

20 The Treatment of ‘Everyday Life’ in Memory and Narrative of the Concentration Camps of the South African War, 1899-1902

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This paper considers the idea of ‘everyday life’ in Boer women’s narratives of the South African War concentration camps in three published collections of camp testimonies. A striking feature of these collections is their absence of memories about ordinary daily life in camp. The focus in women’s camp narratives is largely on the brutal mistreatment of Boer women and children by the British. This is part of a wider pattern evident in Boer women’s camp accounts, which frequently testify to ‘identical’ incidents, share formulaic narrative schemes and replicate stock phrases, thus exhibiting what Gillis has called “memory work” (Gillis, 1994). The absence of the ‘everyday’ in camp narratives is symptomatic of the close relationship many of these accounts had with the growth of Afrikaner nationalism, particularly in the late 1930s.

The lack of memories about mundane, daily aspects of camp life bears out Vogelsang’s argument that re/creating history in the context of nation building encourages people to remember only the traumas they suffered under past regimes (Vogelsang, 2002). In ‘remembering’ the South African War concentration camps, women testimony writers ‘forgot’ about ordinary people going about the daily, domestic camp life in favour of memories of suffering and victimhood that fitted with nationalist objectives. Some of the repeated incidents and shared memories in three collections of testimonies are examined here to explore what counted as ‘worthwhile’ memory in the quest for a useable nationalist past. It is first necessary to contextualise Boer women’s accounts by briefly outlining the war, the camps and their political afterlife. I then consider some definitions of everyday life in relation to the three collections under discussion, and examine how ‘everyday life’ has been ‘forgotten’ in favour of politicised memories that serve nationalist purposes. I consider how formulaic narratives about illness, suffering and death replaced the ‘everyday’ in women’s camp testimonies.

The Narrative Context: The War, the Camps and Women's Testimonies

During the South African War, fought between 1899 and 1902 between Britain and the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, the British military authorities established concentration camps to accommodate Boer women and children who had been rendered homeless by the scorched earth policy used to deprive Boer commandos of food and other resources. By the end of the war, about 27,000 Boer children and women had died in the camps, with a large majority of about 22,000 of these deaths occurring amongst children, particularly children under five. Death was caused mainly by disease as virulent strains of measles, pneumonia, typhoid and enteritis raged through the camps, and this was exacerbated by poor sanitation, inappropriate feeding, and lack of access to clean water, factors greatly influenced by the hurried and haphazard establishment of the camps, rather than a result of deliberate neglect. These camps cannot in any way be equated with Nazi death camps of the Second World War, which deliberately sought to exterminate inmates. Deaths in the South African camps were not the result of an intentional, genocidal project on the part of the British authorities, although this is frequently how they have been represented. The concentration system was based on controlling, regulating and institutionalising everyday life as it sought to organise the several thousand women and children who populated each camp, and was not aimed at the destruction of the Boer people.

In the period immediately following peace in June 1902, a wave of publication of women's accounts of their war and camp experiences emerged. Emily Hobhouse's *The Brunt of the War and Where It Fell*, which contained brief women's testimonies she had collected during her relief work in the camps, appeared in late 1902 and was followed by a spate of other accounts. From the 1910s onwards, Afrikaans magazines such as *Die Brandwag* [The Sentinel, founded in 1910] and *Die Huisgenoot* [The Home Companion, founded in 1926] were established to popularise the language, and encouraged women to write in and contribute accounts of their concentration camp experiences. These accounts focused strongly on the legacy of suffering endured by the Afrikaner people, and helped to generate the notion that this shared experience of suffering and hardship not only unified and strengthened Afrikaners, but could provide them with a history of solidarity on which to build an independent future state. Post-war women's published war and camp accounts played an increasingly formative role in the development of an Afrikaans cultural nationalist movement, especially during the late 1930s. As Stanley has observed, Boer women's testimonies "served *political purposes* by testifying within the framework of a nationalist political position *contra* the British imperialist one – the authors were all women committed to a nationalist and republican cause" (Stanley, 2005: 116, original emphases).

Subsequent to the camp accounts published immediately after the war, and the shorter magazine testimonies of the 1910s and 1920s, there have been sporadic surges of publication since, usually coinciding with moments of political significance and public interest. Many of Boer women's camp testimonies or collections of testimonies were published by *Nasionale Pers*, a group of publishing companies linked to the National Party, and these publications were frequently promoted, bought and distributed by women's National Parties and organisations. The three main collections of women's camp narratives, discussed here, are Hobhouse's *War Without Glamour* (1927), Neethling's *Mag Ons Vergeet?* [May We Forget?] (1938), and Postma's *Stemme Uit Die Verlede* [Voices From The Past] (1939).

War Without Glamour, introduced and edited by Emily Hobhouse, presents the testimonies of 31 Boer women, many of them well-known and influential, who describe their first-hand wartime experiences. *Mag Ons Vergeet?* contains 29 testimonies collected and edited by Mrs Neethling, who herself was a camp inmate for a time. *Stemme Uit Die Verlede* gathers together 39 women's testimonies, with some in the form of statements sworn before a magistrate. Both *Mag Ons Vergeet?* And *Stemme Uit Die Verlede* were republished in the late 1930s, when Afrikaner nationalism was experiencing a period of unprecedented growth. This period saw a surge in the re/publication of women's camp accounts that depicted the camps as places where Boers had been subjected to oppression and mistreatment by the British, but where ultimately the Boer people's stoicism, bravery and patriotism had prevailed, paving the way for the emergence of a powerful and united Afrikaner nation, ready to re/claim *ons land*, our land, which was ostensibly achieved in the National Party election victory of 1948. *Mag Ons Vergeet?* and *Stemme Uit Die Verlede* are inextricable from the nationalist context of their production, publication and distribution, and while *War Without Glamour* predated the fierce Afrikaner nationalism of the late 1930s and Hobhouse herself was not an Afrikaner nationalist, many of the contributors to her collection were active in nationalist circles.

'Everyday Life' in Boer Women's Testimonies?

For Highmore, the idea of the everyday "points (without judging) to those most repeated actions, those most travelled journeys, those most inhabited spaces that make up, literally, the day to day. This is the landscape closest to us, the world most immediately met". (Highmore, 2002b:1), an approach confirmed by Bovone's proposal that, "The term 'everyday life' brings to mind daily rhythm: it would literally mean 'that which happens every twenty-four hours'" (Bovone, 1989:41). From this viewpoint, extraordinary events such as natural disasters or wars do not readily seem to be part of the 'everyday'. However,

‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ are socially constructed categories and the content and meaning of everyday life are culturally determined. Highmore goes on to point out some of the complexities associated with the concept:

Everyday Life is a vague and problematic phrase. Any assumption that it is simply ‘out there’, as a palpable reality to be gathered up and described, should face an immediate question: whose everyday life? [...] To invoke the everyday can be a sleight of hand that normalises and universalises particular values, specific world-views. (Highmore, 2002a: 1)

In addition, those who experience the ‘extraordinary’ – wars or natural disasters – still have to continue with the business of daily life, although in dramatically changed circumstances, and so what constitutes ‘everyday life’ becomes both modified and structured by changed social conditions. If ‘everyday life’ is interpreted as Bovone’s “daily rhythm”, the ordinary, routine practices that make up day-to-day existence, such as sleeping, walking, working, cooking, eating, family life and socialising in the extraordinary conditions of wartime South Africa, then there is very little, if any, writing about everyday wartime life in Boer women’s narratives.

Interestingly, while the testimonies in the three collections under discussion do not narrate details of what was ‘everyday life’, this stands in contrast to the many photographs that have been archived and which do testify to the ordinary domestic routines around which camp life was organised. Photographs show families with their possessions posing for pictures outside their tents, children attending school or catechism classes, and camp inhabitants playing sport, cleaning, working, cooking, at Sunday church services and receiving rations. Many of these photographs were taken by travelling photographers at the request of camp inhabitants themselves, often to send to absent relatives. While these photographs, like testimonies, are situated in a particular historical context and can be read in a variety of ways to deconstruct their multiple meanings, they were nevertheless taken at the time in the context of the war, and were thus less subject to the retrospective re/working so evident in women’s testimonies.

The three collections under discussion, and also the wider number of archived testimonial writings purport to present the stories of ‘ordinary’ suffering Boer women, who are presented as wronged mothers who stoically bore ‘the brunt of the war’. However, they display a curious silence about the commonplace aspects of camp life such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, schooling or socialising, although for most women these activities would have taken up the majority of their time. Instead, the testimonies conform to a grand narrative: each is structured in a similar way, and there are specific incidents and emphases that recur across the accounts. Hobhouse took these similarities as a confirmation of the veracity of the women’s accounts, but there is another

way of reading these similarities. By the time women's accounts were being published, many of them as a more-or-less explicit part of the Afrikaner nationalist project, only 'certain' narratives about the camps were encouraged into the public domain. Writing about memories of trauma, death and hardship with an overtly political anti-British tone were favoured.

While these things – trauma, death, hardship – certainly made up part of daily life for *some* women in *some* camps at *certain* times, their ubiquitous appearance in the testimonies suggests that the official nationalist campaign to 'remember' led to a distorted emphasis on only certain types of experiences. For instance, while almost all camp narratives decry the widespread 'murder' of children by starvation and mistreatment in camp hospitals, only a small minority of those women whose stories appear in the three published collections had children who died in camp. These were nationalist women making political capital from the individual losses of others. To illustrate the similarity between women's accounts and the importance of their nationalist context in shaping of these narratives, I now turn to the basic narrative structure of the testimonies. There is a good deal of overlap between this particular cluster of texts, with women repeating, corroborating and reproducing their own and one another's testimonies across the individual accounts and collections. The testimonies tend to focus on four main aspects of war and camp experience – (1) the capture by British soldiers; (2) the journey to camp; (3) mistreatment by the British in camp, with particular reference to poor or tainted rations, starving children and the murderous camp hospitals; and (4) making sense of these experiences as part of the Afrikaner nation's history of suffering and sacrifice, and a looking forward to a time when these sacrifices will result in national liberation and independence from the oppression of British imperialism. The following extracts from some of the testimonies give a good indication of the themes that dominate all the testimonies in these collections.

The Capture

On 3 August when I went to my house, I found everything there destroyed. The animals had been cut into pieces while still alive; the yard was painted with blood ... everything they could take, they took, and then they set the house on fire.

(Mrs Makwayer in Postma, 1939: 63)

In a moment they [British soldiers] sprang from their horses and beat to death all the animals there were; yes, they did not mind even though the animals crept amongst us, but they beat them dead, they were so cruel; and we must just look on ... When they were gone we found nothing but pieces of the pigs.

(Mrs Meijer in Hobhouse, 1927: 45)

It was a terrible sight to see how the so-called civilised people [British soldiers] stabbed heaps of innocent animals to death and destroyed everything they encountered. Pigs were cut up while still alive. With just the clothes on our backs we were transported to the concentration camp.

(Mrs Le Roux in Postma, 1939: 31)

Interestingly, a large proportion of many of the testimonies devote more space to the capture by the British soldiers and the subsequent journey to camp than they do to camp life itself. The descriptions of capture emphasise the brutality of the British captors as they set about enforcing the scorched earth policy, burning crops and farmsteads and killing farm animals. The killing of animals motif centres on the stabbing and cutting up of livestock, especially pigs, often when still alive, and symbolises the purported savagery of the British. Women's accounts also emphasise their destitution after capture and having 'nothing but the clothes on our backs' is the description most readily given of being left homeless and penniless after British raid and capture.

The Journey

On the way there [to Brandfort camp] my youngest child died, and the most heart-breaking thing was no white person, but three kaffers had to bury her.

(Mrs Wolvaardt in Postma, 1939: 28)

In three vans and open trucks we left Middelburg ... The worst for us was to hear the Kaffirs shouting at us and their provocation at all the stations. We had no way of defending ourselves. We heard the Kaffirs say: 'Boers, that is good enough for you!' Can Afrikanders stand that? Again we trusted the Lord would avenge us.

(Mrs Van Den Berg in Hobhouse, 1927: 31)

We got given nothing to eat until the evening, and then it was raw meat, which we quickly had to cook ... We had to sleep next to the wagons without any protection other than our blankets, while the kaffers slept under the wagons and still complained that they were hindered by the crying of our children.

(Mrs Du Toit in Neethling, 1938: 83)

Tales of the journey to the camps are permeated with indignant disapproval about the role of black people in assisting the British with the capture and transportation of Boer women to the camps. Many women express fear and anger at the presence of threatening racial 'others', who have transgressed the racial order by conspiring with the British against their 'rightful' Boer superiors.

Rations and Vitriol

We got nothing other than corned beef, white bread and black coffee, and there wasn't enough of anything to still our hunger; we nearly died of hunger ... We also got blue vitriol in the flour and something else that made red flecks in the bread.

(Mrs Du Toit in Neethling, 1938: 88)

The meat that was given to us, was that of sick animals and in the flour there were pieces of vitriol.

(Mrs Alberts in Postma, 1939: 91)

They gave us the meat of sheep that had died of hunger, flour with vitriol and sugar with mouse droppings and acorns in it.(Mrs Greyling in Neethling, 1938: 148)

Great stress is placed in the testimonies on poor, insufficient rations and there are frequent claims that vitriol was added to rations to poison camp inhabitants. The allegation that the British tried to murder Boer women and children by adding hooks to tinned meat is also pervasive. In fact the tinned meat distributed in the camps was imported from America, and the hooks story relates to a particular incident concerning a single tin of corned beef in Pietersburg camp that was found to contain some meat-hooks. The crystals in sugar and flour that were assumed to be vitriol were additives to stop the rations going hard in high humidity. However, these specific stories were generalised, gained currency and repeated as evidence of the British plot to wilfully murder the Boer people.

Starving Children

Here and there one saw a child sitting up with out-stretched hands and tears streaming, crying 'bread, bread, I am so very hungry'.

(Mrs Roos in Hobhouse, 1927: 126-127)

Many people in the camp were so debilitated by hunger that they had to be taken into hospital. And many people died of hunger in the hospital. Once I asked a child of about twelve years old how he was. He said: 'Fine, but I am almost dying of hunger'.

(Mrs Bronkhorst in Neethling, 1938: 22)

My daughters and I know that more than one woman and child literally died of hunger in the murder camps.

(Mrs Scheepers in Postma, 1939: 145)

In women's camp narratives, children appear exclusively in relation to starvation, sickness and death. One device used to give impact and authenticity to claims made about hunger and starvation amongst children is the use of children's 'own' direct speech about this. Some children, notably those

suffering from gastro-intestinal diseases such as enteritis, were placed on restricted diets in hospitals to bring the illness under control. Boer women who did not share the same medical culture as the British camp doctors usually regarded these regimes not as a cure but a form of murder.

Hospitals

Most of the people who used the doctors' medicine, died. I also lost one child in this manner, but the other children who did not make use of the doctors' medicine, all stayed alive. (Mrs Alberts in Postma, 1939: 92)

The hospital was a place of horror to us, we dreaded it like death, especially the children, who had to be forced to go. (Mrs Viljoen in Hobhouse, 1927: 63)

It was generally known: in the hospital, all the children die, if not of sickness, then of hunger. (Mrs Truter in Neethling, 1938: 195)

A key theme here is that all those who entered the camp hospitals were more than likely to die, and that the best way of avoiding death was to keep out of hospital. This is not borne out in the camp records, which reflect that the majority of patients treated in camp hospitals survived, and that the overwhelming number of deaths occurred in the tents.

Making Sense

Our trials began when our loved ones – husbands, brothers, sons – were called up. Yet they went willingly, like heroes, to give their lives for freedom and for justice. (Mrs Wepener in Neethling, 1938: 100)

The Afrikaner woman carried herself very bravely. Was it not for people and fatherland that she suffered, and would it not have been more than enough reward if she kept her independence? (Mrs Kriegler in Neethling, 1938: 124)

How can there still be Afrikaans mothers who suffered still more and now go along with the arch enemy? But we trust that our People will once again be united. (Mrs Wolvaardt in Postma, 1939: 29)

Several women's accounts end by reworking Boer suffering during the war – camp deaths and those of Boer men on commando – into part of a pre-ordained rise of the Afrikaner nation. The phrases “for freedom and for justice” or “for freedom and fatherland” recur across the texts, and some women anticipate the future Afrikaner Nation by writing: “we trusted the Lord would avenge us”

(Mrs Van der Berg in Hobhouse, 1927: 31) and “we trust that our People will once again be united” (Mrs Louw in Neethling, 1938: 29).

Forgetting the Everyday in Narratives of Traumatic Pasts

In considering the absence of ‘everyday’ memories in the three collections of testimonies, it is necessary to locate these accounts in the context of Afrikaner nationalism for as sketched out above, they were produced during a period of intense nation-building. Vogelsang (2002) has explored the process of remaking history in former Soviet states – her study focuses on Simferopol in the Crimea – through a ‘remembering the forgotten’ that has occurred since the end of Soviet rule. She argues that re/creating history in the context of nation-building encourages people to remember ‘correctly’ the traumas they suffered under Soviet domination, now that they have the freedom to do so and are no longer oppressed and silenced by an authoritarian regime. These stories of past oppression, long denied and suppressed but now brought to the surface, constitute the new history of a now-liberated nation, whose people are united by their shared experience of past injustice.

Vogelsang holds that this had led to the assumption that there was no ‘normal life’ under Soviet rule, and that all legitimate memories about the past are those that are traumatic and were repressed. Memories of ordinary people going about their everyday lives have now been ‘forgotten’ in favour of ‘worthy’ memories of suffering. Vogelsang insists that official campaigns of remembering always involve official campaigns of forgetting, and in the South African case women testimony writers ‘forgot’ memories of everyday camp life because their narratives were produced for expressly political, nationalist purposes.

Many commentators have stressed the significance of concentration camp memories of victimhood and suffering to the formation of Afrikaner nationalism:

After 1902, Afrikaner women and their suffering during the war remained in the forefront of popular consciousness, serving an important political function in the development and deployment of Afrikaner nationalism. (Brink, 1990: 279)

The deaths in the concentration camps gave Afrikaners common victims to mourn and common grievances to nurture. As such the camps constituted a shared national tragedy, destined to have an enduring effect well beyond the war itself. (Grundlingh, 1999: 22)

The testimonies in *Stemme Uit Die Verlede* and *Mag Ons Vergeet?* in particular, were closely associated with the Afrikaner nationalist project. Remembering ‘the worst’ aspects of camp life and describing the camps as

places of 'murder' where Boer women and children were martyred in the nationalist cause, best served their political aims. This is not to suggest that memory of such things was nothing other than a nationalist construction for as Werbner points out in relation to Zimbabwe, this reduces memory to "an artefact of the here and now, as if it were merely a backwards construction after the fact" (Werbner, 1998: 2). What is interesting, however, are "the processes by which memory lives, gets realised or ruptured, is textualised, becomes buried, repressed or avoided, has its effects, and is more or less transformed" (Werbner, 1998: 2), and how the nationalist context resulted in only traumatic and politically 'correct' or expedient memories being brought into the public domain, at the expense of other more everyday memories, shown so graphically in the photographic representations.

By explicitly re/producing in a ubiquitous way narratives which inscribed collective death and suffering in place of the everyday experiences of individuals, the greatest political capital could be generated by those seeking to further a nationalist agenda: this was post-war 'memory work'. Gillis stresses that memory work is always "embedded in complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what ends"(Gillis, 1994: 3). In this instance, nationalist politicisation of the concentration camps led to British cruelty and barbarism and Boer suffering replacing memories of ordinary, everyday life in women's camp testimonies.

Notes

1. I have translated all extracts from Neethling's *Mag Ons Vergeet?* and Postma's *Stemme Uit Die Verlede* into English from the Afrikaans.
2. An extended and modified version of this paper appears in Graeme Dunstall and Barry Godfrey (eds) (2005, in progress) *Global and Local: Comparative Histories of Crime and Criminal Justice in Europe and Empire c.1800-1940*, Cullompton, Devon, Willan Publishing.

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