

The International Impact of the Boer War

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With hostilities in the Second South African War spanning the period from 1899 to 1902, with the result that Boer War centenaries have been falling thick and fast for the last couple of years, it is not altogether surprising that in recent times books on this conflict have been appearing at a furious rate. This latest offering is a collection of essays that examines, in various different ways, the international context of the fighting.

As with all such edited compendia, the main task facing the reviewer is to comment on the viability of the chosen theme, the quality of the chapters and the cohesion of the collection. As regards the first of these questions, there is no doubt whatsoever that the editor and contributors to this volume have hit upon an important topic. Over the last few years, a number of different scholars have explored various aspects of the international dynamic that surrounded the origins, course and consequences of the war fought between Britain and the two Afrikaner republics for supremacy in southern Africa. Thus, for example, in a recent volume by Apollon Davidson and Irina Filatova, the Russian perspective on the conflict has come under scrutiny.⁽¹⁾ In a similar vein, Richard B. Mulanax has performed a systematic examination of the outlook of the United States.⁽²⁾ While, in separate monographs, Harold Rosenbach and this reviewer have looked at Wilhelmine Germany's interest in South Africa.⁽³⁾ Furthermore, notable work has also appeared on the reactions the Boer War produced in various parts of the British Empire.⁽⁴⁾ However, despite all the scholarship taking place - and the list above is very far from being exhaustive - prior to the publication of this book, no attempt had been made to put these various international perspectives on the war together in a single volume. Given that by doing so, this collection opens up the possibility for all kinds of interesting

global comparisons and contrasts, it is clearly a valuable addition to the literature. On this basis alone, this new volume is to be greeted with enthusiasm.

Turning to the individual chapters, contributions are to be found on the war as seen from the perspective of each of the five European continental great powers, as well as from the standpoint of the two minor European powers most interested in the conflict, namely Portugal and the Netherlands. A further national perspective is provided by a chapter on the United States, a power whose rise to global significance had recently been made evident by her victory in the war with Spain. On top of this, there are four additional essays. One looks at the origins of the war. Another examines it in the context of Britain's imperial position. Yet another outlines the view held by British subjects resident at the key port of Delagoa Bay. And a final contribution charts the opinions of the German military advisor to the Ottoman Empire, Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz. Without exception, all the essays are clearly written, contain interesting ideas and are produced to a high standard. They do, however, differ a little in length and, also, in the degree and nature of the research upon which their conclusions are based. Thus, while some incorporate substantial archival investigations and are rich in new documentary citations (for example, the chapter by Roy Bridge on Austria-Hungary), others are interpretations/re-interpretations that seem to owe more to previously published material (for example, William Tilchin on the USA). This does not, however, detract from the strength or quality of a collection, the principal merit of which derives from the fact that it brings a range of international perspective on the Boer War together in the same place. In any event, the majority of the essays are strong on the historiography. And those not contributing much in the way of new archival material are often strongest in this respect. Their insights into the existing literature and their critiques of the various arguments and works on offer are definitely worth reading, even if, as in the case of the chapter by Tilchin, the major historiographic excursions are modestly tucked away in the endnotes.

As regards the question of cohesion, the volume is also strong in this respect, although this is an area where I have one minor reservation. That there is a common theme to the collection is not in any doubt. Admittedly, the various contributors interpret the idea of 'international impact' slightly differently, but the term, it must be admitted, is relatively elastic and lends itself to a variety of different emphases. Thus, that some of the authors are more inclined to stress public opinion and the reaction of the press, while others focus more on high politics and the operation of foreign policy, is a desirable reflection of the distinct national responses to the war in South Africa. A straightjacket would not have been appropriate here and the editor and contributors are right to have avoided unnecessary uniformity in this respect. Nevertheless, diversity does at times require some justification and it seems, to this reviewer at least, that there are three chapters that rest rather uneasily within the collection.

The first of these is Peter Henshaw's essay on the origins of the war. This, it must be said, is an excellent piece that mixes a clear synthesis of existing arguments with some of its author's own original work in this area. However, for all its many qualities, there is a necessary distinction between the origins of a war and the impact it has on global affairs once the fighting begins. Given that this essay is immediately followed by eight chapters on different countries' responses to the conflict, this contribution on the war's genesis looks a little out of place here.

A similar point could be made, albeit for different reasons, with respect to Sandra Ferreira's chapter on the British community in Delagoa Bay. This is a simulating and well-researched contribution to the scholarship that has much to commend it. However, it differs markedly from the nine chapters that precede it, being concerned with neither the opinion nor the reaction of a particular state, but rather with a small British community in Portuguese colonial Africa. While not suggesting that the state is the only unit worth evaluating in international affairs, the inclusion of just a single chapter looking at the behaviour of a small local enclave in a volume otherwise mainly concerned with the responses of entire countries makes this chapter a noticeable oddity. Had there been further essays on the reactions of other local communities, then the critical mass would have existed to claim that this book looked at the international impact of the Boer War at both the macro (state) and micro (local) levels. However, a single chapter on a locality does not really allow this to be stated with any conviction. Rather, it hints at possibilities that the volume does not go on to develop.

Finally, there is Feroz Yasamee's exploration of the views of Colmar von der Goltz. This chapter is truly fascinating and thoroughly deserves to be published, but one wonders if this is the most appropriate place for it. Goltz was an interesting figure, who, it would seem, was genuinely influenced by the Boer War. However, with so much of this volume focusing on particular national responses, to include one solitary chapter where the perspective of a single individual is considered, seems - as with Ferreira's chapter - to buck the trend. On what basis was Goltz chosen as the sole individual to be profiled? Is he representative of individuals in general? Or is he the token individual? Does he substitute for a chapter on the Ottoman Empire? With no clear answers to these questions, the chapter feels - like the two others just mentioned - out of place.

The inclusion of these three chapters invites a couple of further questions. The first of these concerns the topics left out of the collection. Given the emphasis in the volume on the distinct responses of various different states, a chapter on Japan - a rising power, a colonial nation, and, shortly after the war's close, a British ally - would have fitted well within the established parameters of the volume. So, too, would chapters on such key constituents of the British Empire as Canada and Australia. Inevitably with edited collections, space and the availability of contributors are major issues, but one wonders, nevertheless, why essays on the origins of the war, on Britons living at Delagoa Bay and on Colmar von der Goltz were preferred to these more obvious alternatives. The second question concerns the underpinnings of the book. Having decided to include these three chapters, it seems to me that more should have been done to justify this to the reader. The logical place for this would have been in the introduction, the arena where the editor of a compendium can set out the rationale for the volume, explain its structure, and detail the themes that link the chapters together. However, this approach was not the one adopted here. Rather, the introduction to this volume, written by the eminent historian of Wilhelmine Germany, Professor Wolfgang Mommsen, offers a highly interesting commentary on the book, but one that, by definition, is Mommsen's own perspective rather than a guide to the intentions and ideas of the editor. Mommsen's views are, of course, interesting and informative - readers are reminded, for example, that he believes that Germany's leaders began the First World War 'against their own better judgement' (p.7), a point brought rather ingeniously into a discussion of the Boer War! - but the latter would have been useful as well. If not provided in the introduction, perhaps Keith Wilson might have offered some explanatory remarks, either directly following from Mommsen's commentary or, alternatively, at the end of the volume as a conclusion. That this is not done is in no sense a serious blemish on the volume, but it would have been a helpful addition.

Such minor reservations aside, it should be said that the overriding impression that one gets from this volume is of sustained scholarship within a coherent framework. While quibbles can be raised as to the choice of topics included and/or excluded, this is nevertheless a useful work that combines in a single accessible package a range of high quality essays that do genuinely help to clarify the international aspects of the Second South African War. The fact that it is available in paperback is also to be commended.

Notes

1. Apollon Davidson & Irina Filatova, *The Russians and the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1998).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Richard B. Mulanax, *The Boer War in American Politics and Diplomacy* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Harold Rosenbach, *Das Deutsche Reich, Großbritannien und der Transvaal (1896-1902)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993); Matthew S. Seligmann, *Rivalry in Southern Africa, 1893-99: The Transformation of German Colonial Policy* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Works on Canada seem especially prolific. See, for example, Carman Miller, *Painting the Map Red: Canada and the South African War, 1899-1902* (Montreal: Canadian War Museum & McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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