Chapter 15

‘Everyday life’ in Boer women’s testimonies of the concentration camps of the South African War, 1899–1902

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This chapter considers the idea of ‘everyday life’ in relation to Boer women’s published testimonies of their experiences in concentration camps during the South African War between October 1899 and May 1902. It examines how ‘everyday’ experiences were ‘forgotten’ in favour of a nationalist version of events that represented the camps as places where the British carried out brutal mistreatment and even murder of Boer women and children. The notion of ‘everyday life’ in a concentration camp may seem anomalous, largely because of what the words ‘concentration camp’ have come to mean (Stanley and Dampier, 2005, in press). The South African War concentration camps were vastly different in both kind and degree to Nazi camps: central to the concentration system in South Africa was the organisation and regulation rather than the destruction of ‘everyday life’. In arguing for the importance of writing ‘everyday life’ back into the history of the camps, this chapter offers some alternative representations of camp life that depict the routine, domestic activities of the inhabitants and provide a counter to the dominant nationalist account.

War, the camps and women’s testimonies

During the South African War between Britain and the Boer Republics, the British military authorities established concentration camps to
accommodate Boer women and children rendered homeless by the scorched earth policy used to deprive Boer commandos of food and other resources. By the end of the war, some 22,000 Boer children (particularly those under five) and 5,000 women had died in the camps. Death came mainly from measles, pneumonia, typhoid and enteritis. Such diseases reflected poor sanitation, inappropriate feeding and lack of access to clean water resulting from the hurried and haphazard establishment of the camps rather than deliberate neglect. Deaths in the camps were not the result of an intentional, genocidal project on the part of the British authorities, although this is frequently how they have been represented.

From September 1900, camps were established and administered by the British military who generally lacked the experience and skills needed to accommodate and provision large numbers of women and children before a civil administration took over during 1901. The camps differed widely from one another and changed internally over the course of the war; conditions depended very much on the individual camp superintendent. Inhabitants were mostly accommodated in tents (some camps had tin or 'sod' houses), were provided with basic rations of food and cooking fuel, and sometimes clothing and bedding, although the quantity and quality of this varied. Most camps permitted Boer inhabitants to keep servants, although servants were not always rationed and the number of private servants in the camps overall was small. (Stanley, 2004, 2005, in press). Hospitals, schools as well as shops where inhabitants could purchase additional food and other items were set up in each camp. Most had a resident clergyman who conducted church services. Some inhabitants worked either for the camp administration or for other wealthier inhabitants, and occupations included carpentry, gardening, brickmaking, shoemaking, clothes laundering, nursing and sewing. In certain camps, inhabitants received passes to work in nearby towns and, depending on the local military situation, inhabitants could also obtain passes to shop in town, visit the seaside or even attend the theatre and parties (Concentration Camps Commission, 1902: 32). The concentration system was thus based on controlling, regulating and institutionalising everyday life as it sought to organise the several thousand women and children, as well as men, in each camp; it was not aimed at the destruction of the Boer people and their lives.

Nonetheless, the terrible epidemics of illness in the camps, and the sometimes inept way these were dealt with, caused much public controversy in Britain. In 1901 the British government appointed a committee of women, the so-called Ladies Commission, under the leadership of Millicent Garret Fawcett, to investigate camp conditions and the causes of the high death rates, and to recommend any necessary changes. By the
time the Ladies Commission Report was published in January 1902, death rates had generally declined, partly because the camps were better established and more efficiently run by officials with greater understanding of what was required to organise them, and partly because the epidemics of measles and pneumonia had peaked in the second half of 1901. Levels and trends of camp death rates varied. Such variations can be attributed partly to the camp officials, but also to the difficult conditions under which they had to work, which included: obtaining suitably qualified medical staff, necessary hospital equipment and supplies and rations of sufficient quality and quantity, as well as maintaining standards of hygiene and cleanliness within the camp. The Commission also focused on Boer women’s reluctance to admit their sick children to hospital, and their use of ‘Dutch medicines’ and home remedies, which included the administering of dog’s blood as medicine and painting measles patients’ skin with oil paint (Concentration Camps Commission, 1902: 17). Certainly many Boer families were unaccustomed to living in close and cramped quarters with others. Habits that had been relatively harmless on large isolated farms, such as emptying human excreta onto the open veld, could prove fatal in crowded camps where typhoid and enteritis were endemic. Boer children were especially vulnerable to infection because of their previous isolation on remote farms and were worst affected by the measles and pneumonia epidemics of 1901.

Whatever the complex epidemiological causes of the concentration camp deaths, this episode in South African history had a dramatic impact on Boer society, not least because an estimated 10 per cent of its population died in the camps. Significantly, Boer women’s testimonies of the camps have been dominated by a strongly anti-British standpoint in seeing them as death camps where the British military deliberately set about trying to murder Boer women and children in a coordinated programme aimed at the eventual genocidal extermination of all Boer people. Such testimonies reveal little of everyday camp life, and focus in an exclusive and ritualised way on the ‘murder’ of the volk or people. This perspective has been uncritically incorporated into much of the historiography of the camps and is closely linked to particular political purposes’ (for example, Van Bruggen, 1935; Steenkamp, 1941; Otto, 1954; Coetzee, 2000; Raath, 2003).

Immediately following peace in June 1902, women’s accounts of their war and camp experiences emerged. Emily Hobhouse’s _The Brunt of the War and Where It Fell_ (1902) contained brief women’s testimonies she had collected during her relief work in the camps and was followed by a spate of other accounts (including Vis, 1902; De La Rey, 1903; Neethling, 1903; Van Helsdingen, 1903; Brandt-Van Warmelo, 1903). From the first,
women's camp testimonies were linked to nationalist political purposes. Calls were made for women to remember and record their wartime experiences, as evinced by Johanna Brant-Van Warmelo's entreaty in *Het concentratie-kamp van Irene*: 'O, women of South Africa, write about everything you have suffered at the hands of our mighty oppressors. Nothing may be lost, nothing may be forgotten' (Brandt-Van Warmelo, 1905: 123).

From 1910, Afrikaans magazines such as *Die Brandwag* (*The Sentinel*, 1910) and *Die Huisgenoot* (*The Home Companion*, 1926) were established to popularise the language and encouraged women to contribute accounts of their concentration camp experiences. These focused strongly on the legacy of suffering endured by the Afrikaner people, and helped to generate the notion that this shared experience of suffering and hardship not only unified and strengthened Afrikaners, but also could provide them with a history of solidarity on which to build a sound, independent future state. In the decades following the war, women's published war and camp accounts played an increasingly formative role in the development of an Afrikaans cultural nationalist movement, culminating in a particularly fervent period during the late 1930s when many women's testimonies were re/published in association with the nationalist centenary celebrations of the Great Trek in 1938 (Neethling, 1938; Raal, 1938; Postma, 1939; Rabie, 1940). As Stanley has observed, Boer women's testimonies 'served political purposes by testifying within the framework of a nationalist political position contra the British imperialist one – the authors were all women committed to a nationalist and republican cause' (Stanley, in press).

After the camp accounts published at the end of the war, and the shorter magazine testimonies of the 1910s and 1920s, there were sporadic surges of publication, usually coinciding with moments of political significance and public interest. Many Boer women's camp testimonies or collections of testimonies were published by Nasionale Pers, a group of publishing companies linked to the National Party, and were then promoted, bought and distributed by women's national parties and organisations (for example, S. L. Le Clu's *Lief en Leed*; E. Hobhouse *Tint* *Alicia of the Transvaal*; letters from Emily Hobhouse to Mrs Steyn, 7 January 1923 and 1 July 1923; VAB, A156). Besides women's published narratives, women's camp testimonies appear in sworn statements, letters to newspapers and private letters, as well as writings presented as journals and camp diaries but apparently written long after the war. Three main collections of women's camp narratives are discussed here: E. Hobhouse, *War Without Glamour* (1927); E. Neethling, *Mag Ons Vergeet? (May We Forget?)* (1938), and M. M. Postma, *Stemme Uit Die Verlede (Voices From The Past*, 1939).
War Without Glamour, introduced and edited by Emily Hobhouse, presents the testimonies of 31 Boer women, many of them well-known and influential, who describe their first-hand wartime experiences, though not all of them were in the camps.\(^{14}\) *Mag Ons Verget?* contains 29 testimonies collected and edited by Mrs Neethling, who had been a camp inmate for a time. She used testimonies obtained by a journalist, Horak, who had advertised for women’s camp accounts in the *Transvaal* newspaper.\(^{15}\) After Horak’s death, Mrs Neethling purchased his collection of accounts (now in the Van Zyl collection, State Archives, Pretoria) and published a selection. Her Afrikaans text in fact is a translation of her 1917 book, which originally appeared in Dutch as *Vergeten?* [Forgotten?]. Magdalina Margaritha Postma’s *Stemme uit die Verlede* was preceded by an almost identical collection, *Stemme uit die Vrouekampe* (Voices from the Women’s Camps), published in 1925 as a booklet for the Women’s National Party. *Stemme uit die Verlede* gathers together 39 women’s testimonies, some in the form of statements sworn before a magistrate.\(^{16}\) While the women represented in Hobhouse’s and Neethling’s collections were generally members of elite, politically well-connected Boer families, Postma ‘collected testimonies from a very wide range of people’ (Van Heyningen, 2002: 189), albeit with political views that are remarkably consistent.

Both *Mag Ons Verget?* and *Stemme uit die Verlede* were republished in the late 1930s, when Afrikaner nationalism was experiencing a period of unprecedented growth. They depicted the camps as places where Boers had been subjected to oppression and mistreatment by the British, but where ultimately the Boer people’s stoicism, bravery and patriotism had prevailed, paving the way for the emergence of a powerful and united Afrikaner nation, ready to re/claim ons land, our land – ostensibly achieved by the National Party election victory in 1948.\(^{17}\) *Mag Ons Verget?* and *Stemme uit die Verlede* are inextricable from the nationalist context of their production, publication and distribution. Their nationalist intentions are made explicit in their ‘Forewords’ (Neethling, ‘Foreword’, 1938: v; Van Der Horst, ‘Foreword II’, in Postma, 1939: 8). *War Without Glamour* predated the fierce Afrikaner nationalism of the late 1930s. While Hobhouse was not an Afrikaner nationalist, many of the contributors to her collection were active in nationalist circles, and it was published by the Nasionale Pers and distributed by nationalist organisations.

While the precise meaning of ‘everyday life’ is dependent on circumstances and what is considered normative, the exclusion of ordinary, daily activities and experiences from women’s camp testimonies is a strikingly conspicuous feature of these collections. Boer women’s camp narratives predominantly emphasise the barbaric and even murderous behaviour of both the British and black people towards Boer women and children. The
testimonies frequently testify to identical incidents, share formulaic narrative schemes and replicate stock phrases, thus exhibiting what Gillis has called ‘memory work’ (Gillis, 1994). The absence of the ‘everyday’ in camp narratives is symptomatic of the close relationship many of these accounts had with the growth of Afrikaner nationalism. Narratives of illness, suffering and death in the camp testimonies replaced the concept of ‘everyday life’ itself, with the resulting perception that no normal life was possible in the camps. What, then, is the meaning of ‘everyday life’?

‘Everyday life’ in Boer women’s narratives?

For Highmore, the idea of the everyday ‘points (without judging) to those most repeated actions, those most travelled journeys, those most inhabited spaces that make up, literally, the day to day. This is the landscape closest to us, the world most immediately met’ (Highmore, 2002b: 1). This approach is confirmed by Bovone’s proposal that “[t]he term “everyday life” brings to mind daily rhythm; it would literally mean “that which happens every twenty-four hours”’ (Bovone, 1989: 41). From this viewpoint, extraordinary events such as natural disasters or wars do not readily seem to be part of the ‘everyday’. However, ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ are of course socially constructed categories and the content and meaning of everyday life are also culturally determined. Highmore goes on to point out some of the complexities associated with the concept:

Everyday Life is a vague and problematic phrase. Any assumption that it is simply ‘out there’, as a palpable reality to be gathered up and described, should face an immediate question: whose everyday life? [...] To invoke the everyday can be a sleight of hand that normalises and universalises particular values, specific world-views. (Highmore, 2002a: 1)

In addition, those who experience the ‘extraordinary’ – wars or natural disasters – still have to continue with the business of daily life, although in dramatically changed circumstances; what constitutes ‘everyday life’ becomes both modified and structured by changed social conditions. If ‘everyday life’ is interpreted as Bovone’s ‘daily rhythm’, the ordinary, routine practices that make up day-to-day existence – such as sleeping, walking, working, cooking, eating, family life and socialising in the extraordinary conditions of wartime South Africa – then there is very
little, if any, writing about of everyday wartime life in Boer women's narratives.

The three collections under discussion, and also the wider number of archived testimonial writings, purport to present the stories of ordinary suffering Boer women, who are presented as wronged mothers who stoically bore 'the brunt of the war'. Yet they display a curious silence about the commonplace aspects of camp life such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, schooling or socialising – though for most women these activities must have taken up the majority of their time. Instead, the testimonies largely conform to a grand narrative: each is structured in a similar way, and there are specific incidents and emphases that recur across the accounts, indicative of shared 'memories'. Hobhouse took these similarities as a confirmation of the veracity of the women's accounts (Hobhouse, 1927: 5); but there is another way of reading these similarities. By the time women's accounts were being published – many of them as a more or less explicit part of the Afrikaner nationalist project – only 'certain' narratives about the camps were encouraged into the public domain. Writing about memories of trauma, death and hardship with an overtly political anti-British tone were favoured.

While these things – trauma, death, hardship – certainly made up part of daily life for some women in some camps at certain times, their ubiquitous appearance in the testimonies suggests that the official nationalist campaign to 'remember' led to a distorted emphasis on only certain types of experiences and memories. While almost all camp narratives decry the widespread 'murder' of children by starvation and mistreatment in the camp hospitals, for example, only 23 of the 99 women whose stories appear in the three published collections had children who died in camp. These were nationalist women making political capital from the personal losses of others.

The basic narrative structure common to most of the accounts is revealed in the overlap between the testimonies, with the writers repeating, corroborating and reproducing their own and one another's testimonies. Four main aspects of war and camp experience are focused on: capture by British soldiers; the journey to camp; mistreatment by the British in camp, with particular reference to poor or tainted rations, starving children, the 'murderous' camp hospitals and the numbers of deaths in camps; and making sense of these experiences as part of the Afrikaner nation's history of suffering and sacrifice, while looking forward to the time when these sacrifices will result in national liberation and independence from oppressive British imperialism. The following extracts are typical of these emphases.
Capture

They [British soldiers] threw our wheat and corn in front of the door or in the ditch. I saw nothing more of my chickens, and the yard was full of feathers. The pigs screamed as they were shot or stabbed to death. (Mrs Du Toit, in Neethling, 1938: 40)\(^2\)

On 3 August when I went to my house, I found everything there destroyed. The animals had been cut into pieces while still alive; the yard was painted with blood ... everything they could take, they took, and then they set the house on fire. (Mrs Makwayer, in Postma, 1939: 63)

In a moment they [British soldiers] sprang from their horses and beat to death all the animals there were; yes, they did not mind even though the animals crept amongst us, but they beat them dead, they were so cruel; and we must just look on ... When they were gone we found nothing but pieces of the pigs. (Mrs Meijer, in Hobhouse, 1927: 45)

Interestingly, a large proportion of many of the testimonies devote more space to the capture by the British soldiers and the subsequent journey to camp than they do to camp life itself (see, especially, the testimony of Mrs Albertyn, in Hobhouse, 1927: 44). Descriptions of capture emphasise the brutality of British captors as they set about enforcing the scorched earth policy, burning crops and farmsteads and killing farm animals. The killing of animals motif centres on the stabbing and cutting up of livestock, especially pigs, often when still alive; it symbolises the purported savagery of the British. Women's accounts also emphasise their destitution after capture: having 'nothing but the clothes on our backs' is the most common image of being left homeless and penniless after a British raid and capture.

Journey

On the way there [to Brandfort camp] my youngest child died, and the most heart-breaking thing was no white person, but three kaffers had to bury her. (Mrs Wolvaardt, in Postma, 1939: 28)

In three vans and open trucks we left Middelburg ... The worst for us was to hear the Kaffirs shouting at us and their provocation at all the stations. We had no way of defending ourselves. We heard the Kaffirs say: 'Boers, that is good enough for you!' Can Afrikanders stand
that? Again we trusted the Lord would avenge us. (Mrs Van Den Berg, in Hobhouse, 1927: 31)

We got nothing to eat until the evening, and then it was raw meat, which we quickly had to cook ... We had to sleep next to the wagons without any protection other than our blankets, while the kaffirs slept under the wagons and still complained that they were hindered by the crying of our children. (Mrs Du Toit, in Neethling, 1938: 83)

Tales of the journey to the camps are permeated with indignant disapproval of black people assisting the British with the capture and transportation of Boer women to the camps. Women express fear and anger at the presence of threatening racial ‘others’ who have transgressed the racial order by conspiring with the British against their ‘rightful’ Boer superiors (Dampier, 2003). An emphasis on hunger, especially the deprivation and hunger suffered by children, appears in the narratives.

**Camp life: rations and vitriol**

We got nothing other than corned beef, white bread and black coffee, and there wasn’t enough of anything to still our hunger; we nearly died of hunger ... We also got blue vitriol in the flour and something else that made red flecks in the bread. (Mrs Du Toit, in Neethling, 1938: 88)

The meat that was given to us, was that of sick animals and in the flour there were pieces of vitriol. (Mrs Alberts, in Postma, 1939: 91)

I myself took vitriol out of the sugar and hooks out of the tinned meat. (Mrs Scheepers, in Postma, 1939: 146)

Great stress is placed in the testimonies on poor, insufficient rations, with frequent claims that vitriol was added to rations to poison camp inhabitants. That the British tried to murder Boer women and children by adding hooks to tinned meat is a common allegation. In fact the tinned meat distributed in the camps was imported from North America, and the hooks story relates to a particular incident concerning one of the large tins of corned beef found to contain some meat-hooks when opened in Pietersburg camp (DAC 6: Papers received, Pietersburg camp, May–December 1901). ‘Crystals’ in sugar and flour, assumed to be vitriol, were additives to stop the rations going hard in high humidity. Specific stories were generalised, gained currency and were repeated as evidence of the British plot to wilfully murder the Boer people.
Starving children

After a few days, one [of my children] died with the words: ‘Mother go to Jesus and ask for food for me’. (Mrs Wolvaardt, in Postma, 1939: 28–9).

Here and there [in the camp hospital] one saw a child sitting up with outstretched hands and tears streaming, crying ‘bread, bread, I am so very hungry’. (Mrs Roos, in Hobhouse, 1927: 126–7)

Many people in the camp were so debilitated by hunger that they had to be taken into hospital. And many people died of hunger in the hospital. Once I asked a child of about twelve years old how he was. He said: ‘Fine, but I am almost dying of hunger’. (Mrs Bronkhorst, in Neethling, 1938: 22)

In women’s camp narratives, children appear exclusively in relation to starvation, sickness and death. One device used to give impact and authenticity to claims made about hunger and starvation among children is the use of children’s ‘own’ direct speech about this. Some children, notably those suffering from gastro-intestinal diseases such as enteritis, were placed on starvation diets in hospitals to bring the illness under control. Boer women who did not share the same medical culture as the British camp doctors usually regarded these starvation regimes not as a cure but a form of murder26 (Van Heyningen, 2002). In the camp narratives, there is a total absence of memories of children playing, being mischievous, attending school or going about their daily routines.

‘Murderous’ hospitals

Most of the people who used the doctors’ medicine, died. I also lost one child in this manner, but the other children who did not make use of the doctors’ medicine, all stayed alive. (Mrs Alberts, in Postma, 1939: 92).

The hospital was a place of horror to us, we dreaded it like death, especially the children, who had to be forced to go. (Mrs Viljoen, in Hobhouse, 1927: 63).

It was generally known: in the hospital, all the children die, if not of sickness, then of hunger. (Mrs Truter, in Neethling, 1938: 195)

A key theme about hospitals and illness is that all who entered the camp hospitals were more than likely to die, and that the best way of avoiding
death was to keep out of hospital. This notion is not borne out in the camp records, which indicate that the majority of patients treated in camp hospitals survived, and that the overwhelming number of deaths occurred in the tents. Many women also describe the sadness and pain of being separated from their children who were frequently taken to hospital by force. Actions that seemed to some Boer women to be needless cruelty on the part of camp authorities were based on the urgent necessity of preventing the further spread of disease by keeping all the sick isolated from other inhabitants.

**Deaths**

In my eyes the camp was nothing other than a murder camp. I saw that in one night 37 bodies were brought to the mortuary. (Mrs Barnard, in Postma, 1939: 94)

At the end of August the daily load of coffins on that transport wagon had increased to 22 in number. Sometimes there were 2 corpses in one coffin. They often put as many as eight coffins in one grave. (Mrs Rossouw, in Hobhouse, 1927: 96)

Almost every day there were up to thirty deaths. (Mrs Pienaar, in Neethling, 1938: 92)

Many testimonies attempt to convey the scale of the camp deaths by describing how many people died at a particular time or each day, and how many were buried together in multiple graves. Little sense of individual sadness, personal loss or private mourning emerges from the narratives. Instead, the numbers of dead are related in a rather routine way and are rallied as conscious sacrifices made by the Afrikaner nation for its ultimate independence. That the large majority of camp deaths occurred among children under the age of five renders as distinctly dubious attempts to cast their deaths as knowing sacrifices made for the volk or nation.

**Making sense**

Our trials began when our loved ones – husbands, brothers, sons – were called up. Yet they went willingly, like heroes, to give their lives for freedom and for justice. (Mrs Wepener, in Neethling, 1938: 100)

The Afrikaner woman carried herself very bravely. Was it not for people and fatherland that she suffered, and would it not have been
more than enough reward if she kept her independence? (Mrs Kriegler, in Neethling, 1938: 124)

How can there still be Afrikaans mothers who suffered still more and now go along with the arch enemy? But we trust that our People will once again be united. (Mrs Wolvaardt, in Postma, 1939: 29)

Several women’s accounts end by reworking Boer suffering during the war - camp deaths and those of Boer men on commando - into part of a preordained ‘rise of the Afrikaner Nation’. The phrases ‘for freedom and for justice’ or ‘for freedom and fatherland’ recur across the texts, and some women anticipate the future Afrikaner Nation by writing: ‘we trusted the Lord would avenge us’ (Mrs Van der Berg, in Hobhouse, 1927: 31) and ‘we trust that our People will once again be united’ (Mrs Louw, in Neethling, 1938: 29).

Forgetting the everyday in narratives of ‘traumatic’ pasts

The almost total absence of ‘everyday’ memories in women’s testimonies examined here needs to be seen in the context of Afrikaner nationalism, with the accounts being produced during a period of intense nation-building. Vogelsang (2002) has explored the process of remaking history in former Soviet states - her study focuses on Simferopol in the Crimea - through a ‘remembering the forgotten’ that has occurred since the end of Soviet rule in 1989. She argues that the practice of re/creating history in the context of building a ‘new nation’ encourages people to remember ‘correctly’ the traumas they suffered under Soviet domination now that they have the freedom to do so and are no longer oppressed and silenced by an authoritarian regime. These stories of past oppression, long denied and suppressed but now brought to the surface, constitute the new history of a now-liberated nation, whose people are bound together by their shared experience of past injustice.

Vogelsang holds that this has led to the assumption that there was no ‘normal life’ under Soviet rule, and that all legitimate or authentic memories about the past are those that are traumatic and were repressed. Memories of ordinary people going about the daily business of everyday life, in spite of the oppression of Soviet rule, have now become ‘forgotten’ in favour of ‘worthy’ memories of suffering. Vogelsang insists that official campaigns of remembering always involve official campaigns of forgetting. In the South African context, women writing their testimonies ‘forgot’ memories of everyday camp life in producing their narratives,
because these were produced expressly for political, nation-building purposes.

That the testimonies in the three collections under discussion do not generally narrate details of ‘everyday life’ stands in contrast to the many contemporary photographs that have been archived. These do testify to the ordinary domestic routines around which camp life was organised. Photographs show families with their possessions posing for pictures outside their tents, children attending school or catechism classes, and camp inhabitants playing sport, cleaning, working, cooking, at Sunday church services and receiving rations. Many of these photographs were taken by travelling photographers at the request of camp inhabitants themselves, often to send to absent relatives. A few camp photographs are reproduced here, and show some aspects of everyday life that are not represented in women’s testimonies.27

Photograph 1 shows a group of children gathered at a camp soup kitchen to receive their soup ration. Soup kitchens for children, the elderly and the infirm were started in most of the camps in the wake of the Ladies Commission visits. Photographs 2 and 5 both show camp inhabitants participating in sports activities. Sports days were sometimes held in camps, and a few camps had rough tennis courts. Photograph 3 depicts a group of camp school children with their teacher. By the end of the war all
Photograph 2  Tennis in Winburg camp

Photograph 3  Schoolchildren in a camp
Photograph 4  Two young women outside their tent

Photograph 5  Sport in Bloemfontein camp
'Everyday life' in Boer women's testimonies

The camps had established schools, although the quality of schooling varied from camp to camp and greatly depended on the ability of the camp authorities to recruit qualified teachers. The two young women posing outside their tent with some of their household possessions in photograph 4 is typical of many of the camp photographs which often show family groups gathered outside their tents, sometimes with their pets and belongings. The men in photograph 6 are shoemakers in Winburg camp, where other occupations for male inhabitants included brick-making and carpentry.

While these photographs, like the testimonies, are situated in a particular historical context and can be 'read' in a variety of ways to deconstruct their multiple meanings, they were nevertheless taken at the time and in the context of the war. They were thus less subject to the retrospective reworking so evident in women’s testimonies written after the war. The photographs portray camp inhabitants grappling with the changed circumstances of their everyday lives. While they show everyday life structured by the camp system, they depict individuals experiencing and negotiating an institutionalised everyday life by, for example, choosing to represent themselves in a very particular way in this context—as in photograph 4. It is a sense of this negotiation of the very specific kind of everyday life, organised by the camp system, that is so absent in the
written representations of the camps. What appear instead in the
testimonies are the stylised, ritualised narratives of nationalism that
emphasise only death and suffering.

Many commentators, such as Brink (1990: 279) and Grundlingh (1999:
22), have stressed the significance of concentration camp memories of
victimhood and suffering to the formation of Afrikaner nationalism. The
testimonies in Stemme uit die Verlede and Mag Ons Vergeet?, in particular,
were closely associated with the Afrikaner nationalist project. To
remember ‘the worst’ aspects of camp life and describe the camps as
places of ‘murder’, where Boer women and children were martyred in
the nationalist cause, best served their political aims. This is not to suggest that
memory of such things was nothing other than a nationalist construction –
as Werbner points out in relation to Zimbabwe, this reduces memory to ‘an
artefact of the here and now, as if it were merely a backwards construction
after the fact’ (Werbner, 1998: 2). What is interesting, however, are ‘the
processes by which memory lives, gets realised or ruptured, is textualised,
becomes buried, repressed or avoided, has its effects, and is more or less
transformed (Werbner, 1998: 2); and how the nationalist context resulted in
only traumatic and ‘politically correct’ memories being ‘textualised’ and
brought into the public domain, at the expense of other more everyday
memories, shown so graphically in the photographic representations.

By explicitly re/producing in a ubiquitous way narratives which
inscribed collective death and suffering in place of the everyday
experiences of individuals, the greatest political capital could be generated
by those seeking to further a nationalist agenda: this was postwar
‘memory work’. Gillis stresses that memory work is always ‘embedded in
complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is
remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what ends’ (Gillis, 1994: 3).
In this instance, nationalist politicisation of the concentration camps led to
visions of British cruelty and barbarism and Boer suffering replacing
memories of ordinary, everyday life in women’s camp testimonies.

Notes

1 For a discussion on the power of the words ‘concentration camp’ see Stanley
2 The camps were situated along railway lines for military reasons and for ease
   of provisioning.
3 The camps in the Transvaal, Orange River Colony and Cape were granted
civil administration in March 1901 and the Natal camps in November 1901.
4 In some camps local committees carried out ‘relief’ work which included
distributing clothing and medical comforts. Some of these items were
supplied by the camp administrations, while various relief committees privately donated others.

5 Apart from black people who lived in the so-called 'white' camps as servants of Boer inmates, there were black people who lived in these camps as employees of the camp administrations. There were also separate black camps (which later became about 60 farms), and estimates of the deaths in the black camps range between 14,000 and 20,000. On black people in the 'white' camps see Stanley 2001 and 2005.

6 For example, the Ladies Commission commented, 'The [Pietermaritzburg] camp was out of bounds for the military camp, but the people were free to go into town as much as they pleased up to 6 p.m. After that hour they required a pass, which Mr Struben not infrequently granted if there was anyone wanting to go to the theatre or to a party.' (Concentration Camps Commission, 1902: 32).

7 The numbers in each camp were constantly changing with new arrivals and deaths, and people were also moved from camp to camp. Bloemfontein had the largest camp population, with the combined population of the 'old' and 'new' camps standing at 6660 in September 1901 (Concentration Camp Commission, 1902: 39). There were also numbers of Boer men in the camps, although this is seldom mentioned in nationalist literature about the camps, where it is implied that all adult men were fighting on commando. Apart from the very young and the very old, men in camp included those who had surrendered, those who were neutral and those who worked directly for the British.

8 This was further fuelled by a speech given in June 1901 by British Liberal M.P. and leader of the party, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, when he denounced Britain's conduct of the war in South Africa as 'methods of barbarism'.

9 Much of the secondary camp literature fails to challenge many of the apparently proven 'truisms' so frequently repeated in women's testimonies about the camps as places of deliberate mistreatment of the Boers by the British. To varying degrees these texts present uncritically nationalist versions of these events, and this historiographical tradition continues up to the present time. Some key examples include Van Bruggen 1935, Steenkamp 1941, Otto 1954, Coetzee 2000, and Raath 2003.

10 These included Vis 1902, De La Rey 1903, Neethling 1903, Van Helsdingen 1903 and Brandt-Van Warmelo 1905.

11 Many Boer women's accounts were re/published around the time of the 1938 Great Trek centenary celebrations, and these include Neethling 1938, Ral 1938, Postma 1939 and Rabie 1940. The so-called Great Trek refers to the events of 1836-38, when a group of Dutch-speaking Voortrekkers left the Cape Colony and journeyed into the interior of Southern Africa, partly to escape British rule. In 1938 these Voortrekkers were commemorated as brave, hardy, heroic pioneers in a series of triumphalist nationalist celebrations which included a re-enactment of the Great Trek.

12 For example, bulk orders were made of both Mrs Le Clus' Lief en Leed and Hobhouse's Tint' Alle by the Women's National Parties, which arranged for
the promotion, sale and distribution of these books amongst their members. See letters from Emily Hobhouse to Mrs Steyn 7 January 1923 and 1 July 1923. (VAB, A156).

13 Most of the documents presented and archived as camp diaries show signs of being written up long after the war itself and are therefore not diaries in the usual sense.

14 Not all the testimony-writers in War Without Glamour or the other collections were actually in camps; some describe wider wartime experiences.

15 The full collection of women’s testimonies obtained by Horak and later bought by Mrs Neethling is now in the State Archives in Pretoria (Van Zyl collection W19).

16 Stemme Uit Die Verlede appeared in a slightly ‘updated’ form of Afrikaans, and significantly included one additional testimony by Mrs S.C. Scheepers, mother of Boer commandant Gideon Scheepers, who had been controversially executed as a war criminal by the British military on 17 January 1902. Scheepers was later valorised as a hero and martyr of the republican cause.

17 Political control of South Africa by the National Party ended in 1994 with the first democratic elections.

18 In the PhD research on which this article draws, I question the referentiality of memory in Boer women’s wartime women’s testimonies by drawing on Stanley’s re/working of Hirsch’s term ‘postmemory’ as post/memory, a concept which recognises the mediated, unstable nature of all memory. See Hirsch, 1997; Stanley, 2005, in press, and Dampier, 2004, in progress.

19 In the preface to War Without Glamour, Hobhouse states: ‘The universality and similarity of experience is striking. Had every woman of the two Boer Republics (apart from the few big towns) recorded her experience, the result would have been but a general repetition of these statements with minor variations of detail.’ (Hobhouse 1927: 5).

20 In War Without Glamour, five out of 31 testimony-writers experienced the deaths of their children in camp. In Mag Ons the proportion is six out of 29 and in Stemme, 12 out of 39.

21 I have translated all quotes taken from Mag Ons Vergeet? and Stemme Uit Die Verlede from Afrikaans into English.

22 For instance, in War Without Glamour the four pages of Mrs Albertyn’s testimony are almost entirely concerned with this, with only the last short sentence making a brief comment about entering Allwal North camp and her feelings of relief because, ‘My troubles were by no means at an end, but the worst was past’ (Mrs. Albertyn in Hobhouse 1927: 44).

23 See Dampier (2003) for an analysis of ‘race’ matters in Boer women’s testimonies.

24 On the Pietersburg meat hook incident, see DBC 6: Papers received, Pietersburg camp, May–December 1901.

25 For a detailed discussion of the conflict of medical cultures in the camps see Van Heyningen 2002.
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26 In some camps during the height of the epidemics, there were occasions when several people were buried in a single grave. Black and white people were sometimes buried in the same grave, although this has not been acknowledged or commemorated officially.

27 The six photographs here are from the archive of the War Museum of the Boer Republics, South Africa, and are reproduced with their kind permission.

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