The Memories and Mythologies of South Africa’s Great War


For those who start them, wars are almost always an illusion, in the sense that the conflict with which they end up is rarely the contest which they had imagined at the beginning. In forcing war upon South Africa’s Boer Republics in 1899, Britain’s War Office envisaged a short little colonial war, easy on the purse and light on casualties. Instead, in its bid to crush settler republicanism and thereby complete the imperial conquest of southern Africa, London got rather more than it had bargained for. The British found themselves lumbered with a draining, costly and controversial military campaign which did them little credit. Likewise, the Boers, too, discovered that they had bitten off more than they could chew. Running down to the wire, they had to wage a desperate and tormented ‘people’s war’ for existence.

Once it had become apparent that victory on the battlefield would not do the job, the issue for Britain was how this war was to be won. Its answer to Boer guerrilla resistance was a form of modern total war. This involved laying waste to the enemy countryside, interning rural civilians in camps, and exploiting the instruments of modern industrial war—telephones, telegraph, trains, barbed wire, searchlights and observation balloons—to control the modern field of conflict and to box in enemy forces and observation. Instead, in its bid to crush settler republicanism and thereby complete the imperial conquest of southern Africa, London got rather more than it had bargained for. The British found themselves lumbered with a draining, costly and controversial military campaign which did them little credit. Likewise, the Boers, too, discovered that they had bitten off more than they could chew. Running down to the wire, they had to wage a desperate and tormented ‘people’s war’ for existence.

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