

The South African War of 1899-1902: A Historiography

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In 1899, the British Empire and the two Afrikaans-speaking Republics of South Africa waged a devastating war against each other that would last for the better part of three years. The grievances between British and Boer in Southern Africa were longstanding, and the scorched earth and guerilla tactics used by the combatants were brutal. However, in the aftermath of a long and bitter struggle, British South Africans in the Cape and Natal regions would be united with the citizens of the former Orange Free State and South African Republic (also known as the Transvaal) who had fought them during the war. The former enemies were brought together in the Union of South Africa in 1910, a semi-autonomous dominion of the British Empire that formed the political and territorial foundation of the modern-day Republic of South Africa. The nation's three capital cities represent the nations that fought in the South African War: Cape Town, the center of British power in the region by 1899, and Bloemfontein and Pretoria, the capitals of the two Boer Republics to the northeast. Reflecting the divisions in the nation, the conflict has been called variously the Boer War (or Second Boer War, to distinguish it from an earlier conflict of the 1880s), the Anglo-Boer War, the Second War of Freedom to Afrikaners, and more recently the South African War.¹

The war of 1899-1902 proved to be one of the most pivotal events of modern South African history, and fertile ground for academic writing, with historians often seeking lessons from the conflict for modern South Africa and its people. Using four historical writings, published from 1975 to 2009, this paper analyzes a few of the different theoretical approaches to writing the history of the South African War. The political and social atmosphere in South Africa has changed radically in the past four decades; the range of publishing dates for the works used in this paper encompasses the independence of neighboring Angola and Mozambique after lengthy anti-colonial wars, the escalating violence in resistance to the White-dominated government in South Africa, and the end of apartheid and election of Nelson Mandela as President in 1994. Through such upheaval and uncertainty, academic history in South Africa has been full of controversy. The historiography of the South African War has been a source of contention among historians, who have clashed with one another over the direction and purpose of South African history.

¹ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 141.

The span of works covered in this paper includes *From van Riebeeck to Vorster: 1652-1974*, by one of the most famous historians of South Africa. F.A. Vvan Jaarsveld, a member of South Africa's Afrikaans-speaking community, presents the war as an ultimately unsuccessful struggle for Afrikaner "nationalism" and "republicanism," the distinctive identity forged by the rural Boers who had sought throughout much of the previous century to establish independence from the growing power of the British in Southern Africa. While he incorporates narratives of racial conflict in South Africa during the war, his main focus is on the Afrikaners and their political and ideological struggle with the British Empire that came to a head in 1899. Although certainly eminent in the South African historical field by the time of his book's publication in 1975, his account of the South African War has been criticized for glorifying the Afrikaners at the expense of both the British and native Africans. Leonard Thompson's *A History of South Africa*, which contains a section detailing the war, its origins, and its aftermath, is an example of the recent liberal tradition in South African historical writing. Emerging as a new, distinct style that brings liberal Africanist history into a modern and post-colonial Africa by emphasizing the tribulations of South Africa's Black community during what has traditionally been portrayed as a "White man's war."

Thompson and other liberal historians have sometimes clashed with those who insist on a more materialist approach to analyzing events of the past, usually treating class and economic conflict, rather than race, as the prime moving force of history. These include historians such as Shula Marks, whose chapter from the *Cambridge History of South Africa* on the war emphasizes the conflict as time of upheaval for class, race, and gender relations in South African societies, driven by long-standing tensions over land and political control that were unleashed in the chaos of war. Another materialist history of the war comes from Diana Cammack's *The Rand at War, 1899-1902: the Witwatersrand and the Anglo-Boer War*, which presents a macro-historical study of the war by analyzing the relationship between geography and natural resources, economics, social and political instability, the movement of populations, and the war experience, focusing on the specific region of the *Witwatersrand*, or "Rand," the gold-mining region that includes the city of Johannesburg and surrounding areas.

The history of the war and of South Africa in general has proved fertile ground for debates, involving issues of race and class, freedom and oppression, and the historians treated in this essay are by no means immune from these conflicts. The war represents a time of disruption in South African society, and although earlier histories tended to treat the war as a struggle only between the Boers and the British, most of the

recent history written on the war goes well beyond this limited scope to encompass the experience of a much more diverse society. This paper, while by no means a comprehensive depiction of South African historiography on the war, will attempt to portray the major trends and approaches observable in the history of the 1899 war written in recent decades, when the long twilight of colonialism produced profound changes in the focus and methodology of historians of South Africa and of African historians in general. The war of 1899-1902 was, to quote Shula Marks, "South Africa's 'Great War', as important to the shaping of modern South Africa as was the American Civil War in the history of the United States."² Although the historians treated in this essay differ in key aspects over the interpretation of the war, they all place it as a pivotal event in the modern history of South Africa.

Naming a War and Writing a History

For many years, most writers that dealt with the South African War referred to it as either the "Boer War" or the "Anglo-Boer War."³ The story was one of a nation forged in bloodshed between two white, European peoples who had settled South Africa and brought civilization to a benighted land. Early historians tended to embody white supremacy, and although some favored the British as more progressive than the agrarian Boers and others lauded the Afrikaners for their independence, most saw the European presence in South Africa as a positive and civilizing mission that benefited all races and peoples living in the region. Native African history, except where it intersected with the Europeans, went largely ignored.⁴ In this context, the most important outcome of the war for the early writers of South African history was the eventual reconciliation and union between the British and Boers that created the Union of South Africa, a British dominion that provided the foundation for the modern Republic of South Africa.

The issue of naming the war has produced its own debate, much like the American Civil War (War of the Rebellion versus the War of Northern Aggression), and of the four historical works discussed in depth in this paper, three weigh in on the controversy. Van Jaarsveld

² Shula Marks, *War and Union, 1899-1910, The Cambridge History of South Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 157.

³ As in the field of American history, most of the writers of South African history during the time of the war itself were not professional historians, and South African universities would not develop a corps of academics versed in the historical discipline until after World War I (Ken Smith, *The Changing Past: Trends in South African Historical Writing* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press 1988), 57-58).

⁴ Ken Smith, *The Changing Past*, 25-26.

provided perhaps the most extensive list of names given to the conflict, referring to the early English usage of the “Boer War” and the Boer use of the “English War” (both placing the blame for the conflict squarely on the opposing side), the more forceful “War of Independence” or “White Civil War,” and the more neutral “Anglo-Boer War” (which van Jaarsveld and Diana Cammack both use) and “South African War.”⁵

Already in use by 1975 and van Jaarsveld’s publication of *From van Riebeeck to Vorster*, the “South African War” has received increasing acceptance among historians seeking to emphasize the multi-faceted conflict and counter the notion that the conflict only touched White and not Black South Africans. Shula Marks describes the shift as a sign that “it is no longer possible to conceive of it traditionally as a ‘white man’s’ war...it was neither white nor the gentleman’s war of Victorian mythology.”⁶ Leonard Thompson also refutes the notion that Blacks were uninvolved or mere spectators in the war, favoring the “South African War” designation but acknowledging the use of “Boer War” and “Second War of Freedom” by English and Afrikaner partisans, respectively.⁷ The debate over nomenclature continues, evidenced by the divide between the authors covered in this paper. The contested history of South Africa, however, goes well beyond the many names of the war. It is a piecing together of the past from the many perspectives of a diverse and often divided country. To better understand the philosophical and academic origins of the contemporary historiography of the war, it is necessary to reach much farther back in time, to when the field of South African history was in its infancy.

G.M. Theal, a Canadian-born amateur historian whose writings form the basis of what has been termed the “Settler” school of South African history, focused on the history of the European colonizers of Southern Africa and their struggles against the native Africans. Ironically, he was also outspoken in his criticism of many European imperial practices, such as the British lust for gold and diamonds that almost precluded annexation of the Boer Republics, and the presence of English missionaries who often spoke out against expansion of White settlement and the mistreatment and exploitation of the Black population.⁸ Many of his assumptions about the racial inferiority of Blacks would be adopted by later historians, and although he criticized British policies he still conceived of South African conflicts in terms of

⁵ F.A. van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck to Vorster: 1652-1974*, Johannesburg: Perskor Publishers (1975), 202.

⁶ Shula Marks, *War and Union*, 160.

⁷ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 141.

⁸ Christopher Saunders. *The Making of the South African Past: Major Historians on Race and Class*. Cape Town: David Philip (1988), 24-25.

Social Darwinism, a system that placed all “civilized” Europeans as naturally triumphant over “barbarian” Africans.⁹

Theal was not a professional historian in the modern sense, publishing the first volume of his well-known *History of South Africa* in 1888. He would come under great scrutiny and criticism among later historians for his lack of historical perspective, his unabashed racism (something that was certainly not limited to Theal), his seeming ignorance of the impact of economics and geography on historical development, and his failure to cite many of his sources.¹⁰ He was not an Afrikaner nationalist historian, and wrote in English rather than Afrikaans, but he conceived of the Boers as a distinct people forged by a frontier that demanded self-reliance, personal industry, and a willingness to fight for survival and their way of life. Indeed, his interpretations were similar in many respects to ideas about the American character espoused by Theal’s American contemporary Frederick Jackson Turner, whose speech on his country’s connection between history, expansion, and progress still resonates with American audiences.¹¹ His sympathy for the Afrikaners, deepened by the South African War, endeared him among many Afrikaner nationalists, and his ideas would greatly influence later historians such as F.A. van Jaarsveld.

Theal’s interpretation formed part of a larger discourse on South African history that assumed White supremacy. Many of Theal’s early critics among historians (most writing in English), especially during the South African war, took exception with his anti-imperial and anti-British stance, but it took until the 1920s for liberal historians to bring up the omission of Blacks.¹² After World War I especially, industrial and urban growth put many impoverished Blacks and Whites, formerly from rural communities, in close contact and competition in South Africa’s growing cities. Founded on classical liberalism of the Enlightenment, these historians became increasingly concerned with the welfare of Blacks, whose complete subordination in South African society had only been consolidated with the South African War that united the country.¹³

One of the most famous of the early liberal school was W.M. Macmillan. Born the son of a minister in Scotland but living in South Africa since childhood, the teenaged Macmillan was personally impacted by the South African War. He recalled feeling his way of life threatened

⁹ Christopher Saunders, *The Making of South African Past*, 27–28.

¹⁰ Ken Smith, *The Changing Past*, 38.

¹¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893).

¹² Ken Smith, *The Changing Past*, 39.

¹³ Ken Smith, *The Changing Past*, 103.

by the growth of Afrikaner nationalism, exemplified in the dismissal of his father from his teaching post (possibly because he was British), which would leave his family struggling financially and perhaps fueled his social conscience. He served the British cause, volunteering as a bugler and then a member of the Stellenbosch Town Guard during the war, while his brother Bertie enrolled in a volunteer unit and was killed fighting for the British in 1900.¹⁴

Part of a small Scottish community in the largely Afrikaner town of Stellenbosch, Macmillan would become increasingly hostile to the history he was exposed to, which largely demonized the British and the Africans. The first Rhodes Scholar (he believed himself to be perhaps the only one to have actually met the eponymous Cecil Rhodes), he traveled back to Britain to study at Oxford and there developed a view that included desire for “reformist and evolutionary change” within societies struggling with inequality and oppression, while at the same time disavowing revolutionary upheaval and violence.¹⁵

Macmillan’s research into writings of early European missionaries, the same despised by Theal for “meddling” in race relations on the frontier, led him to the firm conviction that actions by the White government systematically oppressed Blacks throughout the entire history of European settlement, and began to ask how and why this racist system had developed rather than assuming the natural distinctions of racial hierarchy that had been central to Theal’s worldview.¹⁶ He was an early advocate of social history, paying close attention to the lower classes, to systems of inequality, and to the close relationship between economics and human experience.¹⁷ For Macmillan, as for later liberals, however, material causes rarely formed the dominant basis for racial oppression or acceptance in society; race formed an ideology of its own, forged in a struggle between Black and White on the frontier, a physical mark of human bodies in a divided society that had provided the justification for imposing inequality, one that continued to result in poverty and unrest in Black communities throughout the country.

The early liberal historians had limited influence on South African historiography, and indeed would be challenged for still failing to put African societies on equal terms with Europeans in history, and at times for giving British too much benefit of doubt in the Imperial claims of humanitarian intervention in 1899, made ostensibly on behalf of Blacks mistreated and enslaved by Boers in the two Republics. Despite these

¹⁴ Christopher Saunders, *The Making of South African Past*, 48.

¹⁵ Ken Smith, *The Changing Past*, 104-105.

¹⁶ Christopher Saunders, *The Making of South African Past*, 163.

¹⁷ Christopher Saunders, *The Making of South African Past*, 165.

shortcomings, their challenge to the assumption of White supremacy would provide the foundation for a modern liberal and Africanist historical tradition to emerge with historians such as Leonard Thompson during the 1960s, when post-colonial attention to indigenous influence in African history sprang forth across the entire continent.¹⁸

The liberal school, however, did not end the contest to set the tone of discourse in South African history. After the 1970's, criticism came at the liberal school from historians who felt that liberal history had partially ignored material causation in history and had generalized Africans, British, and Boers as monolithic groups with unified interests. The delineation between liberal and what has often been called "radical" schools of history is not always clear (a single historian may well write one work termed "liberal" and another "radical"), and many radicals were influenced by the liberal Africanists and vice versa after 1970, in addition to being influenced by earlier materialist interpretations of history.¹⁹

However, there were distinctive criticisms leveled against Thompson and the other liberal Africanists by radical historians (particularly in response to the *Oxford History of South Africa*, the authoritative liberal history of the late 1960s co-edited by Thompson and released in 1969 and 1971).²⁰ Shula Marks moved beyond using race as the main force in South African history, incorporating class and gender struggles for power in the story of the South African War, and stressed the diversity of responses within African, Afrikaner, and *Uitlander* ("foreigner," often British) communities, as well as the growing South Asian immigrant community of South Africa. This theme would be carried by Diana Cammack as well, in her focus on the chaotic political and social situation in the gold-mining region of the *Witwatersrand* during the war. The effects of race, economics, and ideology on the South African War would prove to be just as contentious for historians of recent decades as for Theal, Macmillan, and the earlier writers of South African history, a sign that some rifts left by the war have never fully healed.

Afrikaner at the Dawn of a New Age: F.A.van Jaarsveld

¹⁸Christopher Saunders, *The Making of South African Past*, 143.

¹⁹Ken Smith points out that the clear critique of the liberal school that began in the 1970's became more muddled by the 1980's, when many historians, responding to criticism, endeavored to write more eclectically and not remain beholden to theoretical dogma, Marxist or otherwise. (Ken Smith, *The Changing Past*, 163.)

²⁰Ken Smith, *The Changing Past*, 139.

F.A. van Jaarsveld remains one of the most prolific writers of South African history, and one who provoked both profound admiration and intense criticism, even hatred, for his outspoken views. He focused much of his analysis on Afrikaner efforts to forge themselves into a distinct nation and people, and his desire to use history in the service of Afrikaner nationalism clashed sharply with calls for increased objectivity in the historical profession after World War II, when “nationalist” history increasingly fell out of favor due to its associations with the Nazis and other totalitarian states that had made heavy use of history for the purposes of propaganda.²¹ Van Jaarsveld, however, was often times unapologetic in his Afrikaner bias, and his support for elements of the old “Settler” tradition of G.M. Theal (whose histories had long been under attack by the time of van Jaarsveld’s writings) put him at odds with many of his contemporaries.²² Although his writings were controversial, they struck resounding cords among many Afrikaners, who saw van Jaarsveld as one of their own and a champion of Afrikaner nationalism.

Having received his M.A. at the University of Pretoria in 1946, van Jaarsveld mastered the historical discipline in the same city that lay at the heart of old Boer Republic of Transvaal and is modern South Africa’s administrative capital. He wrote in Afrikaans, the common language of Afrikaners, derived from the Dutch spoken by settlers and traders who traveled to the Cape of Good Hope in the seventeenth century. By the time that he published *From van Riebeeck to Vorster* in 1975, he had gained attention for his histories of Afrikaner nationalism, especially in the independent states of the Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal) that fought the British in 1899. Ken Smith, in his study of South African historiography, described van Jaarsveld as a historian who “identified with the struggles and fears of the Afrikaners as they contemplated the future.”²³ With increasing agitation against White rule, which would culminate in the formal end of the apartheid regime in 1994 (the year before van Jaarsveld’s death),

²¹Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 30-31.

²²In his notes on the movement of peoples in South Africa, van Jaarsveld cites Theal’s *History of South Africa* and its claim that the Black Bantu-speaking peoples and Whites had both arrived as migrants in South Africa around the same time, implying that both groups have equal claim to the land. He admits that more recent histories have challenged this idea by placing Bantu migration at dates prior to European settlement, but van Jaarsveld insists that “none have been proved conclusively.” See F.A. van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck to Vorster: 1652-1974* (Johannesburg: Perskor Publishers, 1975), 54.

²³Ken Smith, *The Changing Past*, 84.

many Afrikaners felt deeply uncertain about the future of South Africa, and what place they would have in it.

Living in the midst of this cloud of doubt and uncertainty, van Jaarsveld wrote *From van Riebeeck to Vorster: 1652-1974*, meaning to provide a summation of South African history. The starting date chosen by van Jaarsveld is telling, and indicates the preeminence that he gives to the story of the Afrikaners and their Dutch-speaking forebears; Jan van Riebeeck was the original head of the Dutch East India Company expedition that claimed the Cape of Good Hope and founded Cape Town in 1652. Indeed, his views on pre-European history in South Africa could be described as dismissive; in his first chapter he references the indigenous history included in the *Oxford History of South Africa* (edited by noted Africanist historian Leonard Thompson and anthropologist Monica Wilson) as archaeology and anthropology rather than the “proper” history obtained from written records of the European settlers.²⁴

Although he does not gloss over the violent history between the Afrikaner settlers and the native Africans, he clearly treats the Boer struggle to colonize and control the South African interior, culminating in the South African War, as key to the nation’s history. He claimed the status of the Boers as that of an independent-minded and rugged people defined by a frontier, accustomed to fighting for survival and to preserve their culture. Van Jaarsveld even gave the Afrikaners a more independent streak than the American frontier settlers described by Frederick Jackson Turner, who “were dependent on their Government, while the Voortrekkers had surrendered their loyalty and created a new Government, and had to themselves try out constitutional institutions which made high demands on them.”²⁵

In his treatment of the South African War, the theme of Boer nationalism is strong. He describes how, by the time of the war, the two Boer Republics had firmly settled into the policy of defending their independence from the British, “to protect it at all costs” after having migrated to the interior and established the Afrikaner Republics in order to escape growing British dominance of the Cape of Good Hope. In light of the independent spirit shared among the Boers, van Jaarsveld points to a common culture that unified the Trek Farmers in the two Republics during times of crisis, when that independence was threatened. Coupled with the expanding land claims of the Boers (the desire for access to the sea as well as *lebensraum* for Boer farmers eager to add grazing lands for their cattle herds), and with British designs on the vast mineral wealth of the interior and the need to protect their

²⁴Van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck*, 1.

²⁵Van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck*, 119.

strategic interests in Africa, van Jaarsveld's story of the growing conflict between British and Boer is portrayed as "self-evident."²⁶ With his partiality to the Afrikaners, van Jaarsveld emphasizes the sympathy that the Boers gained, both from fellow Afrikaners remaining in the British colonies and throughout the wider world as a part of their anti-imperial struggle, but he also describes the war as containing "an element of tragedy in the fact that two White cultural groups of Western European origin should fight one another on African soil."²⁷

For van Jaarsveld, the British provoked war with the Boers by maneuvering to cut off their expansion and exploiting British sympathies within the large population of foreign *Uitlanders* within the Republics, many of them workers in the rich gold-mining districts around Johannesburg. After the Jameson Raid of 1896, an attempted coup against the Transvaal backed by members of the British government, van Jaarsveld points out that the two Boer Republics were drawn closer together into a formal defensive alliance.²⁸ The spirit of Afrikaner nationalism would unite them in war against the British in 1899, although the large number of *Uitlanders* in the rich mining districts of the Transvaal would continue to be a source of conflict and anxiety for the Afrikaner leaders.

Van Jaarsveld claims that the British exaggerated both the numbers of *Uitlanders* and their pro-British sympathies, in the hope that by pressuring the Transvaal to extend formal voting rights to foreigners they could use the ballot to vote the Republic into a union with the British colonies in South Africa. If the government in Pretoria refused to submit to the suffrage claims of the *Uitlander* reformers in Johannesburg, then the stage would be set for British intervention, war, and the crushing of the Boer power in Pretoria by military means. For van Jaarsveld, the British motives for war were twofold: an attempt to remove the threat of Afrikaner nationalism cradled in the Transvaal and Orange Free State (there were still large numbers of Afrikaners living in the British South African colonies, especially in Cape Colony) and in the process to gain control of the gold mines of the interior.²⁹ Against this, he judges the Boer actions as "preventative," with early offensives against the British driven by a desire to secure access to the sea and prevent future immigration of British and other foreigners that would make the Afrikaners a minority among South Africa's White population.³⁰

²⁶Van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck*, 166.

²⁷Van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck*, 188.

²⁸Van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck*, 197-198.

²⁹Van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck*, 198-200.

³⁰Van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck*, 202.

Although the Boers achieved early military successes in the war, van Jaarsveld points to their failure to advance on the British harbors and secure free access to the sea as the source of their ultimate defeat. This left them surrounded by the British, who would use their control of the coast to muster a vast army that would capture all of the major cities of the Orange Free State and Transvaal by the summer of 1900. At this point, those Boer commando units that refused surrender resorted to guerilla tactics, while the British began a scorched earth policy of destroying farms and placing Boer civilians in concentration camps. Although van Jaarsveld acknowledges that Bantu Africans were placed in similar camps, he remains largely silent on hardships suffered by Blacks during the war, while emphasizing the destruction of Boer property, the suffering of women and children in the camps, and the imposition of martial law on Afrikaners in the British colonies.³¹

Van Jaarsveld describes a “war of attrition” against the Boers (and the arming of Bantus by the British) that would destroy their ability to continue fighting and lead the last of the “bitter-enders” to surrender in May of 1902, bringing the South African War to an end. Although the Orange Free State and the Transvaal were now British colonies, van Jaarsveld’s conclusion of the war details a *triumph* of Afrikaner nationalism. British prestige suffered abroad during the war, and the Afrikaner struggle was seen as symbolic of freedom and anti-imperialism, although the frontier that had forged the unique identity of the rural Boers was closing, and many Afrikaners were forced to move to urban areas. In spite of British victory, the Afrikaners formed a majority in the colonies of South Africa after the war, and van Jaarsveld points to a political and cultural awakening of the Afrikaners that would cement Afrikaner nationalism by giving the nominally defeated people histories, poems, and literature in their own Afrikaans, and political power in the new nation formed from the defeat of the Boer Republics.³²

Liberal Africanism and the Myth of the “White Man’s War”: Leonard Thompson

Leonard Thompson approached the subject of the South African War in a much different way than van Jaarsveld and other Afrikaner nationalist historians. He described the Afrikaner historiography as a type of nationalist mythology, one filled with “bitter grievances and solemn heroics.” As newly independent nations throughout Africa sought to establish their own Africanist traditions of history, Thompson worried that South Africa would be left behind. He began to work with other members of other academic disciplines, notably anthropologists

³¹Van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck*, 204–205.

³²Van Jaarsveld, *From van Riebeeck*, 209–212.

and archaeologists, to present a picture of the South African past that gave unprecedented significance to the role of native Africans in shaping history.³³

Successor to Macmillan and the earlier liberal historians of the 1920s and 1930s, Thompson adhered to the model of Progressive historians in seeking to use history to reform contemporary society, a view that was common with historians in Britain and America that held classically-liberal (or Whig) views of history. However, the history of South Africa before and after the 1899 war seemed to portray not progress, but regression, as the racial hierarchy that had defined South Africa for years became increasingly codified into law following the South African War and unification; the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 coincided with the massacre of Blacks by the police in the township of Sharpesville in 1960, even as nation after nation in Africa was declaring independence.³⁴

In compiling the *Oxford History of South Africa* in 1969, Thompson drew on archaeological and anthropological evidence to create a history of South Africa that included substantial attention to pre-European history. Like Macmillan, he worked to counter the old racist view that Africans had lived in constant struggle and conflict before the arrival of Europeans, and also compared the British favorably to the Boers in terms of their treatment of Blacks. The use of archaeological and anthropological evidence, however, led to sharp criticism that his history did not form an integrated narrative, and accounted for neither the internal dynamism of societies nor the material and economic causes in historical change.³⁵ Interestingly enough, many of the leaders of the attack on the *Oxford History* were Thompson's old students from his teaching days at the University of Cape Town: his former pupils Martin Legassick, Anthony Atmore, and Shula Marks all formed part of the "radical response" of the 1970s.³⁶

Leonard Thompson's *A History of South Africa* represented some of Thompson's later work, being first published in 2000, and in some ways it reflected a response towards earlier criticism of his writings. As

³³Christopher Saunders, *The Making of South African Past*, 145-146.

³⁴ Christopher Saunders, *The Making of South African Past*, 95. See also Ken Smith, *The Changing Past*, 160.

³⁵ Ken Smith, *The Changing Past*, 140. Ironically, this accusation differentiates Thompson's early work from Macmillan's considerably, as the latter worked hard to incorporate economic causes into his historical analysis. Smith posits that the change in South African liberalism came with the election victory of the pro-Afrikaner National Party in 1948, when liberals increasingly focused on the political dynamics of South Africa to explain the "defeat" of liberalism, at the expense of more economic and material analysis (Ken Smith, 137).

³⁶ Christopher Saunders, *The Making of South African Past*, 152-153.

before, Thompson held race as central to the understanding of South Africa, and contained within his story of the South African War, its buildup, and aftermath are plenty of examples of racial conflict and exploitation as key factors in driving historical development. However, *History of South Africa* also connects many of these conflicts to economics, and to the material causes and consequences of the struggle. The section on the South African War bears the title “Diamonds, Gold, and British Imperialism,” and seeks to establish that the mining industry and British Imperialism were intimately connected to each other, and to the war of 1899.

Even so, Thompson continued to insist that race held the greatest determining factor in determining social and political standing in the White-controlled lands (British as well as Boer), both before and after the South African War. Tracing the expansion of first the diamond and then gold mining industries in the interior, Thompson pointed out that the mining industry segregated the labor force, and when disputes arose between Whites and Blacks in mining districts, both the government and the mine-owning capitalists (increasingly banding together to protect their interests and lobbying power in Pretoria, at the expense of any small-scale mining going on) sided with White interests and granted them more concessions than Black workers.³⁷ In their dealings with non-White kingdoms in the region, Thompson asserted that Whites practiced a dubious and underhanded diplomacy, generally willing to betray African allies, foster divisions among Africans, and to forgo their own internal differences (such as Boer versus Briton) in order to promote White interests over Black.³⁸

However, the South African War proved that Whites were indeed willing to fight each other as well as the native Africans. For this, Thompson placed much of the blame on Afrikaner nationalism. He stresses the formation of two “distinct paradigms” among the Afrikaners of the Cape (those still under British control in 1899), which grew out of the victory of the Transvaal over the British in the early 1880s that secured an independent Boer Republic, at least for the time being. Those Cape Afrikaners who were more pragmatic felt that British rule had plenty of benefits, even for the Afrikaans-speakers, and that British hegemony in the region was practically a foregone conclusion. The other more idealistic strain, one that Thompson connected to the rural Boers, declared the Afrikaners to have a distinct and exclusive identity, and a divine mission to occupy the land of South Africa and “civilize” its inhabitants.³⁹

³⁷ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 120-121.

³⁸ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, , 122-123.

³⁹ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 135.

Thompson claimed that the “pragmatic” Afrikaner community held more sway during the time of the war, and some of its members actively worked with the British in their plans for Imperial expansion. Key among these was the journalist Jan Hofmeyr, who led the Afrikaner Bond political organization into an alliance with Cecil Rhodes, the British imperialist and mining magnate who held much of the economic and political clout in South Africa by the end of the nineteenth century. They agreed to mutually promote British and Boer attempts at expansion in the region, with the aim at eventually uniting Afrikaner and British territories into a single South African state that could effectively control Blacks.⁴⁰ The increasing mistrust between the leadership of the Republics (concerned primarily with preserving Boer cultural and political independence) and the industrialists in control of the mining industry (concerned mostly with keeping loose restrictions on the mines and a steady supply of cheap, often non-Afrikaner labor), coupled with British designs on the diamond and gold fields would heighten Boer/British tensions in the region and put dreams of unification on hold until the bloody struggle of 1899 played out.

As for the war’s ultimate cause, Thompson seemed to agree with van Jaarsveld that the currents of British imperialism and Afrikaner nationalism had been on a collision course for years. During the ‘Scramble for Africa’ by European powers in the late 1800’s, when Germany began to grab territory in the region, Thompson argued that the British feared losing their traditional position of power and any deal between the Germans and Boers that would bring the riches of the South African interior into the camp of a potential enemy. Although public opinion worldwide was largely sympathetic to the Boers, the lack of a seaport meant that no foreign government sent direct aid during the war. British political culture in this age of new imperialism, awash with chauvinism and arrogance, “enabled members of the ruling class to maneuver Great Britain into a war in the belief that brute force would solve the problem.”⁴¹

Thompson divided the South African war into three phases: first the initial Boer offensives to the South and West, aided by the strength of Boer conviction in the Republican cause and the skill of rural farmers at military skills such as riding and shooting, then the British counter-offensive following the Boer failure to capture any main ports or cities, which would see the conquest of the Republican cities by the end of 1900, and finally the disorganized guerilla war that continued until 1902, when British measures of attrition would convince those Afrikaners without land and a vested interest in the Republics to side

⁴⁰ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 136.

⁴¹ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 141.

with the British, and the remaining commandos to lay down their arms. The Peace of Vereeniging, the British hoped, would enable them to dictate the terms of the peace and to “de-nationalize” the Afrikaners. However, as with van Jaarsveld’s account, Thompson concluded that British policy during and after the war failed to Anglicize the Boers or end their desires for cultural and political control, instead giving them a strong position within the Union government formed in 1910.⁴²

For the native Africans, who had traditionally been left out of histories of the South African War altogether, Thompson reserved a place of importance, if not one of preeminence. After detailing the scorched earth tactics and use of concentration camps for Afrikaners, he brought up the denials given by both sides that they used Blacks for any military purpose, although “both sides made extensive use of black labor, and Africans as well as Afrikaners suffered from the scorched earth policy.”⁴³ Thompson also emphasized the clause in the Peace of Vereeniging that promised to restrict the voting franchise in the Transvaal (at this point a British colony) to Whites. As the British turned increasingly to the Afrikaners for support in reconstructing South Africa, Thompson pointed to what he viewed as an age-old theme of White consolidation and unity that appealed to South Africans wary of Blacks as competition for labor and a source of civil unrest and potential revolution.⁴⁴

Social History on the Rand: Diana Cammack

Of the four main works surveyed in this paper, Diana Cammack presented the most in-depth analysis of the South African War. *The Rand at War, 1899-1902: the Witwatersrand and the Anglo-Boer War*, published in 1990, represents a strongly materialist interpretation of the South African War. It contains elements of Macro-history, typified by the influential Annales School, centered in France during the 1950s and 60s, which Fernand Braudel describes as “long-term equilibriums and disequilibriums.” Focusing extensively on economic causality, Braudel describes pre-market economies where peasants live in “an almost autonomous way,” but where they are connected, without any agency or even conscious thought of their own, into the emerging forces of an “expanding capitalism...two universes, two ways of life foreign to each other, yet whose respective wholes explain one another.”⁴⁵

⁴² Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 142-144.

⁴³ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 143.

⁴⁴ Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 148.

⁴⁵ Fernand Braudel, *Afterthoughts on Material Civilization and Capitalism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press (1977), 5-6.

This method also describes the nature of Cammack's work, an in-depth look into the saga of the Witwatersrand during the South African War, the ridge extending south and west from Pretoria through what was once the western edge of the Transvaal Republic, and an area that holds some of South Africa's most profitable gold reserves. The mining industry, ever-hungry for cheap labor that often came from immigration (both from rural areas of the South African subcontinent and from overseas in Europe and Asia), as well as the saga of urban Johannesburg, are both intimately connected with the development of a modern and capitalist economy in South Africa. The discovery of gold in 1886 would bring the Rand town of Johannesburg from a sleepy mining community to the largest city in modern South Africa.⁴⁶ Cammack connects the geography and natural wealth of the region to the movement of human populations through the area, a trend that intensified during the war. On top of the geographic, economic, and demographic statistics used, Cammack describes the faster pace of social and political conflict, and how all contributed to the unique war experience of the Rand and its people, and the focal point that Johannesburg and its nearby gold mines played in the conflict.

Cammack's book begins with a series of maps and descriptions of the city of Johannesburg and surrounding areas at the time of the war. Clearly visible are the segregation and stratification of a diverse city with a growing urban center, the crowded "Coolie" (Chinese) and "Kaffir" (African) slums centered around the railroad, more affluent neighborhoods such as Doornfontein that housed many urban professionals, the old Burgher farmer district of Braamfontein that had become one of the city's main suburban areas by 1899, the cemetery, and the outlying fields and mines that formed the economic engine of the region.⁴⁷

Rather than Thompson's recurring themes of White unity and Black oppression, Cammack's view of the war is more nuanced, and she describes a situation of labor unrest, with a major strike occurring at the Robinson Deep mine in August 1899, mere months before the start of the war. Johannesburg, she says, only had the "illusion of unity" that was used in a contradictory fashion by the government in Pretoria and by the British imperialists to try to extend their control over the wealth of the Rand. The Rand's growing social and political instability, however, presented problems for prospects of effective governance; Cammack points to other strikes, high unemployment, alcoholism, prostitution, and a steady exodus out of the region by the non-Boer

⁴⁶ Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War, 1899-1902: the Witwatersrand and the Anglo-Boer War*, London: University of California Press (1990), 1.

⁴⁷ Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War*, viii-ix and 4-9.

Uitlanders (foreigners), whose lower classes, along with Africans from neighboring regions, formed the core of the city's workforce. The *Uitlanders* tended to constitute higher-skilled and higher-paid labor, and threats to "deskill" the industry and either force down wages of White workers or replace them with Chinese or Africans formed a recurring conflict between classes in the mining city.⁴⁸

Cammack asserts that the city's emerging industrial and capital-owning class, seeking cheap labor, clashed often with the White miners and other workers, but also with the Transvaal government of Paul Kruger (1883-1900). The Boer Republican often presented itself as the defender of White workers' rights and working conditions, and the government's interference in the mining industry especially did not endear the Afrikaner government to the mine-owners. However, Cammack also highlights the use of labor agitation by pro-British *Uitlander* reformers, who were pressuring the Transvaal government for the vote in the interest of using their sheer numbers to force the Transvaal, the Rand, and the gold into a union with the British colonies.⁴⁹

The conflicts Cammack points to are often economic ones, and not generally political in nature, and she claims the sincerity of *Uitlander* agitation for the vote is suspect; Cammack uses the general decline in their population on the Rand to indicate that it may have been merely a pretext to invite British intervention while the *Uitlanders* still held some power in Johannesburg. Although the elite of the *Uitlanders* tended to favor the British, Cammack insists that much of the working-class of this often-transient population favored Kruger as a champion against both the mining magnates and the demands of the non-White workforce.⁵⁰ When war broke out the diverse people of the Rand held divided loyalties and Cammack describes the attempt by the Boers to rein in the Rand, force out potentially subversive populations, and use its gold to finance the war with Britain as the occupation of "essentially a foreign district."⁵¹

Cammack's story of human movement picks up during the war, fueled by rumors of conscription to Boer commando units and attempts to place the town under martial law, with the result that the city of Johannesburg became rather depopulated during much of the war. Those who remained behind lived in terror of the lawless conditions and festering racial animosity, those who left and "voted with their feet" left their homes and property vulnerable to looters, and later to seizures by

⁴⁸ Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War*, 14.

⁴⁹ Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War*, 15.

⁵⁰ Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War*, 10-11.

⁵¹ Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War*, 61.

Boer commandos and British officers.⁵² According to Cammack, the spike of petty crime coupled with the dire manpower needs led to many criminals being released wholesale from jail, either to be expelled or used for labor in the mines.⁵³

The gold from the Rand formed a primary cause of the war in Cammack's view, key to the material-economic determinism of her argument. If either side could harness it, the war could be paid for handsomely, without it the Boer Republics would surely not survive.⁵⁴ For the Boers, the loss of the Rand and the capitals in Pretoria and Bloemfontein in 1900 essentially sealed their fate. Attempts by the British to "Anglicize" the Rand met with mixed success, hampered by competing interests over control of the region's economic and political axes of power, especially the mines, and providing for the remaining civilians in Johannesburg, many left without jobs or reliable access to food and housing.⁵⁵ In spite of these obstacles, Britain would maintain control of the territory through the rest of the war (in part by following the earlier practice of the Boer authorities in seeking to drive out "undesirables").⁵⁶ Although some Boer commandos would continue to fight for two more years, with accompanying human and material devastation that only served to heighten social tensions in the Rand and elsewhere, Cammack presents the period of guerilla fighting as a long-drawn lost cause, a complication for the British as they struggled to turn the Rand into a loyal and productive British asset, one that they hoped would pay off the debt incurred in blood.

Race, Class War and Gender Upheaval: Shula Marks

Another example of a materialist history of the South African War came from Shula Marks, an English historian who studied under Leonard Thompson at Cape Town, but began to come into her own in South African history during the "radical turn" of the 1970s. Rather than Thompson's portrayal of an ultimate White unity that coalesced against the Blacks, Marks elaborated divisions within White South Africa along the lines of class and gender, and added an element of class conflict to the escalating tensions between Blacks and Whites in the frontier region that accompanied the war. Her chapter on the war included in the *Cambridge History of South Africa*, entitled "War and Union: 1899-1910," posited the conflict as a "total war," one that touched all aspects of South African society. Although, for Marks, class

⁵² Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War*, 62.

⁵³ Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War*, 68.

⁵⁴ Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War*, 83.

⁵⁵ Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War*, 135-138.

⁵⁶ Diana Cammack, *The Rand at War*, 153.

remained a main focus of historical causality, she also brought in a gendered analysis to her account of the South African War.

Embodying historian Joan Scott's description of gender, class, and race, as three of the main axes along which power inequalities are expressed, Marks weaved together a variety of conflicts into the wider story of the South African War.⁵⁷ Marks included a section on the role of Afrikaner women in the war effort, women who provided men on commando with food, clothing, and shelter, an even more important role after the fighting moved from regular to guerilla phases (and would lead the British to target Boer civilians as well as fighting men). According to Marks, the upheaval led to a shift in gender relations within the Afrikaner community as men came back beaten and demoralized from the battlefields. While the men were away from their farms, Marks asserted that Afrikaner women had taken the lead in resisting British occupation and encouraging the men to keep fighting, even taking up arms themselves. All this occurred even while many men found that they had lost their farms and livelihoods to British scorched earth tactics, a severe blow to Boer identity of self-reliance and masculinity for those who lost their homes.⁵⁸

In the aftermath of war, cultural nationalists, both British and Boer, male and female, sought women as the main way to indoctrinate youth with civic and cultural pride and responsibilities. Afrikaner women, who had suffered greatly during the war, became a potent symbol of Afrikaner grievances and a source of solidarity for the defeated people, although Marks admitted that such power by these women came through their identity as suffering victims, rather than having agency of their own. This, she claimed, was far from the true story of the Afrikaner women at war, who had been "assertive participants in their own right." The peace of 1902 largely meant, for men and women, a return to "traditional" gender norms, but although female activities during the reconstruction consisted of more conventional charity work, such as teaching, nursing, and welfare in the camps, they did not embody a separate, non-political world for women, as groups such as the Afrikaans Christian Women's Society became deeply involved in Afrikaner nationalism after the war.⁵⁹

In addressing race, Marks emphasized that as the fighting continued, increasing numbers of Boers and their African servants and collaborators went into the British camp, further destabilizing Afrikaner society that remained divided between the die-hard "bitter-enders" and

⁵⁷ Joan Scott. "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1054.

⁵⁸ Shula Marks, *War and Union*, 160-161.

⁵⁹ Shula Marks, *War and Union*, 183.

those who began to advocate a peace settlement to ensure survival.⁶⁰ Similar to Thompson, Marks cited escalating fears by White Afrikaners of an armed uprising of the displaced Africans. She included a letter by one of the main Boer generals and statesmen, Jan Smuts, written in early 1902, decrying the British practice of employing “armed barbarians under white officers in a war between two white Christian peoples.” Smuts and others foresaw a dangerous future in which the Whites would live at the mercy of the Black majority, and Marks asserted that native African attacks were instrumental in convincing the Boers to sue for peace.⁶¹ However, unlike many liberals who to a greater or lesser extent had put stock in the British claims to be “defending” the Blacks from the more “unenlightened” Boers, Marks’s portrayal of British actions pointed to a coldly-calculated imperial interest and a desire to claim the riches of South Africa for themselves. As with the Boers, if Africans served this interest they were allowed to continue unabated; if they proved themselves obstacles to British policy, they stood to face violent retribution.

Marks, in elaborating on racial conflict during the war, connected it closely with class conflict. She claimed that by 1902, lands from which Boers who were evicted in the Transvaal were often reclaimed by Africans. The dispossessed landowners sometimes came back after the war to find their old homes closed to them, with former tenants refusing to work or pay rent and even holding off the Boers with force of arms. “The wartime expropriation of the Boer landlord class, and the role played by the rural underclass, had turned the Transvaal world upside down. In effect...an agrarian class war accompanied the South African War and its aftermath, as black peasants struggled for land and liberty in the countryside.” Marks went on, with a somewhat Marxist flair attached to the older liberal line of triumphant white supremacy, to describe how the “former enemies (British and Boer) had joined hands to shore up the supremacy of white men and to defend white property rights in the face of what amounted to a widespread black jacquerie in the Transvaal.”⁶²

Marks also cited Diana Cammack’s *The Rand at War*, key to the linkage of economic causes for the war and the growing power of industry and the mining interests in Johannesburg. By the time of the city’s capture in 1900, “the centre of gravity in South African politics had already shifted definitively from the Cape to the Transvaal.”⁶³ The industrialists of the Witwatersrand had hedged their bets during the

⁶⁰ Shula Marks, *War and Union*, 161.

⁶¹ Shula Marks, *War and Union*, 163.

⁶² Shula Marks, *War and Union*, 164–165.

⁶³ Shula Marks, *War and Union*, 165.

war, and the pro-(White) labor stance of the Republican presidents, coupled with the foreign or transient loyalties of the workers, had created a liability for the Boers, turning the mining industry into a source of both potential wealth and unrest. In the end, the British had to deal with the occupation, with labor shortages and disputes at the mines, and with anti-capitalist reformers who sought to limit the power of the mine-owners. Marks detailed the maneuverings and deals by the British colonial leadership and mining magnates with some of the old Boer leaders such as Jan Smuts and Louis Botha (who came to see the future of a White-dominated South Africa as one linked to unity between British and Boer) to create the foundations of a modern and capitalist South Africa.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The four main writings addressed in this paper do not represent a comprehensive historiography of the South African War, but they provide a look into some key examples of the different schools of thought that have developed in South African history. Although the authors all share some conclusions on the South African War, such as the collision between British aims on the mineral wealth of the interior and Republican desire to remain independent, or the dire conditions imposed on civilians during the war, or the consolidation of White rule following the war, they are also deeply divided over the significance of the war itself. While the historiography of South Africa and its most infamous war has changed much since the days of Theal and Macmillan, and indeed since the new Africanist historians encountered the "radical" or materialist response to their writings, many of the same rifts exist today. Afrikaner nationalism, far from being dead in the post-apartheid era, lives on with the same contemptuous attitude towards Black South Africans that brought van Jaarsveld so much controversy. The murder of white supremacist Eugene Terreblanche in 2010 brought white power movements into public displays of mourning.⁶⁵ The mining and labor disputes so central to the war's history also continue to this day, with the 2012 massacre of dozens of striking workers at the Marikana platinum mines, accompanied by accusations that police hid weapons on the dead bodies.⁶⁶ Social and political inequality, disease and despair, corruption, and poverty all remain alive and well in South Africa.

⁶⁴ Shula Marks, *War and Union*, 167-169.

⁶⁵ Pumza Fihlani. "Terreblanche laid to rest in South Africa." *BBC News*, April 9, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8612017.stm>.

⁶⁶ "Marikana mine killings: South African police 'planted weapons'." *BBC News*, November 6, 2012. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20218828>.

The historians who wrote the history of the war lived through similar tales of hatred, corruption, and oppression. The central theme of the war for these historians, whether one of white redemption and unity or of a downward-spiraling society with sharp racial and class divisions, seems to offer little more to those living in the present except perhaps a warning of the costs of greed, arrogance, and hatred. Even though the South African War has been over for more than a century, it has continued to inspire heated debates over its meaning and significance for modern South Africa. Only time will tell if the next generation of South African historians can justify a more optimistic direction to the nation's history, or any more of a consensus on the war.