

TO COMMEMORATE OR NOT TO COMMEMORATE: THREE IMPORTANT COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS IN TWENTIETH- CENTURY SOUTH AFRICA

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1. INTRODUCTION

To remember and to commemorate events that took place in the past seem to be a universal human trait, both at individual and group level, and there are countless examples of what we commemorate. The events in question can be of either a tragic or a joyous nature, but it seems to be more common to commemorate the former kind of events. At an individual level, commemorations usually deal with birthdays, wedding anniversaries or the remembrance of a loved one that died. Groups and nations usually commemorate events such as the birthdates of important leaders, independence days, and important military events. For example, every year on 17 May, most Norwegians celebrate their independence from Sweden in 1905; in the Netherlands 30 April is the day on which the queen's birthday is officially celebrated (and consequently is a public holiday), and 4 May is a public holiday to commemorate the country's liberation at the end of World War II, while 4 July is celebrated in the United States of America (USA) as Independence Day.

South Africa, and especially the Afrikaner,³ has a long history of commemorations, for example, the annual commemoration of the battle of Blood River (1838) on 16 December (for many years a public holiday, first known as Dingaan's Day and later as the Day of the Vow, or Day of the Covenant, and since 1994 as the Day of Reconciliation). At the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, commemorations, especially the Day of the Vow, became increasingly politicised and were usually closely connected to the development of Afrikaner nationalism.⁴ For

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³ There is no typical Afrikaner, but for the purposes of this article, the term **Afrikaner(s)** refers to all Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans, albeit that some of them prefer to be called **Afrikaanses** (i.e. those who speak Afrikaans) and reject the term Afrikaner for political and ideological reasons.

⁴ A Bailey, "Geloftefees: toe en nou", **Handhaaf** 2(3), 1998, p. 10; E Brink and S Krige, "Remapping and remembering the South African War in Johannesburg and Pretoria", **South African Historical Journal** 41, 1999, p. 415. See also DT Moodie, **The rise of Afrikanerdom: power, apartheid and the Afrikaner civil religion** (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975) and LM Thompson, **The political mythology of apartheid** (New Haven and London, 1985).

many years the life and work of President Paul Kruger of the old South African Republic (i.e. the Transvaal) was commemorated on 10 October each year (the day on which Kruger might, or might not, have been born) - first known as Kruger Day, and later broadened in meaning when this public holiday was known as Heroes Day (abolished in 1995). Another public holiday in South Africa that had more meaning for Afrikaners than any of the other population groups, was Van Riebeeck Day (6 April)⁵ - later known as Founders' Day - which commemorated the establishment of the first permanent European settlement in 1652 at the Cape, albeit that Jan van Riebeeck and his party only set foot below Table Mountain on 7 April 1652 (having arrived in Table Bay the previous day). This public holiday was abolished in 1995.

After 1961 interest in public commemorations declined. Grundlingh cites three main reasons for the reduced public interest in the Anglo-Boer War since 1961, and these reasons might also have played a role in the flagging interest in commemorations in general. The establishment of the Republic of South Africa in 1961 was seen by many Afrikaners as a restoration of what had been lost in the Anglo-Boer War, and the past thereby lost much of its political and ideological meaning. From 1961 onwards, attempts were also made to draw English-speaking South Africans into a broader white nationalism, and therefore potentially divisive commemorations were somewhat played down. Finally, due to the improved socio-economic situation of the Afrikaners, they "were less inclined to reflect upon a past marked by dislocation and suffering and more likely to look forward to what they considered a bright and prosperous future".⁶

It is the purpose of this article to compare three very important commemorations in the history of South Africa (and in particular the history of Afrikaners), namely, the centenary of the Great Trek in 1938, the 150-years' anniversary of the same event in 1988, and the Anglo-Boer War centennial of 1999 to 2002. These three commemorations are significant for a number of reasons. They took place in three different eras in the history of South Africa, and each of them reflects the state of South African society at those particular points in time. Furthermore, the Great Trek and the Anglo-Boer War are two crucial events in the history of South Africa, and have especially been viewed as such in nationalistic Afrikaner historiography. By comparing the above-mentioned commemorations, the article will shed light on the development of the South African nation in three different phases of its development, as well as on the problems and possibilities with regard to commemora-

⁵ C Rassool and L Witz, "The 1952 Jan van Riebeeck tercentenary festival: constructing and contesting public national history in South Africa", *Journal of African History* 34, 1993, p. 447.

⁶ A Grundlingh, "The bitter legacy of the Boer War", *History Today* 49(1), 1999, p. 24.

ting historical events. First of all, the issue of commemorations in general will be discussed briefly. Thereafter (in section 3) follows a brief summary of the three commemorations, followed by a comparison (section 4) and a few concluding perspectives (section 5).

2. THE COMMEMORATION OF HISTORICAL EVENTS

Commemorations may seem to be relatively insignificant events, but in some instances they can have far-reaching consequences for a society, some of which will be discussed here. Commemorative events are, due to their potential to influence a society, often (mis)used by politicians. The past can be used in selective ways to account for, justify, criticise or understand the present. Historically, the most common political aim with commemorations has been to create or strengthen nationalism and unity in a particular group of people, a ploy that has often been relatively successful.⁷ But, commemorations can also increase divisions in a society and contribute to negative inter-group attitudes, for instance, if some groups are excluded from the event or presented in an untruthful and derogative manner, or if there are acrimonious debates regarding various possible interpretations of the past.⁸ One such an example is the bicentennial commemoration of the independence of the USA in 1976, when several groups, in particular native and black Americans, were indifferent or hostile to the event since it neither acknowledged their past suffering nor the role played by their ancestors in the building up of the USA. The anniversary was severely criticised and demonstrations were held in protest to it.⁹

Knowledge of the past is essential in order to be able to understand the present, and all human beings make use of the past for this purpose. Thus, the past is often used to make sense of a contemporary situation. According to Eriksen, everybody needs to have a perception of a past, and the destruction of someone's past is one of the most effective ways to deprive a person or a group of self-respect.¹⁰ Stories about the past can provide a sense of meaning in a seemingly chaotic world. Commemorations can therefore have important implications, in particular for societies that are

⁷ See, for example, B Anderson, **Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism** (London, 1991); B Kapferer, **Legends of people, myths of state: violence, intolerance and political culture in Sri Lanka and Australia** (Washington and London, 1988); E Hobsbawm and T Ranger (eds), **The invention of tradition** (Cambridge, 1983); D Kertzer, **Rituals, politics and power** (New Haven, 1988); J Gillis, **Commemorations: the politics of national identity** (Princeton, 1994); T Ranger, "The invention of tradition revisited: the case of colonial Africa" in P Kaarsholm and J Hultin, **Inventions and boundaries: historical and anthropological approaches to the study of ethnicity and nationalism** (Roskilde, 1994).

⁸ Kertzer, pp. 6-7, 67 *et seq.*

⁹ TH Eriksen, **Historia, myt och identitet** (Falkenberg, 1996), p. 94.

¹⁰ **Ibid.**, pp. 6, 20.

going through major transformations, especially if these affect or concern identity issues. When a society goes through an extensive transformation process, feelings of uncertainty and of discontinuity in relation to the past might appear. By explaining how the changes came about, history can make transformations seem logical and when the past is understood as something that led to the present, it can give the individual a feeling of coherence and belonging.¹¹ History can, according to Hobsbawm, be a useful tool to cope with change, since it can legitimise the change by anchoring it to the past.¹² Thereby the present might become more comprehensible and also less frightening. Commemorative events can also become sources for members of the public to learn about their history, can generate interest in history among the broader public, and can lead to a better understanding of the past (a shared past in the case of certain multicultural societies).

Commemorations can affect a society, but the commemorations as such can also be affected by the specific society in which they take place; i.e. the historical context can influence a commemoration, as well as its implications. By studying a commemoration, one can therefore gain insight into the state of the society at a particular point in its development. Connerton, for example, states that if there is such a thing as a social memory (i.e. a memory that is more or less shared by a particular group), "we are likely to find it in commemorative ceremonies".¹³ The possibility of learning about the state of society by studying a commemoration is amplified by the fact that commemorations usually include a process of stocktaking. At an international level, there were the very extensive stocktaking exercises which took place in 1999, as a part of the preparations for the millennium celebrations, albeit, strictly speaking, that the new millennium only started on 1 January 2001. In the much narrower South African context, the commemorations of 1938, 1988 and 1999 to 2002, also seemed to prompt reappraisal.

3. THE COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS OF 1938, 1988 AND 1999-2002

3.1 The Great Trek centennial (1938)

The symbolic ox-wagon trek of 1938 is known by various names, for example, the *Ossewatrek* (Ox-wagon trek) and the *Eeufees* (Centenary). It was organised by the Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuurvereniging (ATKV), whose founder, Henning Klopper,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11, 27-8.

¹² E Hobsbawm, *On history* (London, 1997), pp. 14-5.

¹³ P Connerton, *How societies remember* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 4-5.

was the chairman of the centennial committee.¹⁴ Klopper was also one of the founders of the Afrikaner Broederbond in 1918 and the centenary was to a large extent facilitated by his Broederbond contacts.¹⁵

Initially there was not much public interest in the event, but after a while the interest started to grow tremendously and more and more towns requested a visit by a wagon. Due to the enormous interest, nine wagons were eventually sent out to re-enact the Great Trek symbolically. In the course of four months, the wagons travelled across almost the entire country and visited approximately 500 towns.¹⁶

The wagons were welcomed everywhere with an enthusiasm the organisers could hardly have dreamt of. The symbolic trek evoked strong emotions and provided extraordinary scenes of euphoria, even though open displays of emotion were normally not common in Afrikaner public life. People were often moved to tears and kissed the wheels of the wagons. Children rubbed grease from the wheels to keep as a memento. Men grew beards and women wore Voortrekker garments. Couples were married and children were baptised besides the wagons. Monuments were erected in numerous places and the wagons were often pulled through freshly laid concrete to preserve the imprint of their tracks. A great number of streets were also renamed to commemorate the Great Trek.¹⁷

Inspiring speeches were delivered everywhere where the wagons stopped, often by prominent Afrikaners. At night, people would gather around the campfires of the symbolic Voortrekkers and sing traditional songs and psalms.¹⁸ The closer to Pretoria the wagons came, the more intense the feelings grew. Adding to the excitement, a torch marathon was organised by the Voortrekker Movement, where youngsters ran and handed down torches from one group to the other. The torches symbolised

¹⁴ For more information regarding the 1938 centenary, see, for example, DJ Mostert (compiler), **Gedenkboek van die ossewaens op die pad van Suid-Afrika, Eeufees: 1838-1938** (Cape Town, 1940); EA Messina, **Die Voortrekkereeufees, 1938** (MA thesis, University of the Western Cape, 1981); APJ van Rensburg, "Die simboliese ossewatrek van 1938", **Historia** 17(1), 1972, pp. 12-46; A Grundlingh and H Sapire, "From feverish festival to repetitive ritual? The changing fortunes of Great Trek mythology in an industrialising South Africa, 1938-1988", **South African Historical Journal** 21, 1989, pp. 19-37. Mostert's book is important, especially since it contains a great number of speeches. In a review in **Die Burger**, quoted by Moodie, it was stated that it deserved a place on the household altar besides the family Bible in Afrikaner homes: "For if the Bible shaped the Afrikaner People, then the **Gedenkboek** reveals that product in its deepest being" (Moodie, p. 11).

¹⁵ Moodie, pp. 176-7; I Wilkins and H Strydom, **The Super-Afrikaners: inside the Afrikaner Broederbond** (Johannesburg, 1978), pp. 97-8, 100.

¹⁶ Mostert, pp. 39-40; Moodie, p. 178; Messina, p. 107; Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 20; Van Rensburg, pp. 14-6, 19-21, 32; FJ du T Spies, "Die eeufees van 1938", **Taalgenoot** 57(10), 1988, pp. 4-5. For a map of the trek routes see Messina, p. 133.

¹⁷ Mostert, **passim**; Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 20; Moodie, pp. 180-1; Messina, pp. 135-44, 191; Van Rensburg, pp. 16, 20, 24; Wilkins and Strydom, pp. 97-9.

¹⁸ Mostert, **passim**; Moodie, p. 181; Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 20.

the light of freedom and civilisation, which was seen to have spread from the south of the country to the north. Two torch groups arrived in Pretoria and at Blood River respectively, simultaneously with the wagons.¹⁹

The centenary culminated in two major ceremonies on 16 December at Monument Koppie in Pretoria and at the site of the battle of Blood River in Natal. Estimates of the number of people at Monument Koppie varied from 100 000 to 200 000. People camped there for days and there were numerous activities. On 16 December a great number of speeches were delivered and the corner-stone of the Voortrekker Monument was laid. The most common themes of the speeches were the Afrikaners' struggle and achievements, as well as the need to stay united.²⁰

At Blood River, the three-day festival was attended by between 30 000 and 40 000 people. The main speaker was Dr DF Malan (then leader of the National Party opposition, and prime minister from 1948 to 1954) who, for example, stated that: "Behind you lie the tracks of the Voortrekkers' Ox-wagons, deeply and ineradicably imprinted across the [...] South African history. They heard the voice of South Africa. They received their task from God's hand. They gave their answer. They made their sacrifices. There is still a white race. There is a new volk. There is our own language. There is an undying urge for freedom."²¹ Malan delivered a political oration that dealt with the urbanisation process, the poor white problem, and the dangers of black competition. The Afrikaner was said to meet the black people, on his second trek at a new Blood River - the city - unarmed on the plains of economic equalisation. Therefore, according to Malan, the Afrikaners met the same enemies as during the Great Trek, namely the blacks and the British, but in a new arena. If the Afrikaners were to survive, they had to form a united front.²²

During the centenary, the Voortrekkers were depicted as united and their most important ideal was said to be their urge to be free. Almost all of the speeches contained a call for unity, through which freedom would be obtained. The Afrikaner volk was presented as having been born during the Great Trek. Another theme was the role of God in the history of the Afrikaners. The suffering, the will-power, the deep religiosity, the courage and the endurance of the Voortrekkers were also stressed. The Afrikaners were, furthermore, presented as once again being under the pressure of enemies, and were called upon to act like the Voortrekkers of old if

¹⁹ Mostert, p. 772; Moodie, p. 183; Messina, pp. 130-2.

²⁰ Mostert, pp. 767-89; Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 20; Moodie, p. 184; Van Rensburg, pp. 30-2; Wilkins and Strydom, pp. 97, 105-7.

²¹ English translation, Thompson, p. 186.

²² Mostert, pp. 624-31; Messina, pp. 124-5; Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 23.

they were to be victorious in these new struggles.²³ Only "true" or "purified" Afrikaners were regarded as worthy warriors in the Afrikaners' struggles; the National Party and the Broederbond managed to outmanoeuvre the United Party government, and Generals JBM Hertzog and JC Smuts were to a large extent forced out of the centenary.

3.2 The commemoration of the Great Trek (1988)

Fifty years after the dramatic events of the 1938 Great Trek centennial, the 150th anniversary of the Great Trek took place in a completely different political environment, with the Afrikaner volk once again divided, but now drifting even further apart, rather than uniting to commemorate an important event in its history. Consequently there were two separate commemorations of the 150-years' anniversary of the Great Trek in 1988. The one was organised by the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge (FAK, i.e. the federation of Afrikaans cultural societies) and the other one by the right-wing Afrikaner-Volkswag. The event was highly politicised and the division between the two groups was sharp.

The National Party government of Mr PW Botha gave official recognition to the FAK's commemorative events and cabinet ministers were often used as draw-cards for FAK events. An FAK ox-wagon trekked from Cape Town to Pretoria, and the event culminated in a ceremony at the Voortrekker Monument on 16 December 1988, where Pres. PW Botha delivered the main speech. This function was attended by between 10 000 and 15 000 people.²⁴

The theme of the FAK commemoration was "Vorentoe vir Suid-Afrika" ("Forward South Africa"). The National Party hoped that the event would increase nationalism as well as support for its policies. Because of the recent reforms, a need was felt to appeal to English-speakers and to "moderate" blacks. Traditionally English-speakers and black people were portrayed as enemies in Great Trek representations, but the FAK realised that it was no longer possible to display the same image. What was needed was, according to Grundlingh and Sapire, a reinterpretation of the Great Trek that would (i) provide an ideological paradigm for a common white co-

²³ Mostert, *passim*; "Die Groot Trek: gedenkuitgawe van Die Huisgenoot", **Die Huisgenoot**, December 1938, *passim*; "Die Groot Trek: 1838, Eeufees 1938", supplement to **Die Burger**, 1 December 1938, *passim*.

²⁴ Interview with Ms A Bailey, Pretoria, 6 September 2000; Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 32; GLeach, **The Afrikaners: their last Great Trek** (London, 1989), pp. 1, 7; "Unity call amid diversity", **Pretoria News**, 17 December 1988, p. 1; "PW calls for a new trek to national unity", **The Star**, 17 December 1988, p. 1; "Nee wat, they trekked better back in '38", **Weekly Mail**, 2 August 1988, p. 6; "More blacks than whites in Trek", **The Sunday Star**, 28 August 1988, p. 1.

operative effort; (ii) continue to act as a rallying symbol for Afrikaner nationalism, and (iii) not offend black opinion.²⁵

An important theme of the FAK event was the forward-looking spirit of the Voortrekkers, who kept going even though they did not know what lay ahead. Just like their ancestors, who had dared to trek into the unknown, the Afrikaners of the 1980s also had to take risks in an effort to ensure their survival - which meant, inter alia, that they had to dare to venture into a new political dispensation. The participation of black and coloured people in the Great Trek was also highlighted and calls for power-sharing and for inter-group respect were made. Many aspects of the traditional nationalist historiography were still present in the commemoration, such as the Great Trek, as the birth of the Afrikaner nation, the Voortrekkers' desire for freedom, as well as their strength of character.²⁶

The prime mover behind the Volkswag event was Prof. Carel Boshoff, a former Broederbond chairman. Motorised Volkswag columns travelled along thirteen different routes, and because ox-wagons were seldom used, the Volkswag commemoration was able to cover more ground. It culminated on 16 December at Donkerhoek,²⁷ just east of Pretoria. Estimates of how many people attended the function vary from 15 000 to 60 000.²⁸ Most people were either dressed in Voortrekker clothes or in khaki, and the "swastika" of the Afrikaner-Weerstandsbeweging (AWB) was worn (or carried as a flag) by some of the people who attended the function. The three main speakers were Dr Andries Treurnicht (the leader of the Conservative Party), Eugène Terreblanche (the leader of the AWB), and Prof. Carel Boshoff.²⁹

The theme of the Volkswag event was "Trek na ons eie" ("Trek to our own"). The festival was presented as an occasion to reject the policies of the government, which was seen to have betrayed the Afrikaners, and to return to hard-line apartheid. Just as the Voortrekkers revolted against a social revolution, contemporary Afrikaners were called upon to revolt against liberalism and PW Botha's reforms. Another message was that the Afrikaners faced the same dangers as the Voor-

²⁵ Grundlingh and Sapire, pp. 31-2; Leach, p. 4.

²⁶ Leach, pp. 7-8; Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 32; Archive for Contemporary Affairs (University of the Free State, Bloemfontein), PW Botha Private Collection (PV203), 4/2/177: speech by PW Botha, 16 December 1988.

²⁷ During the Anglo-Boer War there was a battle at Donkerhoek, when a Boer army for some time held off a numerically superior British force.

²⁸ Leach, pp. 4-6; "Unity call amid diversity", **Pretoria News**, 17 December 1988, p. 1; KGouws, "Groot Trek 150", **Lantern** 38(3), 1989, pp. 74-9.

²⁹ Gouws, p. 79; "Rifles stutter. Cannons boom. The dying scream. The mist clears; to reveal...nobody", **Weekly Mail**, 23 December 1988, p. 13; "One voorloper was black - so was I", **The Sunday Star**, 18 December 1988, p. 15; "Ná fees trek hulle weer uit een...", **Rapport**, 18 December 1988, p. 6.

trekkers had done; they were once again losing their freedom, and would in the end lose their future and identity. The traditional image of the Great Trek was strongly emphasised.³⁰

3.3 The Anglo-Boer War centennial (1999-2002)³¹

The Anglo-Boer War centennial officially commenced in October 1999 (although the run-up started towards the middle of 1998) and lasted until the middle of June 2002. During that period more than a hundred centennial events took place all over South Africa, as has been pointed out in a previous study.³² The majority of the non-governmental events were co-ordinated by the Central Steering Committee for the Commemoration of the Anglo-Boer War. In turn, every region had its own committee, which was free to draw up its own programme. The same applied for the great number of local, town-based committees. The national government, academic institutions, and the Volkskomitee van die Herdenking van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog (a so-called right-wing organisation) were other role-players. It is important to note that groups orientated towards the far right figured very little in the centennial.³³

Three events launched the commemoration officially, namely, the opening of a new exhibition at the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein on 8 October 1999, the unveiling of a monument at Brandfort on 9 October 1999 (where Pres. Thabo Mbeki officiated), and a commemorative event in Mafikeng. After these three events the government played a low-key role.

The most common type of commemorative event centred on unveiling new or re-dedicating old monuments. These functions usually included speeches, prayers and a wreath-laying ceremony. The second kind of event was the commemoration of

³⁰ Leach, p. 6; Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 36; "Ons doel is vryheid: feesboodskap deur die voorsitter van die Afrikanervolkswag, Prof. CWH Boshoff", *Die Patriot*, 16 December 1988, p. 4; "Hou vas aan die Voortrekker ideaal. Feesboodskap deur Dr AP Treurnicht, leier van die Konserwatiewe Party", *Die Patriot*, 16 December 1988, p. 3; "Rifles stutter. Cannons boom. The dying scream. The mist clears; to reveal...nobody", *Weekly Mail*, 23 December 1988, p. 13; "PW calls for a new trek to national unity", *The Star*, 17 December 1988, p. 1.

³¹ Please note that the authors attended several of the events that are mentioned in the text and, consequently, they often write from first-hand experience – which explains why documentary proof is sometimes not supplied in the footnotes.

³² A-K Ewaldsson and A Wessels, "The Anglo-Boer War centennial: a critical evaluation", *Journal for Contemporary History* 27(3), 2002, pp. 125-44. In this article more particulars are supplied with regard to the goals of the commemoration, the commemorative events and the consequences of the events.

³³ Interview with Col F Jacobs, Bloemfontein, 10 November 1999; G Dominy, "Is there anything to celebrate? Paradoxes of policy: an examination of the state's approach to commemorating South Africa's most ambiguous struggle", paper read at the UNISA Library Conference on the Anglo-Boer War, Pretoria, 3-5 August 1998.

battles, which sometimes included a re-enactment of the battle in question. The third type of event included concerts, dance performances, plays, festivals and sports meetings. The upgrading of historical sites connected to the Anglo-Boer War, as well as the infrastructure necessary to reach the sites, can be regarded as a fourth kind of centennial activity. There were also many academic activities, the most important one being conferences. A sixth category that can be identified, albeit that it involved only one event, was the debate in the National Assembly (Parliament) on 16 November 1999 regarding the Anglo-Boer War and the lessons that could be learnt from it.³⁴

Even though all the role-players did not have the same goals, the main goals of the centennial can be summarised as follows: to commemorate those who died, to increase interest in the war, to maintain the momentum of the centennial for the period equivalent to the duration of the war, to promote tourism, to boost economic growth, to ensure that historic sites were upgraded and maintained, to promote nation-building and reconciliation and, finally, to increase knowledge with regard to the war.³⁵

In the course of the centennial, the losses suffered by all participating groups in the war were acknowledged in a balanced and inclusive manner. Both the actions of well-known "heroes" and the suffering of white and black civilians were commemorated. The centennial was characterised by a sense of goodwill and promoted good relationships and understanding among different population groups. During the centennial, many interpretations of the Anglo-Boer War were presented; for example, the war was depicted as a part of the mutual past of all South Africans, with emphasis on the issue of mutual suffering in the concentration camps.

4. A COMPARISON OF THE COMMEMORATIVE EVENTS

4.1 The historical contexts of the commemorations

To study a commemoration, it is of utmost importance to note the historical context in which it took place. It is clear that the contexts in which the commemorations that are discussed in this article took place, had a significant influence on them. On the other hand, the events themselves usually also say much about the state of a particular society at a particular time.

³⁴ Republic of South Africa, **Debates of the National Assembly (Hansard): First session - second parliament**, 16 to 18 November, 1999, cols 1911-1976.

³⁵ Interview with Mr K Gillings, Durban, 18 October 1999.

The three commemorations in question took place under very different circumstances, but there are nevertheless a number of similarities regarding the historical contexts. One major similarity is that extensive transformations took place before or during all three the commemorations. The nature of the transformations was, however, different. In the 1930s, the most important changes were the considerable growth in industrialisation and urbanisation. Thus, it was mainly an economic and social transformation, from a predominantly agrarian economy to an increasingly industrialised and city-based economy. It is also important to note that the Great Trek centenary took place only about five years after the end of the Great Depression, and even though the economic situation had improved by 1938, unemployment and poverty were once again on the increase by then.³⁶ The end of the 1980s can be seen as a transformational period leading up to the "real" transformation of the 1990s. The late-1980s was characterised by political changes (albeit minor), severe political disagreements, and high levels of political violence. Some ten years later, the Anglo-Boer War centennial took place in the context of the "new" South Africa, more than five years after the change in government, and with rapid change still taking place, mainly on the economic and social levels.

Another similarity which is connected to the issue of transformation, is that all three the periods in question (late 1930s, late 1980s and late 1990s) were characterised by feelings of insecurity among Afrikaners. The main causes of insecurity in the 1930s were urbanisation, industrialisation, their weak economic position, the dominance of English-speakers' money, language and culture, and competition with black people for jobs. Many Afrikaners, according to Grundlingh and Sapire, felt exploited and alienated in their new environment, and it was a period of profound psychological adjustment.³⁷ The insecurity of the 1980s can mainly be traced to the political transformation (albeit minor), the worsening economic situation and the high levels of violence. Many Afrikaners also knew that changes were coming, but not to what extent or how quickly these would happen. The context in which the Anglo-Boer War centennial took place was also characterised by high levels of insecurity, often combined with pessimism, especially, but not only, among white South Africans, many of whom are feeling insecure and disillusioned about their future in South Africa. Issues that contribute to this are, for example, affirmative action and the high levels of violent crime.

Of the three periods in question, it was only the 1930s that was not characterised by high levels of violence. On the other hand, many who lived then were still able to remember the violence of the Anglo-Boer War. Another difference between the

³⁶ Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 24; Grundlingh, p. 23; Messina, p. 9.

³⁷ Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 25.

three eras is that it seems as if the Afrikaners of the 1930s were more optimistic about their future than in the other two periods.

All three the periods were highly politicised and were, furthermore, characterised by divisions among the Afrikaners who, in the 1930s, were divided between the United Party and the National Party (NP). In the 1980s, there was a sharp division especially between the NP and the Conservative Party. Le Roux states that the divisions in the 1980s, to some extent, were similar to the ones in the 1930s, with one party wanting to move towards others, while the other wanted to reinforce the laager.³⁸ The Afrikaners are today a highly differentiated group and adhere to many different political orientations. In a sense they are more divided than ever before, but the divisions are less pronounced and not necessarily politicised.

A major difference among the three periods is the political dispensations that obtained. In the 1930s, there was little opposition against white rule. In 1988 the NP had been in power for 40 years, but the opposition against it was becoming more and more evident. It was, in fact, the final stages of apartheid, with the process of dismantling that system gaining momentum. The Anglo-Boer War centennial took place five years after the first democratic election, and with a predominantly black African National Congress government in power.

The 1930s saw a huge upsurge in the growth of Afrikaner nationalism. In the 1980s it was mainly the right-wing that pursued the same kind of nationalism, and had a similar view of the past. But while the right-wing had the support (or at least the sympathy) of many Afrikaners in 1988, active support for them had dwindled considerably by 1999.

The societies of the three time periods differed significantly, especially when the 1930s and the two later eras are compared. The Afrikaners of the 1930s were less materialistic and individualistic, as well as more religious than in the later periods in question. Society in general can probably be described as more egoistic in the two later eras. Grundlingh and Sapire depict the later twentieth-century urban Afrikaner society as increasingly secularised, participating in and identifying with an international consumerist culture, especially since the beginning of the 1970s. It had also lost its taste in mass rallies.³⁹ Another major difference is the available communication technology. In 1938 radio had only recently been introduced, while in the other two periods television could spread the images of the commemorative events, as well as divert people's attention away from them.

³⁸ JH le Roux, "Die simboliese Ossewatrek van 1938 en die Hertzogbewind", Gen. JBM Hertzog Memorial Lecture, Bloemfontein, 22 September 1988.

³⁹ Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 34.

Another important difference is the economic situation. In the 1930s, the majority of the Afrikaners held working-class positions, with relatively low levels of education, and many were unemployed and poor. After 1948, with the NP in power, profound changes took place and Afrikaner society became an increasingly middle and upper-class society, with high levels of education.⁴⁰ It was this "new" Afrikaner society that did not show much interest in the 1988 Great Trek commemorations, but - courtesy of the mass media - at least took note of the Anglo-Boer War centennial.

One may conclude that the differences among the three time periods were much more pronounced than the similarities, but there were some important structural similarities, such as transformation and insecurity, even if these differed with regard to the content.

4.2 The organisation and the functions of the commemorations

The organisation of the three anniversaries differed in several respects. In 1938 the centenary was organised by one unitary body, viz the ATKV. In contrast, the 1988 anniversary was organised by two rival camps. The Anglo-Boer War centennial formed a third variant, with a highly diversified organisation, which included a multitude of role-players.

Politicians and political parties were involved in all three the events, but there are also differences in this regard. The involvement of politics in 1938 was not obvious, but rather under the surface.⁴¹ In contrast, the politicisation in 1988 was highly evident. Even if the events were organised by two cultural organisations (FAK and Afrikaner-Volkswag), the connections between these organisations and the two rival political parties (NP and Conservative Party) were clear. The Anglo-Boer War centennial had official government involvement, but was in practice not really politicised. The reasons for this were that the majority of the organising bodies were not connected to any political party, and that most of them had the explicit goal of keeping the event out of politics. The fact that there were so many different committees, also contributed towards keeping the centennial out of the political domain.

The various commemorative functions during 1938, 1988 and 1999 to 2002 took on largely similar formats; for example, the unveiling of monuments, wreath-laying

⁴⁰ **Ibid.**, pp. 27-8; Grundlingh, p. 24.

⁴¹ See, for example, JHP Serfontein, **Brotherhood of power: an exposé of the secret Afrikaner Broederbond** (London, 1979), p. 43.

ceremonies, speeches by politicians and academics, and re-enactments of important events. The content of the functions, however, varied to a great extent; for example, with regard to what was said in the speeches, how the past was depicted, the kind of monuments that were unveiled, who participated in the re-enactments, who laid wreaths, and who they were laid for. Much of the content in the Anglo-Boer War centenary would, for instance, not even have been considered in 1938. In that particular context, very few Afrikaners, if any, would even have thought of laying wreaths in honour of the black casualties of the battle of Blood River.

Another difference is that the Great Trek anniversaries only lasted for four months, while the duration of the Anglo-Boer War centennial was two and a half years. The Great Trek anniversaries also centred, to a large extent, on one event, viz the battle of Blood River, while numerous events, major and minor ones, were commemorated during the Anglo-Boer War centennial.

All three the events were relatively extensively covered in the media. In 1938 this meant on radio, in newspapers and in news-shows shown before the main feature in cinemas. The 1988 event attracted the least attention in the media, and the reports were mainly about the divisions in Afrikaner ranks and not about the event as such. The Anglo-Boer War centennial was extensively covered in the media, especially in the newspapers, and in the period 1999 to 2002 several documentaries on the war were also shown (and sometimes repeated) on television.

The 1938 centenary was a collective, large-scale, national (albeit white Afrikaner) event. The 1988 anniversary was to some extent also (relative to Afrikaners) collective and national, but on a much smaller scale. In contrast, the war centennial mainly took place on a more localised and individual level. There were few big events; instead, most of the functions had the character of community events, and commemorated specific local events or individuals and not the entire war as such. Many people were also, to a great extent, interested in what had happened to their own relatives in the war. And then, of course, the Anglo-Boer War centennial was also commemorated in other parts of the world (especially by means of conferences and publications), and many foreign visitors came to South Africa, either to take part in some of the organised commemorations, or privately to pay homage to family or friends who had fought and died in the conflict.

The centenary of the Great Trek was a very emotional event, something that, to some extent, was also true of the Afrikaner-Volkswag's commemoration of the Great Trek in 1988. Even though the Anglo-Boer War, and especially the concentration camps, in many respects, have always generated more emotions than the

Great Trek, most of the events during the war's centennial were not particularly emotional.

The Great Trek centenary was highly nationalistic and aimed at enhancing nationalism among the Afrikaners. In line with this, a very traditional, nationalistic and romanticised image of the past was depicted, where heroes were glorified and suffering emphasised. In 1988 the Volkswag promoted basically the same nationalistic image. The FAK commemoration, on the other hand, presented a somewhat changed picture, for example, when, to some extent, it included the experience of other groups. The predominant view of the past depicted in the Anglo-Boer War centennial was relatively inclusive in the sense that it included the experiences of everybody who had been involved in the war in a balanced manner, and the issue of its being a part of all South Africans' history was stressed. Most of the role-players in the war's centennial had unity as a goal, just as in the Great Trek commemorations, but this time in the form of nation-building across the historical dividing-lines among the various population groups, and not just among the Afrikaners. The right-wing, however, still promoted the Afrikaner-nationalistic image of the war. So, the organisation of the commemorations differed extensively, and although many functions were similar in form, their content varied significantly.

4.3 The implications of the commemorations

Of the three commemorations that are analysed in this article, the Great Trek centenary without doubt had the greatest impact on South African (and especially the white Afrikaner) society. Grundlingh and Sapire state correctly that it is not often that the commemoration of an historical event assumes such dimensions as to constitute an important historical milestone in itself.⁴² No one had expected that the symbolic trek would be such a huge success, especially since the Afrikaners were sharply divided between two political parties. The centenary captured the imagination and the feelings of the Afrikaners to an enormous extent and contributed to the growth of Afrikaner nationalism. To a large extent, it managed to unite the Afrikaners across party and class divisions. The event was a clear-cut example of how a commemoration can contribute to unity and to a growth in nationalism. It can be seen as the most dramatic event in the upsurge of Afrikaner nationalism, and it played a not insignificant role in the coming to power of the NP in 1948.⁴³

⁴² Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 19.

⁴³ Messina, p. 191; Thompson, p. 39; Grundlingh and Sapire, pp. 20, 27; Moodie, p. 185; Serfontein, p. 42; Van Rensburg, pp. 16, 18, 23, 33-5; Wilkins and Strydom, p. 97; A McClintock, **Imperial leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context** (New York and London, 1995), p. 370; S Dubow, "Afrikaner nationalism, apartheid and the conceptualization of 'race'", **Journal of African History** 33, 1992, p. 215; D Harrison, **The white tribe of Africa: South Africa in perspective** (London, 1987), p. 9.

It is doubtful whether the 1988 anniversary had any effects on society, mainly since it was a very low-key event. It did not, contrary to the wishes of both of the organising groups, have any unifying effect. Instead, the event was a manifestation of the existing divisions among the Afrikaners and might even have aggravated them. Both sides used the anniversary to demonise the opposition and made no secret of their dislike for each other.⁴⁴

It is difficult to evaluate the effects of the Anglo-Boer War centennial, since it ended so recently. One can conclude that the centenary did not work against nation-building and reconciliation, which were two of the goals of the majority of the organisers; on the other hand, it probably did not have a great impact regarding promoting them either. The event might have contributed, to a small extent, to increased understanding and respect among different groups. The centenary might, furthermore, have contributed to a better understanding of the complexity of South Africa's history, and of the influence the war had on shaping the course of events in twentieth-century South Africa. Knowledge about the war is, for example, important to be able to understand why apartheid came about. The emphasis on the war as being a part of a mutual past might also have contributed very slightly, if at all, towards nation-building.

The way in which most of the debates during the Anglo-Boer War centenary were conducted, as well as the manner in which most of the articles and other publications on the war have been written since 1998, indicate that today educated and well-informed South Africans think about their history in more nuanced fashion than previously. It also indicates that there is an increased level of mutual respect among various cultural groups.

To a large extent the historical context influences the level of public interest in a commemoration, which is a crucial issue, since the event will not have any implications without public interest. This is also the main explanation for the success of the 1938 centenary, the almost zero effect of the 1988 Great Trek anniversary, and the somewhat more extensive potential effects of the most recent commemoration. It is important to note that the Great Trek and the Anglo-Boer War commemorations as such contributed to an increased interest in the respective historical events.

One important factor regarding public interest is whether the event and the interpretation of the past presented in it, make sense in the present situation.⁴⁵ Firstly,

⁴⁴ Interview with Ms A Bailey, Pretoria, 6 September 2000; Grundlingh and Sapire, p. 37; various newspaper articles.

⁴⁵ Kapferer, p. 211.

there has to be a connection between how people look at themselves and their past, and the interpretation of an event that is presented in a commemoration. Thus, there are a limited number of plausible versions.⁴⁶ Few, if any, Afrikaners would, for example, accept a presentation of the Anglo-Boer War as a predominantly black war. Secondly, the public interest will usually be greater if the depicted interpretation seems to have a bearing on the present by, for example, explaining a contemporary problem or producing insights that could be used in the present. There are numerous examples of how the past was connected to the present in the three commemorations, for example, when Malan in 1938 explained urbanisation as a second trek. McClintock suggests that the centenary of the Great Trek brought the past and the present together and thus offered a symbolic amalgam of disjointed times, "capturing in one single [...] spectacle the impossible confluence of the modern and the archaic, the recent displacement and the ancestral migration".⁴⁷

The feeling of insecurity is another issue that seems to determine whether an event captures the imagination of the public or not. In 1938 insecurity in Afrikaner ranks regarding economic, social and cultural matters contributed to a need for something solid to hold on to. The world seemed less comprehensible due to the recent changes. A national identity can be a stable point of reference, which asserts that you have value because you belong to a certain nation.⁴⁸ Thus, the insecurity of the new situation (in the cities) could be reduced by the security of a national identity, which in turn increased the interest in the nationalistic centennial. Messina states that the symbolic trek gave the Afrikaners a new sense of hope, self-confidence, courage and strength.⁴⁹

However, if insecurity contributed to the success of the 1938 commemoration, why did the same thing not happen either in 1988 or from 1999 to 2002? Apart from the different contexts in general which played a role, the answer might lie in the nature of the transformation processes that were in progress in the different eras. In 1988 the transformation process was mainly political, while on the economic and social levels the situation remained basically the same. Since economic, social and cultural insecurity will touch people's everyday lives and identities more directly than the insecurity associated with political changes, the first-mentioned insecurities will contribute to the development of a strong (and sometimes unhealthy) interest in national movements, and in the history of a particular group (to the exclusion of others). Furthermore, a distinction can be made between insecurity perceived on a

⁴⁶ TH Eriksen, **Ethnicity and nationalism: anthropological perspectives** (London, 1993), p. 93.

⁴⁷ McClintock, p. 376.

⁴⁸ S Marks, "Black and white nationalisms in South Africa: a comparative perspective" in P Kaarsholm and J Hultin (eds), **Inventions and boundaries: historical and anthropological approaches to the study of ethnicity and nationalism** (Roskilde, 1994), p. 107.

⁴⁹ Messina, p. 194.

collective level and insecurity perceived on a more individual level. Collectively perceived insecurity might, to a greater extent, promote interest in a nationalistic image of the past, while individually perceived insecurity might contribute to reactions such as emigration, drug abuse, or efforts to try to find one's security in material things. Few contemporary Afrikaners seem to believe that collective Afrikaner action is an answer to problems, while the opposite was true in 1938.

After studying the three commemorations, one may conclude that there seems to have been two kinds of public interest in them, both of which were present in all three events, but with different emphases. The centenary of the Great Trek managed to capture the imagination and touch the emotions of the Afrikaners. This can be seen as an emotional kind of interest, which was also predominant in the Volkswag commemoration in 1988. The other type of public interest was more non-emotional, and was the major form of interest in the Anglo-Boer War centennial. This type of interest can be more sustained than the other emotionally-charged interest, while the emotional type is probably more conducive to creating support for nationalistic movements, since it touches people's hearts and not just their minds. A more non-emotional interest also entails more critical thinking with regard to the historic event that is commemorated, thereby making the event more difficult to (mis)use for political purposes.

The issues regarding the changing nature of society (discussed earlier), most probably played an important role in either promoting or working against a public interest in the commemorations. The secular and industrialised Afrikaner felt, according to Van Jaarsveld, more at home in the city than in the veld and was (and still is) more concerned about his/her economic well-being than about the past.⁵⁰ An anniversary in South Africa will probably never again create such an enthusiasm as the 1938 one did, mainly since contemporary South Africans, including contemporary Afrikaners, are far too diverse in their world views and opinions to any longer be collectively swept off their feet by a commemorative event. The fact that there were more events in 1988 and from 1999 to 2002 that competed for the attention of the public than in 1938, probably also played an important role; for example, it is easier to create public interest in a commemoration if there are fewer other entertainment opportunities the population can choose from.

Commemorations can have positive effects with regard to the strengthening of self-respect. Since the traumatic Anglo-Boer War, the Afrikaners had in 1938 been living in relatively difficult and insecure circumstances, in a country dominated by British money and culture, which might have had negative effects on their self-

⁵⁰ FA van Jaarsveld, "Die Groot Trek in die historiese bewussyn van die Afrikaners" in JS Bergh (ed.), **Herdenkingsjaar 1988: Portugese, Hugenote en Voortrekkers** (Pretoria, 1988), p. 120.

respect. The Great Trek centenary contributed to a strengthening of the self-respect by presenting a glorious past and a glorious future, and thereby reducing a sense of inferiority.⁵¹

An important similarity between the three commemorations is that they stimulated new research and the publication of research findings and works of fiction. After 1938, there was an increase in publications and research both regarding the Great Trek and the Anglo-Boer War, predominantly within the tradition of Afrikaner nationalist historiography. Prior to and during the 1988 anniversary, there were also new publications, but many of them were of a relatively low quality, and little new research was generated. To a great extent, the war centenary stimulated both research and the publication of such research and provoked new questions about and interpretations of the war.⁵²

An important issue when comparing the commemorations is the historical events as such that were commemorated. The Great Trek and the Anglo-Boer War are traditionally the two main events in the Afrikaner nationalistic historiography, and both have been extensively used for political purposes, but there are also many differences between them. There is, for example, more information available about the war than about the Trek, which makes the latter more difficult to use for political purposes.

It is also more difficult to commemorate the Great Trek since you cannot pinpoint its exact beginning and end. The Anglo-Boer War, on the other hand, has a definite start and an end, it is better documented, and consequently there is also extensive knowledge available regarding numerous incidents during the war, which is not always the case with the Great Trek.

In general, the Great Trek has been more ritualised than the war. Grundlingh thinks one of the reasons for this is that the Trek was a success story for the Afrikaners, while they lost the war.⁵³ And then, of course, the history of groups of people who left their homes behind and trekked into the relatively unknown and dangerous interior, has adventurous and epic dimensions. It must also be borne in mind that the Great Trek lends itself more easily to exclusive Afrikaner commemorations since it can be seen as more of an internal affair than the Anglo-Boer War, which

⁵¹ See, for example, Van Rensburg, p. 46.

⁵² See, for example, C Saunders, "Historiographical reflections on the significance of the South African War", *Kleio* 33, 2001, pp. 4, 14-6; B Theron, "Remembering the Anglo-Boer War: its place, 100 years later, in our historical consciousness", *Kleio* 33, 2001, pp. 115-6, 137, 143; A Porter, "The South African War and the historians", *African Affairs* 99, 2000, pp. 633-48; A Porter's review of D Omissi and A Thompson (eds), *The impact of the South African War in South African Historical Journal* 46, May 2002, pp. 330-2.

⁵³ Interview with Prof. A Grundlingh, Pretoria, 6 September 2000; Grundlingh, p. 23.

included many groups and countries. Another difference is that the Great Trek clashes, and especially the battle of Blood River, were primarily clashes between Afrikaners and black people, while the Anglo-Boer War was primarily a conflict between white people – albeit that blacks participated on both sides.

One may conclude that the possibility for a commemoration to have an effect on society mainly depends on three factors. Firstly, and most importantly, the context greatly influences both the anniversary and its implications, for example, by affecting the degree of public interest. Secondly, the organisation of the event plays an important role. In this regard the commitment of the organisers, the positions held by the organisers in the community, the organisers' ability to convey their message to the community and to stage interesting functions, play an important role. Finally, the nature of the historical events as such will often affect the implications of a commemoration. In most cases, the more important the event(s) is (are) perceived to be, the bigger the possibility that its (their) commemoration will have an impact on society. The impact of a commemoration is also enhanced when the community(ies) at which it is directed, can identify with the event(s) that is (are) commemorated, as well as with the nature of the commemoration as such.

5. CONCLUDING PERSPECTIVES

To commemorate or not to commemorate? Even if commemorations can have both negative and positive effects, it is questionable whether it would be recommendable or even possible to answer "no" to the question posed in the title of this article, since it seems to be a universal human trait to remember and commemorate events that are seen as important.⁵⁴ Also, even if politicians try to (mis)use commemorations for political aims, they are not always successful, because it is difficult to completely control the event; after all, the commemoration can develop a momentum of its own that no one planned. What Davison said about museums, namely, that there is always a surplus of meaning in displays at museums and that "[m]useums hold and shape memories but they cannot contain them",⁵⁵ can hold true with regard to the commemoration of historic events.

Even if commemorations can be misused for political purposes, their potential positive effects often outweigh the negative ones - at least in open and democratic

⁵⁴ This might not be the case in societies which do not have a linear perception of time, but look at time as a circle of events happening over and over again (in most instances being the different seasons of the year which determine agricultural activities). These societies are, however, becoming fewer in number, mainly since it is becoming increasingly difficult to continue with such a perception of time in a modern and globalised world.

⁵⁵ P Davison, "Museums and the reshaping of memory" in S Nuttall and C Coetzee (eds), **Negotiating the past: the making of memory in South Africa** (Cape Town, 1998), p. 160.

societies. One of the main positive implications stems from the fact that most, if not all, commemorations include a stocktaking exercise, where questions are posed regarding the causes and the consequences of particular events. Such a stocktaking process is in most cases positive since it often makes people ask new questions about their past and about their contemporary society. It makes them think about the past and in so doing they might obtain a better understanding of themselves and of their society.⁵⁶ Stocktaking processes can also contribute to an increased interest in history. It is important that the stocktaking process does not end up solely in looking for and finding something or someone in the past to blame for everything that is wrong in the present. Instead, it should ideally be conducted in a manner which seeks to learn from the past and which will bring people closer to the truth, but which will also lead to the realisation that there are different ways of interpreting the past.

Stocktaking processes can be very one-sided, as was the case with the 1938 centenary, but then the process as such says something about the society in which it took place, for example, regarding what is seen as the important questions of the day, as well as its view of its past, its present and its future.⁵⁷ Commemorations can therefore be important points of departure for the historian to learn more about a particular society. When studying history, one of the main issues to take note of is the way in which societies change over the course of time. By studying the Great Trek commemorations of 1938 and 1988 and the Anglo-Boer War centennial of 1999 to 2002, insight is gained with regard to the state of the nation at a particular point in its development.

The first anniversary of September 11 in 2002 looked very different in various parts of the world, and how it was remembered says something important about those societies. These issues, and the ones discussed elsewhere in this article, are important to bear in mind when we come closer to the tenth anniversary (in 2004) of the first democratic government in South Africa, the centenary of the rebellion of 1914-15, as well as of the First World War - to name but a few of the many events in the history of South Africa that can (and should) be commemorated in a dignified way.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Eriksen, **Historia, myt och identitet**, already referred to in footnote 9.

⁵⁷ See, for example, the books of Anderson, and Hobsbawm and Ranger, already referred to in footnote 7.