their sugar.<sup>137</sup> There is no evidence that suggests that this was indeed the case accounting for the number of deaths in the camps, or whether it was mere speculation. In the report, Hobhouse also mentioned that the food was repetitive and dull and not suitable for young children and babies since there were no vegetables.<sup>138</sup> The meat supplied to some of the camps was often rotten and infested with worms, and the coffee was coppery and undrinkable.<sup>139</sup> This means that, although the rationing of food in the camps was not the same, the experience in terms of food was similar. Van Heyningen argues that food rations indicate that food was used as a form of punishment and reward.<sup>140</sup> As a defence mechanism against the reports made by Hobhouse, the British shifted the blame to Boer women, and accused them of ignorance that led to the deaths of children in the camps.<sup>141</sup> Another delegation had to be sent to verify the reports made by Hobhouse.<sup>142</sup>

While the situation in the camps was dire and heart-breaking, these were the experiences in the white concentration camps. The literature records that Hobhouse did not visit black concentration camps.<sup>143</sup> Instead, she had designated someone to conduct such visits on her behalf. According to McGreal, Hobhouse visited the second largest camp in Aliwal North in 1901, where white women, children and a few men had died in large numbers.<sup>144</sup>

She decisively ignored the black camp that was situated close to the white one. Other researchers have come to Hobhouse's defence. According to De Reuck, Hobhouse had mentioned during her aborted second visit to the country that, due to time and strength, she had not been able to investigate the black camps.<sup>145</sup> She had instead instructed other members of the investigation commission to visit the camps, but it seems this was not done. This is a clear illustration that black African concentration camps were utterly ignored, which illustrates the perceived low value of a black African life. Hobhouse was apparently able to visit six concentration camps located in the Orange Free State but was not able to visit the camps in the Transvaal.<sup>146</sup> The speech she wrote for the unveiling of the Vrouemonument (Women's Monument) in Bloemfontein in 1913 suggested that she acknowledged the suffering and deaths endured by black Africans during the South African War. This was despite the fact that she did not visit the concentration camps where black Africans were detained. Hobhouse acknowledged that black Africans suffered as much as the Boers in the concentration camps, which was even worse considering that they did so for a fight that was considered not theirs.

While some have argued against defining black camps as concentration areas, some scholars such as McGreal,<sup>147</sup> Van Heyningen,<sup>148</sup> Nasson,<sup>149</sup> and Benneyworth<sup>150</sup> have interpreted these localities as "labour camps" that were established to serve military needs. They were expected to work for the British army and would be paid "native rates".<sup>151</sup> This apparently was the reason why these black concentration camps were mainly situated along railway lines – to enable them to work on the maintenance of the railways and to man the blockhouses in exchange for food.<sup>152, 153</sup> Some black African men who were not incorporated into concentration camps were forced to work in gold mines.<sup>154</sup> The end of political or economic self-sufficiency of black Africans was heavily affected by the war. This saw a decline in their ability to sustain themselves, and they were therefore forced to seek work in the mines or on white farms and were forced to pay taxes.<sup>155</sup>

The British government also wanted to restore economic activities in the mines, which were affected by the war. The British government therefore introduced the no work, no food policy, which was administered by the Native Refugee Department.<sup>156</sup> The policy indicated that black Africans who were not employed in the gold and diamond mines (these included women, children and elderly men) had to do agricultural work to cultivate food for the army, while they were expected to pay for their own food.<sup>157</sup> According to Benneyworth, it was the same British policy that established the unequal rationing of food and medical and building supplies for black Africans.<sup>158</sup> Working in the white men's industries or on their farms was how most black Africans were able to access food rations.<sup>159, 160</sup> Those who did not want to work or purchase food were left to starve.<sup>161</sup> The aim of the policy was to reduce the financial implications of the war, as well as to force black Africans to "provide labour in exchange of rations".<sup>162</sup> This meant that black Africans in the concentration camps had to work in order to receive food and other essential supplies. In early 1901, discriminatory food rationing took place in the camps in general.<sup>163</sup> In some of the camps, food rations were discontinued for those who refused to work for the British or for families of those who were in war against the British.<sup>164</sup> This resulted in an increase in starvation, diseases and malnutrition in the camps, especially those that interned black Africans.<sup>165</sup>

Archival material from the National Museum of Military History indicates that black Africans were treated unfairly during the war. An article found at the National Museum of Military History, dated only as “May 26”, indicated that there were some white people who had alluded that it was not fair for the black man to be given more food than white people, or the same food rations as white people (see Figure 6). A situation of equality between the different races was regarded as spoiling the natives. The date and contents of the article suggest that the events took place after Mafikeng was relieved from the siege, but certainly during the course of the war. It was relevant to include this fact in this article in order to illustrate the situation in terms of inequality and the relations between the black Africans and their white counterparts.

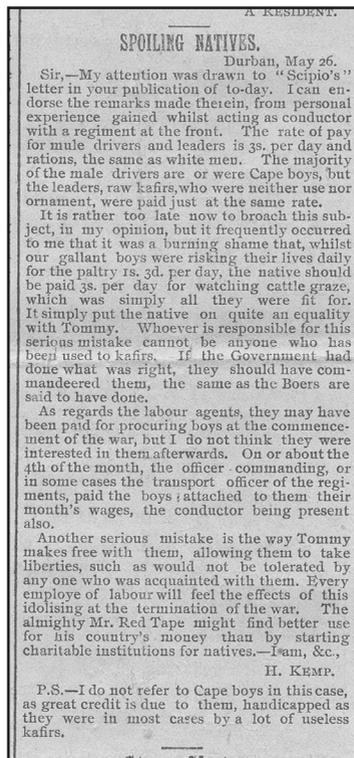


Figure 6: A letter on “spoiling the natives” during the South African War<sup>166</sup>

There is little detailed information on the food rations in the black African concentration camps, as only fragmented records were kept – or no records at all – in terms of these camps. According to South African History Online, black Africans were usually left in empty and arid land without any tents and essential rations.<sup>167</sup> They had to source material from the surroundings, such as sacks, reeds and tins to make shelter.<sup>168, 169</sup>

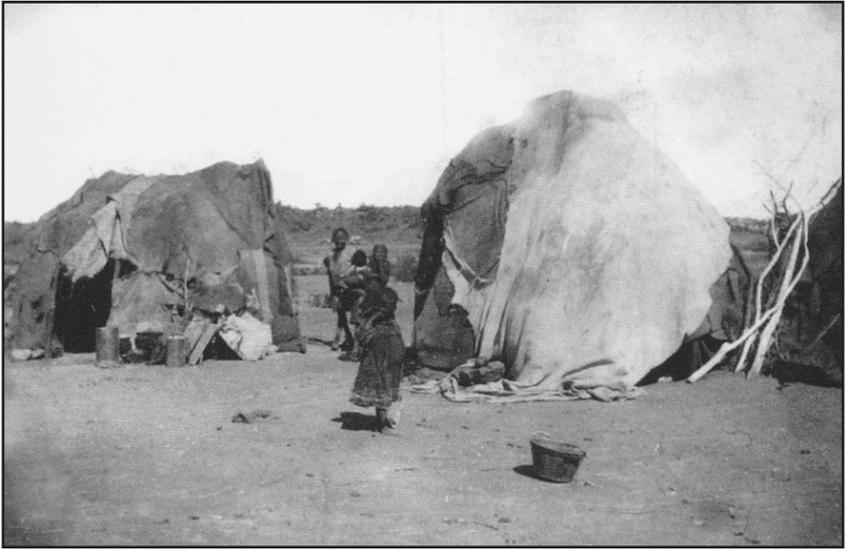


Figure 7: Shelters in the black camps<sup>170</sup>

As mentioned earlier, black Africans had to work for their food rations, while the white camps received these for free.<sup>171</sup> Food rations were less than those offered to the Boers in the white camps, even though they had to work for it. Van Heyningen mentions that food rations for black adults were limited to 4½d worth a day, while white adults were limited to receiving 9d worth of food rations.<sup>172</sup>

Table 2: Indication of the daily food rations in the black concentration camps<sup>173</sup>

Daily measures of the rations	Conversion to kg	Food rations
1½ lbs	0,67 kg	Mealies, K/corn, <sup>1</sup> unsifted mealie meal
¼ oz	0,007 kg	Salt

Table 3: Indication of the weekly food rations in the white concentration camps<sup>174</sup>

Weekly measures of the rations	Conversion to kg	Food rations
1 lb	0,45 kg	Fresh or tinned meat
2 oz	0,5 kg	Sugar
½ oz	0,14 kg	Coffee

<sup>1</sup> K/corn is “kafir corn”, which is a form of sorghum. The term ‘kafir’ is generally an offensive term to describe black Africans.

It was believed that these rations were sufficient for black Africans, as it was assumed that their diet and nutritional needs were different from those of white people.<sup>175</sup> The lack of protein and vitamins in the black people's diet resulted in diseases such as pellagra, which was linked to "an all-maize diet".<sup>176</sup> According to Karthikeyan and Thappa, "pellagra is a clinical syndrome characterized by: (1) symmetric photosensitive skin eruptions; (2) gastrointestinal manifestations; and (3) neurologic and psychiatric disturbances".<sup>177</sup> Most black Africans died from such diseases due to a lack of vitamins and protein. Because farms were burned down as a result of the scorched earth policy, it would make sense that meat was also scarce since animals had also died of starvation.



Figure 8: A rare image of conditions and starvation in the black camps, not explicitly displayed to indicate the fatalities.<sup>178</sup>

It is also relevant to focus briefly on the black Africans who were interned in the white camps. According to Van Heyningen, these groups of black Africans in the white camps were rarely rationed and usually "fed off the scraps allowed them by the Boer families".<sup>179</sup> These black Africans lived among the Boers because Lord Kitchener still allowed the Boers to have servants.<sup>180</sup> The presence of black Africans in the white camps was to maintain these places to make them much more comfortable living areas than those where their counterparts were kept.<sup>181</sup> Their presence in areas occupied by white people was allowed, as they served as servants.<sup>182</sup> This made black Africans in these particular camps double victims of the war, as they were still required to serve their white masters even though they were 'prisoners' themselves. Some of the black Africans in the camps were apparently treated fairly by their masters. According to Nasson, Hobhouse had documented that, during her visit to the concentration camps, she experienced 'undue familiarity' where some white people shared food and sleeping areas with the black Africans.<sup>183</sup> Such actions were criticised by the British and they often regarded Boers who were friendly with the black Africans as not being well trained to behave as white men.<sup>184</sup>

## Conclusion

The effects of the South African War (1899–1902) on black African people can be summarised as follows: “[t]he Boers said the war was for liberty, the British said it was for equality. The majority of the inhabitants, who were not white at all, gained neither liberty nor equality.”<sup>185</sup> This devastating war had a lasting effect on politics, economy and the social landscape long after the end of the conflict.

As mentioned earlier, the events related to the South African War are very much fragmented. Much of what we have come to rely on is based on archival sources or available historical records that are biased to suit certain agendas. Some archival records are incomplete or missing. According to Benneyworth, continuing to base deaths and experiences in the black African concentration camps on fragmented records is flawed.<sup>186</sup> While this is the case, the available records are sufficient to indicate that the mortality faced by black Africans was dreadful and disgracefully high. According to Willan, it is evident that black “Africans had in general suffered much more than the white population”.<sup>187</sup> This is also true taking into consideration how black Africans were viewed or regarded. There are many gaps in the history of conflicts. This is a general practice and is thus not only limited to the South African War. This means that understanding the actual events of conflicts is close to impossible because of the emotions involved. This may explain why, even though black Africans are now in positions to criticise and rewrite colonial history from a black African perspective, most do not seem to know where or how to begin. One could argue that archives are the first avenue to visit to explore, understand and present historical narratives.

Historical records have hidden behind the ‘shared suffering’ of the Boers and black Africans to undermine the negative experiences of black Africans during the war while interned in the concentration camps. While the food scarcity experiences can be regarded as part of a ‘shared struggle’, it is worth noting that, as much as historians have focused on the struggles of Boer women and children in the concentration camps and the war in general, the struggle experienced by black Africans should also be focused on through its own lenses or as a struggle on its own. It is also worth accepting that the struggles were not the same, as black Africans were initially not meant to be part of the war but suffered even worse fatalities than the Boers and lost their land. The reality is that we will never know the true fatalities that were experienced during the war but accepting the concept of a ‘shared struggle’ means continuing to accept and publish flawed information.

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# Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Dr. Mpho Manaka (nee Maripane) is a lecturer in Archaeology at the University of South Africa and founder of the Pretoria Archaeology Club for Schools. Trained as an archaeologist from the University of Pretoria, Dr. Manaka has spent the last few years studying and pursuing a career in historical archaeology. Her main focus is on conflict and how war events of the past still continues to shape current politics. Over and above her qualifications, she holds a short course certificate in battlefield archaeology from the University of Oxford. She is passionate about the inclusion of history and archaeology in the basic education curricula.
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- <sup>160</sup> SAHO. “To fully reconcile the Boer War is to fully understand the ‘black’ concentration camps by Peter Dickens (The Observation Post)”. 2017. <<https://www.sahistory.org.za/archive/fully-reconcile-boer-war-fully-understand-black-concentration-camps-peter-dickens#:~:text=The%20'official'%20rations%20were%20meagre,receiving%20it%204%C2%BDd%20per%20ration>> Accessed on 21 June 2022.
- <sup>161</sup> Benneyworth *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- <sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>163</sup> SAHO, “Women and children in white concentration camps ...” *op. cit.*
- <sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>165</sup> Benneyworth *op. cit.*, p. 5.
- <sup>166</sup> Ditsong National Museum of Military History. “Spoiling natives”. Newspaper article: Siege of Mafeking, C221, file 2, n.d.
- <sup>167</sup> SAHO, “To fully reconcile the Boer War ...” *op. cit.*
- <sup>168</sup> Van Heyningen *op. cit.*, p. 154.
- <sup>169</sup> SAHO, “To fully reconcile the Boer War ...” *op. cit.*
- <sup>170</sup> War Museum of the Boer Republics, *Black participation and suffering ... op. cit.*, p. 19.
- <sup>171</sup> SAHO, “To fully reconcile the Boer War ...” *op. cit.*
- <sup>172</sup> Van Heyningen *op. cit.*, p. 154.
- <sup>173</sup> SAHO, “To fully reconcile the Boer War ...” *op. cit.*
- <sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>175</sup> Van Heyningen *op. cit.*, p. 154.
- <sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- <sup>177</sup> K Karthikeyan & DM Thappa. “Pellagra and skin”. *International Journal of Dermatology* 41/8. 2002. 476–481.
- <sup>178</sup> War Museum of the Boer Republics, *Black participation and suffering ... op. cit.*, p. 16.
- <sup>179</sup> Van Heyningen *op. cit.*, p. 158.
- <sup>180</sup> McGreal *op. cit.*
- <sup>181</sup> Westby-Nunn *op. cit.*
- <sup>182</sup> Nasson *op. cit.*, p. 176.
- <sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> JS Mohlamme. “Blacks in the ex-Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State in the aftermath of the South African War of 1899–1902”. *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* 25/2. 2000. 270–283.

<sup>186</sup> Benneyworth *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>187</sup> Willan, “The siege of Mafeking” *op. cit.*, p. 157.

