
2nd Turner Lecture

**Battling for History:
The Impact of War upon Modern South Africa**

*Bill Nasson**

I should like to start this talk with two disclaimers. The first is that I am acutely aware of standing in the shadow of last year's highly distinguished Turner lecturer, Professor Jeffrey Grey. Professor Grey's presence with us on this gracious occasion is a telling reminder of his professional stature as a military historian, and of my own lesser scholarly pedigree in the field. That is, being by background and inclination more of a Heinz Foods kind of historian, guilty of 57 varieties from oral history to cultural history, with a dash of war thrown in as light seasoning.

The second disclaimer is the alleged topic for this brief lecture. If ever there was a case for chewing off more than one can bite, 'the impact of war upon modern South Africa' must be it. Ideally, one would need to be an A.J.P. Taylor or a John Keegan to really be able to pull this off. It must be said that I had initially considered addressing the question of the impact of the Anglo-Boer or South African War upon South African history. That would have made for some easily acceptable, straightforward verdicts. Just as A.J.P. Taylor thought memorably that the Second World War was wonderful, so we can all agree on simplicity of understanding. Boiled down to its essence, what is there to be said about the Anglo-Boer clash? In the long run, South Africa's Great War of 1899-1902 was as crucial to the historical formation of modern South Africa as were the decisive Civil Wars of England, the United States of America, and Spain to the construction of those societies. And again, in the long run, cultivated memories of that war have fed successive nationalist illusions: firstly, the partisan fires of a resentful Afrikaner nationalism, more recently a post-apartheid South African narrative of shared white and black suffering under the heel of British imperialism. Going beyond this case study to the sweeping question of war and South Africa may risk substituting presumption for expertise. Nevertheless, if war is a hazardous enterprise, why should views of it not also fall into the area of educated guesswork or conjecture?

* Bill Nasson is Professor of History and Head of the Department of Historical Studies, University of Cape Town. He delivered the 2nd Turner Lecture at a gala dinner during the *War and Society in Africa* conference held at the South African Military Academy, 12-14 September 2001.

In trying to make something of the broad question of the effects of war upon modern South Africa, I thought that I could most usefully divide my remarks into several general perspectives or overall judgements, and then raise a few tentative analytical considerations. Firstly, in the imaginative and intellectual construction of South Africa, wars have long been part of a battle for its history, in which scholars have found themselves as entrenched belligerents, often waging war on various fronts with all the strategic optimism of the Somme or Passchendaele. For earlier generations of conservative white historians, the late-c.18 and early c.19 wars in the Eastern Cape were **frontier** wars, wars of pacification, wars against tribal lawlessness, or wars undertaken for Christian civilisation. For African nationalist writers, whether Silas Molema in 1919 or Francis Meli in 1975, these Xhosa-settler clashes were **land** wars, invasive wars of appropriation and the extinguishing of local independence.

Or, again, we could return to the South African War. For many decades, popular Afrikaner nationalist historiography laid exclusive claim to its grim history and sombre meaning, as a heavy moral charter of blood sacrifice, awaiting redemption in the present. For Anglo-South African writers, the hostilities of 1899-1902 were either regrettable or discomfiting; or the war was best handled by being turned in on itself, as an episode about strategy and tactics, or as the usual roll-call of military antiquarianism, how many Victoria Crosses, how many faulty cartridges, how many dead horses, how many blown-up bridges. At another extreme, for orthodox black nationalism, sectarian Anglo-Boer hostilities were of little relevance to wider historical processes. The war's outcome merely signified another disillusioning chapter in the history of the frustrating struggle for rights. Or it had all been an unseemly squabble between British and Boer over how best to divide up conquered land. Or it had been a novel spectacle of 'white-on-white' violence, like the 1914-15 Afrikaner Rebellion, or the 1922 Rand Revolt. Whatever its dynamics, it was demonstrably not part of the history of the majority of South Africans.

It is, of course, scarcely surprising that the South African War should have produced such fractured and irreconcilable past histories. And it is no more surprising to find, in more recent times, new scholarly and political concentration on documenting the war as a collective, shared, national experience, in which African, Coloured and Indian South Africans were squarely caught up.

Naturally, all wars, as virtually everyone from Clausewitz to William MacNeill have emphasised, leave a messy residue or legacy of unresolved issues or contested understandings behind them. Even the most cursory glance across the past century of modern wars involving South African society will throw up a large litter of examples. Take the World Wars as Dominion experience. For Australia, New Zealand and even Rhodesia, relatively high levels of volunteer participation became a major source of **generalised** national pride, suffused by a shared sense of colonial valour and accomplishment, springing from unified settler societies free of the marks of disloyalty or treason. South Africa's war narratives provide a somewhat less straightforward kind of history. Between English and Anglo-Afrikaner empire loyalists and prickly nationalist Afrikaners, 1914 and 1939 brought their own kind of domestic **blitzkrieg**; for the ruling white minority, these wars not only stirred up fierce controversy and bitter divisions. They also produced split responses to the stark business of historical choice. What would best serve the national interests of South Africa in the event of war between Britain and

Germany? Up to what point would it be honourable for South African men and Women to offer London their loyalty? Could wartime interests not be better served by remaining aloof, observing a position of neutrality?

A large part of home front experience was hardly about making common cause against a shared enemy: it was about articulating old enmities and questioning the definition of the enemy. For that matter, within black society, too, there were rumblings. By the end of the 1930s, loyal, patient, and dutiful men had acquired a painful sense of the deception of voluntary service in wars not of **their** making. Neither the South African War nor the Great War had brought the marginalised black majority civic reward or a political dividend for their pro-Empire patriotism. At a general level, the hindsight of history influenced attitudes to a further war. Certainly, thousands of individuals served in the Union Defence Force, but very many more were alienated, sceptical, or just too lethargic to be bothered.

History suggests that the World Wars were no more a great patriotic, consensual experience for binding South Africa and its people than were the more recent bush or border wars of Namibia and Angola. There, while the Republic's expeditionary forces may have taken fire and sword to every belligerent region or grouping, within its own borders the porous growth of dissident regions or liberated areas through the 1980s gradually eroded the necessary will for survival and renewal of a difficult foreign front. The sufferings of civilians in these wars, and the trauma of soldiers who conducted hostilities, are likely to be the subject of anguished examination and writing for years to come. That apart, the price of the regional wars fought by the apartheid system, and the basis on which they were fought, look set to remain a troubled part of South Africa's continuing historical consciousness.

This simple summary of South African war as a kind of history battleground comes nowhere near exhausting the record of this country's armed conflict as a tangled web of divided interpretation and lost causes. Even the post-1994 invasion of Lesotho by a new, unified South Africa under arms did not exactly bring out the flags and the bunting; who can forget the press image of one of our more voluble Cabinet Ministers, wringing his hands over an indifferent display of nationhood and patriotism.

What this all amounts to suggests one thing, at least. On one hand, there is undoubtedly something to be said in favour of the notion of war strengthening the glue of national patriotism and common purpose in countries at war, even countries striving for cohesion. For instance, one might cite Verdun, or Dunkirk, or Adowa or even the Falklands as the start of a long laundry list of war's unifying potential. Yet, on the other hand, there is the historical experience of modern South Africa, which suggests that there is clearly something to be said against it, too.

Now, to the second and concluding part of this brief synthesis. Here, I would like to pose a sample number of analytical questions or issues in relation to ways of seeing the historical impact of war on South African society. A useful way to pursue this is to adapt Niall Ferguson's imaginative approach to the First World War in his recent imposing study, *The Pity of War*. That volume posed such questions as: Was the war popular? Who won it? Why did humans endure horrifically inhuman conditions, and so on. Using this

grid of meaning, what kind of perceptions could be offered about the South African experience of modern war?

For present purposes, we might consider just a few interesting paradoxes or contradictions. Take the historical standing of war personalities or the status of generalship in South African society. Wars, after all, have a way of bringing forth imposing leaders, and South Africa has surely had its fair share of towering soldier-politicians: just consider Shaka, Louis Botha, Jan Smuts, and even the rustic decency of Constand Viljoen in the more current era. Strongly emblematic of a stiff-necked soldiering past, they were all, in various ways, decisive or influential figures in South African history.

And yet, their purchase upon popular imagination has turned out to be largely ephemeral. Unlike, as in Australia, universities have not been named after celebrated national warriors. Shaka Zulu, that lexicon of strategy and belligerence, has become a boardroom text for training in corporate planning, an African Renaissance manual for consultants on the make. A decade ago, far-right Afrikaner insurgents called for some return of the generals, to lead the taking up of arms for a third Boer War of Freedom to preserve self-determination. Yet the spirit of General Manie Maritz slept on, and that tragi-comic moment passed. Not much more than half a century ago, the debonair Jan Smuts was a soldier statesman of world stature, while at home his funeral cortege would have place for the inclusion of a troops of black boy scouts. But at no point could he ever have become a South African de Gaulle, a khaki-clad redeemer back from the field, with a uniquely strong centrist appeal to all national constituencies and interests. Like Remembrance Day, a day which ordinary South Africans find increasingly hard to remember, or Union involvement in the Korean War, which has long receded into some virtually unknown past, the generals as **generals** have simply faded away in public consciousness.

Or, one might take another factor - race. Unlike the generals, this is something that not only remains with us, but also looks likely to be around for some time to come. At one level, the South African past makes an excellent historical laboratory for looking at racism and war - a country which has seen centuries of race hate, merciless fighting, atrocious conduct, demonising of the enemy, and exterminationist imperatives. In the eighteenth century, for example, a martial discourse and a race discourse came together in a manner which fed atrocious bloodletting, as Boer commandos were let loose to accomplish the annihilation of Bushmen or San raiders. In the early nineteenth century, there was John Graham's practice in Eastern Cape warfare of no quarter, no surrender, no wounded, and no prisoners. In the later nineteenth century, one could cite the grisly battlefield toll of the Zulu wars, and the erosion of even the veneer of an ethical humanity.

And yet, in the larger picture, victor and vanquished have found ways of sublimating the more vicious and contemptuous battlefield attitudes of old. In a myriad of ways, contemptuous white perceptions of a warring African enemy have always been diluted by fighting collaboration and fighting contract with friendly parties; thus, the nineteenth century web of perception which demonised or belittled Xhosa antagonists included admiration and praise of loyal Mfengu fighting auxiliaries who stuck with colonial forces. In another context, early colonial non-human or sub-human

representation of bushmen became supplanted in the 1970s and 1980s by a more paternalist military idiom of the bushman as a faithful collaborator, a skilled tracker with no equal. Similarly, the mature transition of the rural Zulu infantrymen from beastly barbarian to romanticised warrior is so basic a part of this picture that it scarcely needs any emphasis. Accordingly, the intertwined history of South African race attitudes and war attitudes is not without its complexities, something to which the bond between thousands of trusted African retainers or *agterryers* and their Boer commando masters bore witness a century or so ago.

I should like to conclude with a last piece of conjecture about the **temperament** of war and South African experience. This is that in our history there is no meaningful sense of war as a consuming **national** experience. To a considerable degree, past wars can be categorised as patchwork wars, or wars of relatively negligible impact. The World Wars were a long way off, and the losses they inflicted were comparatively light. Demographically, it could be said that the South African War mattered; but its civilian morbidity was really only a problem for the reproductive base of post-1902 Boer society. For South African society subsequently, the war at home was invariably one in which it fared reasonably well. The World Wars certainly brought no crippling war-related deprivation: less rice, less meat, less sugar, but with no threat to biltong life could go on. Perhaps only the armed rising against the apartheid order in the 1970s and 1980s eventually brought some sense of battle to an insulated home front. But, arguably, not much more than a frisson of fear, as the Pretoria housewives of 1976 joined pistol clubs.

What this all suggests is a simple conclusion about the place of modern war in this country's collective history. In a perversely reassuring way, the experience of South African war is comfortingly like the mirror of South Africa. In other words, it is essentially a story of unequal shares and differential deprivation.

Exemplary leadership and exemplary teams: Unleashing future defence leadership potential

*Brig Gen L.S. 'Solly' Mollo**

1. Introduction

A perusal of leadership literature reflects the relatively vast amount of readily available information about leader development, all lumped under the generic heading of 'leadership training.' Yet, according to the present leadership-training debate, training is but one aspect of leader development. And from this we may deduce that much important work remains to be done on leader-development issues. Particularly so, as leader development is the imperative ingredient if organisations are to maximise the performance of human beings in pursuit of organisational goals.

Conceptually, the development of leadership can be premised on two approaches: firstly, that leadership can be taught and people are capable of learning; and, secondly, there are those who still doubt whether leadership can in fact be taught at all. The latter tend to view leadership as a set of innate abilities endowed by God and espouse the view that "great leaders are born, not made." However, social scientists have demonstrated repeatedly that leadership can be taught to those with suitable potential.

The unleashing of future leadership potential is our challenge. This requires, among other things, exemplary leaders and teams. Yet, in determining the kind of military leaders needed in the future, we must begin by position of several questions. In what context do we expect them to lead? In what roles and missions will they have to serve, and in what strategic context will they have to operate? And then to ask if the strategic environment is different, what qualities do we require in the officer expected to lead and participate in these missions?

Confronted with the complexities of our current epoch, we are painfully aware of the fact that today is by no means just a linear continuity of days past. Advances in information technology and the greater diffusion of knowledge are changing all sectors of our society. In what some scholars describe as the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) armed forces across the globe are confronted with the necessity to educate and develop military practitioners who are well-rounded individuals, armed with the knowledge and skills to manage legitimate violence under conditions of increased perplexity. To quote the profound insight of Richard Jennings with regard to change management, "where the

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