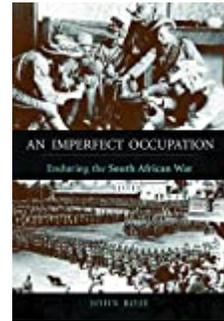


**John Boje.** *An Imperfect Occupation: Enduring the South African War.* History of Military Occupation Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 248 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03956-0.



**Reviewed by** Benjamin Hurwitz (George Mason University)

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**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

John Boje's *An Imperfect Occupation* complicates heroic narratives about the Anglo-Boer War and the foundation of Afrikaner nationalism. Though focused on the small Senekal-Winburg districts of the Free State, Boje touches on conflicts throughout the Boer Republics and even the broader British Empire. His portrait of the South African war is a complicated one in which the allegiance of individual Afrikaners shifted with the winds of change. Some defeated rebels collaborated with the British, while some neutral parties were driven to resist and, ultimately, rebel against British rule.

More than anything, Boje's story is one of empathy for the people caught in the crossfire of a messy war. The title is apt as the various phases of the South African War, the conventional campaign, the guerrilla campaign, and the eventual peace, were all "imperfect." All parties involved were ill-prepared for the ill-defined rules of the conflict and were forced to develop strategies for coping with them. Boje's work is especially strong when showing the lack of choice available to civilians in and near the combat zone. Neither the British nor Boer military forces could provide comfort, stability, or security to the people of Winburg and Senekal. Both forces, however, demanded allegiance and support during their intermittent occupation of territory. Under these conditions, neutral-

ity became untenable and taking sides risked almost certain repercussions. Boje presents evidence that many Afrikaners collaborated with the British occupiers, but only when faced with few alternatives.

Boje's consideration of the concentration camp is equally nuanced. While acknowledging the horror caused by disease, malnourishment, and mistreatment in the camps, he highlights the uneven experience of camp life. Some prisoners protested conditions and resisted, even in the face of further punishment or even banishment from the colony. Others, however, actively cooperated with camp authorities.

While Boje's treatment of blacks during wartime at first seems an afterthought, it is actually clear-eyed and empathetic. He shows the many ways black people were drawn into the conflict, either through promises, threats, or a lack of alternatives. At war's end, Afrikaner resentment toward blacks only increased, while English authorities reneged on their commitments to protect those who had supported them during the war. These sad episodes reinforce Boje's portrait of a war devoid of heroic causes.

This work will be appreciated by any reader who, like

myself, has struggled to understand how the Boers and the British emerged so quickly from this bitter conflict into cooperative agreement. This study highlights ideological divisions within both the British and Boer camps and shows how militant members of both groups degraded the position of occupied civilians. Despite the hardships suffered by blacks, the war disrupted systems of white supremacy in the Boer Republics. After the war, some blacks experienced real economic success, while some Boers saw their fortunes reduced.

Although the British won the war, British hardliners

failed to achieve their goal of “Anglicizing” the country. Boer hardliners remained an important political force but did not reconsolidate power for a half-century. The “liberal” Anglo-Boer coalition that emerged after the war was led by ideological moderates who also agreed, principally, on maintaining white supremacy. Boje’s work helps to explain how old Boer loyalties were broken by the lengthy occupation, paving the way for this new coalition. Though hardliners in both British and Boer camps failed in their primary goals, alienating civilians in the process, they succeeded in their mutual goal of subordinating the black population.

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