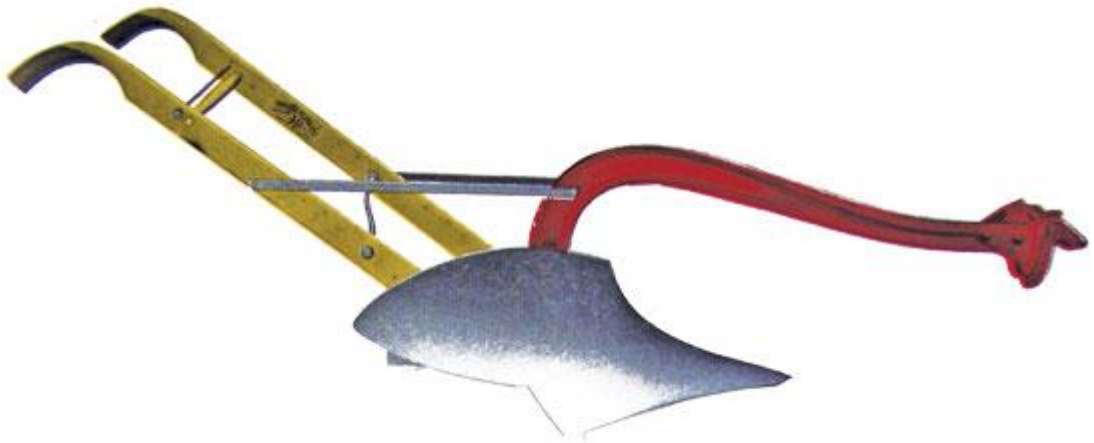
FREE STATE FARMERS:
"WE HAVE A GOOD STORY TO TELL!"



BY

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INTRODUCTION

In *The Agrarian Question and Food Production in Southern Africa* (1988), the political activist Prof Archie Mafeje says: *"While colonialism and apartheid systematically undermined African agriculture, white farmers, on the other hand, benefited from substantial state subsidies."* He continues: *"... their continued control over the vast expanse of South African arable land lies at the heart of the enduring African exclusion and deprivation. Apart from the state subsidies, white capitalist agriculture has flourished as a result of the availability of a captured cheap African labour."*

In an article on *SA Breaking news*, the writer and development economist, Rabelani Dagada, stated: *"... if you tell a lie several times, you may end up believing it. Moreover, some of your listeners may start to believe your lie. The ANC and its government have created a narrative which portrays white farmers as thieves of land that rightfully belongs to the indigenous people of this country."* By the way, Dagada is saying the opposite to what is proclaimed as truth: *"The ANC government and unions should start to appreciate the role of farmers in providing food security and creating jobs."*

There is sufficient historical evidence that farmers did not ósteal ô the land in the Free State or elsewhere. According to documented treaties, land was obtained legitimately by means of either barter transactions, the delivery of services or by cash sales. Rather than argue about these historical facts, this article focuses on the debate regarding the assumption that white farmers, specifically Free State farmers, obtained their wealth by means of subsidies and cheap slave labour.

BACKGROUND

Initially food production was not the priority of farmers in the central parts of South Africa. From 1859 to 1870, agriculture in the Free State was characterized by a settlement phase. Farmers moved from the Cape Colony to settle in, among others, the Free State. Food production was limited to sustaining individual families, with perhaps a minor surplus sold in nearby towns. Wool and mohair were the commercial products which were exported to Europe via Durban.[1]

These small scale primary industry activities continued until diamonds were discovered in the region of Kimberley in 1867. The general wealth created by the diamond industry generated an upsurge in trade, including agricultural produce. Kimberley became an important market for livestock, vegetables and timber from the Free State and this led to an improvement of economic wealth for the farmers.[2]

The rise of a massive trade centre followed the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886, which was the foundation of South Africaôs economy. By 1895, only nine years after the discovery of the Main

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Reef, the Witwatersrand was the biggest gold producer in the world. The Transvaal, formerly a poor area, became one of the richest in South Africa.[3]

The growing population on the Reef and associated secondary industries such as harbour settlements, created a thriving market for agricultural produce. This was the incentive for increased production, but also for an improvement in livestock herds and the modernization of farming methods. The simultaneous development of a transport network made the distribution of agricultural produce possible. South Africaôs mineral wealth was the direct cause for the Anglo Boer War (ABW), but it also resulted in a flourishing agricultural industry through which farmers were able to generate wealth. In 1899, on the eve of the ABW, agriculture was fully commercialized and the Free State was quickly becoming one of the wealthiest and financially most successful agricultural regions in South Africa.[4]

BEFORE THE WAR

In 1952, Catharina van den Berg, a survivor of the war, told anecdotes about her days on a typical Free State farm before, during and after the war. Vredefontein in Kroonstad, where she abided, was a huge farm with mixed farming activities. There had been good rains and the vegetation was lush. Well tended fields stretched for miles. The homesteads and gardens were well cared for with an abundance of livestock, horses, poultry (chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys) and fruit trees laden with fruit. It was a peaceful country life but it required a lot of hard work from sunrise to sunset.[5]

Before the invention of the motorcar, horses were bred on a large scale. It was not strange for a single farmer to own 500 to 600 horses. By 1890 there were even farmers who owned more than 1 200 horses. Every farmerôs wife kept chickens and geese and were seen as wealthy if you owned 60 to 100 geese. These geese were plucked for down for the use in bedding.[6]

Farm equipment consisted of an American two share turn plough, the *"Flying Dutchman"* walking plow, the McCormick self-binder machine and the Daisy Reaper. There were threshing machines (belonging to contractors) in every district. Livestock belonging to Free State farmers amounted to 8.3 million sheep, 1.2 million head of cattle, 860 000 goats, 35 000 pigs and 250 000 horses. Total exports from the Free State Republic amounted to £1.8 million, of which agriculture contributed £1.4 million, or 73%.

The British political scientist, JA Hobson, said in 1902: *"The Free Staters knew what they were doing and what they wished. They are proud of their country and have good reason for their pride. On a poor soil, unable to support its population except by assiduous toil, they have built up one of the most successful nations the world has ever seen."* Even Lord Alfred Milner, British Colonial Secretary in South Africa from the end of the ABW, admitted to Sir Percy Fitzpatrick: *"These old fellows, quite uneducated in our sense, who have never read a book except their Bibles, and very frequently cannot write an ordinary letter, are yet the landed aristocracy and are gentlemen in the best sense: dignified, courteous and hospitable, and amazingly self-controlled."*[7]

THE WAR[8]

After continuous pressure from Britain to award voting rights to the foreigners on the gold fields, the Boer Republics declared war on 11 October 1899 and the conflict only ceased after 2 years and 8 months on 31 May 1902. The war can be divided into three phases. During the first phase the Boers attacked British strongholds at Ladysmith, Mafeking and Kimberley and they had a series of tactical victories at Colenso, Magersfontein and Spioenkop.

During the second phase, after the arrival of British reinforcements, under the chief command of Lord Roberts, the British launched an offensive in 1900 which successfully ended the Boer sieges. After Natal and the Cape Colony were set free, British troops set out to claim their ultimate goal by invading the Transvaal and occupying Pretoria in June 1900.

During the third and final phase of the war, which began in March 1900 and ended in May 1902, the Boers conducted a drawn-out guerilla war which targeted British lines, telegraph posts, railway lines and storage holds. British forces found it difficult to corner the fast-moving Boer commandoes and this prolonged a war that was becoming very expensive for the British to maintain. As long as the Boer women remained on the farms, the fighting burghers would have no shortage of food supplies and horse fodder, and as such they would be able to continue indefinitely.

DESTRUCTION

In an attempt to cut off supplies from the Boers, Roberts implemented a scorched earth policy on 16 June 1900, when he ordered that the farmsteads nearest to where the Boers attacked a railway line, should be destroyed. In September 1900 the policy was increased to a 10 mile radius of a Boer attack. On farms within this radius, livestock was killed or raided and crops destroyed. During this time the first concentration camps, under command of Roberts, were erected.[9]

When Lord Kitchener took over as Chief of Command from Roberts, the scorched earth policy was carried out with more severity. Homesteads were indiscriminately burnt down and the number of concentration camps increased. Under Kitchener all food supplies were burnt or spoilt, wagons, carts, mills, ploughs, threshing machines destroyed and dams blasted. Even coffee mills were broken to unable the women to grind wheat. Fruit trees were cut down below the graft to prevent it from bearing fruit again. Stones were thrown into windmill boreholes and water in wells poisoned. Haystacks and bags of grain were burnt and livestock killed. Crops were burnt down or thrashed on the field. Grocery supplies were destroyed or taken to British lines. By this time farm labourers had deserted the farms and the personal wealth and agricultural capacity of the Free State farmers were completely destroyed.[10]

At British quarters, comprehensive reports on supplies were compiled. The state of the different districts were indicated on a map with different colours: red indicated a total destruction of supplies and equipment, blue indicated supplies and equipment partly destroyed and yellow indicated no destruction. Kitchener threatened his commanders on more than one occasion: *"Commanders of columns will be held absolutely responsible that all farms and the country is entirely cleared of stock and supplies in the vicinity of the march."* Commanders had to declare by means of a written certificate that areas under their control had been completely raided of all supplies.[11]

When Catharina van den Berg received notice that the British were on their way to Vredefontein, she managed to move all possible possessions to the river where there was a deep pool. In an attempt to save something for their survival, she dropped as many of the farm implements, farm equipment, a plough, as well as household goods like plates, cutlery, pots and pans and three horse carts with ox-thongs into this pool.

A far worse threat came from another quarter. Some indigenous people, armed with British guns and ammunition, were sent to further raid the farms and complete the destruction where the British forces could not reach.[12]

Destruction of the livestock pool[13]

Immediately after the annexation of the Free State, large amounts of livestock were gathered and sold at

public auctions. Proceeds were deposited into state coffers. According to Kitchenerôs clean-up policy even the livestock of loyalists were taken away and placed in safekeeping by the British to prevent it from falling into Boer hands. British records show that from March to August 1901, when British policy was at its most severe, 119 999 head of cattle, 49 499 horses, 1 000 tons of fodder and 2 912 wagons and other means of transport were looted. Some records however only mention ñmuch livestockò or ñmany horsesò, but many reports state: *"All stock removed from this district."*

According to census returns before and after the war, livestock numbers were as follows:

	1899	1902	Difference	%
Sheep	8 332 490	805 225	-7 527 265	-90%
Cattle	1 248 448	142 449	-1 105 999	-89%
Goats	1 079 472	110 700	-968 772	-90%
Pigs	34 787	1 995	-32 792	-94%
Horses	248 878	48 978	-199 900	-80%
TOTAL	10 945 974	1 109 347	-9 834 728	-90%

Source: APJ van Rensburg

According to statistics, 90% of the livestock pool was wiped out. The numbers for poultry have to be added, but these statistics were not recorded.

Equipment[14]

Fencing was removed or destroyed. Fencing removed from farms were used for British block house chains and after the war it was classified as government property. Drill machinery and tanneries were destroyed. Whatever implements were left on the farms were looted by unscrupulous opportunists and indigenous people not taking part in the war

Agricultural crops[15]

Trek animals, implements and all means of production were destroyed, with weeds flourishing on fallow fields. In some cases salt was strewn over some fields which rendered them in-fertile.

Homes and towns[16]

In the Free State, 26 towns were totally destroyed in the war. Not only material wealth, but church- and school records were destroyed. At least 65 churches were damaged or destroyed. At least 30 000 homes in the two republics were destroyed. It is unknown how many of these were in the Free State.

Farm sales[17]

When the destruction of farms and homes could not force the Boer forces to surrender, funds in bank accounts of ñBittereindersò were seized to pay for the maintenance of women and children in the concentration camps. In another proclamation 15 farms, followed by an additional 38 farms, were sold below market value in the Free State to pay for the maintenance of women and children in the concentration camps. After the war these transactions were cancelled only if the original owner paid the outstanding maintenance fees.

Conclusion

In a report dated 6 December 1901, Milner admitted to Joseph Chamberlain, British minister of colonies:

"Even if the war is to come to an end tomorrow, it would not be possible to let the people in the concentration camps go back at once to their former homes. They would only starve there. The country is, for the most parts, a desert ..." Milner wrote to Lady Edward Cecil in 1902: *"The country is quiet ... only it is a complete wreck ... it is a melancholy spectacle. The farm houses are all gone ... What is far more serious is the total absence of stock ..."* Leo Amery, war correspondent for *The Times* reported on the post-war condition of the two Boer republics: *"... a country which the war had converted into an absolute wilderness. From end to end of the two colonies there was hardly a farmhouse left standing. In large areas the live stock had been almost exterminated. Except for a few dams and occasional fences which had escaped destruction, the whole apparatus of rural civilization had practically been wiped out."*[18]

Those who survived the war, had to return to these conditions in the winter of 1902. Among these were ñBittereindersò, prisoners-of-war from prisoner-of-war camps overseas, women and children from concentration camps and even a small number of fugitives from Lesotho. For some return was impossible, while others gave up their badly damaged farms to find work on the gold mines. The Boers were disarmed and stripped of political power. Their means of transport, the horse, was almost extinct. They literally arrived on their farms with their only possessions being the tattered clothes on their backs.

During repatriation, the women were allowed to take the tents they had been living in from the concentration camps. When they returned home, remaining ruins served as refuge while their homes were rebuilt. These were the conditions the Free State farmers faced when they had to rebuild their lives and try to rejuvenate the agricultural capacity of the land.[19]

RECONSTRUCTION

The ABW cost the British government £221 million. British casualties; fallen, wounded or ill, amounted to 97 477. Of these 20 870 had fallen and 13 250 died as a result of being ill. On Boer side 9 103 had fallen or been wounded and more than 20 000 women and children had died in concentration camps. An estimate of 12 000 black people also paid with their lives.[20]

The Boer generals of the two former republics estimated the total loss of agricultural resources at £60 million after the war.[21] Perhaps this is an underestimation. Losses to the livestock pool in the Free State alone amounted to £30 million, and this at military tender prices. The Peace Treaty of Vereeniging made provision for a sum of £3 million *"for the purpose of assisting the restoration of the people to their homes and supplying those who, owing to war losses, are unable to provide for themselves, with food, shelter, and the necessary amount of seed, stock, implements etc. indispensable to the resumption of their normal occupations."*[22]

A further £2 million (of which £171 000 was awarded to the Free State) was offered as compensation to British subjects, the indigenous population and foreigners. Another £4.5 million was approved for military receipts and compensation of the ñHensoppersò. The Orange River Colony (former Republic of the Free State) received a loan to the value of £7.7 million, while farmers received another collective £3 million interest free loan.[23]

There were many disputes regarding the compensation fund. There was discord as to who could claim, how much could be claimed and what debt should be held against these claims. Most claims were only settled by 1905 and, as can be expected, compensation was far less than the true cost. At the end of the day 17 132 claims to the value of £17 872 932 was received in the Free State, at an average of £1 043 per claimant. Every claimant received a minimum of £25, and the remaining balance was paid out at 2 shillings to the pound (almost 10 cents to the Rand). For an example: a farmer from Harrismith, JF de Villiers, had lost 4 000 sheep, 600 head of cattle, 200 horses, 6 wagons, 2 mule teams, 2 horse carts, as

well as a house consisting of 16 rooms and outbuildings. He received £370 as compensation. At going military prices this would enable him to buy 64 cattle, or maybe 19 horses.[24]

There was general disillusionment and bitter disappointment when the first cheques were paid out. Some, like General Christiaan de Wet, refused compensation as a matter of honour. In lieu of the £2 million reserved for British subjects, blacks and foreigners, £16.5 million was eventually paid out. An additional £4 050 were allocated to the Boers to round off the individual claims and so £3 004 050 was paid out to settle the claims. Livestock and supplies of the British forces to the value of £1 391 000 were put at the disposal of farmers with the upcoming planting season in mind. The Free State received £770 891 which was allocated as follows:[25]

	Number	Value	Price/item
Horses	11577	£ 219 310	£ 18.94
Mules	6000	£ 128 972	£ 21.50
Oxen	11851	£ 118 510	£ 10.00
Donkeys	110	£ 880	£ 8.00
Cattle	153	£ 879	£ 5.75
Wagons	990	£ 35 530	£ 35.89
Trolleys	77	£ 770	£ 10.00
Scots carts	265	£ 3 180	£ 12.00
Cape carts	120	£ 360	£ 3.00
Water carts	21	£ 315	£ 15.00
Equipment		£ 6 680	
		£ 515 386	
Sadles, bridles, etc		£ 13 028	
Building material, fencing, etc		£ 3 109	
Supplies (Coffee, meat, etc)		£ 224 368	
Block houses	1500	£ 15 000	
		£ 770 891	

Source: APJ van Rensburg

Livestock was of poor quality and it was winter so grazing was scarce and there was no stockpiles of fodder. Hundreds of animals died before they could be utilized and the rest were in no condition to work. As a result of the poor quality, farmers rather used the available loans to buy livestock in the Cape Colony.[26]

Farm labour was an essential problem. A great number of black workers, who were employed by the British army for higher wages, were reluctant to work for farmers. In great numbers they flocked to the Witwatersrand to work on the goldmines.[27]

RESTORATION[28]

In the spring of 1902, rains stayed away which was the prelude to the worst drought in forty years. In 1903 the maize-, potato- and wheat harvest was a failure. From January to September 1903, only 222 mm rain fell, as opposed to the average of 590 mm from 1879 to 1901 (point of measure unknown.) In addition, the repatriation department ceased operating on 1 May 1903.

During this time, many farmers survived on hare, aardvark, porcupine and wild birds (guinea-fowl, partridge and pheasant). On occasion they were able to shoot buck with the rifles of mounted police doing their rounds on the farms. Because oxen were scarce, children pulled the ploughs in some cases.

Despite the drought, there was rapid progress, with magisterial reports showing that 60% of the residents of the Northern Free State were self-sufficient by October 1903. Although there were outstanding bonds on the farms, most farmsteads were restored by 1904 and farmers had roofs over their heads. The livestock pool had been restored to within 90% of pre-war numbers:

	1899	1907	Difference	%
Sheep	8 332 490	8 020 308	-312 182	-4%
Cattle	1 248 448	585 077	-663 371	-53%
Goats	1 079 472	1 251 606	172 134	16%
Pigs	34 787	61 409	26 622	77%
Horses	248 878	127 579	-121 299	-49%
TOTAL	10 945 974	10 045 979	-898 096	-8%

Source: APJ van Rensburg

The production of agricultural produce increased and loans were paid off:

- In 1906 eggs to the value of £33 000 were exported;
- A jam factory was erected in Parys in 1905 and during the 1906/7-season 40 tons of fruit were bought from farmers;
- From December 1904 to June 1905 a creamery at Tweespruit bought 30 tons of cream from 50 farmers and sold 12 tons of butter. The year after, the creamery bought 120 tons of cream from 156 farmers. The success of this project was the incentive for other creameries to be erected in towns elsewhere in the Free State;
- At the end of 1907 wool to the value of £787 700 was exported, the amount doubled to that of 1899 (£363 776);
- At the end of 1906, advances provided by banks amounted to £1 990 000, but this amount decreased to £1 658 059 towards the end of 1907.

At the end of 1907, five years after the war, exports exceeded imports by £237 000 and the Free State was once again a net exporter. Total exports amounted to £3 672 591, of which agriculture contributed £1 462 500 (40%). Agricultural exports were 7% more than pre-war exports of £1 360 869 in 1898.

It took the Free State farmers only five years to restore their agricultural capacity and to regain the wealth they accumulated from 1854 to 1899 in the 45 years before the war. After the war they had to survive on wild animals and birds, but by now they produced enough to feed a whole colony, as well as a surplus to export.

SURVIVORS

The older version of the *Webster Dictionary* (1913) defines a *"victim"* as an unhappy person who finds himself in adverse circumstances. It explains that this person might experience a form of suppression or abuse.

The therapist, Mary Ellen Halloran, explains that a *"victim"* experiences circumstances as a threat and therefore feels fearful and helpless. He does not know what the future holds, but has a worst case scenario expectation. He loses his willpower and finds himself in a situation of no escape.

As opposed to this, the *Webster Dictionary* describes a *"survivor"* as someone who survives adversity; whether it be a person, time or catastrophe. It is a person who forges ahead despite opposition, hardship or setbacks. It is a person with the willpower to carry on despite misfortune.

Halloran is of the opinion that a *"survivor",* as a*"victim",* feels fear and helplessness when he faces a crises, but it is not the only emotion he experiences. Very soon his frame of mind changes, enabling him to investigate alternative options. Future expectations are hopeful and therefore he overcomes adversity.

The ABW destroyed the wealth and agricultural capacity of the Free State farmers. Their remarkable comeback shows that these farmers returned from war as *"survivors"* and not as *"victims".* They took it one step further and turned ñsurvivalò into ñrevivalò. This revival can least of all be attributed to colonial subsidies or cheap slave-labor.

Wealth, as depicted by the Free State farmers, is in all likelihood only a frame of mind and does not have an absolute value on its own. Stripped from all their possessions, the war just confirmed their true value. They could not be stripped from their inherent wealth and their legacy, which is still exhibited in the current generation of farmers, deserves to be retold: *"They have a good story to tell ... and the government and unions should start to appreciate the role of farmers in providing food security and creating jobs."*

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