

The South African War and the Russian Public

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Public opinion has its natural flux and reflux.

T. B. Macauley

I know where there is more wisdom than found in Napoleon, Voltaire, or all the ministers present and to come—in public opinion.

Talleyrand

Church services are held for President Kruger's health. Orchestras in public places are asked to play 'the Boer anthem' and when they do they have to repeat it indefinitely,

reported a St. Petersburg magazine in 1900¹.

The Boers and everything that is in any way connected with them now attract the interest of all sections of the public. In a beau monde sitting room, at newspaper publishers, and in a cabmen's inn you hear one and the same conversation, about the Boers and the Boer War,

wrote an anonymous Russian author, calling himself Boerophile, in a pamphlet 'In Relief to the Boers!' published in St. Petersburg in 1900².

Things reached such a pitch of Boer-mania that another Russian author sounded an almost plaintive note: 'Wherever you go these days, you hear the same story—the Boers, the Boers, and only the Boers'³.

¹ *Zhurnal dlia vsekh*. 1900, No. 1.

² *Burofil. V pomoshch buram! Prichiny voyny i yego techeniie. Vozmozhnyie posledstviia anglo-burskogo stolknoveniia*. (Boerophile. In Relief of the Boers! The reasons for and events of the War. The possible results of the Anglo-Boer collision). St. Petersburg, 1900, p. 25.

³ *Bury i anglichane (The Boers and the British)*. St. Petersburg, 1900, p. 3.

Literary Russia and the Anglo-Boer War

This was hardly an uncommon observation for in truth at the turn of the century the Boers were at the height of fashion in Russia. Pictures of the Boer soldiers and officers and of President Kruger and his generals appeared in virtually every illustrated magazine on a regular basis. Thousands of articles and many books and booklets were published about the Boers and the Anglo-Boer War not only in the big cities of the Russian Empire (such as St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev, Warsaw, Tashkent, Yekaterinoslav, Odessa, Vilnius, Tiflis—now Tbilisi), but even in towns as small as Borisoglebsk,—a place not easily found on a map.

The volume of these publications was enormous. In Georgia alone, for example, there were so many of them that a special study, 'The Reflection of the Anglo-Boer War in the Georgian Media', could be undertaken several decades later⁴. So insatiable was the public demand for news of the Boers and their challenge to the British Empire that many magazines and publishers not normally given to coverage of international affairs hastened to get on the bandwagon. Among the publishers to carry such articles were, for example, such unlikely enterprises as the Printers of the Staff of the Separate Gendarme Corps, the Printers of the Turkestan Military District and the Printers of the Poor Children's Home.

The overwhelming majority of these publications, irrespective of their quality, were outspokenly pro-Boer. Even the titles were often so partisan that it was hardly necessary to read the text: *Why We Should Wish Victory to the Boers; The Transvaal. The History of its Suffering under British Domination; The Boers. The Fight for Freedom*.

It is impossible to tell how many translations of Boer literature appeared in Russia at this time. Hundreds of journals and magazines were published in St. Petersburg, Moscow and provincial towns and nearly all of them were interested in the Anglo-Boer War. No bibliography of these publications exists and a systematic search for translations, let alone general publications about the war, could take years. We have looked through many periodicals of the beginning of the century and discovered dozens of literary translations.

One would hardly have expected to find a large survey of Boer songs and poetry in Russian at the beginning of the century, yet there exists an article entitled 'The Poetry of the Boers'⁵, published in Russian in 1901 which had been translated from a

⁴ V. B. Donadze. 'Anglo-burskaia voina i iego otrazheniie v gruzinskoi presse'. ('The Anglo-Boer War and its Reflection in the Georgian Media'). (In Georgian). In: *Trudy Tbilisskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta*. Vol. 33. Tbilisi, 1949, p. 97-129.

⁵ Vera Beng. 'Lirika Burov'. ('Lyric Poetry of the Boers'). *Novoie vremia* 27/10—9/11 1901, No. 9213.

volume of collected Boer poetry published in Amsterdam in 1898. No full texts were reproduced and the poems were anonymous since the Amsterdam volume did not give the names of the authors, yet the fact remains that as early as 1901 the Russians could read Boer poetry. The national anthems of both the Boer republics were published by many Russian newspapers and journals in prose and verse form⁶. Pamphlet publications were also available⁷.

Boer prose had come to Russia even earlier. In 1900 one of the most popular Russian journals published Jacob Swart's story, 'For the Motherland'. The plot of this patriotic melodrama rested on the notion that Paul Kruger, in anticipation of war with England, spent large sums of state moneys purchasing arms in Europe without informing the government or the Volksraad. The missing funds have to be accounted for, and Kruger persuades a clerk in the Finance Ministry to declare that he should patriotically take responsibility and confess to having squandered the money.

You must put up with the idea that you will be considered a thief until such time that we can make our secret public and everybody sees that you are a hero,

Kruger tells him⁸.

Letters and first-hand accounts by Boer fighters appeared frequently in Russian literary periodicals. Their stories were simple and always touching in one way or another. One Boer, taken prisoner by the British, related his dramatic escape from the prisoners' camp when he hid himself among the bodies of his dead comrades that were to be taken outside the camp to be buried⁹. Another, an officer from the Ladysmith district, wrote of how both the Boers and the British while not making a formal truce, spontaneously ceased fire during the 1899 Christmas night¹⁰.

⁶ For example, *Priroda i liudi* 1899/1900, No. 3, p. 48,50.

⁷ For example, *Gimn burov. Raznotsvetnoie znamia Transvaalia* (*The Anthem of the Boers. The Many-Coloured Banner of the Transvaal*). St. Petersburg, 1900.

⁸ Jacob Swart. 'Za rodinu! Rasskaz iz nedavnego proshlogo Transvaalia' ('For the Motherland! The story from the recent past of the Transvaal'). *Niva* 1900, No. 27, p. 538.

⁹ Vera Beng. 'Zhivoi sredi trupov. Neobychainoie begstvo bura iz angliiskogo plena' ('Alive among the Dead. The extraordinary escape of a Boer from British captivity'). *Novoie vremia* 4 (17) May 1902, No. 9397.

¹⁰ 'Rozhdestvo pod Ledismitom. Iz pisma transvaalskogo ofitsera' ('Christmas near Ladysmith. From the letter of a Transvaal officer'). *Russky listok* 1899, No. 353.

Several books by Boer political leaders were published in Russia. The first of these, *A Century of Wrong*¹¹, and Piet Joubert's 'Message to Queen Victoria', appeared in 1900¹². General Christiaan De Wet's memoirs were published in St. Petersburg in two different translations, both from the Dutch, with Pastor Gillot contributing a preface and commentary to the first translation and supplementing it with additional material. This first translation ran through three editions in 1903 and 1904¹³ and the second translation was published twice, in 1903 and 1908¹⁴. Kruger's memoirs were also translated into Russian in 1903¹⁵. As these publication dates attest, the Russian public's fascination with the Boers considerably outlasted their defeat in the war.

It is hardly surprising that notes by Villebois-Mareuil, the Commander of the European Legion, should have been published in Russian in 1902¹⁶ but it is, on the face of it, far more surprising that in the same year the Russian translation of Arthur Conan Doyle's strong statement of the British imperial case, *The War in South Africa*, should have appeared¹⁷. This latter publication did not, however, derive from any be-

¹¹ *Stoletiie nespravedlivosti. Sbornik materialov po anglo-burskoi voine v Yuzhnoi Afrike (A Century of Wrong. Collected materials on the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa)*. Vol. 3. St. Petersburg, 1900.

¹² *Transvaal. Istoriia iego stradany pod angliiskim vladychestvom. Poslaniie glavnokomanduushchego transvaalskimi voiskami generala Zhubera k angliiskoi koroleve (The Transvaal. A History of its suffering under British domination. Message of the Comander-in-Chief General Joubert to the British Queen)*. St. Petersburg, 1900.

¹³ [Christiaan De Wet]. *Borba burov s Angliiei. Vospominaniia burskogo generala Khr. Deveta (The Struggle of the Boers against England. Memoirs by the Boer General C. De Wet. Translated from the Dutch original by Ye. N. Polovtsova. Preface, commentary and appendix by Pastor Gillot)*. St. Petersburg, 1st and 2nd ed.—1903, 3d ed.—1904.

¹⁴ C. De Wet. *Borba za svobodu. Vospominaniia o trekhletnei voine burov s anglichanami. (C. De Wet. The Freedom Fight. Memoirs of the three years of the Boers' war against the English. Translated by L. Zhdanov)*. St. Petersburg, 1st ed.—1903, 2nd ed.—1908

¹⁵ *Memuary Kriugera (Kruger's Memoirs)*. Supplement to the magazine *Vsemirny vestnik*, 1903).

¹⁶ [De Villebois-Mareuil]. *Anglo-transvaalskaia voina. Zapiski burskogo generala Vilbua de Mareil (The Anglo-Transvaal War. Notes by the Boer General de Villebois-Mareuil)*. Translated from French, St. Petersburg, 1902.

¹⁷ Arthur Conan Doyle. *Voina v Yuzhnoi Afrike, ieio prichiny i sposob vedeniia (The War in South Africa, Its Cause and Conduct)*. Translated from English. Odessa, 1902.

lated demand for a less partisanly pro-Boer text. The publication of Conan Doyle's book was subsidised by the British who must have regarded with some alarm the possible political implications of the Russian public's pro-Boer passion. But even so the publisher could be only found in Odessa, not in Moscow or St. Petersburg.

Among the Russian intelligentsia the British faced an uphill task. This was true even with the greatest figure of all, Leo Tolstoy, despite his pacifist convictions which might have been expected to preclude him from taking position for either of the protagonists. Tolstoy followed the events in South Africa closely and made copious notes about them which he then published under the title *About the Transvaal War*. Just how preoccupied his household was with these distant events is evident from the frequency with which his wife, Sofia Andreievna, mentions the subject in her diary. Although Tolstoy was the main proponent of non-violence of his time, his attitude to this war seems to have been a special case. This is evident from the account by a reporter from one of the St. Petersburg papers who visited Tolstoy at the beginning of 1900:

The Count was not willing to discuss his works, but as soon as the Transvaal and the Anglo-Transvaal war were mentioned, the great old man became animated, his eyes glittered.

—'You know what point I've reached?'—he said, 'Opening a paper every morning I passionately wish to read that the Boers have beaten the British'¹⁸.

Another interlocutor related a similar conversation with Tolstoy:

'I know', he said, as if apologising for breaking his moral religious principles, 'that I should not rejoice at the victories of the Boers or grieve about their defeats; after all they kill the English soldiers too. But I cannot help it: I am glad when I read about the defeats of the British, it cheers my soul'¹⁹.

The majority of popular Russian writers of the time shared Tolstoy's attitude. Mamin-Sibiriak strongly denounced the British in his story about the war, 'Eee'. Alexander Kuprin entitled his Boer war story, 'The Murderers'²⁰ the title applying only to the British, of course. Nikolai Karazin published several stories about the war, all highly condemnatory of the British while Vladimir Giliarovsky published a similarly engag   poem 'Thoughts of a Boer Prisoner'²¹.

¹⁸ *Novoe vremia*, 10 January 1900

¹⁹ V.A. Posse. 'L.N. Tolstoy kak chelovek. Iz vospominany' ('L. N. Tolstoy as a Person. From the Memoirs'). In: *Gorkovskaia kommuna*, 17 November 1940.

²⁰ *Odesskie novosti*, 1 January 1901.

²¹ *Russkoe slovo*, 25 December 1901.

The war re-animated the interest of the Russian public in the South African novels of Rider Haggard, Jules Verne, Meyne Reid, Louis Boussenard and other European writers, leading to print runs for these novels which were immense for that time. Particularly popular were the novels *Pieter Maritz—the Young Boer from the Transvaal*, by the German writer, August Niemann, and *Captain Daredevil* by Louis Boussenard.

For several years the Anglo-Boer War became the favourite subject of Russian cheap popular fiction. One such offering, *For the Boers! Russian Volunteers in the Transvaal*, appeared as early as 1900, the author choosing the pseudonym, 'Boerphile'²². The most popular of these popular publications was *Rose Burgher, the Boer Heroine, or the Gold Prospectors in the Transvaal*²³, a novel published in series, one booklet in a colourful cover every week. The genre of serialised fiction was thoroughly in vogue in Russia at the time. There were endless series about Sherlock Holmes—imitations of Conan Doyle's stories, and series about Nick Carter, Nat Pinkerton and 'the Russian detective Kobylkin' were very widely read, even by those who sneered at their quality. At the turn of the century these serialised novels clearly filled the entertainment space in society which is now filled by popular TV series and 'soaps'.

The booklets were produced by different authors, some of them not without a literary talent, but the fact that they were targeting people without sophisticated literary tastes ultimately defined the manner in which the booklets were written. The names of the authors were never mentioned perhaps because there were too many of them or because they were serious writers who wrote these series for money but did not want to be associated with this kind of literature. In any case it was impossible to find out who actually wrote the *Rose Burgher* series.

The plot of *Rose Burgher* is more intricate (although certainly more artificial) than those of Dumas' novels. It revolves around Cecil Rhodes, his second wife—in the past a poor adventurer—and her daughter, the Boer heroine, Rose Burgher. The heroes find themselves in the richest houses of Cape Town and Johannesburg, in the trenches of the Anglo-Boer War, in the deserted mines and on 'death islands'. They fly air balloons, sail ships and get caught in shipwrecks. However, even this novel did not consist of sheer nonsense; many historical realities and personalities were reproduced correctly. The authors must have read dozens of books and articles about South Africa, and certainly not only in Russian. And the style and manner ensured that the reader,

²² Burofil. *Za burov! Russkii dobrovoltsy v Transvaale* (*For the Boers! Russian Volunteers in the Transvaal*). Moscow, 1900.

²³ Roza Burger, *burskaia geroinia, ili zolotoiskateli v Transvaale. Roman iz anglo-burskoi voiny* (*Rose Burgher, the Boer Heroine, or the Gold Prospectors in the Transvaal. A Novel from the Anglo-Boer War*). St. Petersburg, 1902.

most likely a youth in his early teens, would wait with a sinking heart for the next Wednesday or Thursday or Sunday, when he would rush to the nearest book shop or news stand to pay 5 kopecks for yet another issue of *Rose Burgher*²⁴.

The Pro-Boer Craze

Writers, journalists, publishers and other representatives of literary circles were not the only group of Russian society to contribute to the pro-Boer sentiment. There were many other participants in and propagators of the pro-Boer campaign each with their inflections and contributions to the general cause.

Churches collected donations for the Boers. Albums, icons, books, luxury editions of the Bible and gramophone records with Russian poems and songs about the Boers were all sent to the Transvaal. Several streets in Russian towns were renamed in honour of the Boers. In Kharkov the City Council was offered to name three new streets Transvaal'skaia, Joubertovskaia and Krugerovskaia²⁵ while Russian Mennonites²⁶ named two of their villages after Pretoria, one in Orenburg near the Ural Mountains, the other on the Terek river in the Caucasus²⁷.

After news of Cronje's imprisonment reached Russia a mass campaign was organised to collect donations for a gift for him. The gift, a huge two metre high porphyry cup of traditional Russian design, decorated with silver, enamel, emeralds and rubies, was despatched to South Africa only at the war's end together with huge lists containing seventy thousand signatures of Russian well-wishers. After many adventures it finally arrived in the Transvaal only in 1921.

The cup was symbolic. Such huge cups, known as bratinas, were used at community ceremonies for communal libations—every military regiment, for example, had a bratina. The libation was poured into it and then the whole community (regiment, members of a club etc.) ladled out their portions by small cups which, when not in use, hung along the sides of the bratina. A bratina signified unity and brotherhood,—

²⁴ Eighty years after the Russian *Rose Burgher* was written a well known South African writer Nadine Gordimer published the novel *Burgher's Daughter*. The main character of the novel was daughter of a Boer communist, Rose Burgher.

²⁵ *Russkii vedomosti*, 9 December 1899.

²⁶ The Mennonites are a sect of Protestant Christians widely spread in Holland, Germany, France, Switzerland, the USA and several other countries.

²⁷ *The Mennonite Historian* (Canada), vol. XX, No. 3, September, 1994, p. 1. We are grateful to Professor C.C. Saunders of the University of Cape Town for this reference.

the word itself deriving from 'brat'—'brother' in Russian²⁸.

Theatres and circuses tried to catch the public mood. The programme of the St. Petersburg Circus, for example, was based on South African events, and the programme of the Moscow City Circus was entitled *At the heights of the Dragon Mountains, or the War between the British and the Boers*²⁹.

Business also contributed to the craze and certainly benefited from it. Children played with new toys which ridiculed John Bull and picturesquely glorified the Boers. Restaurants, inns and cafés were given South African names and their interior re-arranged accordingly. An inn known as 'The Pretoria' was opened in St. Petersburg near Tsarskoselsky railway station which served the line leading to the upper class suburb. Even in so small a town as Kozlov an inn known as 'The Transvaal' was said to be 'doing well'.

Politicians could not but feel the mood. One member of the Moscow City Duma (Council) wrote in his memoirs:

During the Anglo-Boer War all the Councillors were united in their indignation against the British and their sympathy for the Boers. The names of Kruger and Botha could constantly be heard. Events involving the Boers generally and at Ladysmith in particular were sometimes of more interest to the Councillors than the problem of buying the city horse tram line The elected members of the Duma clubbed together to order a wonderful gold goblet ... which was sent as a gift to the Commander of the Boer army³⁰.

Central to pro-Boer activities in Russia was the Dutch Committee for the Relief of the Wounded Boers, formed in the first days of the war and active throughout the war from its headquarters on St. Petersburg's main street, Nevsky Prospect. A number of eminent people served on the Committee including the St. Petersburg aristocrat, Count P.A. Heiden, the Minister of the St. Petersburg French community, E. Crottet, and three big businessmen, G. Heyse, H. Kruys and Van der Pals. The Head of the Committee was Pastor Hendrik Gillot, the Minister of St. Petersburg's Dutch community, who was constantly in touch with Dr. Leyds' mission in the Hague.

²⁸ Some of the Russian presents and souvenirs, the bratina among them, are now exhibited in the Museum of Culture and History in Pretoria. The bratina stands in the centre of one of the halls with 304 long lists of signatures, beautifully decorated with water colour paintings next to it. Several books that were among the presents are housed in the Stellenbosch University library.

²⁹ *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 19 February (3 March) 1900; *Kurier*, 1900, Nos. 44-51.

³⁰ N. I. Astrov. *Vospominaniia (Memoirs)*. Paris, 1941.

The Committee issued regular information bulletins and addressed repeated appeals to the Russian people, starting in October 1899 with an appeal for donations for the Boer wounded. 70 thousand roubles were collected (a very large sum for the time) in only a month, the money being used to send a combined Russian-Dutch hospital (the Russo-Dutch Ambulance) of 40 beds, to South Africa. By December the donations exceeded 100 thousand roubles, giving the Ambulance enough funds for six months, including return tickets for the staff, and the public were informed that doctors and nurses from Amsterdam and St. Petersburg were already on their way to South Africa.

Estimates of total donations raised vary slightly according to the sources used, but concur on the general level of the figures. The Moscow newspaper, *Moskovskii Vedomosti*, estimated that in all the Committee had collected 165, 547 roubles during the war, with 117, 300 roubles spent on the Russo-Dutch Ambulance plus widows' and orphans' allowances. A further 48, 245 roubles were handed in to the Russian Credit Bank which had opened its own Russian-Boer Fund for the restoration of ruined Boer households³¹.

The Committee appealed to the leading artists, actors, musicians, composers, writers and other public figures of St. Petersburg to donate their portraits, pictures, autographs, paintings and drawings for the cause. This was how one of the best known gifts to the Boers, the album *St. Petersburg—the Transvaal*, came into existence. The album was luxuriously published and contained reproductions of paintings by Repin, Rerikh, Makovsky and other world famous Russian artists, as well as portraits and pictures of ballet dancers, opera singers and actors, many of these celebrities supplementing their gifts with warm wishes of success to the Boers. The album—a copy of which is housed today in the Stellenbosch University library—also included key documents of the Committee, together with pictures of its members, and portraits of Presidents Kruger and Steyn, the Ambassador of the Transvaal in Europe, Dr. Leyds and the General Consul of the Orange Republic in Europe, Hendrik Muller³².

The Russian Right Contribution to the Boer Cause

The Russian public concurred in seeing the Boer struggle against the British as a battle

³¹ *Moskovskii vedomosti*, 15 March 1904, No. 74.

³² *Sankt Peterburg—Transvaal. Izdaniie Gollandskogo komiteta dlia okazaniia pomoshchi ranenym buram (St. Petersburg—Transvaal. Published by the Dutch Committee for the Relief of the Wounded Boers)*. St. Petersburg, 1900.

between David and Goliath but there was often little agreement beyond that for, strange though it may seem, the Boer cause found sympathisers both among the opponents of the Russian monarchy and absolutism and among staunch Monarchists.

Russian officialdom played a very active if not the major role in the pro-Boer campaign. The Anglo-Boer War was boon to the pro-regime circles, not only because it weakened Britain, Russia's main rival, but because it served conservative domestic interests as well. Loud expressions of compassion for the suffering of a foreign people distracted public attention from the issue of social and political inequalities at home. Moreover, the war served to strengthen chauvinistic trends in the Russian society, a society in which only a permanent state of excited nationalism appeared to hold out any prospect of overcoming the tensions stemming from deep social divisions.

In February 1900 the Troitse-Sergiev Monastery sent a gonfalon, religious banner, 'sanctified at the relic of St. Sergy' to the Boers. The fathers thought of sending 'the air that covered the remains of the Saint' as well but 'in view of the dangers on the way' the air was stored in one of St. Petersburg cathedrals until the end of the war³³. This generosity towards the republican Boers did not betoken a liberal consciousness among the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church. At the same time that this gift was being made the Church was excommunicating Leo Tolstoy and declaring him to be the anti-Christ.

Conservative journalists and writers took pleasure in stressing similarities between the Russians and the Boers, some of them fairly far-fetched, for the Boers were taken to exemplify many of the values that the government wanted to inculcate in the Russian people: simple-mindedness, patriarchal devotion to family and community values, fanatical religiosity and enmity to the wants of the 'depraved' West, for this kind of mentality was thought to be less susceptible to 'alien' ideas stemming from the Western democracies.

'The Boers have much in common with the Russians', wrote the most influential Monarchist newspaper, *Novoie Vremia*, at the outset of the war.

First, they, as well as the Russians, are predominantly agricultural people inclined, just as we are, to the extensive cultivation. Second, the Transvaal is now suffering from the invasion of foreign capitalists, just as Russia. The Transvaal uitlanders who are the cause of the war, can be safely compared to the American, Belgian and Jewish capitalists who overrun our country³⁴.

³³ *Moskovskie vedomosti*, 10 (22) February 1900; *Novoie vremia*, 12 (24) February, 1900.

³⁴ *Novoie vremia*, 20 October (1 November) 1899.

Another writer in the same newspaper argued: 'We have a lot in common with them (the Boers). They are muzhiks, fighting against gold mining capitalism'³⁵.

'A Mennonite is a taciturn, reserved "Boer"', wrote a Mennonite writer, author of the most authoritative book on Russian Mennonites, 'apart from the fact that he does not fire guns or cannons ...'. This author was to publish a complete history of Russian Mennonites under the title *From the World of the Russian Boers or Mennonites*³⁶.

'The Boers look like our Cossacks', wrote a Russian author M. Protasov. They are

tall and perfectly built. They are physically very strong, have remarkable endurance and are, indeed, indefatigable. An open face with large features, darkish brown hair and a light brown beard and moustache, kind thoughtful blue eyes—such is the appearance of the Boer³⁷.

The religiosity of the Boers was always stressed by conservative Russian writers as one of the main features of their character.

The Boer professes Reformed teaching It (the Bible) is his only faithful friend; to it alone does he open his soul; it alone inspires him to his heroic deeds and to his truly Christian life, which leaves even his enemies, the British, in a state of dumb and respectful amazement,

wrote Protasov³⁸.

The conservative *Novoie Vremia* summed up this view:

Straightforward religious farmers, who have decided to shed their blood to defend the freedom of their Fatherland will always be closer to the heart of the Sacred Rus³⁹, than our enemy from time immemorial—cold and egoistic England. Their deep faith makes the Boers our own brothers⁴⁰.

³⁵ Ibid. 3 (15) October, 1899.

³⁶ *Mennonite Historian*, op. cit., p. 2.

³⁷ M. Protasov. *Bury i anglichane (The Boers and the British)*. St. Petersburg, 1900, p. 20, 27.

³⁸ M. Protasov. Op. cit., p. 26.

³⁹ Rus—the Russian state before the 13th century

⁴⁰ *Novoie vremia*, 16 October 1899, No. 8490.

Glorification of the Boers went hand in hand with abuse of the British. 'The brave Boer endeavours to protect his independence from the greedy Brit'⁴¹, as one of *Novoie Vremia*'s writers put it. In such monarchist publications liberalism was always associated with greed and conservatism with honesty. Conservatism was good, liberalism bad. Comparisons between the two, in a manner that was invariably unfavourable to the British, was a staple topic in the pages of the Russian monarchist press. Virtually every day one could read something like: 'The liberal self-interested Brit ... could not stand against the persistent and stubborn resistance of the honest and conservative Boer'⁴², or

The Boers constitute one family, alien to party struggle and any liberal negativism. They are accustomed to strict discipline, and the elder is a born and undisputed leader of the junior.

The juxtaposition of conservative virtue and liberal viciousness was situated in a global context.

The deep historical meaning of this war is that faith, patriotism ... the patriarchal family, primordial tribal unity, iron discipline and complete lack of so-called modern civilisation have already become such an invincible force, such a redoubt, before which ... even the seemingly unbeatable British began to tremble,

wrote one conservative Moscow newspaper⁴³.

Such perspectives fitted easily into the assumption that Russian conservatism was actually carrying the flag of all the forces of progress. As one of the editorials of the *Novoie Vremia* asserted,

As we battle without cease persistently against Britain on the territory of the Asian continent we wage the struggle not only for ourselves, but for humanity. We fight for the victory of the humanitarian interest over the brutal egoism of the Anglo-Saxon race⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Ibid. 3-15 October, 1899.

⁴² *Nachalo i konets anglo-burskoi voyny 1899-1900 (The Beginning and the End of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1900)*. St. Petersburg, 1900, p. 22.

⁴³ *Moskovskie novosti*, 27 February (11 March) 1900.

⁴⁴ *Novoie vremia*, 18 (30) October, 1899.

The loathing of Russian conservatives for this perfidious liberal super-power, was visible even in the titles of their books and pamphlets of the time about Britain: *British Policy as a Source of World Tragedies*, *The Decline of British Political and Military Power*, *Colossus on Clay Feet*, *On the question of the British military superiority*, etc.

Some of these publications could claim a degree of respectability but there were many that fed the Russian public with cheap and even racist propaganda. The South African pamphlet by S.I. Glebov (pseudonym—Gnedich) was one of many examples. Glebov was something of a phenomenon who wrote on any readable topic he could lay his hands on—in 1900 alone he published about a dozen pamphlets on such burning issues as *Bald St. Petersburg and the Hygiene of Head-Wear. The book useful for each and everyone*; *Hygiene of Life, or how to live hundreds of years*, and so on.

Such an author could not fail to tackle the Anglo-Boer War. In his pamphlet about it Glebov dealt with England in the most abusive manner he could muster. England, he wrote, 'is a trading country, and its conscience is of the same nature'; 'we understand the feeling of loathing inspired by England', and so on. The Boers, on the contrary, were all 'Orthodox Christians, and generally a very God-loving nation'⁴⁵.

In the eyes of Russian conservatives all means were good means when deployed in the noble cause of opposition to the cruel West.

It is much more appropriate to join hands with future Mamais⁴⁶ and Genghis Khans and lead them against Europe than to fight for those who deeply hate us and try to destroy us by hook or by crook,

wrote the *Novoie Vremia*⁴⁷.

Monarchist papers tried to present this massive pro-Boer campaign as a spontaneous upsurge of the popular emotion amongst ordinary Russians. This was only partially true. Thus, Monarchist and other conservative newspapers were the most active collectors of donations for the Boer cause: the *Novoie Vremia* collected 40 thousand roubles; the *Sankt-Peterburgskii Vedomosti*, 16 thousand roubles, the *Peterburgsky Vestnik*, 6 thousand roubles; and the *Moskovskii Vedomosti*, 5 thousand roubles. The majority of donors were clerks, traders, officers and clergymen, that is,

⁴⁵ S.I. Glebov (Gnedich). *Novy Napoleon iz yuzhnoafrikanskoi voiny Transvaalia s Angliiei, 1899-1902* (*New Napoleon from the South African War between the Transvaal and England, 1899-1902*), St. Petersburg, 1899.

⁴⁶ Mamai—one of the Tatar invaders of Russia in the 14th c.

⁴⁷ *Novoie vremia*, 3 (15) October, 1899.

the same social strata who dominated the membership of the Dutch Committee for the Relief to the Wounded Boers. In the end even Gillot himself had to admit that only 'very seldom the donations were received from ordinary people'⁴⁸.

But pro-Boer propaganda had an undoubted mass appeal, for the Russian chauvinistic interpretation of the Anglo-Boer War was not merely the creation of a narrow layer of politically conscious Monarchists, but was nourished by mass perceptions of a more general nature. It is, in this respect, worth mentioning a curious document housed in one of the Russian archives: an anonymous letter addressed to the Foreign Minister, Vladimir Nikolaievich Lamsdorf, and forwarded from his office to the Police Department. The letter, sent from Moscow some time in spring 1901, was the work of several people (there are several different hands) at least some of whom were clearly semi-literate, for the rules of grammar spelling are mostly ignored, phrases are cut in the middle and many words are unfinished⁴⁹.

Thus one anonymous writer pleads:

For one and a half years of the heroic struggle of the Boers, our Government has been indifferent, and even by diplomatic means has not protected the poor wounded heroes—the Boers, thus because of that we ask Your excellency to receive the Transvaal Ambassador, D. Leyds, during the first week of the Lent, and to accept the tormented Boers under your protection.

Another petitioner (in a different hand) threatens:

Don't you see that Russian society is irritated by British impudence, the second year already ... (unintelligible—AD, IF). If you do not sympathise with the Boers at least a bit, and do not take any measures to defend the oppressed, then take care, we'll show you what for. We'll be convicted anyway, but we'll send you to the better world. You might think that this is funny, but there is absolutely nothing funny here. Remember, last year kings and tsarinas, etc. were gathered to their fathers. There will be a place for you too in the better world. Of course, you will not believe this letter, and will not get frightened, but it does not matter.

Remember Russia at the Berlin Congress of 1878, where Beaconsfield and Salisbury jeered at us. What right did they have to shout and to break the San Stefano treaty,

⁴⁸ A.L. Vitukhnovsky. 'Anglo-burskaia voina v otsenke russkoi periodicheskoi pechati (Russian Media about the Anglo-Boer War)'. In: *Uchionye zapiski Petrozavodskogo Universiteta*, Petrozavodsk, 1962.

⁴⁹ Gosudarstvenny Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (State Archive of the Russian Federation). Fund 102 (Police Department), 1901, file 15, lists 14-15.

now is it not possible to show them, just make a demonstration on the Indian border, if only you do not want to dance to the British tune, if you don't—you have only to say a word, and everything will be there. Why have you not received President Kruger? If you do not receive Mr. Leyds, you have only yourself to thank for the results. Moscow.

Yet another writer exclaims:

Who would have thought that such an obscure land could for one and a half years fight against the colossus; i.e. David against Goliath; they are fighting for the right cause, and if you allow them to be wiped out from the earth (The letter is cut at this point.)

One wonders who wrote all this. Drunken students? Intelligent, but no less drunken criminals? The authors certainly read newspapers for all the newspaper clichés are there—the reference to the ‘offenders’—Beaconsfield and Salisbury, and the San Stefano treaty, the call for a ‘demonstration’ on the Indian border, the sacred belief in the military might of Mother Russia—just say a word, and ‘everything will be there’, and at the same time some quite revolutionary sounding threats to the government. Whoever the authors were, one feels sure that it was such human material as this which constituted that backbone of Russian chauvinism, the Black Hundreds.

Social-Democratic and Liberal Response

Many opponents of Russian tsarism felt that the Boer republics stood for democracy against Europe's most powerful monarchy. Others denounced Britain for what they saw as yet another act of imperialist aggression in the colonial partition of the world. Among the latter was the young and still obscure Vladimir Iliich Ulyanov (Lenin) whose article on the war was published in the first issue of the *Iskra*, the organ of the Russian Social Democrats, in 1900. Although Lenin denounced the role of British capitalism in the war, as did the Russian conservatives, his vision of the Boers and of the South African conflict sharply differed from theirs.

The democratic perception of the South African situation in Russia was shaped by one overwhelming influence from South Africa—that of Olive Schreiner.

Even those who have made a special study of Olive Schreiner's work and influence seem to be unaware of her huge and early popularity in Russia. Ruth First and Ann Scott published a list of translations of Schreiner's works into every possible language in the world, including Czech, Ukrainian and Esperanto, but do not mention

a single Russian translation⁵⁰,—and yet there were scores of them.

In 1893, for example, Russian translations of Schreiner's story, 'A Dream of Wild Bees', and of her novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, were published in one of the leading Russian literary journals, *Vestnik Inostrannoi Literatury*⁵¹. 'Trooper Peter Halket of Mashonaland' was published in the same journal in 1897, just a few months after it appeared in English⁵²; and this was only the first of many editions. Her short stories, 'Dream Life and Real Life', were also published in Russian at the end of the last century, and some of these were incorporated into an essay about Olive Schreiner written by the young (and then unknown) Maxim Gorky⁵³.

With the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War the tempo of publication of Olive Schreiner's work quickened. Her writings appeared in such leading journals and magazines as *Niva*, *Russkaia Mysl*, *Zhurnal Dlia Vsekh*, *Literaturnye Vechera*, *Zhivopisnoie Obozreniie*, *Novy Vek*, *Mir Bozhy* and *Russkoie Bogatstvo*. In 1900 the *Dream Life and Real Life* stories were published as a book, and in 1904 a second edition appeared⁵⁴. Newspapers and magazines kept their readers informed about events in Olive Schreiner's life and her remarks on a variety of subjects and political issues.

Russian literary critics heaped praise on Schreiner, one of them even comparing 'Peter Halket' to Leo Tolstoi's novels⁵⁵, while another thought that Schreiner's 'sublime fantasies are sometimes reminiscent of Dante'⁵⁶. 'Dream Life and Real Life' was praised for employing 'poetic images comprising the core issues of morality'⁵⁷, and some Russian authors even believed that Schreiner possessed a gift of prophecy and sometimes called her 'the Cape Cassandra'. What made a particular impression was that she had warned not only of the possibility of the Anglo-Boer War but also of its dramatic results. In this connection one magazine even compared her to Jesus him-

⁵⁰ Ruth First, Ann Scott. *Olive Schreiner*. London, Andre Deutsch, 1980, p. 371-376.

⁵¹ *Vestnik inostrannoi literatury* September-December, 1893.

⁵² *Ibid.* October, 1897.

⁵³ M. Gorky. 'Allegorii Olivii Shreiner' ('Olive Schreiner's Allegories'). *Nizhegorodsky listok* No. 56, 26 February 1899.

⁵⁴ Olive Schreiner. *Grezy i snovideniia* (*Dream Life and Real Life*). St. Petersburg, 1900, 1904.

⁵⁵ *Russkaia mysl* August 1900, p. 277.

⁵⁶ *Vestnik inostrannoi literatury* October 1897, p. 21-22.

⁵⁷ *Zhurnal dlia vsekh* June, 1900, p. 786

self: 'She too preached in the desert'⁵⁸.

For the majority of Russian readers Olive Schreiner's novels and stories constituted their first discovery of South African realities. They had read novels about South Africa before but all of these had been written by European authors who had never visited the country and used it only as scenic background for romantic adventure stories. Schreiner's realistic approach was a real eye-opener, as even the first Russian critical essay about her was to admit⁵⁹.

Even more important was the democratic nature of Schreiner's interpretation of South African problems, with its strong resonance for democratic circles of Russian intelligentsia. Indeed, among democratic Russian intellectuals not only was Schreiner considered the greatest authority on South African problems and her opinions often quoted⁶⁰, but effectively they adopted her view of South Africa and of more general problems pertaining to the South African situation (race, gender, colonialism etc.). They saw Schreiner's descriptions of race discrimination and of the position of Africans as a reflection of the position of their own illiterate and deprived compatriots⁶¹.

No wonder that Schreiner's vision of the Anglo-Boer War was accepted by Russian democratic intellectuals as their own. Ironically, her book about the war, *An English—South African's View of the Situation*, was never translated into Russian, but it was extensively quoted and attracted considerable attention among the reading public. Her stand against the British invasion of the Boer republics turned her into such a heroine in Russia that Russian newspapers frequently published her pictures alongside those of the bearded Boer fighters and leaders, while journalists wrote romanticised versions of her suffering under the British authorities during the war⁶².

Although the tide of the pro-Boer sentiment flowed strongly among the democratically-minded Russian intellectuals but there were dissenting voices. For a start, the excesses of pro-Boer propaganda did not remain unchallenged. Students of St. Petersburg University wrote that:

⁵⁸ *Mir Bozhy* October, 1901, p. 41-42.

⁵⁹ *Vestnik inostrannoi literatury* October 1897, p. 19.

⁶⁰ See, for example, V. Lesevich, 'Oliviia Shreiner i ee proizvedeniia' ('Olive Schreiner and her Writing'). *Russkaia mysl* 1901, Book VIII.

⁶¹ See, for example, *Zhurnal dlia vsekh* June 1900, p. 767-768.

⁶² See, for example, 'Oliva Shreiner' ('Olive Schreiner'). *Mir Bozhy* October 1901, Part two, p. 41.

We all feel sincerely and deeply for the Boers as fighters for independence and freedom. However, we have closer and more crying needs Can we, indeed dare we, forget that hundreds of thousands of our own compatriots are starving in three southern provinces, and that very unnerving news is coming from Transcaucasia as well?'⁶³

Several prominent Russian intellectuals denounced anti-British hysteria. In his book *Three Conversations* the influential philosopher, Vladimir Soloviev sharply rejected militant anti-British propaganda and defended Britain and its culture. Even Tolstoy, despite his admitted pro-Boer stand, was worried by the fact that more often than not Russian sympathy for the Boers went hand in hand with hatred of the British.

The liberal *Vestnik Yevropy* was unimpressed by the pro-Boer craze and wrote: 'We have enough of our own business and troubles of all kinds'⁶⁴, a view echoed by the Narodnik paper *Nedelia*⁶⁵. Social Democrats were more categorical:

For Goodness sake! Why worry about the Boers? Think about your own people. Look at what is going on in the south: there is famine there ...⁶⁶.

Priroda i Liudi went even further and attempted to debunk the sacred subject itself:

Our Editorial Board is often criticised for lack of sympathy for the Boers. What are we supposed to sympathise with? With the fact that they beat and have always beaten the Natives? That they turn them into slaves and use them as working cattle? That they deny these unfortunate creatures even the right to be considered human beings? That, having occupied huge territories, they do not use the land and do not allow others to use it, like a dog in the manger? Think about it: we know no more about these 'poor' Boers than about their neighbours, the Kaffirs, the Bechuanas, the Hottentots, and about others, even less. Isn't, really, this passionate love which has so suddenly overwhelmed our society really rather funny?⁶⁷

Strangely, even the Printers of the Staff of the Separate Gendarme Corps pub-

⁶³ *Kurier* 6 November, 1899.

⁶⁴ *Vestnik Yevropy* No. 1, 1900, p. 383.

⁶⁵ *Nedelia* No. 44, 1899, p. 1463-1464.

⁶⁶ *Zhizn* No. 12, 1899, p. 380.

⁶⁷ *Priroda i liudi* No. 22, 1900, p. 352-353.

lished an anonymous and clever pro-British book, *The Anglo-Boer War and the Russian Press*, written, perhaps, by an Englishman⁶⁸.

However, despite reservations, Russian society was seldom as united as it was in its sympathy for the Boers. The majority of both the right and the left, the conservatives and the liberals, the republicans, the Social Democrats and the Monarchists were pro-Boer and anti-British.

The Distant Echo

Russian involvement in the Anglo-Boer War and the emotional engagement of the Russian public with the Boer cause was, no doubt, a phenomenon in Russian history as much as it was a factor on the international arena. It has become an integral part of Russia's nostalgic image of itself at the turn of the century and remained this for many decades to come.

Five decades after the Anglo-Boer War Konstantin Paustovsky, one of the best Russian writers of the twentieth century, wrote:

We, the children, were shocked by that war. We hated the British and felt sorry for the phlegmatic Boers who fought for their independence. We knew about every battle on the opposite side of the world We were carried away by Pieter Maritz, a Young Boer from the Transvaal⁶⁹.

In 1961 a well known writer Ilya Ehrenburg wrote that when the war broke out he first 'wrote a letter to the bearded President Kruger' and then, having stolen ten roubles from his mother, 'set off to the theatre of war'. He was soon caught and returned home⁷⁰.

Don Aminado (pseudonym of Aminad Shpoliansky, a Russian émigré journalist and writer) a schoolboy at the time of the war, also went 'to help the Boers' together with several friends. They too did not go far, of course⁷¹.

⁶⁸ Britanets. *Anglo-burskaia voina i russkaia pressa (The Anglo-Boer War and the Russian Press. Britantsa)*. Printers of the Staff of the Separate Corps of Gendarms, St. Petersburg, 1900.

⁶⁹ Konstantin Paustovsky. *Dalekie gody. Povest o detstve i yunosti (Remote Years. A story of my childhood and youth)*. Moscow-Leningrad, 1946, p. 45-46.

⁷⁰ Ilya Ehrenburg. *Liudi, gody, zhizn (People, Years, Life)*. First and second books. Moscow, Sovietsky Pisatel Publishers, 1961, p. 27.

⁷¹ Don Aminado. *Poiezd na tret'em puti (The Train on the Third Track)*. New York, 1954, p. 10-12.

Those who were still younger played their Anglo-Boer wars in their courtyards. There was usually a small problem: nobody wanted to be British. 'I was a Boer too when we played in the streets of our village and at the school courtyard', wrote Samuil Marshak, a well known poet and a brilliant translator of the English poetry into Russian⁷².

Writer Anastasia Tsvetaieva recalled that she and her sister Marina who was to become famous poet, used up all the stock of paper in the house on drawings of the Boers and Queen Victoria. The Boers in these pictures looked very heroic, while the Queen was, on the contrary, quite unattractive: small, fat, with a repulsive big nose and an ugly crown⁷³.

Anna Akhmatova, the greatest Russian poet of the twentieth century, mentioned the Boers in one of her poems as part of her image of the beginning of the century:

Austere and gloomy
Are Boers with rifles⁷⁴.

All his life Roman Sharlevich Sot, St. Petersburg military historian, kept the most precious treasure of his childhood, a memorial Boer war medal with President Kruger's portrait.

A Russian folk song about Transvaal which appeared at the beginning of the century and began with the words 'Transvaal, Transvaal, my country, you are all in flames!' has survived throughout the Soviet era and is remembered even today.

In 1948 Soviet poet Mikhail Isakovsky wrote a poem about it, expressing, perhaps, the feelings of many Russians⁷⁵.

Transvaal, Transvaal, my country
How did it get
To Smolensk land,
How did it enter a peasant home?

I hardly even knew then
At twelve—

⁷² Sergei Marshak. *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh* (Collected Works in Four Volumes). Vol. 4. Moscow, 1960, p. 526.

⁷³ Anastasia Tsvetaieva. 'Iz proshlogo' ('From the Past'). *Novy mir* 1966, No. 1, p. 81.

⁷⁴ Anna Akhmatova. *Beg vremeni* (The Running of Time). Leningrad, 1965, p. 288.

⁷⁵ Mikhail Isakovsky. *Stikhi poslednikh let* (Poems of the Last Years). Moscow, 1952.

Where this Transvaal was,
And whether it existed or not.

Yet it found me
In my native Smolensk land,
It followed me
Along the quiet village streets.

And I understood its pain
I saw that fire,
I repeated:—Transvaal, Transvaal!—
And my voice trembled

I was singing out my anger and my sorrow
With the words of that song,
I repeated:—Transvaal, Transvaal!—
But I thought of the other country—

About the one with which
My life was tied for ever

Transvaal, Transvaal!—I knew
Many beautiful words.
But I remember this song
As my first love

At the end of the 1970s the song was quoted again in a poem about the time of the Russian revolution and the civil war:

Beyond Okhta, beyond Okhta, on the Vyborg Side⁷⁶
Yesterday's soldiers sing about the war.
Smoke dangles over the chimneys, the sunset burns
in the window
Transvaal, Transvaal, my country, you are all in flames.

Workers return from their shift, beyond Okhta the rain
is pouring
And a legless beggar turns the handle of his street organ,
begging for vodka.

⁷⁶ Okhta and Vyborg Side—regions of St. Petersburg.

On the wall the pictures of dead soldiers are covered
with dust.

Transvaal, Transvaal, my country, you are all in flames.

Carriages, barracks, dug-outs, and widow's cheese-cloth
cosiness.

And the coupons are exchanged for bread in the morning.

Through years and partings, it rings, it aches in me:

Transvaal, Transvaal, my country, you are all in flames⁷⁷.

The Anglo-Boer War must have touched upon some vital nerve in the Russian society if it proved to be so important to so many different people and has been remembered for so many decades. We still have to understand what it was that made the Russians during the Soviet era feel so nostalgic about it.

In the history of relations between Russia and South Africa there were two most important periods of direct contact, direct link. The first was the Russian involvement in the Anglo-Boer War and the second, the Soviet ties with the ANC and SACP. Politically and ideologically the two seem to be complete antitheses—yet they are closely interconnected: the second would not take place without the foundation laid by the first.

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⁷⁷ *Pesni russkikh bardov. Teksty. Seriya 3. (Songs of the Russian Bards. Texts. 3d series)*. Paris, Ymca-Press, 1977, p. 71-72.