Role of Black people in the South African War

Introduction

The South African War of 1899-1902 was essentially a 'White mans' war, fought to determine which white authority had real power in South Africa but other populations groups like the Zulu, Xhosa, Swazis and Basotho and Sothos were also involved in the war. Although there was an unwritten agreement between the Boers and the British that Blacks would not be armed in the war, neither side adhered to this agreement.

It should be mentioned that the South African war was fought in a region where four fifths of the population was Black and that the conflict was over land that belonged to the various African tribes. Most politically conscious Blacks, Coloureds and Indian groups in South Africa believed that the defeat of the Boers would mean more political, educational and commercial opportunities would be afforded to them. They hoped that the Cape franchise would be extended throughout South Africa. The Indian community was encouraged by MK Gandhi to show loyalty to Britain if they wished to achieve their freedom. Thus, the Ambulance Corps was formed in Natal, was and became active on the British side during the early months of the war.

Reasons for not wanting to arm the Black population

The British believed that the Boers would be easily defeated and that any military collaboration from groups of Blacks would not be decisive in winning the war. In addition, it was commonly believed by both sides that the military methods of the Black people were more brutal than those of white people and that white women and children would not be shown mercy by Black soldiers. Another reason for not wanting Blacks to be given arms was the fear that this would increase the possibility of Black resistance to white control in the future. However, as soon as the war started, it was evident that Black people played an indispensable part in military operations.

On the Boer side

Republican law forbade the carrying of arms by Blacks, but because many Boers were pressed into service, they allowed their servants to carry arms. Black cooperation in the war enabled a larger number of whites to serve actively in war operations on both sides.

According to the law of the Republics, all males between the ages of 16 and 60 were eligible for war service, and although the law did not refer to race it was generally applied to the white population only. Provision was made for coloureds to be called up, but in most cases, this meant an employee going along with his employer.
On the Boer side, Black people assisted at various levels. Most were assigned to the roles of wagon drivers or servants. Blacks were also used to stand in on farms of Boers who were commandeered to the war. Many were used as "agterryers" who would tend to chores at the camp or see to the horses. On the battlefield, the 'agterryer' would carry spare ammunition and spare rifles and even load up the rifles for his master.

The Tswana people were conscripted by the Boers to help maintain the siege of Mafeking. Many armed Blacks and Coloureds also assisted during the siege of Ladysmith.

Refusal on the part of the Blacks to serve could see them punished with a fine of 5 pounds, imprisonment or 25 lashes. Although there is no accurate figure, some sources say that at least 10 000 Black men accompanied the Boer Commandos and, as a rule, labour conscripted by the Boers received no pay.

**On the British side**

It was estimated that about 100 000 Blacks were employed by the British army and more than 10 000 received arms. The British army used Black workers for carrying dispatches and messages, to take care of their horses and assist in the veterinary department. They also were used to do sanitary work and construct forts. Armed Black sentries guarded blockhouses and were used to raid Boer farms for cattle.

In 1900, 7000 Blacks took part in General French's march to Machadodorp in the Transvaal. Over 5000 others, mostly transport drivers and leaders, were employed by Lord Roberts' columns on his journey to Bloemfontein.

The British army also provided the Kgatla chief and Kgama of the Ngwato with 6000 and 3000 rounds of ammunition respectively, to defend the Bechuanaland Protectorate. In the Transkei, 4000 Mfengu and Thembu levies were assembled to ward off any attempt at invasion by the Boers or to suppress any Boer uprising. The Boer occupation of Kuruman was initially resisted by a small force of local Coloured and white policemen. In Mafeking, over 500 Blacks took part in the town's defence during the siege and 200 more enrolled as special constables in Hershel to discourage incursions into the area by Free State commandos.

In Natal, the Zulu Native Police were armed with rifles and a number of them were mounted. However, after the war, Blacks who had served as scouts or fighting men were denied campaign medals which they were entitled to.

It is apparent that both sides would deny that armed Blacks served with them, each accusing the other of doing so. However, in April 1902, after much pressure, Lord Kitchener finally admitted that some 10 053 Black men were issued with arms by the British army. The Boers cited the arming of Blacks on the side of the British as one of the major reasons for discontinuing the war.

**Reasons for Blacks entering the war**

Black poverty was a major spur to enlistment in the British army. For many Black families, the war had disastrous consequences as it disrupted the migrant labour system, a development that deprived them of an income used to buy grain, and pay taxes and rent. Also, the return of thousands of men to the rural areas increased the pressure on food resources in some already overpopulated districts of Natal, Zululand and the Transkei. In the Transvaal and Orange Free State Britain's scorched earth campaign destroyed the livelihoods of many thousands of Blacks. In 1901, separate concentration camps for Blacks were established to accommodate those who were uprooted from the land. Most of these were from Boer farms, where they resided as labour tenants,
cash tenants or share-croppers. Those who entered the camps had very little or no food. Only in exceptional cases were free rations provided, thus most Black men had no choice but to accept work in the British army in order to survive. By April 1902, over 13 000 refugees were found to be working in the British army. As a result, the camps were mainly filled with women, children, the elderly and the infirm.

The British recruited on the basis of a three-month contract with a monthly wages of 40 to 50 shillings. A major consolation to Blacks entering the British army was the fact that rations were usually included.

**Concentration Camps**

Many Black people were held in concentration camps around the country. The British created camps for Blacks from the start of the war. Entire townships and even mission stations were transferred into concentration camps. The men were forced into labour service and by the end of the war there were some 115 000 Blacks in 66 camps around the country.

Maintenance spent on white camps were a lot higher than that spent on the Black camps due to the fact that Blacks had to build their own huts and even encouraged to grow their own food. Less than a third of Black interns were provided with rations. Black people were practically being starved to death in these camps.

Blacks in the concentration camps were not given adequate food and did not have proper medical care, which resulted in many deaths. Those in employment were forced to pay for their food. Water supplies were often contaminated, and the conditions under which they were housed were appalling, resulting in thousands of deaths from dysentery, typhoid and diarrhea.

The death toll at the end of the war in the Black concentration camps was recorded as 14154, but it is believed that the actual number was considerably higher. Most of the fatalities occurred amongst the children.

**After the War**

After the war the Black camps remained under military control even after the white camps had been transferred to civilian control.


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