

***THE BOER WAR:
ARMY, NATION AND EMPIRE***

THE BOER WAR AS A MEDIA WAR
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By the very nature of its title, this contribution to understanding the Boer War and its place in history may be different from those that are concerned entirely with a narrative of the war itself. The term 'media war' was coined in the immediate aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, first appearing in print a year after, and at the end of the twentieth century it has become a commonplace expression. In Britain particularly, diplomatic and military historians have adopted the term 'media war' to a long-standing belief that mass news media coverage has been a missing or misunderstood element in the wider understanding of war. The concept has also provided a convenient vehicle for the continuing process of making whole what should never have been separated: by forging links between military history on the one side, and political, cultural and social history on the other.¹

The application of the concept of media war to the South African War of 1899-1902 presents the obvious historical problems inherent in applying the ideas of one society and historical period to another. It is an essential part of history that analysis should not be too prescriptive, and parallels not too readily drawn; if there is one rejoinder that characterises academic historical debate, it is the cliché that 'things were more complicated than that'. The current and well-established view of the British school of military history sees one of its principal roles as disabusing politicians, defence professionals and others who might seek to use history for support rather than for illumination, of cherished but flawed beliefs, rather than offering prescriptive lessons from the past. But such parallels and comparisons may still be of value, as much for the differences that they reveal as the similarities. There is also the long-standing tradition among historians of a search for origins, to investigate how far into the past any apparently new idea or phenomenon may be traced. There are a number of similarities both in communications and media technology, and in the nature of the wars of the period, between the 1890s and the 1990s, that makes such comparisons particularly fruitful. As it happens, the Boer War has also been largely neglected in histories of military-media relations and of propaganda; the few mentions that it has received being surprisingly inaccurate or superficial.²

The term 'media war' has also been increasingly used in the 1990s by defence professionals as synonymous with propaganda. There is indeed a degree of overlap, but in so far as propaganda is concerned with altering opinions and perceptions for the benefit of the propagator, it is capable of an extremely wide definition, to embrace almost any form of human activity. The most common and most fruitful form of military battlefield propaganda this century has been the humble leaflet distributed to enemy troops. This did not feature in any significant manner in the Boer War, except perhaps in the form of the safe-conduct pass. 'Media war' describes something that is at once smaller and larger than propaganda. It is smaller because it is not so all-embracing, but concerned only with the mass communications media. But it is also larger, because it deals not just with the efforts of governments, armed forces or others to manipulate opinions, but with the entire breadth of involvement of the mass media in a war, from the front lines to the highest political levels, and to the broadest social impact on civil society, including the perception of the war held by later generations. Partly, 'media war' is concerned with institutions and technologies, in particular the reporters and their employers, and their relationship with both the armed forces and with wider society. Partly it is concerned with the abstract, and with the difficult concept of public opinion as related to war. Often what has been discovered by historians is that although contemporaries may have assumed a simple and direct relationship between media reporting of a war and public support for its conduct, the evidence is anything but straightforward. An important early case of this problem, although by no means the first in history, is the link between Lord Roberts' self-proclaimed victory over the Boers' in 1900 and the subsequent 'Khaki Election' in Britain.³

The age of the war reporter, and indeed of news reporting in the modern sense, came in the middle nineteenth century. It was the product of the double revolution in communications technology of the 1830s, the development of railways and steamships and of the electric telegraph, which between them allowed both physical travel and the transfer of information on scales, at speeds, and over distances that were unprecedented in human history. By 1899 the British Empire was linked together by a unique global network of underwater telegraph cables, the existence of which helped determine the nature of the Boer War. This was a considerable information advantage at a time when in the Transvaal (correctly: the South African Republic or ZAR) the existence of a telephone in a private house was a rarity worthy of comment.⁴

The Boer War was for Britain an expeditionary war. Britain in 1899 had the ability, in the form of a commercial steamship fleet of unprecedented size, to project considerable military strength to any part of the globe within reach of a deep-water port, and to do so within a matter of months. During the course of the war, just over 1000 British merchant ships carried 386,081 troops with their equipment to South Africa (and in many cases back home again as well), as well as 352,864 horses and accompanying stores. But the Empire had also communications making it possible for the first time for events on a distant battlefield to be reported to the metropolis, by methods other than those under government and military control, with sufficient speed to have direct political consequences. The existence before 1899 of telephones, film and automobiles, and after that date of radio, television, computers and satellites, have all extended this double communications revolution, but not transcended it. The adoption of new media and communications technology in the twentieth century has been a complex interaction of social and political structures. Just as the first breech-loading rifles were built more than two centuries before their widespread military use, so the chemical telegraph printer or fax machine was first demonstrated and patented in 1847.⁵

As it happened, the decade before the Boer War was accompanied both by very rapid developments in communications technology, and the emergence of a number of new forms of mass media. The invention of the functioning cine-camera is conventionally dated to 1896, and the Boer War was a technology; the newsreel was not yet an established feature of working class urban life in Europe, as it was to become over the next decade. There is not much evidence that genuine films of the war made much greater impact on public attitudes than some of the rather more famous fictional productions. Of greater importance in historical terms was the widespread use since the 1880s of lightweight still cameras, used by serving soldiers, civilians and conventional reporters as well as by the few photojournalists. In 1894 the new primed photographic or illustrated postcard was introduced, thanks to new printing techniques; and in 1897 George Eastman introduced the Pocket Kodak, which was widely used throughout the war. Some of the more dramatic images appeared in contemporary pictorial newspapers like the *Graphic*, including photographs of the dead at Spion Kop. Others, such as the touching photographic studies of wasted children taken in the Bloemfontein concentration camp, belong to the historical rather than the contemporary record of the war.⁶

Despite these new media technologies, reporting and recording the Boer War remained dominated by the written word and the daily newspaper, both in southern Africa itself and around the world, supplemented by the vivid half-tone illustration. The developments of most importance before the war were the introduction 1896 by Alfred Harmsworth of the London *Daily Mail* as the first mass popular circulation newspaper, and the establishment in 1898 of the Imperial Penny Post which made it possible for letters to be sent virtually anywhere in the Empire. This, together with the telegraph, meant that the Boer War could be reported in a manner and on a scale not seen before in history.⁷

As throughout the rest of the Empire, it was common practice in peacetime for the London newspapers to rely on reports and opinions supplied by the local press in southern Africa, rather than base their own independent reporters there. In turn, the Empire was effectively dependent on stories retransmitted from London for most of its news of the wider world. It was an important part of their development that for the Boer War, Australia, Canada and New Zealand sent not only troops to southern Africa but also their own reporters. The most famous

of these, of course, was Andrew Paterson of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, better known as the poet 'Banjo' Paterson, composer of 'Waltzing Matilda'. Reuters and other news agencies also used as stringers reporters and editors from a variety of newspapers in Cape Colony, Natal, the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Given the basic reluctance of late nineteenth century British governments to engage in expansionist wars, the use of the press and other methods by ambitious colonial figures to force war on Whitehall had been noted by contemporaries before 1899. Successful cases of this phenomenon included George Grey with the Waikato War in New Zealand in 1863, and Bartle Freere with the Zulu War in 1879. The arguments used by contemporary Radical critics of these wars were also virtually identical to the 'manufacturing consent' hypothesis associated in the late twentieth century with Professor Noam Chomsky. This ability of colonial authorities to dictate war-making policy to uncertain or indifferent governments in London, partly by deliberate manipulation of the press and public opinion, has been a neglected issue in Imperial history.⁸

Despite the determination of the British to learn from their experience, no major investigation of the role of the press in the war featured in the Elgin Commission Report, or in the War Office Official History of the War in South Africa, or even in LS Amery's *The Times History of the War in South Africa*. Partly this was because the investigators were themselves too close to the issue, taking the very close relationship between the London press, politics and perceived public opinion in war for granted. Most obviously this was true of Amery, who was chief war correspondent for *The Times* in South Africa 1899-1900. Partly it was because most statesmen and senior Army commanders alike saw their relations with the press as personal and slightly shameful, something best left to their staffs except on rare occasions, rather than as an integral part of their professional role. The only prominent exception to this was Lord Roberts, who was quite prepared to declare war reporters his comrades in public, as long as they did his bidding, but whose reputation suffered in consequence. In a tradition based on 'great men' and on 'drum and trumpet' military history, media relations was one more neglected field, together with logistics, officer-man relations and many others, which a later generation of historians has attempted to recover.⁹

In Britain, with the notable exception of the *Manchester Guardian*, the major newspapers both supported government policy in going to war, and its prosecution through to a conclusion. The industrialist George Cadbury, of the famous Quaker pacifist family, actually bought the *Daily News* in 1901 in the hope of providing a platform for anti-war views. But this support of newspapers for the war's prosecution was not the same as giving support to individual generals, or to all aspects of the war's conduct, and it was heavily predicated on the assumption of British victory.¹⁰

The established British war reporters (not all of who were British nationals, including as they did the American Julian Ralph for the *Daily Mail*) were known to transfer from one newspaper to another as better offers were made for their services, and any link between their writings and the political stance of their newspaper was by no means straightforward. John Black Atkins, reporting for the *Manchester Guardian*, was broadly supportive of the war effort, while Henry Nevinson of the jingoistic *Daily Chronicle* developed a reputation for being pro-Boer. But in addition largely to sharing the values of their society, these men saw their role as providing vivid and lengthy descriptions of battles, rather than engaging in criticisms of higher command or wider strategy. In contrast to most earlier colonial wars, the Boer War was also quite a dangerous experience for the professional war reporter. Of the better known British reporters, GW Steevens of the *Daily Mail* died of fever in Ladysmith, EF Knight of the *Morning Post* lost an arm to a Boer bullet, Aubron Herbert of *The Times* lost a leg, and Winston Churchill, also of the *Morning Post*, saw his younger brother Jack, serving with the South African Light Horse, wounded beside him.¹¹

One notable feature of British political conduct in southern Africa from the Jameson Raid to the Vereeniging settlement was the degree of familiarity with the press shown by the new generation of Conservative Imperialists who were the war's most enthusiastic supporters. Whereas the older generation of politicians like Lord Salisbury accepted an interaction with the press as part of their duty, Sir Alfred Milner and his men were what a later generation would call 'media literate' to an unusual degree, and actively sought to involve the media in

their plans. Milner himself had worked earlier in his career on the *Pall Mall Gazette*, while among the bright young men of his famous 'Kindergarten' administering South Africa after the war were Geoffrey Robinson (who as Geoffrey Dawson would rise to be Editor of *The Times*) and John Buchan, who in addition to his novels held several senior positions in British propaganda during the First World War. Milner could also draw on the support in South Africa of such notable figures as Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle, who both contributed to *The Friend*, a British propaganda newspaper established by Lord Roberts in Bloemfontein after its capture in March 1900; and also on the support of ambitious Conservative Imperialist young men such as Amery and Churchill.¹²

Because no vital British interest was perceived to be at stake in the war, other than an increasing view after Black Week that British Imperial prestige depended upon victory, public opinion was perceived as being of critical importance to its conduct. Historians point to the reluctance of Lord Salisbury's government to engage in war against the Boer republics, on the very reasonable assumption that they were likely to fall quite peacefully under British control within a few decades, as indeed the Transvaal had briefly done between 1877 and 1880. There is no doubt that to oppose this position both Milner and Cecil Rhodes deliberately manipulated both the provincial press in southern Africa and as far as they could the London press, helping create a climate of public opinion for war. Rhodes in particular targeted the General Manager of Reuters in South Africa, MJM Bellasyse, whom he absurdly accused of being 'Pro-Boer', and who was replaced shortly after the war's outbreak by Howell A 'Taffy' Gwynne, a notably extreme Imperialist. Typical of the kind of newspaperman helping shape British public opinion were FW Money Penny, a former assistant editor of *The Times* in London who edited the pro-Rhodes *Johannesburg Star*, and who rejoined *The Times* as a war correspondent in October 1899; together with Vere Stent of the anti-Boer *Transvaal Leader* and W H Mackay, editor of the anti-Boer *Pretoria Press*, who were both Reuters agents.¹³

These attempts at creating a climate of public opinion for war were aimed at Britain through the English-language press of southern Africa only. Apparently without exception, each side in the increasing conflict aimed its propaganda at its own supporters and treated the other side as a lost cause. Even after the outbreak of war there was no real attempt by the British to close down or regulate Afrikaans-language newspapers in Cape Colony and Natal, which continued to publish the most vehement anti-British sentiments, although newspapers in the Orange Free State and the Transvaal were closed down or taken over by Lord Roberts as his campaign progressed from town to town in 1900.¹⁴

On the other side, the Transvaal and the Orange Free State made little or no effort in creating a co-ordinated media strategy, either within southern Africa or within Europe, to go with their political and military strategy. To have done so would have required a degree of political sophistication, and knowledge of European politics, that was probably beyond its leaders at the time. It was also physically quite difficult to report the war from the Boer side, even before the fall of Pretoria. Through their settlement at Aden, the British controlled all telegraph lines out of southern Africa, including from Pretoria and Lorenzo Marques, and only a handful of reporters accompanied the Boer commandos.¹⁵

Famously, since 1897 Dr Willem Leyds as the South African Republic's Ambassador-at-Large to Europe had from his headquarters in Brussels sought to influence others to support the Boer cause by encouraging anti-British propaganda as well as by diplomacy. In one assessment, Leyds 'was to cause almost as much embarrassment to Queen Victoria as Kruger himself'. The British attributed many of their difficulties in Europe to Leyds; and if the actual achievements of his policy of demonising the British was slight, with propaganda largely restricted in Germany and France to satirical magazines or specialist publications, the impact could be considerable if brief. A well-known cartoon showing Kitchener and Joseph Chamberlain as devils stoking a cauldron with dead children which appeared in the German satirical magazine *Ulk* in 1901 (and is reproduced by Thomas Pakenham in his popular history *The Boer War*) seems to have drawn as much criticism as praise. This was even more true of an otherwise innocent-looking drawing dedicated to Leyds, 'Hero Worship' by Thomas Heine, which appeared in the special German publication *Der Burenkrieg*. The caption of this drawing read, 'English princesses decorate the youngest soldier in the British Army for having already, at the age of thirteen years, raped eight Boer women'.¹⁶

Boer propaganda produced in Europe, and indeed their whole media stance, was otherwise characteristically 'reflexive' in nature. That is to say, although apparently aimed at others, its main function was to demonstrate to the Boers themselves the wickedness of their enemy and their own righteousness. This applied to Leyds' speeches just as much to the articles on farm burning for European newspapers that Jan Smuts found time to write while on commando. This assumption of the self-evident justice of their cause and ability to fight for themselves by the Boer leaders also ran contrary to any attempts to generate outside support. 'Thank you for coming', President Paul Kruger told one group of foreign volunteers, 'Don't imagine that we have need of you. The Transvaal wants no foreign help but if you wish to fight for us you are welcome'. Other foreign volunteers also found the Boers on commando hostile and insular, and only in rare cases did they develop closer ties. Equally, the small number of American reporters who accompanied the commandos seem to have decided on a pro-Boer stance before entering the war zone, rather than being converted by their experiences.¹⁷

Even so, in an important sense the first political and propaganda battle of the war was won by the Boers even before their ultimatum of October 1899. British military doctrine of the time drew a very sharp distinction between the rules and methods of conduct of European warfare or *Grande Guerre*, and those of savage warfare or 'small wars' (not in the sense of being small in scale, but as a different type of war). In 1896 this doctrinal division was made absolute with the publication of the first edition of CE Callwell's textbook of imperial soldiering, *Small Wars*. (This absolute distinction, which fell rather out of favour in the course of the century, has recently been revived through the introduction in 1994 by the United States of the doctrinal term 'operations other than war', adopted by a number of other countries.) The Boer success in 1899 was in proclaiming themselves to be the inhabitants of organised and developed states along European lines, and without much thought the British also accepted this position. In the famous phrase of the time, this was to be 'a white man's war'. From the British side the Boer War was initially reported as the American Civil War or the Franco-Prussian War had been, with an emphasis on setpiece battles, and on the capture of the enemy capital cities in the expectation that this meant the war's end. This portrayal of the two republics as organised states to which individual Boer farmers and their families owed an abstract loyalty was very far from reality, as was shown when the fall of the capitals failed to produce the expected victory, and by the repeated breakdown of central authority over the commandos.¹⁸

The strategic situation faced by the two Boer republics in October 1899 also closely resembled that of the Southern Confederacy in early 1861. The surprise ultimatum had successfully pre-empted the main British deployment, and offered perhaps the only chance of an outright Boer military victory. As envisaged by Jan Smuts in particular, a three-pronged commando invasion of Cape Colony could have triggered an uprising from its Boer population and the capture of its deep-water ports while the bulk of the British expeditionary Army Corps under Sir Redvers Buller was still on the high seas. The Afrikaans language press contributed to the atmosphere of revolt against the British, but despite repeated commando invasions through to 1902 no such revolt ever materialised in Cape Colony. This once more suggests that a common Boer identity in terms of European patriotism was not a particularly significant factor in the war, and that the Boer propaganda and media strategy aimed at stimulating such an identity may have been misconceived.¹⁹

After the failure to win a quick success, the only realistic chance for the Boer republics was a political victory rather than a military one. Commandant-General Piet Joubert expected to fight his last war again. The experience of the First Boer War 1880-81 (or Transvaal War of Independence) was that the shock of one or more Boer victories on the scale of Majuba Hill would cause the Salisbury government to fall to public pressure, and a new Liberal government would negotiate peace. This opportunity came with the triple British defeat of 'Black Week' in December 1899. It is not simply historical revisionism to stress how militarily lacking in significance the three British defeats at Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso were. The total British dead for all three battles was under 400 soldiers, compared to nearly 1000 lost at Maiwand in 1878 and a similar number at Isandhlwana in 1879. The underlying cause of all three defeats, understood at the time by experienced British officers, was the lack of an effective supply system and mounted scouting forces, the creation of both of which had

been pre-empted by the Boer ultimatum and sieges. This importance granted to these battles has also obscured for historians the British record against the Boers up to that point, which at four victories and two defeats does not support the conventional view of an army bulging with incompetence. British expeditionary strategy of the middle and late nineteenth century was based on strength in depth and the ability to recover from such defeats; it was the political decision to make peace after Majuba that had been the exceptional case.²⁰

The Boer victories of 'Black Week' derived their importance from their impact on politics and public opinion in London, rather than presenting the republics with any military advantage on which they might capitalise. Denys Reitz recorded the expectation in his own commando that 'peace would soon follow' as it had after Majuba. But at this low point for the British, there is nothing to indicate a prepared or sustained political offensive by the Boer Republics in order to secure a climate for peace in London, or intervention from outside. President Kruger's mission to the capitals of Europe after the fall of Pretoria was a case of political mis-timing.²¹

An informal War Office enquiry a few months before the Boer War found that the vast majority of owners and editors of British newspapers were anxious to co-operate with the government in wartime, and favoured informal agreements on security issues. Lord Lansdowne's rejection of these offers in favour of attempts at formal military control of the press, which in 1899 were unsuccessful, was the first case of a wartime dynamic between military authorities and the media which has characterised all twentieth century wars. Another common theme which found its first expression in the Boer War was the military belief that recent changes to press behaviour, public sensibilities and media technology posed a new and dangerous threat to their ability to carry out military operations. The Adjutant General, Sir Evelyn Wood, wrote a few months before the war's outbreak:

It is unnecessary to quote historical examples to prove the advantages derived in past wars by military commanders from a study of the newspapers of the enemy. The possibility of so reaping advantage has been greatly enhanced in modern times by the multiplication and acceleration of the means of communication and the feverish competition of modern journalism to obtain news which will interest the enormous reading public for which it caters.²²

The military controls which were prepared in peacetime for the British press between 1902 and 1914 were not the personal creation of Lord Kitchener, but a genuine attempt by the Army to address what it saw as a serious threat to its ability to wage war. (There is no doubt, however, that Kitchener was deeply hostile to the press after his experience with them in the Sudan in 1898.)

In the absence of any formal analysis or investigation, or anything resembling a Staff College doctrine on the press, the views of senior officers were most likely to have been shaped by personal experience earlier in their careers. A number of commanders and their staffs who served in the Boer War had such direct campaign experience. Lord Roberts, although he had not seen active service since 1880, had effectively invented the prevailing command style of unofficial rewards and restrictions towards the press in his campaign in Afghanistan of that year.

Since then, like his rival Lord Wolseley, he had maintained and developed his press contacts in Britain. Kitchener in the Sudan had established his own personal approach, based more on restriction and control rather than co-operation. Lord Methuen had served in 1897 as the unofficial press censor for a punitive expedition on the Afghan frontier, and showed a relaxed and supportive attitude towards the press in South Africa. Sir Redvers Buller, as Adjutant General in 1889, had introduced the first formal licences for war correspondents with the Army, although in his relations with the press, Buller remained friendly but formal, rather than proactive and manipulative like Roberts.²³

A number of significant middle-ranking officers also had experience from earlier wars, either of writing anonymous paid reports for newspapers, or of providing illustrations, or of acting as censors on the staff, including through association with Roberts. These included Colonel Robert Baden-Powell, Colonel Ian Hamilton, and Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Henry Rawlinson. Even Major Douglas Haig, who like Lord Kitchener had the lowest opinion possible of war reporters at this stage of his career, understood their value in providing support and publicity, and was by no means discourteous or unreceptive to approaches from reporters.²⁴

From the point of view of Britain and the Empire, reporting from southern Africa itself in the course of the war followed four overlapping phases, closely matching the progress of the war itself. Its opening months from October 1899 onwards were marked by a British failure, as a War Office system of control based on previous practice in colonial war of a small number of accredited war reporters accompanying the Army broke down or was never properly implemented. Instead, the relatively sophisticated and well-developed infrastructure of southern Africa allowed and encouraged a much greater number of reporters, and this opening phase of the Boer War saw the first example in warfare of a 'media circus'. The Reuters news agency employed about 100 reporters and stringers in the course of the war, and 21 of them saw enough action with the British to receive the campaign medal. The big London daily newspapers each maintained a staff of 20 or so in southern Africa, supporting four or five war reporters in the field, backed up by political correspondents based largely in Cape Town; while many of the minor British newspapers also sent at least one war reporter. The War Office's failure to establish either effective pre-war regulations or agreements with the major newspapers meant that it was also possible for individuals to travel to South Africa as reporters who had quite separate motives. The most famous of these was the young Churchill, certainly in South Africa to report for the *Morning Post*, but also intent on establishing a reputation for himself in order to enter a career in politics, which he did on his return. According to British censors' notes, an important motive for Lord de la Warr, who came out to South Africa for *The Globe* but soon resigned, was pursuit of another man's wife. An exact total may never be known, but according to censors' records there were at least 70 accredited reporters with the British in early 1900, and probably over 200 individuals involved in the news media process at the war's height.²⁵

The second phase of the war, in terms of military relations with the mass media, was marked by a gradual establishment of mutually agreed rules and methods of conduct, beginning with the arrival of Colonel Edward, Lord Stanley, in South Africa as the Army's chief censor. The presence of the politically sophisticated Lord Stanley was an indicator of how seriously the British government regarded the issue of press censorship. A former government Whip, he would become Earl of Derby and Minister for War in the First World War. Also, and not unusually for the twentieth century, the press themselves reacted to a coherent censorship policy with relief and enthusiasm at knowing the parameters within which they were to work. This phase of relative harmony between the press and the Army reached its peak under Roberts, although it was a harmony based on the understanding that Roberts and his staff occupied by far the dominant position.²⁶

The third phase came between July and December 1900, after the fall of Pretoria, when most reporters including virtually all the famous names associated with reporting the Boer War simply went home, sharing with Roberts the conviction that the war was successfully over. Lord Stanley also left South Africa with Roberts at the end of the year. The importance of the role of the press in this British self-deception should not be under-estimated, particularly in their praise of Roberts. For the final and guerrilla phase of the war, other than one or two war reporters such as Bennet Burleigh of the *Daily Telegraph* or the newcomer Edgar Wallace of the *Daily Mail*, British newspapers were dependent on Reuters and other news agencies or on stories from local newspapers, exactly as they had been before the war. By January 1901 the war had almost ceased to feature at all in the provincial press in Britain, while in the London press it was marked more by critical leader articles than by an increasingly few actual reports from the front.

Although Kitchener inherited from Roberts a compliant British and local press, his own attempts to exercise even greater control gradually brought about a deterioration in relations, and a polarisation of opinion between such figures as Gwynne on the one side, and Edgar Wallace on the other. The strategy established by Roberts and developed by Kitchener of farm burning and concentration camps, particularly at a time when the British Government had proclaimed that there was no war in South Africa, created a second major dynamic in military-media relations of the twentieth century. At a time when the term 'concentration camp' was still fresh in public sensibilities from Cuba in 1898, the military maladministration of the camps, together with such practices as an authorised food ration scale for the families of Boers who had not surrendered lower than for those who had provoked outrage in London when they were revealed by the press. The Liberal Leader of the Opposition, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, in a speech to a Liberal Party dinner at the Holborn Restaurant on 14 June 1901, declared that:

A phrase often used is 'war is war'. But when one comes to ask about it, one is told that no war is going on—that it is not war. When is a war not a war? When it is carried on by methods of barbarism in South Africa.²⁷

It has been a repeated characteristic of twentieth century governments and their armed forces to take the position that indeed 'war is war', and to seek to impose on the press in expeditionary wars the same obligations and restrictions as in wars of national survival. Equally, although the media have often accepted restrictions placed upon them in total war, political conflict has arisen over the extent to which the 'war rules' should apply in lesser conflicts. It is significant that the main criticisms of Kitchener's conduct of the war did not come from reporters within South Africa itself, who saw their role as reporting with the mounted columns and blockhouse patrols, rather than criticising high policy. Rather, it came from editorials and accounts that appeared in newspapers from informal observers after they had left South Africa, most famously Emily Hobhouse over the concentration camps. A passage from a short story published after the war by Captain Ernest Swinton of the Royal Engineers (later famous in the First World War for contributing to the invention of the tank) catches the prevailing attitude to such writings among junior officers nicely:

He thought of what would happen if they got too close to the enemy's trap to open out in time, and were caught in column by a cross-fire Stellenbosch for him! Scare headlines in the papers at home! 'Another regrettable incident!' 'When will our officers learn sense?' 'When will they take their profession seriously?' He had quite recently smelt the railway, and had browsed on old papers, and knew the gush by heart! How he would like to have 'Constant Reader' ahead to guide now, and 'Taxpayer' alongside himself to advise!²⁸

This military response, to see such writings as unwarranted interference rather than a legitimate expression of public opinion, has again been characteristic of many twentieth century wars.

By way of summing up: it is not necessary to overdraw parallels, nor to project back onto a previous age the obsessions of our own, to show beyond dispute that the role of the mass news media in the Boer War was, and was recognised at the time to be, of central importance to its conduct. The Boer War was a media war, just as much as it was a political war, or a soldier's war, or a people's war. It is a sufficient starting place in our understanding both of this war and of warfare in general, for this fact to be recognised.

Endnotes

1. John Pimlott and Stephen Badsey (eds), *The Gulf War Assessed* (London: Arms and Armour, 1992), 219-45; Philip M Taylor, *Global Communications, International Affairs and the Media Since 1945* (London: Routledge, 1997), 119-23, and *War and the Media: Power and Persuasion in the Gulf* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992). Cf Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 444, describing the First World War: 'The war was certainly a media war'.
2. David French, *The British Way in Warfare 1688-2000* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 225-39; Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars* (London: Counterpoint, 1983), 208-17; BH Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn From History?* (London: George Allen & Unwin, reprinted 1972), 53-90; Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (London: Quartet edn, 1982), 59; Peter Young and Peter Jesser, *The Media and the Military: From the Crimea to Desert Strike* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1997), 27-28.
3. Richard Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class: Working-Class Attitudes and Reactions to the Boer War 1899-1902* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); John M MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986); Garth S Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992); Oliver Thompson, *Easily Led: A History of Propaganda* (Thrupp: Sutton, 1999). The confusion of the term 'media war' with propaganda or psychological operations (psyops) was particularly marked during the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia over Kosovo in 1999.
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