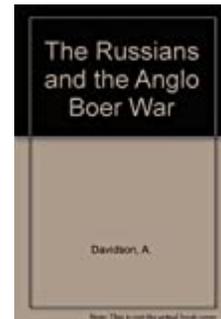




Apollon Davidson, Irina Filatova. *The Russians and the Anglo Boer War.* Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1998. 287 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7981-3804-8.



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To this day these opening lines of a folksong dating from the beginning of this century are well-known among Russians. It is the most popular Russian song about a foreign country (p. 250). It was once sung everywhere in Russia by monarchists, liberals and revolutionaries alike (p. 252), and remained popular long after the end of the South African War. The poet Mikhail Isakovsky wrote in his memoirs that, as a young boy, although he knew nothing about a country called the Transvaal, he would sing this song loudly while walking in the fields and that it touched him to the depths of his soul (p. 254).

The popularity of this folksong symbolises the emotional bonds between the Russian and Boer people at the turn of the century. These bonds are traced in *The Russians and the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, written by two eminent Russian Africanists, Apollon Davidson and Irina Filatova. Davidson, the doyen of Russian Africanists, is head of the Center for African History at the Academy of Sciences in Moscow and Professor of African History at the Moscow State University. He spent a number of years in South Africa as Director of the Centre for Russian Studies at the University of Cape Town. He is the author of several books on southern African history and the editor of more than 30 books on African history and the history of relations between Russia and Africa. Filatova,

previously head of the African Studies Department at the Moscow State University, is Professor of History at the University of Durban-Westville. She is the author of books on Kenyan history and editor of several other books. Davidson and Filatova were co-editors of *A history of Tropical and Southern Africa, 1918-1988* and *Russia in the contemporary world*, and are working together on a book covering the history of ties between Russia and South Africa in the twentieth century.

The Anglo-Boer War, or the South African War as it is now more generally called, is the best-documented event in South African history. Scores of books on the war were published during and shortly after the war. Through the years many diaries and memoirs by participants in the war on both sides, men and women, were published. When official documents became available fifty years after the war, academic studies of the war started blossoming. Recently there has been interest in involvement by blacks in the war. With the centenary of the war approaching, a new generation of fiction and non-fiction about the war is being published.

Davidson and Filatova's book is not the first study of Russian involvement in the South African War. Fifty years ago Alexander L. Vitukhnovsky completed a pioneering Ph.D. thesis on this topic at the Leningrad State University (p. 11). This was followed in the 1960s and

1970s by several MA theses at the University of Petrozavodsk under Vitukhnovsky's supervision. More recently G.V. Shubin completed an MA thesis and T.V. Shapovalova a Ph.D. thesis in this field (p. 11). However, books published in English on this topic are scarce. In 1977 an English translation of a Russian text by Sophia Izedinova, entitled *A few months with the Boers. The war reminiscences of a Russian nursing sister*, was published in Johannesburg. Elisaveta Kandyba-Foxcroft's *Russia and the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902*, based mainly on Vitukhnovsky's materials, was published in Pretoria in 1981. In Roy Macnab's *The French colonel: Villebois-Mareuil and the Boers* (Cape Town, 1975) and Brian Pottinger's *The foreign volunteers. They fought for the Boers (1899-1902)* (Pietermaritzburg 1986) reference is made to the Russian volunteers in the war. Without doubt Davidson and Filatova's book is the best on the topic to date. Apart from the materials previously available, they also made use of documents newly available after the fall of the Soviet Union and rare sources which they themselves had collected laboriously over many years.

The book is divided into two parts. The first, "In the crucible of war", is an anecdotal account of the participation of the Russian volunteers in the South African War. Estimates put the number of foreign volunteers who fought for the Boers at roughly 2500, of whom 225 were "Russians". These numbers are disputable, because the Boer republics registered volunteers only during the first two months of the war. No complete list of names of the Russian volunteers exists. Fewer than 50 of them are known by name (p. 45). All "Russian" volunteers were not ethnic Russians. Many of them were Jewish emigres from Russia, who had come to the Transvaal before the war (p. 50). Others came from the Baltic states or parts of Eastern Europe (pp. 49,50,56). Both staunch monarchists and future Bolsheviks were among the volunteers.

Only one Russian volunteer, Lieutenant Yevgeny Fiodorovich Augustus, published detailed memoirs about his participation in the war (p. 24). "What made me set off for the Transvaal to war to fight for an alien people, for an alien cause?", he wrote (p. 23). He could not give a clear answer, neither could many of his compatriots. Davidson and Filatova are of the opinion that the motivations of the Russian volunteers were shaped by Russian realities. Most of them wanted to support what they considered to be the righteous cause of the Boers, a "national peasant democracy", against the evils of capitalism, imperialism and authoritarianism. Some felt a romantic desire for military glory. They wanted to escape from the dreary routine of military drill to the exotic adventure of

"wild Africa" (pp. 60, 61).

The authors trace the involvement in the war of some prominent Russian volunteers. The most important of these is Yevgeny Yakovlevich Maximov, a former lieutenant colonel in the Russian army who came to South Africa as a war correspondent, but soon joined the European Legion as the Frenchman, General De Villebois-Mareuil's, second in command. Maximov was a friend of several famous Boer leaders, an advisor to the presidents of the Boer republics (p. 68) and, according to the authors, probably had a secret mission in South Africa on behalf of the Russian War Ministry (pp. 82-86). Davidson and Filatova managed to locate Maximov's handwritten South African diary, covering the period February to March 1900. As commander of the Hollander Corps Maximov distinguished himself as a disciplined leader and a brave soldier (pp. 75-76). His biggest and last battle in the war was at Thaba Nchu, where he was wounded by a shot from Captain Towse (p. 77). He was taken to Kroonstad and from there to Pretoria, where he received a hero's welcome. He was elected "veggeneeraal" (combat general), "an honour accorded to him alone among all the European volunteers" (p. 80). Villebois and he were the only foreigners who served as combat generals in the Boer commandoes during the war. Maximov's wound made it impossible for him to go back to the battlefield, and he returned to Russia at the end of May 1900 (p. 81). In a letter President Kruger expressed his gratitude for Maximov's services to the Boer cause (pp. 87-88). His further life history till his death in battle in Manchuria in October 1904 is sketched (pp. 96-103).

Another prominent Russian volunteer was the Georgian prince Nikolai Georgiievich Bagration-Mukhransky, who was called "Niko the Boer" after the war. He was taken prisoner by the British and sent to St Helena, but was soon released. His memoirs, *With the Boers*, was published in Georgian in 1951 (pp. 112-22). The sketchy stories of the participation in the war of other Russian volunteers are related. They include Vasily Yosifovich Romeiko-Gurko, Mikhail Antonovich Zigern-Korn, Alexei Nikolaievich Ganetsky, Alexander Ivanovich Guchkov, Leo Pokrovsky and Boris Strolman. There is a chapter on the services in the war of Russian Red Cross doctors and nurses (pp. 149-62) and one on the information on military aspects of the war collected for the Russian War Ministry and published in 21 volumes totalling 3561 pages (pp. 130-48). In Russian military circles it was believed that the British army would not sustain a fight against the army of a continental power (p. 141).

In their announcement of Davidson and Filatova's book, the South African publishers stated that it would "fascinate those who enjoy reading history as a story". The readability of the book is enhanced by pursuing the life stories of some of the Russian volunteers after their return to Europe. Some of the former volunteers experienced the great upheavals of Russia's history in the twentieth century. Interesting facets of Russian history become stories within the story.

A fascinating aspect of the book is the way in which the historian's craft is revealed. This is done when the authors relate how they searched for sources in archives, libraries and private homes (pp. 13-19, 46-49, 69,120-21), which is a story in itself. They explain on what basis they evaluated their finds (pp. 58, 128).

After studying the role of the Russian volunteers the authors have come to the conclusion that these volunteers had their faults and virtues (p. 109). Some of them were adventurers and rogues (p. 27), others were courageous heroes (p. 44). Casualties among them were high (p. 40). On the whole they did not disgrace their fatherland (p. 39). Of course they had no major impact on the outcome of the war owing to their small numbers, but their mere presence and commitment to the Boer struggle had symbolic significance. Because of cultural differences relations between the Russian volunteers and the burghers were not always easy. Although they admired the courage and fighting skills of the Boers (pp. 31, 37, 115, 140, 146), the Russians were aware of their military weaknesses (pp. 34, 37, 104, 140, 146) and were sometimes shocked by crude racism in South Africa (pp. 65, 115, 146).

When reading the first part of the book, the anecdotal nature of the text owing to a lack of sources, seemed a shortcoming. Davidson and Filatova admit that they are aware "how much more there is to know" (p. 67). Because of language difficulties they also seem not to have exhausted Afrikaans sources to the full. They even use a source whose authenticity is in doubt and which is apparently fictional (Maria Z., *How I was a volunteer in the Transvaal*), just because it shed more light on the topic (pp. 123-29). On top of this one can also argue that the participation of the Russian volunteers was of very little military significance in the war (p. 61). Most of them had left South Africa by May 1900, when the crucial guerrilla phase of the war, which was to continue for two years, started. Isn't the view that this study is nothing but "a mere microhistory" (p. 260) true then?

That it is not the case becomes clear in the second

part of the book called "The Anglo-Boer War in the Russian context". One becomes aware that the skirmishes on the South African battlefields are not the central issue in the book. Rather it deals with how Russians, from Tsar Nicholas down to ordinary citizens, experienced the war and reacted to it. The authors try to put the war in its international context (pp. 165-73). They believe that in the final analysis all history is "world history, the history of the interdependent world" (p. 261). According to the publishers the book "demonstrates the significance of the South African War in Russia's international and internal policy, and thus also the role of this war in the international arena ... By situating events in Russia and in South Africa in a global context, it broadens the view of the war which is often perceived as an internal South African and/or British concern." This is the real value of the book. In his review the South African historian, At van Wyk, rightly points out that this book, more than any other in the century since the war, situates the South African War in the European context (*Beeld*, 7 Sep. 1998).

At the Great World Exhibition in Paris in 1900 the Transvaal pavilion was extremely popular, with a Boer farm the most popular single exhibit. "More than any other event of the turn of the century," the authors state, "the Anglo-Boer War had become the centre of attention for the European public" (p. 175). This was particularly the case in Russia, where Boer mania reached fever pitch (p. 177). The Russian media published an enormous volume of information on the war. It became the setting of works of Russian popular fiction. Boer literature was translated into Russian (pp. 177-82). Translations of the work of Olive Schreiner were particularly popular and had an impact on public opinion (pp. 190-2). The great Leo Tolstoy told a reporter: "Opening a paper every morning I passionately wish to read that the Boers have beaten the British" (p. 181). Although the war above all strengthened right-wing chauvinistic trends among conservative monarchists, the pro-Boer campaign had mass appeal: "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" (p. 194). Involvement in the South African War "became an integral part of Russia's self-image at the turn of the century" (p. 261).

Diplomatic relations in Europe which had a bearing on the South African War are discussed. Intervention by continental powers such as France, Germany and Russia was a strong possibility at the start of the war. Boer leaders, somewhat naively, pinned their hopes on such

intervention (p. 201). Russia had interest in economic relations with the Transvaal, mainly with regard to gold and diamond markets (p. 195). The biggest incentive for the Tsar's government to become involved in the South African conflict, however, was Russia's longstanding rivalry with Britain (pp. 196-99). Smuts hoped for decisive assistance by Russia, but although it was theoretically in favour of intervention, the Russian government was very cautious. In his diary the Tsar wrote that he possessed the means of deciding the course of the war in South Africa, should he order his troops to advance to the Indian frontier (p. 209). Publically, however, he posed as a peacemaker. He visited Germany to foster the formation of an anti-British coalition (p. 210), but William II declined (pp. 211-13) and nothing came of concerted action against Britain. Russian sentiment remained faithfully pro-Boer (p. 216), but anti-British protest remained in the realm of words rather than that of action (p. 217). Great power diplomacy in connection with the South African War was extremely intricate (p. 218).

When a mission of Boer ministers visited St Petersburg in August 1900 they were enthusiastically received by the public. However, the government regarded the visit as unofficial and Nicholas refused to receive them (pp. 223-5).

The authors also give an account of Boer fugitives who escaped from Ceylon and were picked up by a Russian ship which transported them to Russia (pp. 227-30). The Russian adventures of Kruger's charge d'affaires who managed to attend the royal wedding of the Tsar's sister, Olga, form a bizarre but interesting story within the story (pp. 231-40). He sketches out how the Boers showed solidarity with the Russians during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 (p. 241) and how a former Boer general tried to obtain Russian support in 1905 for his plan to overthrow British rule in South Africa through a workers' revolt (pp. 244-48).

In the epilogue the authors point out that, both in Russia and South Africa, Russian involvement in the South African War has always been politically incorrect as a field of academic research (p. 258). This was especially the case in the Soviet and apartheid eras. Never-

theless, in the Soviet era Russians still felt nostalgic about the war, despite attempts to suppress the public memory (p. 263). After the long reign of authoritarianism in both countries, however, the "full story" of relations between them can be exposed to public view (p. 263).

Involvement of the Tsarist empire at the turn of the century in a conflict on the other side of the globe was truly remarkable and paved the way for further Russian/South African interaction (p. 261). It was the starting point of direct relations between the two countries. Davidson and Filatova believe that, although the Soviet ties with the ANC/SACP alliance may seem to be the antithesis of the Boer/Tsarist relations, these ties which started when the South African communists established links with the Communist International in Moscow in the 1920s, would not have come into existence without the foundations laid during the South African War (p. 261). How strange is the course of history! The link between these two sets of ties between the two countries is symbolised by the fact that Abraham Fischer visited Russia during the war as representative of the Orange Free State and that his grandson, Bram Fischer, visited Russia as representative of the SACP.

This book on the South African War, written from an unusual angle, is a welcome contribution to the literature on the war. It is well-published with an index, informative maps and photographs, and a bibliography that will be useful to future researchers. Certainly the book is not meant for academic use only. It has been included in the catalogue of the biggest South African book club and will hopefully have a wide readership. History needs to be popularised to grip the public imagination. The book will hopefully be published in Russian as well, which will make it available to a much larger audience. Will Boers and Russians rediscover their bonds a century after the war? Will "Transvaal, Transvaal my country" sound throughout Russia again?

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