

RECONSTRUCTING THE HOUSEHOLD: THE NORTHERN CAPE COLONY BEFORE AND AFTER THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR*

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ABSTRACT: A major component of the South African War, the imperialist conflict that gave birth to modern South Africa, was the violence that occurred between white settlers and indigenous black populations. This article seeks to understand the particular nature of this violence in the northern districts of the Cape Colony. The war intruded into a region in which memories of conquest were alive, and where recently established settler authority was extremely fragile. Here, the war has to be seen as the final chapter in the closing of a nineteenth-century colonial frontier. The conflict was one between masters and servants in a region where capitalist relations of production had yet to take hold. Conflict continued in the years immediately after the war, and an essential task of the post-war state was to calm disgruntled black subjects.

KEY WORDS: South Africa, colonial, war, violence, race.

THE South African War of 1899–1902 ultimately had its origins in the vast mineral deposits that were to be found in the South African Republic, the trekker state established to the north of the Vaal River in the mid-nineteenth century.¹ But, as hostilities between Britain and the Boer republics spread to all regions of South Africa, the conflict inevitably took on local hues. In the Cape Colony, where Britain had long ruled though local (white) collaborators, the war was not fought over the Transvaal's mineral riches. Here, colonial relations were inherited from a pre-industrial past founded on imported slave labour, gross land alienation, and the near enslavement of the indigenous Khoisan population.

Historians have long recognised the centrality of black people to this conflict.² Although some black combatants fought on the Republican side,

* This article is a revised version of a paper first presented at the University of Cambridge to celebrate the career of Professor John Iliffe, and is published here in his honour. I am also grateful for questions posed to me at the Universities of Stanford, Sheffield, Birmingham, Johannesburg, and Oxford, and to Ruth Watson for her comments.

¹ There is no shortage of interpretations on the origins of the South African War, but, for two timeless statements, see A. Atmore and S. Marks, 'The imperial factor in South Africa in the nineteenth century: towards a reassessment', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 3 (1974), 105–39; S. Marks and S. Trapido, 'Lord Milner and the South African State', *History Workshop Journal*, 8 (1979) 50–80. For a more recent statement on Britain's changing interests in nineteenth-century southern Africa, see B. Nasson, *The South African War, 1899–1902* (London, 1999), 1–45.

² See P. Warwick, *Black People in the South African War* (Cambridge, 1983); B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899–1902*

the vast majority who became embroiled in the conflict served the British army. Many carried arms. Although there were significant material rewards to be had by carrying British supplies and by acting as scouts – service in the British armed forces paid considerably more than could be earned in the agricultural economy – black participation in the war was driven by motives that were profoundly more significant than material imperatives. In the Cape, as Bill Nasson has shown, the partisan commitment of the colonial black population to the imperial war effort was grounded in the reality of a dependent and ambiguous loyalty to British rule.³ For, in the Cape, there had grown up in the decades since the ending of slavery a stratum of black colonial ‘subjects’, schooled in missionary-derived notions of respectability and self-improvement. A mere five days after the declaration of war, one Abraham Esau, ‘the natural leader of the coloured people in Calvinia’, and 65 other ‘coloured British subjects’ swore to ‘support the Imperial policy with life and death’.⁴

The broad mass of the black population in the north-west Cape, however, were not the literate and respectable accumulators of Esau’s type but rural labourers in a predominantly pastoral economy. Historians have not fully appreciated the extent to which black participation in the war was rooted in the specificity of a backward agrarian economy, in which extreme and routine violence characterised personal relations of production. While Esau’s loyalty to Britain can clearly be rooted in a version of black jingoism, this article emphasises the specific and local origins of the Cape’s racial war. On the eve of the South African War, this was a region of recent conquest and one in which settler authority remained extremely fragile. By drawing on criminal records from the northern districts of Calvinia, Kenhardt, and Victoria West, this article argues that the war in the Cape should be understood as a final chapter in the closing of the nineteenth-century northern frontier. In the northern Cape, this was a war between masters and servants. It was these intensely local conflicts, frequently informed by personal grievances and fed by the failure of white settlers to translate military conquest into moral authority that led black labourers to turn on Boer commandos and their former masters. In the aftermath of the war, as they set about reconstructing the political landscape in the interests of white settler rule, British authorities were quick to dispense with their wartime allies. However, as battles continued to be waged between masters and servants, colonial authorities were compelled to make some accommodations in order to placate their former soldiers.

THE WAR IN THE NORTH-WEST CAPE

The war in the north-west was particularly brutal. Calvinia fell to forces of the Free State on 7 January 1901 when commandos rode into the town,

(Cambridge, 1991); J. Krikler, *Revolution from Above, Rebellion from Below: The Agrarian Transvaal at the Turn of the Century* (Oxford, 1993).

³ Nasson, *Abraham Esau’s War*, 8.

⁴ National Archives of South Africa, Cape Town (hereafter CA), GH 35/129, Memorandum by Mr Fiddes, 18 Feb. 1901; National Archives, United Kingdom (hereafter NA), CO 48/543, Enclosure no. 2 to Despatch no. 32030, 18 Nov. 1899.

pulled down the Union Jack, and threw the Resident Magistrate into the local jail. General J. B. M. Hertzog arrived on 10 January, declared martial law, and established the offices of *landdrost* and *veldkornet*, the primary institutions through which local notables had ruled the Cape countryside in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵ Hertzog appointed Francis Van der Merwe to the position of *landdrost*; Abraham Louw had the distinction of being *veldkornet*. Louw and Van der Merwe used their positions to terrorise the local black population in an orgy of violence that resulted in the death of Abraham Esau. Louw was deeply implicated in Esau's killing.⁶

Despite denials on both sides, there was no doubt that blacks carried arms. What has been overlooked is the fact that black participation in the war united a divided settler society. Not all Cape settlers were ready to join their northern kin. In Calvinia, the 'better class of farmers' recognised that they were 'best off under the British flag', and the Civil Commissioner of Cradock doubted whether 'men of substance' would 'under any circumstances throw in their lot with the Boers'.⁷ But as early as November 1899 a deputation of 'leading farmers' warned the Resident Magistrate of Upington that they could not guarantee the loyalty of their district if a 'Bastard corps' were to be raised.⁸ General Kritzing, who on two occasions led commandos into the Colony, saw the arming of black people as one of the major causes of the Cape 'rebellion'. In Calvinia, he alleged, there was an 'infamous Hottentot column, five hundred strong' who by 'their actions ... goaded the Calvinia farmers into rebellion'.⁹ He probably had in mind the Bushmanland Borderers, a division of coloured combatants led by white officers. Kritzing had no qualms about dealing with 'armed natives in the most effectual manner possible', as he so chillingly put it, and his testimony serves as a reminder of how incendiary the sight of armed blacks was to Republican forces and their Cape allies:

The enlisting of blacks by the British induced many Colonists to cast in their lot with the Boers. If natives were to be employed to crush a kindred race, the Colonists thought that they were justified in rendering assistance to their fellow-Dutch ... Moreover, these armed natives, once promoted to the rank of soldiers, tantalized the farmers, *who were formerly their masters*, to an inconceivable degree. With rifle in hand they would go to these and treat them in the most insulting manner.¹⁰

Sentiments of this nature meant that black scouts and combatants frequently paid a heavy price. One of many incidents may be taken as representative. On Friday 4 October 1901, the elderly Koos Volmoer, who

⁵ These terms cannot easily be translated into English, but the closest equivalents are 'magistrate' and 'sheriff' respectively.

⁶ The most moving account of Esau's life and death is to be found in Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War*, esp. 120–41; CA, GH 35/129, Evidence of Elizabeth Manel, 30 March 1901.

⁷ NA, 48/545, Enclosure to Despatch no. 4658 of 24 Jan. 1900, Civil Commissioner Calvinia to Secretary of Law Department, 20 Dec. 1899; NA, CO 48/543, W. Blenkins to A. Milner, 19 Oct. 1899.

⁸ NA, 48/543, Enclosure 52 to Despatch no. 35051, Resident Magistrate, Upington to Secretary of Law Department, 28 Nov. 1899.

⁹ P. H. Kritzing and R. D. McDonald, *In the Shadow of Death* (London, 1904), p. 167.

¹⁰ Kritzing and McDonald, *Shadow*, pp. 88, 166–7, emphasis added.

served as a scout for the British army, was executed on the farm Kliprug in the district of Calvinia. Volmoer, a 'Bastard Hottentot' according to Calvinia's District Surgeon, had been captured the previous day and was taken into the veld by a party of four or five Boers who had decided that he was a 'hottentot who [was] for the English'. Two coloured labourers, Klaas Blinkvlei and Arie Wildschut, who had been made to accompany the party, were ordered to dig a grave, while the blindfolded Volmoer was hurried along in his prayers. As he said 'Amen', one of the party, a certain Daniel Van Heerden, acting under orders of the 22-year-old Hendrik Johannes van Rensburg, shot Volmoer through the back of the head. Blinkvlei and Wildschut had specifically been taken along so that 'they could tell the coloured people ... what the punishment was for a coloured man who sided with the English'. 'We shoot every one we catch', Van Heerden is reputed to have said. Volmoer died instantly, the bullet having exited through his chin. He was buried in the shallow grave that had just been dug.¹¹

THE VIOLENCE OF COLONIAL CONQUEST

The particular retributions of war were rooted in the everyday violence of what had been until very recently a frontier society – well into the 1880s, settler society of this region was still engaged in a process of conquest that had started more than a century earlier. The first white settlement in a region that for thousands of years had been occupied by hunter-gatherers commenced as early as the mid 1720s. By 1725, *trekboers* ('frontier farmers') from the south-western Cape had made their way to the Hantam, and in 1746 the Dutch East India Company (the VOC) handed out the first farms in Roggeveld, a region well suited to the rearing of sheep.¹²

For the next century and a half the Hantam-Calvinia region was one of conflict as Bushmen resisted every step of white settlement. From the start, relations between *trekboers* and hunter-gatherers were marked by extreme violence. But it was particularly in the last third of the eighteenth century, when *trekboers* began to settle the Great Escarpment of the Cape's interior, that Bushmen mounted the most determined resistance yet to white intrusion. From about 1770, and for the next forty years, the Bushmen held settlers at bay in a series of ghastly wars that stretched along the entire length of the escarpment, from the Roggeveld Mountains to the Sneeuberg. Well-aimed poisoned arrows killed Khoikhoi shepherds, leaving Bushmen free to carry off hundreds of sheep and cattle at a time. Such attacks effectively put an end to further *trekboer* expansion as many white settlers were forced to abandon their farms. It was only in the Sneeuberg that the Bushmen could not prevail, but even here many white settlers were forced to flee.¹³

¹¹ CA, AG 3525, Part II, case of Hendrik Johannes Janse van Rensburg, 27 Sep. 1902; CA, 1/CVA 1/1/1/1, *Rex v Hendrik Johannes Janse van Rensburg [and] Daniel Johannes van Heerden*, 13 Aug. 1902.

¹² K. Schoeman, *Die Wêreld van die Digter: 'n boek oor Sutherland en die Roggeveld ter ere van N. P. van Wyk Louw* (Cape Town, 1986), 12.

¹³ A. Sparrman, *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope towards the Antarctic Polar Circle Round the World and to the Country of the Hottentots and Caffres from the Year 1772–1776* (Cape Town, 1975), II, 110.

In response, white settlers repeatedly raised horse-mounted and armed units, or commandos, in a tradition that had been firmly established early in the eighteenth century. In 1774, as it became apparent that whites were losing the war, the VOC convened the first of a number of 'general' commandos in an attempt to establish settler authority along a frontier that extended for 300 miles. This commando was intent on annihilation of the enemy, and in 1777 the VOC effectively proclaimed the extermination of the Bushmen a matter of policy. Hundreds were killed as an immediate consequence, and many more in the decades that followed. In just one incident, in September 1792, a commando killed 250 Bushmen in the vicinity of the Sak River.¹⁴ By the end of the century, thousands of Bushmen had lost their lives.¹⁵

By the 1830s, resistance to continued white expansion had effectively ceased. Nevertheless, colonial conquest of the north-west frontier remained incomplete. We know very little about the fate of Bushmen on the northern frontier in the period between the 1830s and the late 1850s. It was only when white settlers commenced their push into Bushmanland (the region that extended from the edges of the districts of Calvinia, Fraserburg, and Victoria West to the Gariep) that they again commanded the attention of colonial authorities.¹⁶ Fierce clashes took place between white farmers and Bushmen in the region of Kenhardt, and in the early 1860s a number of reports reached authorities in Cape Town that the Bushmen in this region were being exterminated.¹⁷ Louis Anthing, the Civil Commissioner of Namaqualand who was appointed to investigate these reports, documented the merciless killing of Bushmen by *trekboer* commandos.¹⁸

From this time on, the people who offered the greatest resistance to white settlement were those who had their roots in colonial society and who had acquired the essential elements of power on the frontier, namely guns and horses. Refugee groups, consisting of people who had forsaken lives as servants in the colonial economy, established themselves on the Gariep. Between the Augrabies Falls and present-day Upington the course of the river broke up in a number of places, forming islands where dense bush provided impenetrable cover.¹⁹ The people who occupied these islands and surrounding areas were variously referred to as 'Koranna' or 'Coranna', but should properly be called '!Kora'.²⁰ The !Kora consisted of a number of

¹⁴ G. M. Theal, *History and Ethnography of Africa South of the Zambezi*, vol. 3 (London, 1910), 214.

¹⁵ On the eighteenth-century northern frontier, see N. Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist & Khoisan on the Cape's Northern Frontier in the 18th Century* (Cape Town, 2005); L. J. Mitchell, *Belongings: Property, Family and Identity in Colonial South Africa, an Exploration of Frontiers, 1725-c.1830* (New York and Gutenberg-e, 2008).

¹⁶ J. S. Marais, *The Cape Coloured People, 1652-1937* (Johannesburg, 1968; first published 1939), 28.

¹⁷ Cape Parliamentary Papers (hereafter CPP), A39-1863, Message no. 29, from Governor P. G. Wodehouse, 16 June 1863; M. Szalazy, *The San and the Colonization of the Cape, 1770-1879: Conflict, Incorporation, Acculturation* (Cologne, 1995), 31.

¹⁸ CPP, A39-1863, Anthing's report to Colonial Secretary, 21 April 1863.

¹⁹ L. F. Maingard, 'Studies in Korana history, customs and language', *Bantu Studies*, 6 (1932), 115.

²⁰ R. Ross, 'The !Kora wars', *Journal of African History*, 16 (1975), 561.

nominally independent bands who were primarily pastoralists. But their politics were unstable – sheep and cattle could easily be lost – and raiding was central to their mode of existence.

By the early 1830s, !Kora bands were well established and offered a considerable threat to white farmers in the northern districts, their attacks having become more frequent ‘and of a much more atrocious character than formerly’.²¹ Commandos that went in pursuit often failed to catch up with retreating bands, and the Colony’s acting Governor was led to call into question the efficacy of the commando as an institution.²² Throughout the 1850s and early 1860s, the !Kora harried white settlers. In 1867, full-scale war broke out. From their island fortresses the !Kora were able to launch raiding strikes as far as 250 miles into the northern districts of the Colony.²³ Even though colonial forces captured Piet Rooy, the most determined of the !Kora leaders, his followers – the Hartebeeste – continued to fight and even attempted to spring Rooy from the jail at Fraserburg.²⁴ Many farmers in the northern parts of the districts of Fraserburg, Calvinia, and Victoria West were forced to abandon their farms. At the end of the winter of 1867, the Resident Magistrate of Calvinia reported that the land between Calvinia and the Gariep was almost completely deserted. Increasingly, the Bushmen and even ‘Bastaards’ previously loyal to the colonial government made common cause with the !Kora; in October 1867, a group of about ten Bushmen entered Kenhardt, ‘cursing and swearing, and prepared to shoot anyone opposing them’.²⁵

The war continued into 1868. In August and September of that year a large band of !Kora caused havoc in the district of Calvinia. Even the village was threatened and there were claims that !Kora were within nine hours of it and that 300 were two days away.²⁶ Hundreds of animals were carried off in these attacks: one farmer wrote to the Civil Commissioner of Calvinia and noted that, in the period May to July 1868, his region had a reported loss of 763 head of cattle and 900 sheep.²⁷ A commando of 300 men set out from Calvinia under Commandant Jacobus Louw but returned without any notable success.²⁸ Governor Wodehouse wrote

throughout a vast tract of country lying south of the Orange River the law of the Colony is practically not in force and ... the Colonial Government does not, and with its present means, cannot afford substantial protection to persons and property.²⁹

It was only towards the end of 1869, after the Cape Parliament passed the Northern Border Protection Act to allow for greater resources to be committed to the frontier, that colonial authorities got the upper hand. A magistracy was established at Kenhardt under the direction of Maximilian James Jackson, who took up his post with vigour. Hundreds of !Kora had

²¹ NA, CO 48/51, T. F. Wade to E. G. Stanley, 10 Dec. 1833.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ CPP, G61-1879, Special Magistrate, Northern Border to Colonial Secretary, 11 Jan. 1869.

²⁴ PPCP, A25-1869, T. Naylor to F. E. Balston, 3 June 1867.

²⁵ CPP, A25-1869, J. B. Roode – Balston, 21 Oct. 1867.

²⁶ Ross, ‘!Kora wars’, 571.

²⁷ CPP, A54-1868, G. P. Steyn to J. Calder, 3 Aug. 1868.

²⁸ T. Strauss, *War Along the Orange* (Cape Town, 1979), 40–2.

²⁹ CPP, A25-1868, Message from Governor Wodehouse.

lost their lives in the war while a number of others were tried, convicted, and sentenced to death.³⁰

In the aftermath of the war, and especially during the drought of 1873, colonial farmers, merchants, and Bastard families moved into !Kora territory, thus laying the basis for future conflict. In 1878–79, as severe drought took hold, war again broke out on the northern frontier as the !Kora attempted to return to old hunting and grazing grounds.³¹ This was a much more serious war, for it involved not only !Kora but all groups living along the Orange, who put up a united front. The Colony's former allies, Klaas Lucas and Klaas Pofadder, in particular, turned against the government, but only after Pofadder had tricked Jackson into giving him a large supply of ammunition and gunpowder.³²

The war was bitterly fought as the !Kora reoccupied the islands in the Gariëp. In one incident, a commando led by Commandant J. A. Van Niekerk massacred a group of 46 men, women, and children they found in the bush. Van Niekerk also took 32 prisoners, 5 of whom were later shot in cold blood. The 'Koegas atrocities', as these incidents became known, shocked many in colonial society. Upon Jackson's insistence, three members of the commando were brought to trial in the district of Victoria West. The trial was a travesty – Van Niekerk himself was not charged, nor was he called as a witness. Crucial evidence against the perpetrators was ignored. One of the jury, Sergeant Carel van Niekerk, had been on the same commando. Another jury member, a Mr Van Heerde, made no secret of his desire to have the !Kora exterminated. Only one member of the commando was found guilty, and he was a Bastard.³³

But even though the region was effectively cleared for white occupation, 'Bushmen'³⁴ continued to engage white farmers in low-level warfare that resulted in numerous deaths on both sides.³⁵ White settlers had good reason to fear the continued 'power of the Bushman arrow'; many Bushmen, moreover, had acquired guns during short stints as farm labourers, the possession of which enabled them 'to live a sort of independent life'.³⁶ Early in the 1880s, there were 'attempts on the part of the Bushmen to maraud on a large scale'; in 1883, a man named Buckle was shot dead in retaliation for killing Bushmen under circumstances of 'particular

³⁰ CPP, A74-1880, Thomas Upington, 'Memorandum relating to the custody of Piet Rooy, David Diedericks and Carl Ruyters', n.d.

³¹ CPP, G60-1888, Gordon Sprigg, 7 May 1888.

³² CPP, G61-1879, 'Report on and papers connected with the affairs on the northern border of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope', Statement by Attorney-General Thomas Upington, 2 July 1879.

³³ D. P. Faure, *My Life and Times* (Cape Town, 1907), 69–77; 'Affairs on the northern border'.

³⁴ It is clear that by this time there was considerable confusion about the identities of those who resisted colonial expansion. Colonial authorities and white farmers increasingly labelled all those outside permanent service to white farmers as 'Bushmen'.

³⁵ CPP, G20-1881, 'Blue book on native affairs', Report of John H. Scott, Special Magistrate, Northern Border, 7 Jan. 1881; CA, NA 169 'Blue book on native affairs', Report for the District Northern Border, Jan. 1883; PPCP, G12-1887, Report of John H. Scott, Special Magistrate, Northern Border, 7 Jan. 1887.

³⁶ CA, NA 168, John H. Scott, 'Report for "Blue book on native affairs"', 1881; Report of John H. Scott, 7 Jan. 1881.

atrocities'.³⁷ Thus, less than two decades before the outbreak of the South African War, the conquest of the northern frontier remained incomplete.

MASTERS AND SERVANTS

The most salient fact about relations between masters and servants in this part of the Cape Colony, then, is that they were forged in the violence of war and colonial conquest. Servants in the northern Cape were the products of war. Ever since the first commandos went out against Khoisan, settlers took captives to be exploited as servile labour. Willem van Wyk's commando of 1772, for example, took 58 captives.³⁸ Although Godlieb Opperman's 'general commando' of 1774 was given explicit instructions to destroy the Bushmen, large numbers of prisoners were taken captive to be distributed as servants among white settlers. According to one account, Opperman took 950 such prisoners, many more than was reported in official papers.³⁹

In the course of the nineteenth century, frontier farmers increasingly launched commandos for the express purpose of acquiring labour, a consequence of their inability to afford slaves to any significant extent. Szalazy has calculated that roughly 9,000–12,000 Bushmen were brought into the colonial economy in this manner, the majority of whom had been captured in the first third of the nineteenth century. In the aftermath of the frontier war of 1867–68 large numbers of !Kora and Bushmen were forced into servitude. L. G. Rawstorne, the Civil Commissioner at Victoria West, found himself overwhelmed with processing and arranging contracts of indentureship for 'a very large number of destitute people'.⁴⁰ Within the space of a few weeks, 283 !Kora and Bushman men, women, and children had been brought into his district 'for distribution as servants'.⁴¹

More war captives were brought into the colonial economy following the war of 1878–79. In excess of 800 people were taken captive during this war and put to work on settler farms in districts such as Calvinia, Clanwilliam, and Beaufort West.⁴² Even at the atrocious battles at Koegas, Commandant Van Niekerk did not neglect to draw up a list of applications for 'indentures' and recommended the applicants 'as fit persons for bringing up children'.⁴³ It appears, moreover, that in the years immediately after the war Van Niekerk routinely rounded up Bushman 'vagrants' and pressed them into the service of farmers in his district, many of whom were his friends and relatives.⁴⁴ Some feared that his actions would result in renewed war.⁴⁵

³⁷ Report for the District Northern Border, Jan. 1883.

³⁸ Theal, *History and Ethnography*, 125. ³⁹ M. Szalazy, *San*, 21–3.

⁴⁰ CA, CO 3153, L. G. Rawstorne to Colonial Secretary, 18 Dec. 1869.

⁴¹ CA, CO 3177, Resident Magistrate, Victoria West to Colonial Secretary, 22 Nov. 1870; CA, CO 3162, Resident Magistrate, Victoria West to Colonial Secretary, 11 Dec. 1869. Theal was clearly off the mark when he estimated that 150 people were brought into farm service following the war of 1867–68: G. M. Theal, *History of South Africa since September 1795*, vol. 5 (London, 1911), 98.

⁴² CPP, A30-1880, Special Commissioner, Northern Border to Secretary for Native Affairs, 13 May 1880; M. Broodryk, 'Die Kaapse Noordgrensoorloë, 1868–1879', *Archives Yearbook of South African History*, 55 (1992), 527.

⁴³ CPP, G61-1879, J. A. Van Niekerk to J. N. P. de Villiers, 2 Nov. 1878.

⁴⁴ CA, CO 3377, Edward Jackson to de Villiers, 22 Feb. 1881.

⁴⁵ CA, CO 3377, Robert Mitchell to de Villiers, 3 March 1881.

The greatest challenge to white farmers, then, was that they had ‘the enemy within’.⁴⁶ Taking war captives was only the first step in turning an indigenous population into a servile class. Domestication was a different matter altogether, and victory in war was no guarantee thereof. White settlers elsewhere had had little success on this score. By the end of the eighteenth century, settlers on the Colony’s north-eastern frontier had failed to enslave indigenous peoples *in situ*, or, to put it another way, had failed to translate military power into moral authority. The Khoisan of the Great Escarpment, Newton-King has argued, suffered ‘no ... sense of moral collapse’ that might have sprung from virtual enslavement. They fought European hegemony ‘tooth and nail’; above all else, servants were kept in check by ‘naked force’.⁴⁷

White settlers had good reason to come to fear their black dependents. Glimpses of the dangers of having the enemy within were to be seen in the early years of the nineteenth century. In 1801, for example, Cornelis Coetzee, as well as his wife and children, were killed in their sleep by their slaves and Khoisan servants, driven to their actions by the ‘ill-timed, or over-strained severity on the part of the master’.⁴⁸ And in November 1812, two Khoikhoi servants killed the overseer of the Hantam farm on which they worked and took off with a number of firearms, in an attempt to foment revolt among other Khoisan servants.⁴⁹ Their actions struck terror in the hearts of white settlers.⁵⁰ Anthing found that the Bushmen responsible for killing a white farmer named Lourens were not those who had been living as ‘independent tribes, but who had been all their lives in the service of the farmers’.⁵¹

War captives were brought into a colonial economy in which capitalist relations of production were not fully embedded. In sharp contrast to the south-western Cape, where wage labour had taken firm hold in the first decades following slave emancipation,⁵² agrarian capitalism here was significantly more stunted. Although the region had its successful accumulators and ‘men of influence’, the majority of white farmers were in all probability impoverished and subservient to money-lending or merchant capital.⁵³ It is little wonder that during the South African War the offices of the Standard Bank, that great symbol of British capital in the nineteenth-century Cape countryside, were common targets of Boer attacks.⁵⁴ Indeed, some of those who joined the Boer cause were specifically under the illusion that

⁴⁶ I owe this phrase and line of analysis to S. Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Cape Eastern Frontier 1760–1803* (Cambridge, 1999), 116–49.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 125, 129.

⁴⁸ H. Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806* (Cape Town, 1928), 124–5; Schoeman, *Wêreld*, 56.

⁴⁹ G. M. Theal (ed.), *Records of the Cape Colony* (London, 1897–1905), XXXI, 23 (C. A. van der Merwe to O. M. Bergh, 13 Nov. 1812).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 24–5 (C. A. van der Merwe to O. M. Bergh, 20 Nov. 1812).

⁵¹ Anthing’s Report to Colonial Secretary, 21 April 1863.

⁵² See W. Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg, 2007), 159–87.

⁵³ For the hold of merchant capital on white agriculture in the south-western Cape, see *ibid.* 197–213.

⁵⁴ G. H. L. Le May, *British Supremacy in South Africa, 1899–1907* (Oxford, 1965), 51.

Republican rule would bring freedom from the weight of mortgage debt: 'Very many of our farmers ... have joined the Invaders under the impression that if the Free State annexes this District they will be absolved from the payment of all shop debts and mortgage bonds', wrote one observer.⁵⁵

This stunted agrarian capitalism was to be seen in relations of production. Servants suffered labour regimes that were harsh in the extreme. Anthing found that Bushmen in the service of white farmers lived lives that were marked by '[h]arsh treatment, an insufficient allowance of food, and continued injuries inflicted on their kinsmen'.⁵⁶ It was common for servants to be paid in kind, a practice that continued into the early years of the twentieth century. According to Special Magistrate John Scott, shepherds typically received about 10s. per month, or a ewe, cast-off clothes, and 'in most cases a not illiberal ration of meat with a little bread and coffee'.⁵⁷ In 1868, a colonial official less sympathetic to white farmers found that shepherds were 'very badly fed',⁵⁸ while Special Magistrate D. Hook wrote in 1873 'I find that masters illuse [sic] their servants, refuse them fair compensation for labor performed, and the natives are too poor to go long journeys ... to get redress'.⁵⁹ Opraap, a male 'Namaqua' shepherd, was employed by the Kenhardt farmer Gert Booysen in 1887 in return for food, clothing, shoes, and tobacco.⁶⁰ 'In lieu of wages', Piet Karsten paid Orlam, his Bushman servant, in food and tobacco, and allowed him to graze his stock 'free of charge'.⁶¹ 'As the wages now run', the Fraserburg farmer Le Roex testified in 1892,

we give a herd one sheep a month and everything free, or 15s. a month and everything free ... the herd gets his coffee and tobacco. The soles and leather for veldshoes, coffee and tobacco are part of his fixed wages. Clothes are often given as a present for good service and are not part of the wages.⁶²

White farmers could also count on the labour of the women and children of their male servants. While male shepherds were away in the veld, sometimes for days or months on end, women typically performed domestic labour in settler households.⁶³ One Kenhardt servant, Maria Booy, worked only for food: 'I am not paid money', she told a court in 1889.⁶⁴ That same year, Lena Dikhaar, a 'Bushwoman', was contracted to work for Abraham Schalkwyk of Kenhardt for three months in return for a new dress and food; her husband was to receive one goat per month as well as food.⁶⁵ Jan Fraser employed Jantje Springbuck as a shepherd 'under the understanding that his wife had also to work for food'.⁶⁶

⁵⁵ NA, CO 48/545, Enclosure to Despatch no. 190000, 16 June 1900, Memorandum of F. R. Tennant of Burghersdorp, 24 May 1900.

⁵⁶ Anthing's report to Colonial Secretary, 21 April 1863.

⁵⁷ Report of John H. Scott, 7 Jan. 1881.

⁵⁸ CPP, A25-1868, Statement of P. D. Smidt, Resident Magistrate of Calvinia, 22 April 1868. ⁵⁹ CA, CO 3232, D. Hook to Attorney-General, 11 Oct. 1873.

⁶⁰ CA, 1/KEN 1/1/1/2, *Gert Booysen v Opraap*, 24 Dec. 1888, no. 53.

⁶¹ CA, 1/KEN 1/1/1/4, *Queen v Orlam*, 13 Dec. 1894.

⁶² CPP, C2SC-1892, 'Report of the Select Committee on the Labour Question', evidence of Mr Le Roex, 3 Aug. 1892.

⁶³ Report of John H. Scott, 7 Jan. 1881; Statement of P. D. Smidt, 22 April 1868.

⁶⁴ CA, 1/KEN 1/1/1/2, *Regina v Dina Johanna Adriana Laurens*, 17 Oct. 1889.

⁶⁵ CA, 1/KEN 1/1/1/2, *Regina v Lena Dikhaar*, 3 Sep. 1889.

⁶⁶ CA, 1/KEN 1/1/1/4, *Queen v Jantje Springbuck*, 13 Dec. 1894.

Relations of this nature, however, bred especially bitter conflicts. Black men and women had very fixed ideas about where the labour of women should be expended.⁶⁷ Opraap's wife was beaten by Booyesen when she made it clear that she did not consider herself bound by the terms of her husband's contract.⁶⁸ 'I have tried everything to induce these people [women and children] to work', was the evidence of one Mr Le Roex. 'But they will not work and my herd tells me to my face his wife is his wife, and she need not work; he can work for her.'⁶⁹ Sentiments of this nature led some white farmers to employ only servants 'unencumbered with families': it did 'not pay to feed the lot for the sake of the man's services'.⁷⁰

We can only speculate about the manner in which war captives were incorporated into settler households, but there can be no doubt, as the Bushman Klaas Bosjesman found, that physical violence was intrinsic to the process. Bosjesman had lost his mother when she was shot in the wars against the !Kora. His father 'gave' him to Floris Johannes Brand of Kenhardt, so the latter claimed, to take care of until Bosjesman reached maturity. It can be assumed that Bosjesman had spent his entire life in Brand's service, for he was estimated to be about 14 years old in 1889.⁷¹ While white farmers employed a great deal of paternalistic rhetoric, this did not preclude them beating their dependants. 'I punish my children when they do wrong', Brand told the magistrate's court at Kenhardt. Bosjesman was clearly not spared treatment of this kind for he had the dubious honour of being treated 'as one of [Brand's] own children'. But, of course, he was not one of Brand's children, his servile status underscored by the fact that he appears to have deserted with some regularity. For this reason, Brand reckoned, Bosjesman 'deserve[d] more punishment' than his own son.⁷²

Thus, even those servants who had been with white settlers since early childhood were not spared extreme forms of physical violence, and could be victims of unspeakable cruelty. The testimony of Jacobus Dikkop, heard before the court at Kenhardt in 1891, reveals much about how children were brought and incorporated into settler households. Jacobus, a 14-year-old servant of Willem Husselman, herded goats and did household work. He slept in his master's house, received his meals in the kitchen, and played with Husselman's son. But Jacobus also described a violent and capricious master:

I remember when my mother gave me to prisoner. I was very little. My master is sometimes good to me, but sometimes he is cross. I sometimes play with my master's son ... I do run away sometimes and stay in the veldt, but I return to my master. Sometimes my master beats me for running away, sometimes not.⁷³

⁶⁷ Pamela Scully has argued that, for the post-emancipation south-western Cape, the 'movement from domestic work for employers into domestic work for one's own household came to signify liberty from slavery, and an entry into womanhood for some freed women': P. Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823–1853* (Portsmouth, NH, 1997), 94.

⁶⁸ *Gert Booyesen v Opraap*.

⁶⁹ 'Report on the Labour Question', evidence of Mr Le Roex.

⁷⁰ CA, NA 168, John H. Scott to Secretary of Native Affairs, 28 Sep. 1883.

⁷¹ CA, 1/KEN 1/1/1/2, *Floris Brand v Klaas Bosjesman*, 24 July 1889, no. 32.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ CA, 1/KEN 1/1/1/3, *Regina v W. C. S. Husselman, Adam Aaron, Abraham Steenekamp, Hendrik Schalkwyk*, 30 Sep. 1891.

This might seem mild in comparison with what was to come later. One Saturday in March 1891, Husselman was overtaken with rage when he found Jacobus asleep in the veld while he was meant to be herding goats. 'He ... sat upon my stomach', Jacobus remembered.

I wrestled with him but could not get away – he was too heavy. He then took the knife ... out of his pocket, lifted my shirt and cut at my testicles. He first cut one and then the other ... I bled profusely on the spot.⁷⁴

A medical doctor confirmed that the boy had been castrated.⁷⁵ Despite the fact that the testimony against Husselman 'remained uncontradicted', a jury at Victoria West failed to convict him. The case caused colonial authorities to remember the miscarriage of justice that occurred in the same district following the 'Koegas atrocities'. The Circuit Court judge doubted whether any jury in the district would deliver a verdict of guilty in such cases 'where race prejudice may be involved'.⁷⁶

Incidents of this nature, however, also speak of the fragility of settler authority and the difficulty of domesticating an indigenous labour force. Desertion was the first option for many, a phenomenon that colonial authorities tried to curtail by removing war captives to districts other than their ancestral homes.⁷⁷ Many – perhaps the majority – of those captured and turned into servants in the aftermath of the war of 1878 deserted and so failed to complete the terms of their 'apprenticeship'.⁷⁸ 'Bushmen and Hottentots' could find alternative means of subsistence to farm labour on settler farms, or, as Scott put it, they could 'live, in a way that to themselves is not intolerable, without work'.⁷⁹ Drought in the 1880s compounded the 'insufferable servant difficulty' that farmers experienced on the northern frontier.⁸⁰ Those who returned from working for farmers in districts such as Calvinia 'one and all absolutely refuse[d] to take service with the farmers', and undertook to 'live from game, roots, fish and honey'.⁸¹ Some returned to their 'beloved' islands on the Gariep, from where they carried out isolated attacks on farmers.⁸²

THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR AS CONFLICT BETWEEN MASTERS AND SERVANTS

Nevertheless, farmers in the north-west Cape did have success in domesticating their labour force in the years before the South African War. By the end of the nineteenth century, many servants had been with individual

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ CA, AG 2935, no. 14, Circuit Court case against Willem Casper Steenekamp Husselman, 25–26 Sep. 1891; CA, CSC 1/2/1/107, Case of Willem Steenekamp Husselman, Second Circuit Court held at Victoria West, 25–26 Sep. 1891; *Regina vs W. C. S. Husselman, Adam Aaron, Abraham Steenekamp, Hendrik Schalkwyk*.

⁷⁶ Circuit Court case against Willem Casper Steenekamp Husselman.

⁷⁷ CA, NA 168, John H. Scott to Secretary for Native Affairs, 20 Dec. 1882; CA, NA 166, D. Hook to Secretary for Native Affairs, 29 Dec. 1874.

⁷⁸ CPP, G8-1883, 'Blue book on native affairs', Report of John H. Scott, Special Magistrate, Northern Border. ⁷⁹ Report of John H. Scott, 7 Jan. 1881.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*; Report for the District Northern Border, Jan. 1883.

⁸¹ CA NA 168, John H. Scott – Secretary for Native Affairs, 20 Dec. 1882.

⁸² G8-1883, Report of John H. Scott.

masters for long periods of time. By 1901, Willem Lichte had served Willem Visagie for sixteen years, while Willem Scheffers and his wife, Sara Kouter, had been with Jan Visagie for six years.⁸³ Domestic servants were more likely to have had the longest periods of residency in settler homes: Dinah Rispin 'grew up' in the house of the Calvinia farmer Jacobus Moolman, while Cecilia Biddow had been in Moolman's house 'ever since [she] was a child'.⁸⁴

It was into this domestic arena of fragile and recently established settler authority that the South African War intruded. The violence directed against black people can be explained with reference to the personal and intimate ties that bound masters and servants. In the Cape, the war represented the collapse of these personal relations of domination.

To the black population of the north-west Cape, the war provided a glimpse of turning the tide on colonial dispossession, in a way that was not unlike that of peasant communities in the Transvaal.⁸⁵ As we have seen, the process of colonial conquest in this region had been completed not long before. Colonial settlers were determined that that conquest would not be turned back. As Republican forces entered the Cape, settlers sought to impose what they called 'Republican Native Law', or 'Free State Law'. Colonial landlords of the north-west proved receptive to 'Republican Native Law' not only because it sought to enshrine the racial superiority of whites but also because it could so easily batten onto the stunted capitalism of the region. To Jan Visagie it meant an opportunity to immobilise his labour force. As Willem Scheffers remembered, '[Visagie] told me we were no longer under English law, and that I was now a slave, and was not to leave his service.'⁸⁶

At the centre of imposing 'Free State Law' in Calvinia was Abraham Louw. A little over two weeks after having been appointed *veldkornet* by General Hertzog, Louw headed off early in February 1901 to join Republican forces in the Orange Free State. Upon his return to the Cape in June 1901, and in his new capacity as Commandant, he unleashed a reign of terror on the black community of Calvinia. Very quickly he earned the title of the 'Flogging Commandant'. One coloured labourer, Jacob Pursens, described in considerable detail the suffering he experienced at Louw's hands:

He [Louw] said it was no use my denying that I worked for the English because there were many who could prove it. He took a riem [whip], told me to take my clothes off, and then fastened me to a thorn tree and beat me with a sjambok. He beat me for some time on the back with the sjambok and then went and rested for a considerable time. He then beat me again until he was tired. He beat me until the perspiration ran down his face. The third time he beat me I swooned away. When I came round again ... he told me to take my things and clear off or I would be shot.⁸⁷

Pursens was unable to work for three weeks as a result of this beating. A medical doctor concluded that he had been 'unmercifully beaten'.

Louw's defence was revealing. Thoroughly unapologetic, he claimed to have flogged 'only six' persons during the entire time that he served as

⁸³ CA, AG 3449, Part II, Case against Casper Jan Hendrik Lukas Visagie, 2 April 1901.

⁸⁴ CA, 1/CVA 1/1/2/2, *Regina v Jacob Moolman*, 18 Jan. 1901.

⁸⁵ Krikler, *Revolution*. ⁸⁶ Case against Casper Jan Hendrik Lukas Visagie.

⁸⁷ CA, CSC 1/1/1/56, Case of Abraham Gert Willem Louw, Criminal Session, Nov.–Dec. 1903, no. 39.

Commandant. 'If people did not obey orders I had to fine and flog', he testified, and claimed to have flogged Pursens for spying for the British. But he did not mount his defence as a military officer, couching it instead in the language of master and servant: 'I have had some experience as a farmer with flogging people', he said, 'as the law is distant and one must flog one's servants.' It is clear that personal knowledge of victims was an important factor. Pursens certainly believed that he had been spared death because he 'was a well known Hottentot and had a good character amongst the Boers', a claim that Louw denied, saying of his unfortunate victim: 'I do not give him a good character. He has no character.'⁸⁸

Louw was one of a number of Cape settlers brought to trial. Many were charged with treason following the passage of Sir Gordon Sprigg's Treason Bill in July 1900. The Treason Bill heightened the tone of the agrarian war in the countryside. When the fortunes of war turned against Republican forces, and as scores of Cape 'rebels' were brought up on charges of treason, the labouring poor of the Cape countryside took great satisfaction from 'doing down their masters'.⁸⁹ As settler society closed ranks, successful prosecutions came to depend on the testimony of black servants, providing ample opportunity to settle old scores.

One case is particularly revealing. In 1901, Leentje Snyman, a 'housemaid' in the service of Gerrit Visagie of Otterkuil in the Calvinia district, told the Cape Supreme Court that she had seen Boers dancing at her master's house. Present at these festivities was Abraham Louw. Her master was present when a 'native boy' was thrashed, Snyman testified, and he seemed to enjoy it.⁹⁰ Visagie's servants were clearly emboldened by the turn of events, but the wartime testimony of the servants at Otterkuil and their obvious antipathy to the Visagies had deep roots, as can be seen from a search of another set of court records going back a decade. In 1891, Jacobus and Gert Visagie were brought before the Circuit Court at Calvinia, accused of assaulting the shepherd Koos Booy and his wife, Mietjie Schalkwyk.⁹¹ The assault, according to Calvinia's District Surgeon, was so severe that it threatened Booy's life. Jacobus Visagie was further accused of the repeated rape of Mietjie Schalkwyk. He 'got hold of my two feet [and] knocked me to the ground', Schalkwyk testified. 'He lifted my dress [and] struck me over the lower parts of my body with a sjambok. He then got on me [and] said that he would now do as he liked [and] had connection with me.' The district's Resident Magistrate had no doubt that Booy and Schalkwyk were speaking the truth. Although the Visagies were 'well to do farmers', he knew them as 'brutal [and] violent men'. They were known to have been guilty of 'previous assaults which were hushed up' and were 'supposed to have committed more than one murder some years ago, but owing to their cunning [and] other reasons, have escaped prosecution for want of evidence'.⁹² Here, then,

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Cited in Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War*, 168.

⁹⁰ CA, AG 3449, Part II, Case of Gerrit Jacobus Visagie and Izak Hendrik Visagie, Testimony of Leentje Snyman, 29 April 1901.

⁹¹ CA, AG 2931, *Queen v Jacobus Hendrik Louw Visagie and Gert Jacobus Visagie*, Jan. 1891.

⁹² *Ibid.*, Resident Magistrate, Calvinia to Law Department, 2 Feb. 1891 and 4 March 1891.

in the thicket of gruesome local struggles between masters and servants in a stunted agrarian economy, are the roots of black enthusiasm for the imperial cause in the north-west Cape.

RECONSTRUCTION

The heavy dependence of white farmers on black labour meant that masters and servants continued to wage bitter struggles on remote farmsteads and within settler households in the post-war years. White farmers remained deeply resentful of their servants who had testified against them in the trials launched by the British army and did all they could to regain the authority that had collapsed so spectacularly during the war. Servants, for their part, were keen to extend the victories that had been gained. Many of the disputes continued to be fought over issues that had been common before the war – conditions of work, the terms of remuneration, and, especially, the labour of female dependants. In 1906, for example, Samuel Witbooi's refusal to work without proper shoes resulted in a confrontation with his master that left the latter suffering from concussion. 'I told the Master that I could not look after the sheep as I was barefoot and that he must first cover my feet and then he could talk', Witbooi, a 'Hottentot' shepherd, told the court.⁹³

In the immediate post-war years, however, much of the conflict between masters and servants was fuelled by the knowledge on the part of white farmers that their servants had sided with British forces, or at least were sympathetic to British authority. Early in January 1903, Frederick Swart, unhappy with the amount of food he was getting from Hendrik van Zyl, decided to leave the latter's service. The dispute, Swart said,

arose out of my attempt to leave my master because he would not feed me. I have a wife and children. They were not engaged to the accused. I shared my food with my family. Our agreement was that [the] accused had to give me sufficient food for this ... I had to get 6 sheep per annum, two suits of clothes, one old, one second hand and my food out of the pot for all that I had with me. This would be even if I had a hundred people with me.⁹⁴

But when Swart tried to leave and to drive his stock off the farm, Van Zyl and his two sons beat him severely and reminded him of 'how the rebels had treated old boys'. Nevertheless, Swart would not be cowed: 'I stand up for my rights', he said.

And if black men did not always stand up for their rights, then their women did so, on their behalf. Thus, when Johannes van Wyk refused to grant permission to Cornelius September to attend a family funeral at Matjesfontein, September's wife, Elsie Fortuin, did not hesitate to make her displeasure known. When Van Wyk told her that Cornelius was 'his man', she retorted: 'Yes, his hired man but my husband.' Fortuin had no knowledge of the terms of her husband's contract, but she regarded the right to attend family funerals as 'the custom'. 'I am of a hasty temperament when my rights are in question', she acknowledged. In return for this assertion of

⁹³ CA, AG 3213, *Rex v Samuel Witbooi*, 12 Nov. 1906.

⁹⁴ CA, AG 3134, *Rex v Hendrik Albertus van Zyl Sr, Hendrik Albertus van Zyl Jr, Johannes Jacobus van Zyl*, 23 Jan. 1903.

customary rights, she received a severe beating. When her husband tried to intervene, Van Wyk beat him too, telling him that he could 'creep under the Englishmen'.⁹⁵

In the post-war years, whites in the north-west remained deeply fearful of their black servants who inhabited the intimate spaces of their households. On the morning of 22 September 1905, Jan Cloete, a shepherd in the employ of the Calvinia farmer Johannes van Wyk, entered his master's dining room to collect his coffee. But, on this morning, Cloete walked up to Helena van Wyk, his master's 15-year-old daughter, who frequently prepared his coffee, undid his trousers, and said, 'De Missis vat' ('there missis take'). At least this is what Helena van Wyk claimed. Cloete was stopped in his tracks by her father. The evening before this incident, Cloete was in Van Wyk's kitchen, 'and more than usual' under the influence of *dagga* [marijuana], which he often obtained from Van Wyk himself. But, despite Van Wyk's conviction that Cloete 'intended to ravish' his daughter, he kept the servant on. 'I did not report the matter at once', Van Wyk said, 'as it was impossible for me to be without a herd.'⁹⁶ Even under these circumstances, with the lingering threat of sexual violence, white settlers could not part company with their black servants.

It is in this context of fear and distrust that British authorities were forced to try Cape rebels for their support of the Republican cause. By settling on a formula that distinguished between black labourers who had served the British army as soldiers and those who were mere 'farm hands', colonial authorities were able to free many Cape rebels guilty of wartime atrocities. Thus Jacob de Klerk could be acquitted for killing Paul Pieters, a 'Hottentot' spy from Calvinia, because the latter had been 'on regular military service and [appeared] to have met his death as a soldier'.⁹⁷ Despite the weight of overwhelming evidence against the persons who killed Koos Volmoer, the 'Bastard Hottentot' who had been shot for spying for the British, the Colony's Attorney-General ruled against prosecuting for murder. The legal issue, as far as the Attorney-General was concerned, was whether Volmoer's shooting was justifiable in the context of general orders to shoot black scouts and the fact that Van Heerden, who actually pulled the trigger, was following orders from his superior officer. '[W]hatever the strict view text writers may take on the subject, I do not think that a prosecution for murder ought to follow on the facts disclosed by the preparatory [examinations] in the peculiar circumstances of this country', wrote the Attorney-General.⁹⁸

What were these 'peculiar circumstances'? The Attorney-General was writing in September 1902, some months after the peace had been signed and by which time the rebuilding of colonial society had become a priority to British authorities. Letting Volmoer's executioners go free was but a small

⁹⁵ CA, AG 3134, *Rex v Johannes Abraham Benjamin van Wyk, Sr, Johannes Abraham Benjamin van Wyk Jr, Willem Jacobus van Wyk*, 14 Aug. 1903. This English rendition does not do justice to the violence of the language. Probably Van Wyk said, '*Jy kan in die Engelse se gat kruip.*'

⁹⁶ CA, AG 3189, *Rex v Jan Cloete, alias Jan Witbooi*, 19 Oct. 1905.

⁹⁷ CA, 1/CVA 1/1/1/1, *King v Jan Jacob de Klerk*, 22 April 1903.

⁹⁸ CA, AG 3525, Part II, case of Hendrik Johannes van Rensburg, 27 Sept. 1902.

price to pay for colonial stability. And, finally, Abraham Esau's killers, too, could escape justice. Despite much legal wrangling, nobody was found guilty of murder in this case. While the newly imposed *landdrost* of Calvinia, Van der Merwe, was the ringleader in Esau's torture, a number of Cape settlers, including Abraham Louw and one Jacobus Moolman, an 'influential man', were party to the killing. A number of Moolman's servants, some of whom had been with him for many years, testified quite clearly to the part that he and Van der Merwe had in Esau's murder. Nevertheless, an unconvinced Attorney-General wrote: 'The evidence of the witnesses for the Crown (who are coloured and were and still are in the service of the accused) is very conflicting so much so that I doubt whether any charge [of murder] can be brought.'⁹⁹

However, colonial authorities also had to be careful not to completely alienate the black soldiers who had served the British army so loyally, especially since this loyalty had 'considerably cooled since the peace, owing to compensation matters, labour questions, agitations, rumours and their expected hopes ... re certain rights ... under British rule not being immediately realised.'¹⁰⁰ It is in this context that the determination of British authorities to prosecute and punish Abraham Louw has to be understood. His case reached the attention of the highest levels of British authority. The Cape Supreme Court sentenced Louw to five months' imprisonment with hard labour.¹⁰¹ Louw's claim that he had acted under the orders of Free State Generals and that he was thus entitled to the 'privileges of a belligerent enemy' was dismissed. He failed to convince the court that Pursens had been a British spy and anything more than a 'farm hand'. The flogging of 'this wretched and inoffensive native', the court concluded, 'was particularly severe and cruel'.¹⁰² No less a figure than Jan Christiaan Smuts, white South Africa's premier statesman at the beginning of the twentieth century, wrote to the Governor of the Cape Colony on Louw's behalf. Louw, Smuts claimed, had been a 'mild and humane officer' and his offence was 'comparatively venial'.¹⁰³ Jacob Pursens would no doubt have disagreed. The Attorney-General found Louw's argument 'utterly without foundation'. 'This scoundrel ... got off easily', Governor Hely-Hutchinson wrote in agreement, and 'got a good deal less than his deserts'.¹⁰⁴ In another case, the Attorney-General dismissed a charge of rape brought by a white woman, Martha Anthonissen, against Piet Carolus, a 'Hottentot labourer'. Despite graphic testimony from Anthonissen that might otherwise have proved fatal to Carolus, the Attorney-General concluded that the case was 'very weak', mainly on the grounds that there existed a 'close connection' between Anthonissen and Abraham Louw.¹⁰⁵ The concerns of the post-war state were

⁹⁹ CA, AG 3449, Part I, Case of Jacobus Nicolaas Moolman, 3 Jan. 1902.

¹⁰⁰ NA, CO 48/579, Military Intelligence Report by 'A', 18 Nov. 1904.

¹⁰¹ Case of Abraham Gert Willem Louw.

¹⁰² NA, CO 48/575, Despatch no. 5379, 15 Feb. 1904, View of Lynedoch Graham.

¹⁰³ NA, CO 48/575, Smuts to W. Hely-Hutchinson, 4 Jan. 1904.

¹⁰⁴ NA, CO 48/575, Despatch no. 5379, 15 Feb. 1904, View of Hely-Hutchinson.

¹⁰⁵ CA, 1/CVA 1/1/2/4, *Rex v Piet Carolus*, 28 Dec. 1903, no. 310; CA, AG 3161, *Rex v Piet Carolus*, 28 Dec. 1903, no. 310; CA, AG 3161, Testimony of Martha Antonissen, 5 Oct. 1903.

clear: ensuring colonial stability, re-establishing collapsed settler authority, and pacifying disgruntled black subjects.

CONCLUSION

The South African War in the northern Cape was the final phase in the closing of a violent colonial frontier. The historical background to this arena of the war was an extended period of colonial conquest that had got underway in the early decades of the eighteenth century. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the people who resisted colonial intrusion most effectively – and as a consequence bore the brunt of settler determination – were those who had their roots in the colonial economy. When Boer commandos came up against the British army's black soldiers, they saw not just enemy combatants but a recently conquered indigenous population that they had struggled to turn into farm servants. Here, then, a larger imperialist conflict was a war between masters and servants.

At one level, the settlers succeeded: in the years leading up to the South African War they were able to impose labour regimes that were brutal in the extreme. There is also evidence that, in some instances, servants stayed with individual masters for long periods of time. In another sense, however, white settlers failed. In a stunted agrarian economy, considerable, sadistic violence accompanied the fraught task of transforming colonial war captives into dutiful servants. When they were given the opportunity to bear arms against an intruding settler population, it was this violence – most often experienced in highly personalised ways – that black servants remembered. Their memory served as a reminder of the failure to turn military victory into moral authority.