

Untold damage of Anglo-Boer war



By Antjie Krog

MORE than 26 000 Boer women and children died in British concentration camps and elsewhere during the Anglo-Boer war. No built structure was left standing anywhere on the platteland. Although a Royal Commission on War in South Africa was appointed after the war, it did not investigate crimes against the local population.

I bring this up to ask: wasn't the mere fact that the abuses of the war were never exposed perhaps not a key factor in the character that formulated apartheid's laws? Was the Boer

reverence of Emily Hobhouse not a symptom of the desperate need for someone "from the other side" to recognise the wrongs that had been done?

What would have happened if acknowledgement had been made about British wrongs and forgiveness asked? A formulation of basic human rights and the respect that ought to be accorded them might have become part of the history of the country. The principle of accountability might have been established. The view that black people should have the same rights as everyone else might at least have become a point of debate, if not necessarily accepted then.

Perhaps no rebellion would have taken place during World War II: the substantial group of Afrikaners who refused to buy into the sudden moral claim of Britain against Germany would have had less reason for such a stand. It was this sceptical core that sprouted the Nationalist group that came to power in 1948.

This is, of course, mere speculation. What is not speculation is what the war came to mean in the Afrikaner psyche. The Afrikaner poet Totius noted in "Forgive and forget" that although the wounds of the war healed, "that scar becomes bigger".

British abuses were recorded by the Afrikaners but never officially acknowledged by the British. Thus the tales of the war did not become part of an ethos relating to how people should behave towards one another. Rather it became a folklore supporting the notion of Afrikaners as a threatened group and a belief that any behaviour, however outrageous, was acceptable if it fostered their survival.

At the previous conference Jose Zalaquett said: "Memory is identity. Identities consisting of false or half memories easily commit atrocities."

Apartheid divided us so successfully that practically no South African can claim memories other than those forged in isolated vacuums. Every one of us has half a memory. Therefore every one of us has a malformed identity which is unsure of how to deal with the reality as it now opens up to us.

How do we make our memories whole? Perhaps it is impossible, but we could at least try to situate them in the larger framework of what was happening while those memories were formed. Zalaquett said:

"We travelled through Chile. I heard hundreds of cases. The victims allowed themselves to show emotion, to cry, to tell. And this was the beginning of the healing process."

In the debate supporting the establishment of a truth commission one hears a lot about justice and amnesty. I want to plead for the uninterrupted telling of experiences as perceived by the victims. These stories should be recorded with respect for the individual's language, vocabulary, accent and rhythm. They should not be written down as detached statistical cases or objective, factual minutes, but should be testimony to the humanity of the people who suffered.

The last point I want to underline is the need for sensitivity about the jargon used in connection with such a commission. "Truth" is a very laden word. Must the commission be called a truth commission? Whose truth are we talking about?

Nadine Gordimer once asked a black writer: "Why do you always picture a white woman lounging next to a swimming-pool? We are not all like that!" He replied: "Because we perceive you like that."

A young comrade arriving from Kroonstad refused to speak Afrikaans to me. He called it a colonial language. "What is English then?" I asked. "English doesn't come from over the sea," he said. "English was born in Africa. It was brought here by Umkhonto we Sizwe."

We have to take cognisance of that perception. It is his truth. But would a truth commission regard it as the truth? And, if it did, what then? I am not trying to smuggle in confusion here but want to stress the ambiguity of language.

Zalaquett warns that one might have to choose between justice and truth. If this commission is only trying to find the truth so that justice can be done in the form of amnesty, trials and compensation, then it has actually chosen not for truth, but for justice. If it sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people's perceptions, stories, myths and experiences, then it has chosen the road of healing, of restoring memory and humanity.

The guilty must come to light but in such a way as not to cast them solely as devils. Otherwise, as in the case of the demonic British and the angelic Boers who emerged in the Afrikaner psyche after the war, one again has angels on hand who may do as they please because of the sinless legitimacy they got from the devil.

Most important of all is that the abuses revealed should be acknowledged by the previous government, in order to create a moral beacon between the past and future for the first time since whites inhabited this country.

Is it hoping for too much to expect of a few ordinary human beings that they will restore the moral fibre of a whole society? But, we are a remarkable country with remarkable people – we should at least give it a try.

Antjie Krog is a poet and editor of Die Suid-Afrikaan. This is an edited version of the speech she made to "The South African Conference on Truth and Reconciliation".