

BOER PRISONERS OF WAR IN INDIA¹

Two Articles

[During the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 in South Africa, thousands of Boer prisoners of war were brought to India and kept in camps around the country. Some of them died in India. Their graves had not been visited by South Africans since 1936 - when a South African Parliamentary delegation to India, led by Jan Hofmeyr, paid tribute at the graves of prisoners buried at the Ambala cemetery - though the Afrikaners regarded the war as their War of Independence and those who died in it as their national heroes.

Mr. Reddy visited the cemetery in Ambala in 1991 and laid a wreath at the gravestone for the Boers in a gesture to stress that the world is not against the Afrikaners but only against apartheid. In these articles in 1991-92, he explained what impelled him to make this gesture.]

WHY I KNELT IN TRIBUTE TO BOER PRISONERS BURIED IN AMBALA

I became interested in South Africa, while a student in Madras in the early forties, after reading Gandhiji's autobiography and *Satyagraha in South Africa*. Proceeding to New York for further studies, I helped organise a demonstration in front of the South African Consulate-General in December, when India's complaint against racism in South Africa was first being debated in the United Nations General Assembly.

Since then, most of my life came to be devoted to the international campaign against apartheid and support to the liberation struggle in South Africa - especially since 1963 when I became Principal Secretary of the United Nations Special Committee against Apartheid and later Director of the United Nations Centre against Apartheid.

I always stressed that the campaign was not against the whites or the Afrikaners in South Africa but against the system of apartheid. I took every opportunity to persuade the South African whites that their regime should speak to Nelson Mandela and other leaders in prison and seek a peaceful change.

In a public speech in Washington in March 1965, reported in the South African press, I said:

¹ *Condensed versions of these articles, written in 1991-92, were published in South Africa and India.*

"Perhaps the Afrikaners, when they look back on their own history, understand and appreciate those who fight for their convictions and rights and are prepared to take the consequences."

I had in mind, particularly, the heroic resistance of the Boers (now known as Afrikaners) against British imperialism, especially in the Anglo-Boer War, their War of Independence.

I continued:

"A really peaceful solution in South Africa can only come with the agreement of the Afrikaners, and not against their resistance. I would like to hope that by a study of the lessons of their history and the realities of the present-day South Africa, and by the pressure of informed world opinion, they will soon begin to look ahead to the promise of the future instead of harping on the outmoded traditions of the past."

My appeal had little effect at the time. The South African Government - influenced by the ideology of Nazi Germany and perhaps the American South - was determined to perpetuate white domination by imposing its "final solution" - confining the African majority to 13 percent of the land, segregating the Coloured people and Indians, and maintaining control over the riches of the country. It was encouraged in that suicidal course by the collaboration of Western Powers and corporations blinded by the cold war psychosis.

Despite brutal acts of repression and aggression by the South African regime, I eschewed any hatred for the Afrikaners, largely because of the inspiration of Gandhiji. I rejected and opposed the common view that the English-speaking whites in South Africa were liberal and that the Afrikaners bore total responsibility for racism.

Gandhiji had raised and led an ambulance corps of 1,100 Indians - professionals, workers and indentured labourers - to work with the British Army in the Anglo-Boer War. But his sympathies were with the Boers. He wrote in *Satyagraha in South Africa*: "It must largely be conceded that justice is on the side of the Boers." (Chapter IX). And in his Autobiography: "When the war was declared, my personal sympathies were all with the Boers..." (Part III, Chapter X).

He often praised the heroism and spirit of sacrifice of the Boers, especially the women, and their leaders, - such as General Louis Botha, first Prime Minister of South Africa, and General J.C. Smuts, his main adversaries in South Africa - and even held them up as an example for the Indian people to emulate in their struggle for independence.

The war had been caused by the determination of the British Government to subdue the Dutch Republics in the Transvaal and the Orange Free State after gold was discovered in the Transvaal. It was precipitated in 1899 when Britain brought twelve thousand troops from India, together with ten thousand Indian auxiliaries, and moved them to the border of the Transvaal.

The Dutch Republics had no organised army, but only commandos. But they were able to inflict humiliating defeats and large casualties on the British. Britain then brought in reinforcements - almost 400,000 troops against a maximum of 90,000 Boer commandos - and occupied Bloemfontein, Pretoria and Johannesburg. But the Boers refused to give up and carried on guerilla warfare.

Lord Kitchener, the British Commander-in-Chief, resorted to collective punishment and other acts of barbarism to force them to surrender. Thirty thousand farms were destroyed. Over a hundred thousand Boers and another hundred thousand Africans were forced into concentration camps; and over thirty thousand prisoners of war were sent to St. Helena, Ceylon, India and Bermuda. The conditions in the camps were so deplorable that nearly 26,000 people, mostly women and children, perished.

The brutality of the war led to an upsurge of protest in Britain and Europe, and a treaty of peace in May 1902.

The Afrikaners, like other peoples, have in their history much to be proud of, and some not so noble. They inspired the world, during the war of 1899-1902, with their love of freedom so that many volunteers from the United States, Ireland, France, Netherlands and other countries joined them in their unequal struggle against Britain. But it has been the tragedy of the Afrikaners that they have followed leaders who have appealed to their baser instincts of racism. As they built the structure of apartheid, causing enormous suffering to the African, Coloured and Indian people, they became detested and isolated around the world.

Happily, the De Klerk regime saw the writing on the wall, released Nelson Mandela and took some bold steps toward the elimination of apartheid and negotiations on the future government of the country. Mandela and the African National Congress, for their part, have been careful not to humiliate the whites in any way; they have encouraged reconciliation as essential for a secure future for all the people of the country.

Regrettably, however, there has been a rise of ultra-right wing terrorist groups among the whites which threaten to fight and disrupt any settlement between the Government and the African leaders. They clothe themselves in "Boer nationalism".

I felt that as an Indian I should try to reach out to the Afrikaners by showing respect for their true heroes. I had seen in a pictorial history of the Anglo-Boer War three photographs of Boer prisoners of war sent to India, and read in Alan Paton's biography of Jan Hofmeyr that Hofmeyr had visited the Ambala Cemetery in 1936 to pay homage at the graves of 18 Boer prisoners buried there. I could obtain no further information on enquiries to scholars and libraries in South Africa and India.

The Indian Council on Cultural Relations and the District Public Relations Officer in Ambala made preliminary enquiries and helped me reach the Ambala Cemetery during my recent visit to India early in December. The Cemetery, mainly for British soldiers in the Ambala Cantonment, was in disuse; the St. Paul's Church, which maintains the Cemetery, was partially destroyed by bombing during the India-Pakistan War of 1965. We had to wade through tall weeds in the cemetery to locate and reach the gravestone dedicated to twenty Boer prisoners who were buried there.

I laid a wreath at the gravestone and paid my respects.

I hope that this gesture will help the Afrikaners to realise that we entertain no animosity towards them - despite their past wrongs - and that we look forward to friendship. For when apartheid is eliminated and a new democratic government is formed in South Africa, our relations will be with all the people of South Africa, not merely with the oppressed majority. When the Afrikaner people rid themselves of racism and look anew at their own history, they will learn to reciprocate Gandhiji's respect for their spirit of liberty. Indeed, they will discover that many of them have Indian ancestors - taken from Bengal, Coromandel Coast and Kerala in the 17th and 18th centuries and sold as slaves in the Cape of Good Hope.

Since my visit to Ambala, I have found that the Boer prisoners brought to India numbered several thousand and that they were stationed in camps in many towns - Ahmednagar, Ambala, Amritsar, Bellary, Bhim Tal, Kakool, Murree, Nilgiris, Satara, Shahjahanpur, Sialkot, Trichinopoly, etc.

I hope that Afrikaner families and historians will begin to visit these stations and pay tribute to the heroes of their War of Independence. I hope also that Indian people will visit, as I was able to do recently, the graves of Indians who revolted against slavery two hundred years ago and lie buried on Signal Hill in Cape Town. They were among the first martyrs for freedom in South Africa.

**INSCRIPTIONS ON GRAVESTONE AT AMBALA CEMETERY,
AMBALA, HARYANA STATE, INDIA, FOR BOER PRISONERS OF
WAR WHO DIED AT AMBALA**

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF THE BOER PRISONERS OF WAR
WHOSE NAMES ARE HERE RECOGNISED WHO DIED AT AMBALA
DURING THE YEARS 1901 AND 1902 AND WHO ARE BURIED
CLOSE TO THIS STONE

*HEILIG TER GEDACHTENIS
VAN DE BOEREN KRYGSGE VANGENEX
WIER NAMEN HIERUNDER GECEVEN WORDEX
DTE GESIOR VEN TE AMBALA
GEDURENDE DE JAREN 1901 1902
EN DIE IN BE NABXHEID
VAN DE ZEM STEEN BECRARAVENZYN*

<i>H.J. VAN ASEWGAN</i>	<i>FAURESMITH</i>	<i>16.6.02</i>
<i>L.P. BOSHOFF</i>	<i>LINDLEY</i>	<i>22.5.02</i>
<i>P.C. CELLIERS</i>	<i>HEILBROX</i>	<i>23.12.01</i>
<i>F.J. CRONJE</i>	<i>PCSTROOM</i>	<i>21.5.02</i>
<i>E. EDMUND</i>		
<i>E.W. VON JAGER</i>	<i>BETHLEHEM</i>	<i>30.6..02</i>
<i>E.E. VON MALITZ</i>	<i>WINBURG</i>	<i>16.4.02</i>
<i>J.F. MARTIN</i>		<i>11.11.02</i>
<i>G.J.V.D MERWE</i>	<i>KROONSTAD</i>	<i>3.7.01</i>
<i>H.J.S.V.D MERWE</i>	<i>FAURESMITH</i>	<i>15.6.02</i>
<i>R.J.J.V. VUUREN</i>	<i>MIDDLEBURG</i>	<i>17.10.01</i>
<i>R.E.V.D. MERWE</i>	<i>FAURESMITH</i>	<i>11.11.01</i>
<i>P.W.J. NEL</i>	<i>KROONSTAD</i>	<i>4.11.01</i>
<i>A.J. PIENAAR</i>	<i>BETHVLIE</i>	<i>16.11.01</i>
<i>P.I.M. DU PLESSIS</i>	<i>KROONSTAD</i>	<i>21.11.01</i>
<i>J.J.RAATH</i>	<i>PARIJS</i>	<i>31.10.01</i>
<i>W.N. VAN RENSBURG</i>	<i>PHILIPPOLIS</i>	<i>16.1.02</i>
<i>B.J.M. VORSTER</i>	<i>FAURESMITH</i>	<i>26.10.02</i>
<i>JANSEN</i>		<i>17.10.01</i>
<i>B.J.L. VANDER WALT</i>	<i>WOLMARANSTAD</i>	<i>15.12.01</i>
<i>WALT</i>		

(Note: List copied from the four sides of the gravestone)

April 9, 1992

TIME FOR RECONCILIATION

Some friends have expressed surprise that I took the trouble of locating graves of Boer prisoners of war in Ambala, India, and even laid a wreath on the gravestone. For the South African War was no war for freedom so far as the Africans and Indians are concerned; it led only to an alliance between the victors and the defeated to streamline the oppression of the blacks and eventually to the inhumanity of apartheid. How could I whose life came to be devoted to the struggle against apartheid - my first demonstration against South African racism was in 1946 and I headed the anti-apartheid unit of the United Nations for over two decades - even consider paying respect to the Boers?

I do not regret - indeed, I am proud - of all that I have done to promote sanctions against South Africa and support to the liberation struggle, defending the right of the oppressed people to use all means including armed struggle, despite my own belief in non-violence. I do not think, however, that my gesture of respect for Boer freedom fighters is inconsistent or untimely.

I grew up in India in the national movement for freedom led by Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru. I avidly read stories of struggles for freedom in other countries. The struggle of the Boers was of special interest because Gandhiji had spent the prime of his life in South Africa and often extolled their heroism and spirit of sacrifice as an example for India. He wrote in *Satyagraha in South Africa* for instance:

"However much the Boers may quarrel among themselves, their liberty is so dear to them that when it is in danger, all get ready to fight as one man... General Smuts, General De Wet, and General Hertzog are all of them great lawyers, great farmers and equally great soldiers. General Botha had one farm of nine thousand acres... His knowledge of English was excellent; yet when he met the King and ministers in England, he always preferred to talk in his own mother tongue...

"Boer women are as brave and simple as the men. If the Boers shed their blood in the Boer War, they were able to offer this sacrifice owing to the courage of their womenfolk and inspiration they received from them."

Speaking to the Indian National Congress on December 28, 1928, moving a resolution calling for civil disobedience, he recalled the South African War and said:

"Have we got a General Botha in our midst who is prepared to sacrifice 20,000 acres of his valuable property and so many thousands of his sheep?... Have we got a General Smuts who is just as ready to tuck up his sleeves and work underground as to shoulder his rifle when the country demanded? I feel we have. If we had not I would not place this resolution before you."

He specially praised the non-co-operation of Boers after the War, until a new constitution was adopted, and their love of their *taal*.

It is true that the Boers were defending not only their own liberty but also their right to oppress the Africans and the Indians. But that has to be seen in perspective. We do not ignore the historic significance of the American Revolution because the whites in America were also fighting to preserve slavery and, soon after the war, George Washington was searching for his slaves who had run away.

Afrikaner history since the War was dominated by politicians who fed and exploited the basest racist prejudices among the people rather than by the spirit and logic of freedom. Many of the "pro-Boers" - who had courageously opposed the war - were ashamed or at least embarrassed by the actions of the Boer leaders. The list of supporters of Gandhi and the Indian struggle includes Olive Schreiner, Albert Cartwright, the Moltenos, Morris Alexander, John X. Merriman and other "pro-Boers". Above all, Emily Hobhouse who was shocked at the savage treatment of Mrs. Kasturba Gandhi in prison and strongly pressed Generals Botha and Smuts to negotiate with Gandhiji. She even invited Mrs. Gandhi, that simple heroine, to her home in Cape Town to meet Mrs. Botha, the wife of the Prime Minister.

The Boer War had many lessons for the struggle against apartheid - the need for mass struggle involving all the people, including women and children, the feasibility of guerilla warfare in South Africa, etc. And the development of the movement against that war in Europe was a precedent for the organisation of the powerful anti-apartheid movement all over the world.

I have always felt - as indeed the leaders of the liberation movement declared repeatedly - that all racism should be eschewed and the opponents should not be humiliated if one looks forward to a new and just society. I went out of the way to publicise and praise the contributions of Braam Fischer, Reverend Beyers Naude, Breyten Breytenbach and other Afrikaners who opposed apartheid.

Though the struggle for a non-racial society is not yet won, and many hurdles remain, I am convinced that the balance of forces has irreversibly changed and that no one can prevent the emergence of a democratic government in the near future. To facilitate this change, it is necessary not only to continue pressure on the present rulers but to reach the hearts of the millions of white people who have been poisoned by decades of privilege and racist propaganda.

I am glad that Nelson Mandela and other leaders have shown great statesmanship. I was particularly happy to read in his interview to *Rapport* on March 22nd:

"We want to transform Afrikaans from a language of oppression to a language of liberation..."

"Now, with the future ahead of us, we have to hold hands."

Those of us outside who have been active participants in the anti-apartheid struggle - especially India, which has played a crucial role in the solidarity movement - will need to make our contribution. It is in that context that I decided to make the gesture of paying homage to the Boer war heroes. Officials of the Indian government showed no hesitation in assisting me to visit Ambala.

As a student of history, I feel that as racism recedes we will find much that links India and Afrikaners. The blood of thousands of Indians - many from my own part of India - brought to South Africa in the 17th and 18th centuries, and enslaved in the Cape, runs in the veins of hundreds of thousands of Afrikaners. Even their language was partly a gift of people from Asia.

I have no hesitation in honouring the genuine heroes of the Afrikaners and other whites in South Africa. And I hope that they will reciprocate, in 1993, by honouring Mahatma Gandhi, who has left a precious heritage for South Africa, on the centenary of his arrival in South Africa. I hope that they will pay homage to the great Chief Albert Luthuli on the 25th anniversary of his death on July 21 this year. And I trust that they will at last think of building a monument to the tens of thousands of Africans who suffered in concentration camps as much as the Boer "refugees" in the South African War.

NOTE

J.L.P. ERASMUS - A BOER PRISONER OF WAR IN INDIA

One of the Boer prisoners of war in India during the South African War of 1899-1902 was Commandant J. L. P. Erasmus, a Johannesburg solicitor from a prominent Afrikaner family. While a prisoner of war at Cape Town, he read a book on "Oriental Spiritism and Occultism" and wished to visit India. As fate would have it, his wish was fulfilled and the visit took place as a "guest of Her Majesty". He was among a group of over 700 POWs sent to India in October 1901 and housed in a military camp at Shahjehanpur.

In February 1902, he was transferred with a dozen "irreconcilables" to Amritsar and detained in Fort Gobindgarh. When peace was declared, the prisoners were allowed parole. Mr. Erasmus went to the Law Courts and met Sarandas Chopra, a barrister in Amritsar, who introduced him to friends, including several Brahmins, from whom he obtained religious literature.

He made a study of Hindu philosophy and in October-November, 1904, delivered a series of six lectures on "India: its religions and social history" before the Transvaal Philosophical Society.

M. K. Gandhi, then a fellow solicitor in Johannesburg, published the first lecture - on "the psychology of the *Bhagavad-Gita*" - in his weekly, *Indian Opinion*, on November 5, 1904. And he wrote in an editorial in *Indian Opinion* on January 25, 1905:

"Our readers are familiar with the lecture delivered by Mr. Erasmus before the Transvaal Philosophical Society some time ago, and which, so far as we are aware, has been published *in toto* only in this journal. It may not be amiss to briefly review this contribution to a correct knowledge of India.

"Mr. Erasmus is a Solicitor of long standing, practising in Johannesburg, and he was one of the commandants who were made prisoners during the late war, and sent to India with others. Few, indeed, could have turned their time to better account than Mr. Erasmus, who, student that he is, at once began to study India and things Indian, and was enchanted with its people and its ancient civilisation, literature and philosophy. We congratulate the Transvaal Philosophical Society on having induced Mr. Erasmus to give it the benefit of his knowledge. That a South African, and he, too, a Boer Commandant, should interest himself in Indian studies, is, to our mind, a happy augury for the future; and if we had more South Africans like him, we should hear very little indeed of anti-Indian agitation and anti-Indian prejudices..."