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The Composition of the Imperial British Forces in the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902: A Military and Socio-Historical Overview

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Abstract

The British forces that served during the Anglo-Boer War (also known as the South African War) of 1899–1902 were an amalgam of several different types of soldiers. These men came from varying geographic and socio-economic backgrounds, and had different reasons for enlisting. This article discusses the composition of the British forces during the war, and adopts a military and socio-historical approach to understand who served in South Africa and why. To this end, the different types of British soldiers are looked at as separate (but ultimately intertwined) groupings, including regular (or career) soldiers, British volunteers, colonial volunteers, and "non-white" combatants. This represents a wide-viewed perspective of the British military system during the late-Victorian era.

Keywords: Anglo-Boer War, South African War, British Empire, British Army, British Soldiers, Australian Soldiers, Canadian Soldiers, New Zealand Soldiers.

During the Anglo-Boer War (also known as the South African War) of 1899–1902, approximately 448 000 men from across the Anglosphere served in South Africa with the Imperial British forces. These men were not all English, they did not wear red uniforms, and the majority did not speak with a Queen's English accent. That much is easy, but the question regarding who the British soldiers that fought during the Anglo-Boer War were, is indeed very complex to answer. The men who served with the British forces in South Africa came from divergent cultural, geographic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. They served in units that were organised, recruited, and led differently, and they had varying reasons for enlisting, including patriotism, peer pressure, and pay. They were thus not a homogenous unit, and understanding the composition of the British forces in South Africa requires an understanding of both the late-Victorian British Army from a military-historical perspective, as well as an understanding of the socio-historical dynamics of the British Empire and its subjects at the turn of the century.

Although the Anglo-Boer War is a well-researched topic, there is a lack of comprehensive, wide-viewed analyses of the make-up of the British forces. The first analyses of this topic appeared very shortly after the end of the war. *The Times History of the War in South Africa, 1899–1902*,[197] and the semi-official *History of the War in South Africa, 1899–1902*[198] both included descriptions of the British Army in South Africa from a purely military viewpoint. The same period saw the publication of the most detailed and compartmentalised analysis of each British regiment that served in J Stirling's works, *Our Regiments in South Africa, 1899–1902*[199] and *The Colonials in South Africa, 1899–1902.*[200] These are invaluable sources, but again they focus on the topic purely from a military-historical perspective.

After the publication of these sources, there followed several silent decades where little or no new research into the British Army in the Anglo-Boer War appeared. The 1970s saw a revival of interest in the subject with R Price's groundbreaking work, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class: Working Class Attitudes and Reactions to the Boer War 1899–1902*,[201] which looked partly at the social background and motivations of the men who enlisted. The succeeding decades saw a steady stream of new research discussing the composition of the British forces. Noteworthy histories of the Regular British Army included J Haswell's, *The British Army: A Concise History*,[202] and E Spiers' *The Late Victorian Army.*[203] These have both military and socio-historical elements, but consider the British Army during the Victorian era as a whole as opposed to during the Anglo-Boer War specifically.

There also appeared a plethora of research focusing on specific groups of soldiers during the war, notably S Miller's *Volunteers on the Veld: Britain's Citizen Soldiers and the South African War, 1899–1902.*[204] There also appeared several publications that describe the composition of the colonial forces, including a chapter by Miller, Wilcox and McGibbon, "The Empire Marches – Canadian, Australian and New Zealand Soldiers in the Boer War" in *Ashes and Blood: The British Army in South Africa, 1795–1914.*[205] Most of these types of works focus on the contribution of one colony to the war effort. The last few decades have also witnessed the emergence of research on the role of "non-white"[206] combatants within the British forces, notably P Warwick's *Black People and the South African War 1899–1902*[207] and A Wessels' *The Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902: White Man's War, Black Man's War, Traumatic War*.[208] G Benneyworth, in his book, *Work or Starve: Black Concentration Camps and Forced Labour Camps in South Africa, 1901–1902*,[209] also expanded on the role of forced labour for black people during the war.

Clearly, there exists a great deal of research on the subject, but available research is fractured into numerous specific works, or focuses solely on one historiographical viewpoint. This article aims to provide a wide-angled overview of the composition of the British forces in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War with specific reference to the military and social aspects thereof. For this purpose, the researchers discuss three main research questions:

- How were the British forces structured during the Anglo-Boer War?
- Who were the men who served with the British forces?
- What were their social relations with each other?

The British forces in South Africa were an amalgam of three main types of soldiers, namely the **regular soldiers** (regulars), **volunteer soldiers** (volunteers), and the **colonial soldiers** (colonials). These different "types" had different skill sets that were more or less functionally applicable to the South African (SA) conditions of warfare. This article focuses on the above-mentioned three types of British soldiers as separate but intertwined sub-sections. Except for these three main types of soldiers, the article also briefly discusses the use of non-whites in a combatant role within the British forces.

It is important to note that serving in the British Army, before and during the Anglo-Boer War, was voluntary, as there was no form of compulsory military service at the time in the United Kingdom or the British Empire.[210] The term "South Africa" is used throughout this article as a geographical concept, as South Africa as a political entity did not exist until unification in 1910.

Regular Soldiers

The Regular British Army was the permanent defence force of the British Empire. Despite the size and complexity of the Empire, it did not require a very large standing army. The Regular Army units were predominantly stationed in the United Kingdom itself, with overseas deployment mostly to India, with smaller permanent forces in Malta, Egypt and South Africa. According to the *History of the War in South Africa, 1899–1902*, the Regular Army on 9 October 1899 consisted of 227 992 officers, non-commissioned officers and men.[211] This was comparatively tiny compared to the armies in Europe at the time. In 1899, the Army consisted of 9 per cent cavalry, 17 per cent artillery, and 66 per cent infantry, with the rest made up of Royal Engineers, transport, medical, and administrative staff.[212]

In peacetime, the Regular Army struggled to attract sufficient numbers of good quality recruits. Regular Army privates were predominantly recruited from the working class, with the unemployed and labourers constituting the majority. On the eve of the war, less than 10 per cent of recruits were from the middle and professional classes.[213] Men enlisted in the Army to ease unemployment, to find "easy" work that also paid on Sundays, or to escape their domestic settings.[214] In the 1890s, an Army chaplain wrote that he knew a man who enlisted for the sole reason of receiving a military funeral. Another, he reported, enlisted because he wanted to learn how to read.[215] According to Farwell, the regulars were recruited from the 'poorest, least intelligent, and least skilled'.[216] Haswell states that many soldiers were 'ignorant', 'unintelligent' and 'physically of a low standard'.[217]

Because the standard of men that enlisted was relatively low, discipline in the Army had to be strict. Regular soldiers were to be wholly reliant on their officers, who were predominantly made up from the ranks of the upper classes.[218] Between regular privates and their officers, there existed a wide social and cultural gulf. Farwell states that both officers and men 'shared the dangers of campaigns, but little else; they lived in different worlds'.[219] This gulf was not as apparent within the British and colonial volunteer units.

Since the 1870s "Cardwell reforms", the Army consisted of 66 regiments, each associated with a district, and each regiment consisting of two battalions.[220] Each regimental district

had its own regimental headquarters, which served as depots for supplies, as well as training and housing facilities. Each battalion had a set number of majors, captains, lieutenants and second lieutenants; thus, meaning that promotion was by default, with everyone moving up one space when an officer died or retired.[221]

As a result of the bad reputation of the Regular Army privates for rowdiness and drunkenness, the public treated "Tommies" (the colloquial name for British regulars) with disrespect and looked down on them because of their behaviour and manners.[222] When war broke out, however, public opinion shifted quickly, and British soldiers were treated as heroes of the Empire.[223] This phenomenon is highlighted in Rudyard Kipling's poem, *Tommy*, which – like many of Kipling's poems – was written from the perspective of a regular soldier:

> I went into a theatre as sober as could be,
> They gave a drunk civilian room, but 'adn't none for me;
> They sent me to the gallery or round the music-'alls,
> But when it comes to fightin', Lord! they'll shove me in the stalls!
> For it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, wait outside";
> But it's "Special train for Atkins" when the trooper's on the tide
> The troopship's on the tide, my boys, the troopship's on the tide,
> O it's "Special train for Atkins" when the trooper's on the tide.[224]

Despite being complemented by the lowest classes, the Regular Army had proved itself capable of fighting (and winning) wars. The expansion of the British Empire over the preceding century was largely down to its army and the deprivations that the men were willing to endure during campaigns. In every year of Queen Victoria's reign (1837–1901), the British Army saw active service in wars and conflicts.[225] However, although the Regular Army had been very successful in the preceding decades, their victories were predominantly against non-Western peoples who were not equipped or trained according to modern military standards.[226]

The relative success of the Army during the late nineteenth century led to a false belief among the British military and political authorities that the Army was in a strong position when entering the war in South Africa. British confidence in the war effort sprung from an overestimation of their own strength. Farwell describes the power of the British Army in the 1890s as 'uncontested and thus untested'.[227] *The Times History of the War in South Africa* stated later:

> Anxiety as to the military issue there was none. Few even believed that the Boers would make any serious or prolonged resistance to the overwhelming advance of the great army that was being launched against them.[228]

Overconfidence was not just limited to the military authorities, but was also widely present among the ranks of the regular soldiers who came to South Africa during the initial months of the war. During this period, British regulars were very eager to engage in battle with the Boers. 'I guarantee that some of the men are literally spoiling for a fight', a Private in the 1st Battalion, Border Regiment wrote in his diary, whilst another recalled that his fellow

soldiers in the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment were 'going crazy' to have a 'smack at the enemy'.[229] However eager, some Tommies were unsure how they would face up to the challenges of battle. On the day before the battle of Magersfontein (11 December 1899), a lieutenant in the Gordon Highlanders noted his reservations in a letter home about the coming battle, '[t]omorrow the big fight begins', he reflected, 'no one knows what will happen, but we will do our best … give my love to all, it may be the last time'.[230]

The British soldiers, as well as the authorities in Whitehall and Pall Mall, were given a rude awakening during Black Week[231] in December 1899. Spiers states that the overconfidence of the British forces going into the war was a decisive element that led to the events of December 1899.[232] Wessels has stressed the strategic errors that the British forces made during this period of the war, and Breytenbach has highlighted the ingenuity of the Boer leaders in the placing of their defensive positions.[233]

The defeats during the battles of Black Week caused much concern for both the tactical errors on the battlefield, as well as the training and preparedness of the Regular Army. The debate among historians on the extent of the unpreparedness of the Regular Army for the war in South Africa is still ongoing. The earlier literature was especially scathing of the Regular Army's performance during the first months of the war. The editor of the very influential *The Times History of the War in South Africa*, Leo Amery, stated that his explicit object in writing *The Times History* was to 'alert the public to the deficiencies in the Army's performance'.[234] Contemporary literature has done much to rebalance the record, and both Spiers and Jones have shown that the Army was not as static as have been promulgated in the past.[235] Although it was a slow and cumbersome process, the British Army was capable of adapting to the requirements of campaigning in South Africa. Counter-guerrilla tactics – such as the scorched earth policy,[236] building of blockhouse fortifications and implementation of large "drives" to capture or destroy Boer commandos – proved effective enough in the end to secure a final, albeit expensive and wasteful, victory in 1902.[237]

British Volunteers

After Black Week (i.e. 10–15 December 1899), the British commanders decided to call upon volunteer soldiers to support the Regular Army in South Africa. Thousands of British men answered the call to arms. Men volunteered to serve in South Africa for different reasons, including the pay, patriotism, and peer pressure.[238] To be a soldier of the Queen meant fulfilling a manly Christian ideal, and according to Hill, an Imperial soldier was seen as a man of character, who was capable of heroic deeds that other men wanted to emulate.[239] This was typically illustrated in the letters of the British soldiers. One such example was Captain FD Price, who, during the sea journey to South Africa, wrote in a letter to his father that he 'felt a proud man':

> I had many reasons for being so; but the first and foremost of all was that I knew I had your love and sympathy and sanction to do what was dearest to my heart, to serve my Queen and country and in doing so I trust I will have, in some measure, proved myself a worthy son of the kindest of fathers.[240]

For the purposes of this article, the term "volunteer" is used in its broader sense, because in the case of the Anglo-Boer War, volunteers included the active service companies, militia, City of London Imperial Volunteers (CIV), Mounted Infantry, and the Imperial Yeomanry. Active service companies were volunteers who were attached to regular regiments, and were recruited from their local regimental districts.[241] They mainly performed supporting roles for their regular units. The militia were volunteers who predominantly filled the garrisons in the United Kingdom for the main purpose of home defence while the regulars were on active duty.[242] The CIV was a celebrated unit that was formed as an independent fighting force, with its own artillery section and mounted infantry section, and sponsored by the City of London. The Imperial Yeomanry consisted of several battalions of volunteers that were raised during the war. Some Imperial Yeomanry units were created and sponsored by individuals, such as Lumsden's Horse (raised by Colonel DM Lumsden) and Paget's Horse (raised by George Paget).[243] According to Price, these privately raised volunteer units were the 'result of the patriotic initiative' by the men who raised them.[244]

In total, the militia, Imperial Yeomanry, and other volunteers supplied more than 100 000 men for the war effort in South Africa.[245] The militia contributed 4 500 officers and men, while another 75 000 militiamen were transferred directly into the Regular Army. Twenty thousand soldiers fought as members of volunteer service companies or the CIV.[246] The volunteers were men of various professions. The men of the CIV, for example, had an average age of 24, an average height of 5 feet 8 inches (173 cm), almost 90 per cent were members of the Church of England, and came from various professions and occupations, including barristers, students, bank clerks, insurance brokers, accountants, timber merchants, plumbers, tailors, salesmen, tax surveyors, engine drivers, glass workers and even piano makers.[247] This diversity was reflected in the chorus of Harold Hardy and Stephen Richardson's song *The British Volunteer,* sung in the music halls during the war:

> A something in the City – a shopman or a clerk,
> A fellow with a pen behind his ear,
> A journalist, a lawyer, or an idler in the Park,
> Is the ready-when-he's-wanted Volunteer.[248]

The militia were predominantly recruited from the lower classes, mostly labourers, while the Imperial Yeomanry had units raised from the middle and working class. As the war dragged on and the lure of excitement vanished, the Imperial Yeomanry were made up of more and more working-class recruits who joined to ease unemployment.[249] In October 1901, Lieutenant Arthur Carrey, described the new Imperial Yeomanry recruits under his command as the 'scum' of London. 'These new men', he wrote in a letter to his mother, 'are terrible chaps & it is dreadfully trying to your temper … some of them are hopeless, dirty, lazy & always gambling.'[250]

During the war, nearly one third of volunteers were rejected on the grounds of physical unfitness.[251] Although recruiting was a problem for the British Army, as evidenced by the large intake of unemployed men, it was never so dire as to force them to accept undernourished or sickly men.[252] Medical examinations were inconsistent but, according to Spiers, they were 'never a simple formality'.[253]

During the initial period of the war, volunteers were regarded as inferior soldiers compared to the regulars, and often did back-up duty instead of fighting. 'We are treated in the Yeomanry', complained a Yeomanry Lieutenant in May 1900, 'like convicts & no consideration whatever [sic] is shown us … we probably never shall go in real battles.'[254] As the guerrilla war dragged on, the better-skilled volunteers became increasingly useful for irregular warfare because they were less reliant on the guidance of officers.[255]

The regular Tommies largely disliked the volunteers, mainly because of pay and media attention.[256] There was an unnaturally large disparity in pay, with a regular who had been in South Africa for less than a year, receiving only 1/- per day (the "Queen's shilling" as they called it), as opposed to the volunteers who received much more. In March 1901, a lance corporal noted that they received 5/- per day and wrote that he was 'not at all surprised' that there was 'a lot of jealousy' between the regulars and the Yeomanry.[257]

Regulars also felt that the volunteers were being celebrated as heroes back in Britain when they were doing more work. Indignation was especially felt towards the CIV, who were much celebrated in the newspapers. Lance Corporal Syd Critten of the Imperial Yeomanry recorded that they tore out parts of newspapers where the exploits of the CIVs were reported, and burnt them. He wrote in a letter, 'they have not done one half as much as other troops, and have left the hardest part to be done.'[258]

Colonial Volunteers

Despite the wide array of colonies that the British Empire had across the globe, mainly men from the Anglosphere took part as soldiers during the Anglo-Boer War, and the majority of the British colonies did not deliver fighting men to the war effort. The Anglosphere comprised Australia, Canada, New Zealand and, in South Africa, the Cape and Natal colonies. Soldiers from these colonies were referred to as "colonials". Like the volunteers from Britain, colonials only came to South Africa in large numbers after the British defeats of Black Week. In total, approximately 30 000 soldiers volunteered from Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, with more than 50 000 who volunteered from the SA colonies.[259] Of the approximately 80 000 colonial volunteers, 3 080 were killed or died of wounds or disease during the war, and 3 333 were wounded.[260]

A sense of duty towards the British Empire was certainly a major reason why many soldiers volunteered to fight in South Africa. According to Miller, the predominant reason why young men from the British colonies enlisted to fight in South Africa was to take part in 'Christian manliness and empire building'.[261] This is clearly illustrated in a letter by a young Canadian volunteer on board the *SS Milwaukee* en route to South Africa. In a letter to his old school principal shortly after departing Canada, Corporal WH Snyder (2nd Canadian Contingent) recorded his feelings:

> I hope once again in the future to meet you all, but if it is my lot to offer my unworthy life for my Queen and country, I promise, God helping me, to die like a soldier and a man.[262]

Generally, colonials were more independent than the British Tommies in the field of operations and were less reliant on their officers. Many English officers felt that this colonial laissez-faire way was undermining the strict military hierarchy to which they were used.[263] Likewise, English officers often looked upon colonials with contempt. "Too Brabanty" (referring to the colonial unit Brabant's Horse) was even used as a term of scorn for British soldiers who were 'too much like colonials'.[264] General Douglas Haig described the Mounted Infantry as a 'colonial scallywag corpse', who were composed of 'ruffians' who knew 'nothing about their duties'.[265] As the war dragged on and the advantages of colonials became obvious, many English officers changed their opinions. Commanding a blockhouse in March 1902, a lieutenant in the Imperial Yeomanry said that he would not accept English recruits if he could get colonials, commenting, '[a] Dutchman' is worth six Englishmen.[266]

South African Colonies

The majority of colonial volunteers came from the SA colonies of the Cape and Natal. According to Carver, 52 000 men volunteered from the SA colonies.[267] During the initial period of the war, there were SA volunteers who fought alongside their British and other colonial counterparts during the sieges, relief efforts, and invasions of the Boer republics. Examples of these included such celebrated units as the Cape Mounted Riflemen, the Imperial Light Horse, and the Natal Carbineers.[268]

The guerrilla phase[269] of the war saw the formation of a different type of SA volunteer force in the form of local units, which consisted of colonials who served to protect and patrol their districts against Boer attacks. These units could be considered as irregular, as they rarely took part in active military operations alongside the other British forces in South Africa, and were not necessarily formulated along such strict military lines. Many of these units were formed in response to the growing threat from Boer invasions into the Cape. Among these units were the so-called "Town Guards", who were raised as defensive forces for their local towns or districts. In 1901, Alfred Milner[270] wrote to Joseph Chamberlain[271] stating that 12 000 colonials had volunteered as Town Guards.[272] Like the CIV and the Yeomanry from Britain, the Town Guards were a mixed bag of recruits, as illustrated by a local poet who described a parade of Town Guards in a Cape Town newspaper:

> The serried line looked very fine, from Office boy to boss,
> Lawyer and client, manager, clerks, chiefs of departments haughty,
> Youths in their teens, roughs in jeans and elderly men of forty.[273]

Australia

Australia contributed the largest number of soldiers from the British colonies outside of South Africa. In 1899, Australia consisted of six semi-autonomous colonies, and only after federation in 1901, did Australia become a single self-governing state. At the start of the war, the Australian soldiers therefore came from the colonies of New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia, and Tasmania. Australians

generally regarded themselves not only as Australians but also as British, and when they referred to “home”, it often meant Britain. According to Wilcox, ‘[f]or most Australians, the British government was ‘the Imperial government’, the British Army simply ‘the Army’, its soldiers ‘regulars’ or ‘Tommy’ just as they were known in Britain.’[274]

At the outbreak of the war, thousands of Australians volunteered to serve in South Africa, and by the end of the war, one out of every fifty Australians of fighting age had volunteered for service in South Africa.[275] Despite the eagerness of the Australians to participate, there was hesitancy on the side of the British commanders at the start of the war. Australian soldiers were untested in battle, while the British Army had a wealth of experience in fighting and winning wars. After the initial military failures of Black Week, the British commanders however realised the need for Australians, who were more adept at riding, shooting, and living off the land than the regulars or volunteers from Britain.[276]

A contingent of the New South Wales Lancers, who happened to be training in England, were the first overseas colonials to set foot in South Africa, having departed on 10 October and landing on 2 November 1899.[277] In Cape Town, the Lancers were addressed by the Mayor of Cape Town as ‘fellow colonists’, displaying something of the solidarity felt by many in the Imperial Anglosphere at the time.[278]

Of the six Australian colonies, New South Wales contributed the largest number of men, with 6 945 officers and soldiers, as well as 6 104 horses, coming to South Africa. In addition –

- Victoria contributed 3 757 men of all ranks in the First and Second Victoria Mounted Rifles and the Victoria Mounted Infantry.[279]
- Queensland deployed 143 officers, 2 756 men (called “roughriders”) and 3 085 horses to South Africa.[280]
- South Australia supplied 78 officers, 1 450 men and 1,524 horses.
- West Australia sent 63 officers, 1 160 men, 1 044 horses.
- Tasmania added another 35 officers, 827 men and 725 horses.[281]

The Anglo-Boer War was, interestingly, also the first war in which Australian soldiers received the Victoria Cross, with Trooper John Hutton Bisbee of the Tasmanian Imperial Bushmen being the first to receive the decoration.[282]

Canada

After Australia, Canada contributed the second largest number of volunteers from overseas colonies. Canada was unique in the Anglosphere because, like South Africa, it had a large population of non-English speakers. The French-speaking Quebecois made up a large proportion of the Canadian population. Support for the British war effort and also the majority of volunteer soldiers came from the English-speaking population of Canada.[283] Canadian soldiers predominantly volunteered from the urban service sector workforce, with a disproportionate number being members of the Church of England and British-born (the 1st Canadian Mounted Rifles, for example, consisted of 56 per cent British-born members).[284] Canadian soldiers wore maple leaf insignia on their helmets, and all of the

Francophone volunteers fought in one company, which had multilingual officers. In total, Canada contributed over 7 300 volunteers for service in South Africa, with 270 of them losing their lives (more than half due to illness and disease).[285]

New Zealand

Like Canada and Australia, New Zealand contributed its share of colonial volunteers to the British war effort, with the first contingent already setting sail on 21 October, and arriving in South Africa on 23 November 1899. In total, New Zealand sent 10 contingents, which totalled 342 officers and 6 171 men for service in South Africa, as well as 6 600 horses.[286] Many men were eager to volunteer and, like Australia and Canada, the war coincided with a peak in Imperial patriotism. In the words of the Premier, Richard Seddon, New Zealand would fight for 'one flag, one queen, one tongue, and for one country – Britain'.[287]

Like the other colonials, New Zealanders were generally adept at the irregular type of warfare being waged in South Africa. They were more skilled in the use of horses, living off the veld, scouting, and firing a gun than the typical volunteer from Britain was. Only one New Zealander, William James Hardham, was awarded a Victoria Cross during the conflict, but the New Zealanders were praised as 'co-operative, dependable, resourceful, and determined' soldiers.[288] In total, 228 volunteers from New Zealand died during the Anglo-Boer War, mostly from disease.[289]

"Non-Whites" in British Service

At the start of the war, British politicians declared that so-called "non-whites" (including black and coloured men) would not participate in a combatant role during the war.[290] This policy was, however, not followed through, and thousands of non-whites did serve in a military capacity within the British forces. These men were never officially part of the British Army per se, but they were part of the British forces because they were armed by the British and served British military purposes. This article identifies two fundamentally different types of non-white combatants, namely those armed to serve in a forward military capacity, and those who were armed in a defensive capacity.

In a defensive capacity, many non-white groups were armed in order to defend against Boer incursions into their territory. In the Cape Colony, several units were formed to defend local towns and districts from the Boer "invasions" into the colony. Examples of these units include the Border Scouts, the Bushmanland Borderers, and the Namaqualand Border Scouts. These units predominantly consisted of Cape Coloured men. In 1901, the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, Gordon Sprigg, reported that there were 28 000 Cape colonial whites and 6 000 "natives" in service.[291] One of the first instances of the British forces arming black Africans in a defensive capacity was during the siege of Mafeking, where Colonel Baden Powell armed 300 Batswana to assist with defending against Boer attacks.[292] In 1900, a force of 3 000 Basotho was formed as a frontier guard to defend against Boer incursions into Basutoland.[293] In the Transkei and Natal, as many as 4 000 Xhosas and 12 000 Zulus were armed to help protect from Boer invasions.[294]

The arming of black men in a forward or offensive role was more prevalent during the latter stages of the guerrilla warfare period, when the British used armed black men both as blockhouse guards and as combatants in semi-independent irregular units.[295] In the former Boer republics, black units – such as the infamous "Winburg black commando" – participated in the scorched earth policy, helping to burn down Boer farms and kill livestock.[296] This contributed to much bitterness after the war had ended. There were certainly many irregular black units that served in a semi-autonomous capacity to search and hunt down Boer commandos. In a letter in May 1901, Lieutenant Lachlan Gordon-Duff of the 1st Battalion, Gordon Highlanders described such an irregular group of armed black men as follows:

> They were a weird crew, some on foot, others mounted on donkeys or ponies, all with guns, (some our own rifles), also Mausers, Martini's, flintlocks and other strange weapons, and all had knobkerries and assegeis [sic].[297]

It is difficult to determine with any level of accuracy how many black people were armed by the British during the war. Herbert Kitchener[298] testified that 7 114 black people were armed by the British.[299] These figures are however questionable, as Wessels points out that there were possibly as many as 25 000 armed black and coloured men who were involved as blockhouse guards alone. Furthermore, he points out that an estimated 45 000 armed black men accompanied the British columns.[300] Even during the war, in 1902, British opposition politician David Lloyd George proclaimed in the House of Commons that there were 30 000 armed black men in the British military service.[301]

It is impossible to know how many black men died serving within the British forces, but this is estimated as high as 12 000.[302] Black people served on the British side mainly for the pay, with many blacks receiving a higher pay than they did before the war, and remarkably, a higher pay than many white British regulars.[303] Many black people believed that British rule would be accompanied by a more liberal government and granting of more rights, as was enjoyed by non-whites in the Cape Colony. These hopes were quashed, however, when the terms of surrender, signed on 31 May 1902, declared that no new political rights were to be conferred upon black people until self-government had been restored to the former Boer republics.[304]

Thousands of Indians also served with the British forces in South Africa, generally in an unarmed capacity, and most famously as members of the Indian Volunteer Ambulance Corps, which was partly organised by Mahatma Gandhi.[305] As many as 9 000 Indians were imported from the sub-continent to serve in non-combatant roles within the British forces.[306] The roles of these men included work as horse-carers, stretcher-bearers, and personal servants to cavalry officers, amongst others.[307]

Conclusion

The question – "who were the British soldiers that fought during the Anglo-Boer War?" – does not have a straightforward answer. The British forces, which served in South

Africa, were composed of three very different types of soldiers, namely regular soldiers, British volunteers, and colonial volunteers. These men had varying backgrounds and motivations for enlisting. The Regular Army was mostly made up of career soldiers with a working-class background who served for the economic advantages. The volunteers served because of patriotism, peer pressure, and pay. In the same breath, many men from the colonies volunteered to serve out of a sense of duty towards the British Empire. Apart from these three "types" of soldiers that made up the British forces, there were also tens of thousands of "non-whites" who served during the war. These men served in either a defensive role or a forward role, and as many as 70 000 or more were armed by the British.

It is thus clear that, during the Anglo-Boer War, the British forces did not comprise a homogenous group; indeed, far from it. A blanket description of either the military or the human make-up of a force – almost half a million men strong – which served in South Africa, is impossible without adopting both a military and socio-historical perspective.

Firstly, from a military-historical perspective, the British forces were not uniformly organised. The Regular Army had a standard organisational structure in training and a sharp division between ranks, especially between officers and men. The volunteer and colonial forces, on the other hand, were organised more loosely, and had a relatively limited standard of uniformity in terms of structure and less clear divisions between ranks.

Secondly, from a socio-historical perspective, the British Army was not a homogenous group in terms of their socio-economic backgrounds, as soldiers came from almost all backgrounds and careers. This is reflected in their reasons for enlisting, where many men enlisted for the pay as opposed to others who enlisted to serve their Queen and country out of a sense of duty. There was also a certain level of dislike between the different types of soldiers, which might not have been crippling, but that was certainly present.

It is thus impossible to understand the composition of the British forces during the Anglo-Boer War without considering both the military-historical and socio-historical facets of the British military system. Indeed, this article argues that studying one without consideration of the other would inherently yield an incomplete understanding of the whole.

ENDNOTES

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[250] J Hardwick (ed.), *Dearest Mother: Arthur Carey's Letters Home from the Boer War and after 1900–1905* (S.l.: s.n.), 17 October 1901.

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[254] Hardwick, *Dearest Mother*, 10 May 1900.

[255] Farwell, *The Great Boer War*, 375.

[256] Farwell, *The Great Boer War*, 374.

[257] Hardwick, *Dearest Mother*, 16 March 1901.

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[259] Wessels, *The Anglo-Boer War*, 23.

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[263] Farwell, *The Great Boer War*, 375.

[264] Hardwick, *Dearest Mother*, 2 June 1900.

[265] Quoted in Spiers, 'The Learning Curve', 7.

[266] Hardwick, *Dearest Mother*, 21 March 1902.

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[268] For a detailed analysis on the South African colonial units, see Stirling, *The Colonials in South Africa*.

[269] From March 1900 onwards, the Boer forces continued the war effort using a guerrilla warfare strategy; this phase of the war is therefore known as the "guerrilla phase".

[270] Alfred Milner was the British High Commissioner in Cape Town between 1897 and 1901.

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[278] RL Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War* (Canberra: The Australian Government Publishing Service, 1976), 27.

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[284] Miller *et al*., 'The Empire Marches', 100.

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[292] T Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1979), 402.

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[297] Gordon-Duff, *With the Gordon Highlanders to the Boer War*, 215.

[298] Herbert Kitchener was the commander of the British Forces in South Africa from December 1900 until the signing of peace.

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