

**Land, labour, war and displacement: A history  
of four black concentration camps in the  
South African War (1899-1902)**

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**Abstract**

From the outset of the South African War both the British and Boer forces deliberately and directly targeted civilians during their military operations, thus heralding a harbinger of twentieth century “total war”. Well established in the historiography are the camps established by the British for internment of the Boers, later known as concentration camps. Less known are the so-called “native” refugee camps, which functioned as forced wartime labour camps, and are today known as black concentration camps. Although civilian internment was not genocidal by design and purpose, the high loss of life and bitterness among the Boer descendants shaped the political narrative of twentieth century South Africa. Yet the black forced labour camps were far more lethal and designed along a completely different model to those where the Boers were interned. The memory of this experience has only in the last two decades entered historical discourse about the conflict, however. This article examines those camps which interned black civilians at Orange River Station, Taung, Vryburg and Brussels Siding. Situated approximately 300 kms apart at their southern and most northerly points, the sites of these camps were first identified by the author in the period from 2001 to 2008.

**Key words:** South African War; black concentration camps; forced labour camps; Orange River Station Concentration Camp; Taung Concentration Camp; Vryburg Concentration Camp; Brussels Siding Concentration Camp; Dry Harts.

**Opsomming**

Van die aanvang van die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog het beide die Britse en Boeremagte gedurende hul militêre operasies doelbewus en direk die burgerlike bevolking geteiken, en dus op hierdie wyse twintigste-eeuse “totale oorlog” vooruitgeloop. Boere-inteneringskampe, later bekend as konsentrasiekampe, is al goed gevestig in

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die historiografie. Minder bekend is die naturelle vlugtelingskampe wat as gedwonge oorlogsarbeidskampe gefungeer het, en wat vandag bekend staan as swart konsentrasiekampe. Alhoewel burgerinternering nie bedoel of ontwerp was vir volksmoord nie, het die hoë lewensverlies en bitterheid onder die Boere se afstammelinge die politieke narratief van Suid-Afrika in die twintigste eeu beïnvloed. Die swart gedwonge-arbeidskampe was in teenstelling tot die Boerekampe baie meer dodelik, en op 'n totaal ander model gegrond. Nogtans het die herinnering aan hierdie ondervinding slegs in die afgelope twee dekades die historiese diskopers binnegedring. Hierdie artikel ondersoek daardie kampe waar swart burgerlikes by Oranjerivierstasie, Taung, Vryburg en Brusselslyn geïnterneer is. Die ligging van hierdie kampe, wat ongeveer 300 km van die suidelike tot die mees noordelike punte geleë is, is eers tussen 2001 en 2008 by die skrywer geïdentifiseer.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog; swart konsentrasiekampe; gedwonge-arbeidskampe; Oranjerivierstasie-konsentrasiekamp; Taung-konsentrasiekamp; Vryburg-konsentrasiekamp; Brusselslyn-konsentrasiekamp; Dry Harts.

### Introduction

Although much has been written about the Boer concentration camps of the South African War, it is only in the last 30 years that scholarly work has started to examine the experience of black civilians in concentration camps. Much of the recent literature adopts a macro approach to the camp system, with little work done around specific case studies. This article examines four specific sites of black civilian internment in camps that functioned as forced wartime camps, also known more widely in the literature as concentration camps. The aim is to demonstrate that the experience of black civilians was fundamentally different to that of interned Boer civilians, a crucial point being that unlike Boer civilians, black civilians were coerced into providing forced wartime labour.

### Conventional warfare and the transition to British military retaliation against civilians

From the outbreak of war in October 1899 and until mid-1900, military operations involved conventional battles, fought between the republican forces of the South African Republic and Free State Republic (the Boers) and British imperial forces. By March 1900 the British forces invaded the Boer republics. Their strategy for defeating the Boer forces hinged on capturing key towns, consolidating their supply lines around South Africa's railway network, reopening the gold, diamond and coal mines, restoring food production, and mopping up any remaining resistance.

By June 1900, the Boer capital cities and numerous towns were occupied by the British but the British military maintained a somewhat tenuous control over the railway infrastructure. This was their main logistic route from the coastal ports and the railway system had to be secured for it ran through countryside in which the Boer forces remained unbeaten.

The Boer commandos adopted guerrilla warfare tactics and attacked the railway infrastructure relentlessly. Support, supplies and morale which underpinned their fighting resolve were Boer civilians residing on farms and in small towns. To counter an escalating guerrilla war, Field Marshal Lord F.S. Roberts implemented a counter guerrilla warfare strategy. This was based on economic and military retaliation by attacking property and livestock belonging to civilians who were believed to be assisting the commandos. Homes near the railway infrastructure that had been targeted or homes where able bodied men were absent and presumed to be serving with the commandos were destroyed, being burnt down or destroyed with explosives.<sup>1</sup>

These reprisals affected both the Boer and black population and their livestock which was their wealth and assets was seized or killed. Many destitute civilians handed themselves over to the British forces who interned them into what were initially described as refugee camps, set up near military garrisons. During the final quarter of 1900, British forces were systematically rounding up and transporting civilians to garrisoned towns and outposts positioned along the railway lines.

#### **Developing a systematic concentration camp policy**

In November 1900, Lord Kitchener succeeded Lord Roberts as commander-in-chief and immediately embarked upon a far more ruthless counter guerrilla warfare strategy than Roberts. To crush Boer resistance, he sought to exert force dominance over the rural landscape and applied a systematic scorched earth policy throughout the republics. He used a military strategy like that of General V. Weyler during the Cuban War of 1868-1878 and again during the insurrection of 1895-1898 when General Weyler developed the Reconcentrado system.

The aim was literally to scour the landscape, remove all life-sustaining means and flush out the Boer commandos into forced engagements. These tactics were also intended as a Boer morale breaker, because by destroying homes, bankrupting civilians and then interning them, the commando's morale would be broken. In Army Circular 29, Kitchener spelled out his counter guerrilla warfare strategy:

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1. G. Benneyworth, "The Department of Native Refugee Camps: A Historical Overview", 2006, available online at [https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/library-resources/articles\\_papers/refugee%20camps.htm](https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/library-resources/articles_papers/refugee%20camps.htm) Accessed 27 April 2019.

Of the various methods suggested for the accomplishment of this object, one that has been strongly recommended, and has lately been successfully tried on a small scale, is the removal of all men, women and children and natives from districts which the enemy persistently occupy. This course has been pointed out ... as the most effective method of limiting the endurance of the Guerrillas.<sup>2</sup>

Kitchener applied three tactics to crush ongoing Boer military resistance and force their surrender. Simultaneous with the forced removals, land clearances and destruction of all rural infrastructure was the securing of the railway network with the construction of at least 8 000 fortifications known as blockhouses. This fortification network was then extended into the countryside to fence in the fighting terrain, thus reducing the Boer forces' zones of influence and operational fluidity. These military grids literally parcelled up the fighting terrain. Superior numbers of troops then asserted force dominance; engaging and grinding down the weakened Boer forces, culminating in their surrender during May 1902.<sup>3</sup> On 15 March 1901 Kitchener clarified his aims:

All natives living on farms should be collected and sent to the railway; if possible household natives should be permitted to accompany families or sent to the same station. Supplies found on the farms should be sent in with the natives to feed them until their arrival at the railway. Additional supplies should be taken by the supply officers and the remainder destroyed. All standing crops are to be destroyed either by turning cattle into them or by burning. All forage is to be destroyed.<sup>4</sup>

The civilians in the former Boer republics then experienced the full impact of Kitchener's strategy, today known as "total war". They were removed forcibly from their homes and farms and in what is described as a scorched earth policy their settlements and crops were burnt and livestock seized or killed. Numerous towns were either totally or partially destroyed. Total war shattered the rural economy, resulting in starvation and a humanitarian crisis. Displaced and captured civilians were taken to military-managed internment camps inside the military controlled zones near towns, mines and railways sidings. The camps were known initially as refugee camps and later as concentration camps.

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2. National Archives of South Africa (hereafter NASA), Military Governor Pretoria (hereafter MGP): Army Circular 29, 21 December 1900.
3. G. Benneyworth, "Traces of Forced Labour: A History of Black Civilians in British Concentration Camps during the South African War, 1899–1902", PhD thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2018, p 70, available online at <http://etd.uwc.ac.za/xmlui/handle/11394/5466> Accessed 20 February 2019.
4. Free State Archives Repository (hereafter FA), Lord H. Kitchener, Circular Memorandum No. 31, 15 March 1901.

The army separated civilians according to race and established separate camps for Boer and black civilians. British policy dictated that black civilians were not officially rationed, nor provided with adequate medical support and building materials to build shelters. This policy aimed to reduce the financial cost of the war, despite the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe. The policy sought to compel black civilians to provide labour in exchange for rations. Rationing was to be manipulated to coerce labour.<sup>5</sup> Kitchener's policy was in line with colonial military policy of doing the bare minimum for enemy civilians who were to be managed (or mismanaged) along the basis of "let die".<sup>6</sup>

Inside the camps black women, men and children exchanged labour for food. Some sought work from the British troops and administrators of the Boer camps where work was rewarded with tinned meat, or discarded scraps. Other avenues of coerced employment were on the mines or with the British forces in operational roles. By early 1901, starvation, infectious diseases, exposure and malnutrition in the black internment camps increased. Those who arrived with cash or cattle attempted to avoid labour and maintain a level of self-sufficiency, however this was eroded with time.

#### **The Native Refugee Department, 1901-1902**

A key objective of the alliance between the British political, military and capital structures was to restore economic activity through gold, coal and diamond mining production, which was curtailed during the initial phase of the war. On 4 May 1901, the first gold mine reopened in Johannesburg. During May 1901, the military and the diamond mines in Kimberley finalised arrangements to increase diamond mining operations by coercing labour through the "no work no food policy".

The Native Refugee Department, which fell under direct British military command, was formed at that time to administer all interned black refugees; its commanding officer was Captain G.F. de Lobtiniere of the Royal Engineers. One of the department's key aims was to underwrite the British war effort, reduce the financial cost of the war and redirect labour to the army and the mines. By July 1901, the Transvaal camps fell under its control and by 1 August 1901, camps in the former Orange Free State followed. Military officers selected the camp sites, with assistance from agricultural specialists attached to the department. Camps were located on Boer farms already cleared of civilians, usually no further than two miles from established

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- 5. B. Nasson, "Black People and the Camps", in B. Nasson and A.M. Grundlingh, *The War at Home* (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 2013), p 176.
- 6. R. Chickering, "Total War: The Use and Abuse of a Concept", in M.F. Boemke, R. Chickering and S. Forster (eds), *Anticipating Total War: The American and German Experiences, 1871-1914* (Cambridge University Press, Washington DC and Cambridge: German Historical Institute, 1994), pp 13-28.

military garrisons on terrain favourable for natural drainage, near natural water supplies and on fertile agricultural ground.

Kitchener's policy was that black refugees were to grow food for the army departments and pay for their food. If they refused they were to starve.<sup>7</sup> This "no work, no food", or "work or starve" policy coerced the women, children and elderly men to cultivate crops on the department's farms. Those who worked could purchase maize and those who refused paid double the price. Or starved.

The interned civilians were then used as wartime forced agricultural labourers. The Native Refugee Department also functioned as a labour reserve for the British Army.<sup>8</sup> By positioning these camps along the railway lines, this in turn helped secure the military infrastructure by supporting the blockhouse networks, making it difficult for the commandos to cross the lines and manoeuvre their forces. With thousands of hectares of land under agriculture, the camps reinforced the British military zones while further functioning as a morale breaker, as most of the camps were located on former Boer farms. From the perspective of the commandos it appeared that their land was lost.<sup>9</sup>

The total number of fatalities inside the Native Refugee Department camps will never be known. Recently, scholars relying only on surviving archival documentation calculated approximately 20 000 deaths.<sup>10</sup> However, due to incomplete and in many cases non-existent British records the death toll was certainly higher.

#### **Orange River Station, Taung, Vryburg and Brussels Siding: four Native Refugee Department Camps**

This section provides a history of these four camps for which no history exists other than research contained in a PhD thesis submitted in 2018.<sup>11</sup> It is a micro study, which through these four case studies, offers insight into the macro-picture of scorched earth, land clearances and the interrelated black civilian internment and forced labour inside the camps. The methodology for recovering this history was by

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- 7. NASA, MGP, 245, Military Governor Pretoria to Major Armstrong, 27 May 1901.
- 8. NASA, Transvaal Administration Reports, Final Report 1901; and NASA, Superintendent Refugee Camps (hereafter SRC): 10, 3422, 1 July 1901.
- 9. G. Benneyworth, "Traces and Memory of African Forced Labour Camps during the South African War (1899–1902)", in J. de Hasque and C. Lecadet (eds), *Après Les Camps. Traces, mémoires et mutations des camps de réfugiés* (Academia-L'Harmattan, Belgium Louvain-La-Neuve, 2019) p 39.
- 10. J. van Zyl, R. Constantine and T. Pretorius, *An Illustrated History of Black South Africans in the Anglo-Boer War: A Forgotten History* (War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, 2012), p 10.
- 11. Benneyworth, "Traces of Forced Labour", pp 204–223.

using the written archive, archaeology and field surveys and, in the case of Vryburg, oral history and memory.

This methodological approach demonstrates that it is possible to recover such a history beyond the limitations of the written archive. In particular, field work and archaeological surface surveys provide additional kinds of evidence, especially with regard to the Taung camp for which there is virtually no written archive, given that the camp there existed only for a brief time.<sup>12</sup> The documentary sources of the Taung camp death statistics tell a fraction of the story and an examination of the burial site revealed the evidence of unrecorded catastrophe. This article demonstrates that, as with many of the initial internment camps, with the creation of the Native Refugee Department, the camps detailed here eventually became forced labour camps. It also shows that the camp at Vryburg remained self-supporting and did not at any stage fall under the Department, although in May 1902 a portion of the refugees were sent to Brussels Siding to form a forced labour camp.

In the case of Orange River Station Camp, the primary source of archival information, but one that provides only limited insight, is in the FK collection in the National Archives of South Africa. An indication of camp refugee numbers and the camps' possible position on the terrain is found in the Free State Archives, Colonial Office collection. To date, the historic site of this camp has not been located.

The camp at Taung was initially a refugee camp and then a department camp. The military garrison had oversight of this camp before it was taken over by the Native Refugee Department to become a forced labour camp. The department's aim was agricultural labour and the records reflect that attempts were made in this direction. Although no direct evidence exists that ploughing and planting occurred, it is likely, because a no work no food policy was employed.

The primary source material for constructing a history of the black refugees in Vryburg is archival material, and terrain surveys undertaken during 2001 to 2008; and an oral history collection housed at the University of Witwatersrand.<sup>13</sup> Information about the Brussels Forced Labour Camp is in the Colonial Office files in the Free State Archives, Bloemfontein.

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12. Discussed in detail in Benneyworth, "Traces of Forced Labour", pp 204–223.

13. Benneyworth, "Traces of Forced Labour", pp 204–223.

### Orange River Station Native Refugee Camp

This camp had 1 237 internees when it was relocated to Dry Harts on or around 30 September 1901.<sup>14</sup> Given the high number of refugees in this camp, graves and surface evidence should exist. A bare minimum death rate of 10% of the total number of internees when the camp closed, namely 1 584, would indicate an approximate 154 fatalities. Ten percent is a very conservative estimate. The other option is that graves and archaeological surface evidence have been destroyed by the centre pivot mass irrigation systems that exist in the area. Alternatively, they may be known about, yet the landowners choose to remain silent.

As was the pattern throughout the fighting terrain, military columns dumped refugees approximately 1.6 km from military garrisons guarding railway terminuses. Consequently, there would have been refugees at Orange River Station throughout the first half of 1901. On 1 August 1901, the Orange River Colony's Native Refugee Department was formed and the camp came under the control of the Native Refugee Department.<sup>15</sup> Major General G.T. Pretzman who commanded the Kimberley garrison and whose jurisdiction extended to Orange River Station, reported to H. Goold Adams, the deputy administrator of the Orange River Colony administration, that the handover had occurred and that the population was increasing at the camp.<sup>16</sup>

Rationing, as always with the camps, was a life or death issue. On 12 September 1901, a Mr Lilinfeld of Messrs Champion & Co, the contractors who supplied the camps, wired Bloemfontein from Orange River Station that the controller of supplies at Kimberley would not permit grain supplies to be sent south. Instead he wanted King Williamstown to expedite a supply northwards. Champion indicated that the corn meal supplies at Orange River Station would last another three days but that grain would not be there by then.<sup>17</sup> It appears that Captain Lobtiniere arranged with Messrs Lawrence & Co in Kimberley to solve the problem, instructing them to immediately provide the Native Refugee Camp at Orange River Station with half a truck of grain as an interim measure until stocks from the coast arrived.<sup>18</sup>

During August and September 1901, a British column was active with land clearances and scorched earth in the Koffiefontein district, so it can be assumed that

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- 14. De Beers Consolidated Mines Archives, Kimberley: 9054 Native Camps and Natives Generally, Box 2/1/36, Reference E.
- 15. NASA, Superintendent Native Affairs (hereafter SNA): 13. Captain de Lotbiniere to Sir Godfrey Lagden, Commissioner for Native Affairs, Johannesburg, 13 January 1902.
- 16. FA, SRC, 10, Reference 3933, 1 August 1901.
- 17. FA, Colonial Office (hereafter CO): 34, Telegram/3259/01.
- 18. FA, CO, 34, Telegram/3259/01.

black refugees from this district were sent to Orange River Station.<sup>19</sup> On 4 August 1901, 46 refugees were brought in by Colonel J. Byng's column and 14 more refugees arrived on 14 August 1901.<sup>20</sup> On 12 August 1901, 101 refugees arrived at Orange River Station from Modder River Station, having been forcibly removed from the Jacobsdal magisterial district. On 14 August 1901, 150 Boer refugees and 11 black refugees were brought in by Colonel H. Plummer's column.<sup>21</sup> They also originated from the Jacobsdal magisterial district, because that was where Colonel H. Plummer was engaged with land clearances at the time.<sup>22</sup>

The FK collection refers to the arrival of 275 Boer refugees on 15 August 1901, from Windserton Road and on 16 August 1901, 31 Boer refugees were brought in from the Fauresmith district. On 17 August 1901, 38 Boer refugees arrived from Luckhoff, on 18 August 1901, five Boers and one black refugee arrived from Wolwekraal. The report does not specify if any black refugees were brought with them, but the reference to Fauresmith and Luckhoff identifies that black refugees at Orange River Station Native Refugee Camp would have originated from those districts. Wolwekraal would refer to a farm.

On 18 August 1901, a new Camp Superintendent arrived from Bloemfontein and took charge of the camp. On 24 September 1901, 347 refugees were railed to Dry Harts, where there a forced labour camp was being established.<sup>23</sup> On 30 September 1901, 1 237 refugees comprising 210 families were still in the camp.<sup>24</sup> They were all relocated to Dry Harts, presumably during late October 1901, because the camp return shows no refugee numbers listed. They disembarked at Taung where they were held until November 1901 and were then routed to Dry Harts when that camp opened later that month. However, the October 1901 report records that mealie meal was purchased for the camp at 25 shillings per bag of 91 kg (200 lbs), presumably earlier in the month.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Taung Native Refugee Camp**

The earliest archival reference to black refugees being interned at Taung was dated 19 August 1901. Two hundred black refugee families were interned at Taung and the commandant of the garrison wired Vryburg for rations to feed them. Taking the average of families to total numbers, this means that the refugee population was

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- 19. NASA, FK, 1822, Staff Diary Jacobsdal, 27 August 1901; and Staff Diary Orange River Station, 24 September 1901.
- 20. NASA, FK, 1817, Staff Diary Jacobsdal, August 1901.
- 21. NASA, FK, 1817, Staff Diary Orange River Station, 21 August 1901.
- 22. NASA, FK, 1817, Staff Diary Orange River Station, 21 August 1901.
- 23. NASA, FK, 1822, Staff Diary Orange River Station, 24 September 1901.
- 24. NASA, CO, 36, Reference 3481/01.
- 25. NASA, CO, 36, Reference 3481/01.

between 1 000 to 1 200 people, brought in by one of the columns then sweeping the western Transvaal.<sup>26</sup>

On 26 August 1901, the Taung commandant issued rations to the black civilians brought from the Transvaal by General Lord P.S. Methuen's column.<sup>27</sup> These civilians are presumed to be the 200 families referred to a week earlier, because the Commandant's diary makes no mention of new arrivals in the interim. The fact that it took a week to obtain authority to feed them is indicative of the condition they would have been in. Displaced, forcibly removed and traumatised by the violence they had experienced, and without food for a week once in camp, speaks for itself.

The impact of the scorched earth campaign across the Transvaal border was clearly devastating. Commandant Tollie de Beer of the Schweizer Reineke commando attempted to smuggle 30 bags of grain into the Taung Native Reserve where it could be concealed from the British columns clearing his district. However, the Taung commandant intercepted this on 29 August 1901.<sup>28</sup>

In September 1901, the Taung commandant's diary provides some information about the refugees' living conditions; where they were located; the fact that they were under the formal control of the Native Refugee Department; and the use of black male labour by the military. There are references to 30 black men being sent to the Army Transport Department as military labourers.<sup>29</sup>

The commandant's records also show the confusion of logistics, for example, on 4 September 1901, when 4 536 kg (10 000 lbs) of flour were loaded into a train truck and railed to the officer commanding supplies at Vryburg. On 20 September 1901, this exact amount of flour was railed back to Taung, offloaded and handed over to the bread contractor.<sup>30</sup> This is a substantial amount of flour for a small garrison guarding the station, which is indicative that additional people needed feeding – perhaps the significant number of black refugees at Taung.

On 7 September 1901, the commandant "... interviewed Mr Dent, inspector re native refugees. Mr McKenzie Assistant Native Administrator arrived to choose suitable spots for cultivation, etc".<sup>31</sup> This reference is the first and only one found in the archives which indicates that, as of that date, the aim of the Native Refugee Department was to form a forced labour camp at Taung based on agricultural labour.

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- 26. NASA, FK, 1813, Staff Diary Taung, 30 August 1901.
- 27. NASA, FK, 1813, Staff Diary Taung, 30 August 1901.
- 28. NASA, FK, 1813, Staff Diary Taung, 30 August 1901.
- 29. NASA, FK, 1822, Staff Diary Taung, 28 September 1901.
- 30. NASA, FK, 1825, Staff Diary Taung, 28 September 1901; and Staff Diary Vryburg, 10 September 1901.
- 31. NASA, FK, 1825, Staff Diary Taung, 7 September 1901.

The Department's printed camp return reports until April 1902 all have Taung printed as a camp yet nothing is filled in except for the month ending October 1901. The majority of refugees at Taung came from Orange River Station and Kimberley and all refugees in the camp were routed to Dry Harts in November 1901. On 12 September 1901, the commandant noted:

Had meeting of Chiefs and Headman [sic] and instructed them to place all Transvaal refugees in middle of Reserve and have them closely watched also to report immediately the arrival or departure of stock from Reserve. Also made arrangements with them re immediately reporting of Intelligence.<sup>32</sup>

This reference is the only clue on the position of the Taung Native Refugee Camp, and informed a terrain audit on where to look for evidence on the ground. In 2001, the author identified a burial site in the exact area described in the archival reference; this was where the camp existed at one time in its brief history.<sup>33</sup> The graves are laid out in rows and are heavily overgrown with thorn bushes, making an accurate count impossible. Numbers were estimated to be about 600 at least. Discussions with various elders in the adjacent settlement were unproductive; local people have no knowledge of who is buried there.

The approximate area of this burial site is 1 233 square meters (one acre), which if correct makes it the same size as the Dry Harts Native Refugee Camp burial site. Therefore, it could possibly have as many as 2 000 graves.<sup>34</sup> The minimum possible burial area is 2 800 square metres. The ratio based on Dry Harts is 500 burials to every 1 000 square metres or a quarter acre. This means that between 1 400 to 2 000 people perished at Taung, which has escaped the written archive. This calculation of the burial site at Dry Harts is based on archaeological surveys undertaken by the author in the period from 2001 to 2008.<sup>35</sup>

There are no deaths recorded in any of the archival sources consulted for the period prior to October 1901. The camp return for the month of October 1901 lists refugee numbers as 632 men, 1 184 women, and 1 633 children, giving a total of 3 449 people. Deaths are recorded as 10 men, 11 women and 63 children.<sup>36</sup> Given the number of graves on the terrain (as with Dry Harts) this total number of recorded deaths needs to be treated with circumspection. When the camp's total population is viewed against its population for September 1901, this means that that approximately 2 849 refugees were brought into the Taung Refugee Camp during

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- 32. NASA, FK, 1825, Staff Diary Taung, 12 September 1901.
- 33. NASA, FK, 1825, Staff Diary Taung, 12 September 1901.
- 34. Benneyworth, "Traces of Forced Labour", p 204.
- 35. Benneyworth, "Traces of Forced Labour", p 200.
- 36. FA, CO, 36, Reference 3481/01, Native Refugee Department ORC, Return for month of October 1901.

October 1901. There is no camp return for November 1901 meaning that the internees were relocated to Dry Harts during that month.

### **Vryburg Refugee Camp and Brussels Siding Forced Labour Camp**

Vryburg is among the earliest, if not one of the first towns where refugees arrived willingly to avoid the British scorched earth policy; others were also forcibly removed and taken to Vryburg. Soon after the refugee camp was opened, black refugees sought shelter with their livestock to escape the fighting in the western Transvaal and surrounds. Kessler states: "If this camp was in existence in early 1900 it would be one of the first black camps of the war."<sup>37</sup> Vryburg was never an official native refugee camp or forced labour camp run by the Native Refugee Department, which makes its profile unique.

An article in the *Bechuanaland News*, dated 15 December 1900, refers to black refugees in Vryburg.<sup>38</sup> However the Vryburg Council's minute book records the earliest date when refugees arrived as October 1900. On the 30 October 1900, the Vryburg Municipal Council approved the issuing of permits by the town clerk, permitting refugees to graze their stock at no charge on the council commonage surrounding the town. The council agreed to review this situation during their next meeting, after a month's time.<sup>39</sup>

Refugee numbers increased and by December 1900, the town's surrounds were filling up with more and more black refugees and their stock. A local newspaper reported that "a stranger ... passing through the streets for the first time might be excused ... for supposing that he had stumbled into a large native location".<sup>40</sup> On 8 December 1900, the *Bechuanaland News* reported that the refugees had considerable numbers of stock with them.<sup>41</sup>

In December 1900, the council revoked their October 1900 decision and decreed that all black refugees should pay grazing fees, so as to encourage them to leave town. They paid the grazing fees, as having fled the perils of the rural battleground and the ongoing scorched earth campaign, why would they return into the fighting zones?<sup>42</sup> This shows that the refugees had sufficient resources to pay

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37. S. Kessler, *The Black Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902* (War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein, 2012), p 81.

38. P. Warwick, *Black People and the South African War, 1899–1902* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1983), p 154.

39. Vryburg Public Library, Vryburg Municipal Council Minute Book, 30 October 1900.

40. South African Library, Cape Town, *Bechuanaland News*, 15 December 1900.

41. South African Library, *Bechuanaland News*, 8 December 1900.

42. South African Library, *Bechuanaland News*, 15 December 1900.

their way. This self-sufficiency is borne out in a column dated 15 December 1900 when the *Bechuanaland News* opined:

The sole business of the women and girls seems to be to promenade, and the men and boys are apparently deeply engaged in trying to discover what is the most comfortable position to lie down in. They are refugees – poor things! But they will not work. As a matter of fact, there is no reason why the native refugees should work. They are well off. They have cattle, they have flocks of sheep and goats, they have cash in their pockets.<sup>43</sup>

Water has always been a problem for Vryburg. Over the course of 1901, new arrivals of both black and Boer refugees strained the town's water supplies. During October 1901, parties of soldiers dug for water on the east side of the railway line close to where the black refugees were assembled.<sup>44</sup> In November 1901, the superintendent of the Boer camp offered to clean the water furrows running from Zwartfontein farm where the town received its water supply for a distance of 914 meters, provided the council did the rest. It was hoped that this would improve the flow of water to the camp. The council refused, and instructed the superintendent not to use the water because it was for the town's use only.<sup>45</sup>

The Maine family's experience speaks of the horrific experiences of black civilians who suffered the consequences of the scorched earth policy and the British land clearance tactics in the region. In the period from 1979 to 1981, interviews were conducted with Kas Maine as part of a research project undertaken by the Institute for Advanced Social Science of the University of the Witwatersrand. Charles van Onselen later used these interviews in his book on Kas Maine's life, *The Seed is Mine* (1996).

Kas Maine was born before the rinderpest outbreak, in 1896. Maine, then five years old, vividly recalls the destruction unleashed on his family by the war.<sup>46</sup> His father, Sekwale, was conscripted as an *agterryer*, when the Bloemhof commando mobilised in October 1899, and drew in the men from the Schweizer Reinecke district, under Commandant Tollie de Beer. *Agterryers* were black men who were conscripted as auxiliaries into the Boer commandos. Some joined voluntarily and many came from the nearby farms where they had worked as labourers. While Sekwale senior was on commando, the British troops arrived at Holpan near Schweizer Reineke. Maine recalls:

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43. South African Library, *Bechuanaland News*, 15 December 1900.  
44. Vryburg Public Library, Vryburg Municipal Council Minute Book, October 1901.  
45. Vryburg Public Library, Vryburg Municipal Council Minute Book, 1900.  
46. Institute for Advanced Social Science, University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter Wits), AG 2738 / A5R. File 37, Interview with Kas Maine, conducted by Charles van Onselen, Ledig, Rustenburg, 21 November 1979, p 7.

My father was away fighting in the war, when the English burnt the crops, the village and took everything to [Madibogo]. We left the village when my father was involved in the war. Yes, he was at Skolsnek when the English soldiers burnt the village and took us away. When we were there a serious famine broke out. We were at Vryburg then. The famine was so serious that we ate barley which was used to feed horses. That was our food. Yes, barley, we cooked and ate it ... My brother was thrown to Taung by the war...The people at Taung were told to come and identify their relatives who came from the Transvaal. She [his mother] identified him, took him away and he stayed with them. There was a shortage of food ... My father had few livestock, but they multiplied before the Anglo-Boer War. Now during the Anglo Boer War at Mimosa [Schweizer Reineke], many of my father's cattle were killed by the Boers and the English soldiers. Hee! Monna (Man) war is cruel. People were taken by contract. My father and others were driven by ox-wagons to the war at Skols Nek.<sup>47</sup>

He continues his reminiscences telling of the scorched earth policy and its effect on African people:

Do you know what we ate during the war? Do you know "Gars" the things fed to horses? "Gars" the things fed to horses, were our food. We ground them up and ate them. Niks without anything. Many cattle died, the English killed them. They even burnt the crops stored in "disho". Houses too were burnt. It was those houses roofed with grass not zinc. They burnt everything so that the Boers should find any food...they burnt houses, crops and shot cattle so that there would not be any food.<sup>48</sup>

He goes on to testify about the horrors of forced removal:

They took us away in wagons drawn by mules. We travelled the whole night. My father's cattle were also driven too. Only one survived. Blom was its name, and it ran away when we arrived at Schweizer Reneke. They also took fowls, they dropped us at Vryburg, some were dropped at Taung, some at Mareetsane. They were separating the Black people from the Boers ...The British were not fighting the Blacks, they were fighting the Boers; and so that they might not have the Blacks, they destroyed everything. ... We ate livestock which had died on the way. They left us in Vryburg. We were crowded there at Vryburg, all the Blacks there were living on "Gars". We were helped by the old dwellers of that location [with accommodation and food].<sup>49</sup>

Maine's reference to this location had direct relevance for locating the terrain where these black refugees were congregated at Vryburg. They certainly would not have been allowed to settle around the perimeter of the town, as this would have presented the council with additional management problems with respect to water,

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47. Wits, A5R 2738/File 15, Interview with Kas Maine, 21 November 1979, p 7.

48. Wits, A5R 2738/File 15, Interview with Kas Maine, 21 November 1979, pp 8-9.

49. Wits, A5R 2738/File 15, Interview with Kas Maine, 21 November 1979, pp 9-10.

grazing, sanitation and security. Apart from which, the military garrison would not have allowed unsupervised refugees and their stock straying around the cleared zone, beyond their outposts and fortified positions after dark. They would have been consolidated into one designated area.

Maine refers to the location residents assisting the new arrivals. Evidence does indeed exist of black refugees being helped by residents of established settlements. It also reflects that the refugee camp and Vryburg Location were in close proximity to each other. Maine's recollection of the dwellers of the location already being there when he arrived is also correct; two separate archival references about the refugee camp are dated 28 September 1901. The second identifies exactly where the Native Refugee Camp was situated. The Vryburg commandant recorded that he:

Visited [the] Native refugee location with Town Clerk and decided to appoint an overseer at 5 shillings a day and to get the location into shape, with east boundary west fence of new cemetery and west boundary north and south in prolongation of street which passes west side of Vryburg hotel.<sup>50</sup>

On 24 May 2007, the author applied this reference to a map using the cemetery and the Vryburg Hotel as references and pinpointed the exact spot. The road alongside the hotel has been truncated by a golf course. The line of the road was traced southwards and the area which had been occupied by the camp was identified. A terrain inspection found it to be an open rectangular piece of impacted ground. My notebook refers:

We then proceeded to the area which was described in the archival reference as being where the Black Camp was situated. We walked the area behind the Police Station/ commando building and the nearby nursery. The area has been severely torn up as part of it was once used as a shooting range by the Vryburg commando, post-1961. Bully beef tins and other tin fragments were observed on the terrain. Our searches suggest that nothing remains of this Refugee Camp site. There is also no clear indication of a cemetery, which is not entirely surprising as the camp was situated close to the new cemetery and is also not far from Huhudi, where in 2001 we had been shown the possible position of a very old cemetery. We did however find some stone groupings not far from the nursery which might be graves.<sup>51</sup>

On 24 September 1901, the military commandant asserted that if natives who own stock "graze same outside protected area ... [and make] claims for loss of stock [such claims] will not be entertained".<sup>52</sup> In other words, stray beyond the perimeter at your own risk. This also indicates that these refugees had retained their stock and hence continued to support themselves. On 12 October 1901, measles was reported to have

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50. NASA, FK,1825, Staff Diary, Vryburg, 28 September 1901.

51. Author's collection.

52. NASA, FK, 1825, Staff Diary, Vryburg, 24 September 1901.

broken out in the native refugee camp. The *Bechuanaland News* commented that refugees in the Transvaal and Orange River Colonies were growing crops and suggested that Vryburg's refugees be encouraged to do the same.<sup>53</sup> However no evidence could be traced that they were forced to grow crops. It is feasible that the refugees grew vegetables on their own accord which would have improved their chances of self-sufficiency. The indication is that they remained self-supporting and were never incorporated into a camp controlled by the Native Refugee Department. Nor is Vryburg listed in the official monthly Native Refugee Department reports.

### **Forming the Brussels Native Refugee Camp**

By May 1902, water shortages at Vryburg were critical and the needs of black refugees always came second to the needs of the white civilian population. In early 1902, water was being piped from Zwartfontein farm to the Boer camp.<sup>54</sup> On 12 February 1902, the military governor at Pretoria instructed the officer commanding in Kimberley that:

One hundred refugees ordered here [Vryburg] from Kimberley should be detained if possible not enough water here following notice posted. People are requested to do as little washing as possible ... MGP 5244 reported that 100 refugees are ordered from Kimberley to Vryburg. Stop. Please state by whose orders there is great shortage of water at Vryburg Stop. If not sent detain them.<sup>55</sup>

That same day the military governor in Pretoria wired the deputy administrator in Bloemfontein:

Who is ordering Transvaal refugees now in ORC Camps back to Transvaal camps. Stop. 700 have now been taken into various camps 300 of which went to Vryburg which arrived at an inconvenient time. Stop. We have now in our camps some 900 ORC refugees which you should arrange to take over.<sup>56</sup>

Despite this, by 17 March 1902 a considerable number of black refugees were at Vryburg and numbers were expected increase due to the fighting in the western Transvaal.<sup>57</sup> The local council minutes reflect that during April 1902, the town and the Boer camp were experiencing severe water shortages. Although the military was laying more pipes from Zandfontein, the Boer camp superintendent informed the

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- 53. South African Library, *Bechuanaland News*, 28 September 1900.
- 54. Vryburg Public Library, Vryburg Municipal Council Minute Book, 19 May 1902.
- 55. NASA, MGP, 151, 2526 B/02, Correspondence from MGP to OC Kimberley, 12 February 1902.
- 56. NASA, MGP, 151, 2526 B/02, Correspondence from MGP to OC Kimberley, 12 February 1902.
- 57. FA, CO, 59, 766/02, 17 March 1902.

Vryburg mayor that this supply would be inadequate for the camp and that no water could be spared for the town inhabitants.<sup>58</sup>

On 1 April 1902, the general officer commanding at Kimberley, reported to the commander of the Lines of Communication in Cape Town, that there were 832 women and girls, and 229 men and boys, totalling 1 061 people at the Vryburg Native Refugee Camp.<sup>59</sup> This is the first reference to numbers in this self-supporting camp which means that a census was taken. Plans were afoot to remove the refugees to Brussels Siding.

On 23 May 1902, the black refugees in the Vryburg Location, were described as self-supporting. However, by desire of the military authorities, they were about to be moved out to a camp then being established at Brussels.<sup>60</sup> A handwritten document attached to this report lists the refugee numbers in camps operated by the Native Refugee Department based in Bloemfontein. The Vryburg Camp had a total population of 2 970 people. This tally reflects that during the period 1 April 1901 to 23 May 1902, the number of refugees in Vryburg grew from 1 061 to 2 970, which would exclude deaths and men who left the camp to work with the military.

The Native Refugee Department report for the month of June 1901 lists the Brussels Native Refugee Camp population as: 210 men, 445 women and 706 children, totalling 1 361 people. According to the report deaths for the month were one male, one female and one child.<sup>61</sup> This means that 1 609 people in the Vryburg Location were not forcibly relocated to Brussels Siding. There is no explanation in the archives as to why this was so, given that Vryburg's water shortages were the reason for creating a camp at Brussels Siding. One possibility is that the intention was to form the camp in two stages which did not occur because this camp was established in the final month of the war.

The Native Refugee Department report for the month of August 1902 lists the camp at Brussels Siding as having a population of: 131 men, 385 women and 554 children, totalling 1 070 people. Deaths for the month are given as five women and four children.<sup>62</sup> This reduction in numbers is indicative that approximately 530 internees had been repatriated to their place of origin.

The department's September 1902 report has no statistics for the Brussels camp meaning that the camp must have been vacated and closed in the course of that

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58. Western Cape Archives and Records Service (hereafter KAB), Resident Magistrate Vryburg, (hereafter VBG): 1/1/1/2.

59. FA, CO, 54, 326/02, 1 April 1902.

60. FA, CO, 54, 326/02, 23 May 1902.

61. FA, CO, 88, 2991/02, Native Refugee Department ORC, Return for month of June 1902.

62. FA, CO, 105, 4316/02, Native Refugee Department ORC, Return for month of August 1902.

month.<sup>63</sup> A comment on these statistics contained in these reports is that the Brussels Siding Native Refugee Camp existed for no longer than four months and it must be borne in mind that as was the case with the Dry Harts Native Refugee Camp, fatalities were very likely underreported.

To date, the exact site and burial area for the camp at Brussels Siding has not been identified. On 12 April 2008, fieldwork narrowed the search area down by locating one of the blockhouses. This was identified by a dump of British army ration tins, milk tins, broken glass and one unfired .303 cartridge.<sup>64</sup>

#### **Conclusion: Land, labour and camps**

What do these four camps tell us? Based on the written archive it is possible to salvage a history of these camps. However, it is a history that is extremely fragmented. For example, in the case of the camp at Orange River Station, the written archive offers no insight into its possible siting. In the case of Taung, the archive on its own suggests that the refugees there were taken there and that the records for the period after October 1901 have disappeared, hence there is no further information on a camp that is presumed to have existed until the end of the war. However, this was not the case. This research study proves that the majority of refugees originated from the camps at Orange River Station and Kimberley and on arrival in Taung were held there until November 1901, before being sent to the camp at Dry Harts.

The archive for Vryburg means that it was possible to establish when black refugees arrived; to locate the site; and establish that water was the issue that resulted in many of the refugees being relocated to Brussels Siding. Most importantly, the archive reflects that these refugees brought with them considerable resources which enabled them to sustain themselves for the duration of the war.

Fieldwork proved critical to gaining an insight into the experience at Taung. The sheer number of graves and possible size of the cemetery shows that, as with the camp at Dry Harts, some sort of calamity occurred there; one that is not recorded anywhere in the written archive. This means that establishing fatality numbers in the black camps and commenting on their experiences using only the written archive, as scholars do with this information, remains a flawed exercise. Fieldwork at Vryburg established the terrain, yet there is very little visible on the surface.

Oral history and memory in the case of Vryburg offers the richness of narrative and provides insight into the experience of total war. Kas Maine recalled the horror of scorched earth, displacement, the destruction of family wealth, forced labour,

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63. FA, CO, 114, 5079/02, Native Refugee Department ORC, Return for month of September 1902.

64. McGregor Museum, Kimberley, EV6, Daybook Number 2, 17 April 2008.

starvation and internment. He also stressed how people's fate was predetermined by race and how the British military segregated them on that basis. Maine recalled eating what he called "gars" (horse feed) and that his brother ended up in Taung, which meant that he would have been relocated to the forced labour camp at Dry Harts.

This experience and what we learn from these four camps is that the fight for land, the creation of forced labour, civilian displacement and the horror of total war is a narrative entwined in a complex history of the camps. In a number of crucial respects, this was not, as other scholars have advocated, a shared experience with the Boer population at the hands of a common enemy, along the notion of mutual suffering or black participation in the war. Rather, the experience of civilians inside these three forced labour camps and the one independent self-sustaining camp, was fundamentally different to that of the Boers who were interned in Vryburg, Kimberley, Orange River Station and elsewhere. Theirs was not so-called "black participation". Theirs was a stand-alone experience of land, labour, war and displacement.

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