

THE BOER WAR: THE SUFFERING OF THE CIVILIAN POPULATION 1900

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The Boer War raged in South Africa from 1899 to 1902. It pitted British against South Africans of Dutch descent (the Boers). The following account describes one tragic episode in this war. From October 12, 1899, to May 17, 1900, the Boer forces laid siege to the British-held town of Mafeking. The long siege caused mass starvation among the villagers.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Clarifying

What are the author's impressions of the people of Mafeking?

It was not pleasant to mix among the people of the kraals.¹ Hunger had them in its grip, and many of them were black spectres and living skeletons. I saw them crawling along on legs like the stems of well-blackened 'cutties', with their ribs literally breaking through their shrivelled skin—men, women, and children. I saw them, too, fall down on the veldt and lie where they had fallen, too weak to go on their way. The sufferers were mostly little boys—mere infants ranging in age from four or five upwards. When the famine struck the place they were thrown out of the huts by their parents to live or die, sink or swim . . .

When the Colonel got to know of the state of affairs he instituted soup kitchens, where horses were boiled in huge cauldrons, and the savoury mess doled out in pints and quarts to all comers. Some of the people—those employed on works—paid for the food; the remainder, who were in the majority, obtained it free. One of those kitchens was established in the Stadt, and I several times went down there to see the unfortunates fed.

Words could not portray the scene of misery. The best thing I can do is to ask you to fancy five or six hundred human frameworks of both sexes and all ages, from the tender infant upwards, dressed in the remains of tattered rags, standing in lines, each holding an old blackened can or beef tin, awaiting turn to crawl painfully up to the kitchen where the food was distributed. Having obtained the horse soup, fancy them tottering off a few yards and sitting down to wolf up the life-fastening mess, and lick the tins when they had finished. It was one of the most heart-rending sights I ever witnessed, and I have seen many . . .

When a flight of locusts came it was regarded as a godsend—this visitation that is looked upon by the farmer as hardly less of a curse than the rinderpest or drought. The starving ones gathered the insects up in thousands, stripped them of

1. kraals: villages

their heads, legs, and wings, and ate the bodies. They picked up meat-tins and licked them; they fed like outcast curs. They went farther than the mongrel. When a dog gets a bone he polishes it white and leaves it there. Day after day I heard outside my door continuous thumping sounds. They were caused by the living skeletons who, having eaten all that was outside the bones, smashed them up with stones and devoured what marrow they could find. They looked for bones on the dust-heaps, on the roads everywhere, and I pledge my word that I saw one poor fellow weakly follow a dog with a stone and with unerring aim strike him on the ribs, which caused the lean and hungry brute to drop a bone, which the [black] carried off in triumph to the curb, where he smashed it and got what comfort he could from it.

Source: “Besieged with Baden-Powell” by J. E. Neilly, 1900.