

# Japie Nesor: Cape colonial and Afrikaner rebel, 1899-1902 and beyond

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## *Samevatting*

Jacob Petrus (“Japie”) Nesor (1873-1959) is een van die minder bekende Kaapse koloniale rebelle en bevelvoerders van die Anglo-Boereoorlog wat vanaf 1899 tot 1902 in Suid-Afrika gewoed het. Dit is die doel van hierdie artikel om in besonder die fokus op die doen en late van ‘n gewone rebel, wat later tot ‘n offisersrang bevorder is, te plaas, ten einde sy optrede aan ‘n breër leserspubliek bekend te stel, en tegelyk ook die aard van die guerrillastryd in die Kaapkolonie tydens die oorlog te belig. Nesor het teen die einde van Oktober 1899 by die Boeremagte aangesluit en aan die Colesbergfront geveg. Nadat die Boeremagte aan die Kaapkolonie onttrek het, het Nesor na die Transvaal gegaan, waarna hy na die Oranje-Vrystaat teruggekeer het en in September-November 1900 ‘n spioenasietog na die noordoostelike Kaapkolonie onderneem het. In Desember 1900 het hy weer eens na die Kaapkolonie teruggekeer, dié keer as deel van genl. JBM Hertzog se invalsmag. Later is hy as veldkornet in die rebellekommando van kmdt. Hendrik Lategan aangestel en met verloop van tyd is hy in bevel van sy eie kommando Kaapse rebelle geplaas. Deur swart en bruin persone wat aan die kant van die Britte geveg het, na gevangeneneming summier tereg te stel, het Nesor ‘n gevreesde maar ook hoogs omstrede bevelvoerder geword. Gevolglik, toe vrede gesluit is, het Nesor in selfopgelegde ballingskap na Europa uitgewyk ten einde vervolging te ontduik. Hy het in 1904 na Suid-Afrika teruggekeer en aan die rebellie van 1914 tot 1915 deelgeneem.

**Keywords:** Anglo-Boer War/South African War (1899-1902); Japie Nesor; Cape Colony; Cape rebellion/rebel(s); Guerrilla warfare; War crimes; (Afrikaner) rebellion (1914-1915).

## Introduction

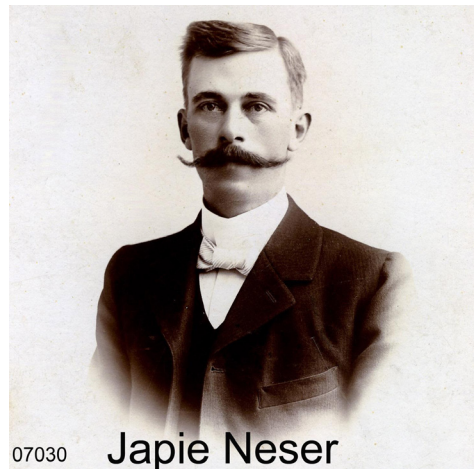
When one reads about the Boer invasions of the Cape Colony during the guerrilla phase of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), it becomes clear that most of the relevant sources concentrate on the exploits of Cmdt Gideon Scheepers (1878-1902),<sup>1</sup> Gen. JBMHertzog (1866-1942),<sup>2</sup> Gen. PH Kritzingen (1870-1935),<sup>3</sup> Gen. CR de Wet (1854-1922)<sup>4</sup> and Gen. JC Smuts (1870-1950).<sup>5</sup> Of course, there were also many rebel commanders who operated in the Cape Colony, for example, Cmdt HW Lategan (1858-1914)<sup>6</sup> and Cmdt JC Lötter (1875-1901),<sup>7</sup> as well as several other Boer commanders who were active in the Cape Colony, for example Gen. Manie Maritz (1876-1940),<sup>8</sup> Gen. Wynand Malan (1872-1953)<sup>9</sup> and Cmdt WD Fouché (1874-1939).<sup>10</sup>

One of the lesser-known Cape rebels, who in due course also invaded the Colony and commanded his own force, was Jacob Petrus (“Japie”) Nesor (1873-1959). (See Image 1.) References to Nesor are not found in basic sources on the war, such as those by JH Breytenbach,<sup>11</sup> LS Amery,<sup>12</sup> JF Maurice (ed.) and

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- 1 See, for example, J Meintjes, *Sword in the sand: The life and death of Gideon Scheepers* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1969); GS Preller (ed.), *Scheepers se dagboek en die stryd in Kaapland (1 Okt. 1901-18 Jan. 1902)* (Cape Town, N.P.B., 1938); T & D Shearing, *Commandant Gideon Scheepers and the search for his grave* (Sedgefield, The Authors, 1999).
  - 2 See, for example, CM van den Heever, *Generaal J.B.M. Hertzog* (Johannesburg, A.P.B., 1943), pp. 112-122.
  - 3 See, for example, PH Kritzingen and RD McDonald, *In die skaduwee van die dood* (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1939), passim; N Gomm, “Commandant P.H. Kritzingen in the Cape, December 1900-December 1901”, *Military History Journal*, 1(7), December 1970, pp. 30-32, 34.
  - 4 See, for example, WL von R Scholtz, *Generaal Christiaan de Wet as veldbeër* (D.Litt., Rijksuniversiteit, Leiden, 1978), pp. 321-370; CR de Wet, *Three years war (October 1899-June 1902)* (London, Constable, 1902), pp. 229-276.
  - 5 See, for example, PA Pyper, “Generaal J.C. Smuts en die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog (1899-1902)” (M.A., PU for CHE, 1960); T & D Shearing, *Jan Smuts and his long ride* (Sedgefield, The Authors, 2000).
  - 6 See, for example, A Wessels, “Die veggeneeraal van Colesberg: Hendrik Lategan en die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899-1902”, *Military History Journal*, 7(5), June 1988, pp. 185-192, 199.
  - 7 See, for example, T & D Shearing, *Commandant Johannes Lötter and his rebels* (Sedgefield, The Authors, 1998), passim; HW Kinsey, “The capture of Lötter’s commando”, *Military History Journal*, 1(5), December 1969, pp. 4, 29.
  - 8 See, for example, SG Maritz, *My lewe en strewe* (Johannesburg, 1938), pp. 10-54; LM Fourie, “Die militêre loopbaan van Manie Maritz tot aan die einde van die Anglo-Boereoorlog” (M.A., PU for CHE, 1975), passim.
  - 9 See, for example, HJC Pieterse (ed.), *Oorlogsavonture van genl. Wynand Malan* (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1946).
  - 10 See, for example, *Dictionary of South African biography (DSAB)*, 4 (Durban, Human Sciences Research Council, 1981), pp. 161-162.
  - 11 JH Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, 1-6 (Pretoria, Die Staatsdrukker, 1969-1996).
  - 12 LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history of the war in South Africa 1899-1902*, 1-7 (London, Sampson Low, Marston and Company, Ltd., 1900-1909).

MH Grant,<sup>13</sup> T. Pakenham<sup>14</sup> and L Creswicke.<sup>15</sup> He is also not mentioned in *Cassell's history of the Boer War* 1-2 (London, Cassell, 1903), or in De Wet's *Three years war*. AC Doyle,<sup>16</sup> D Reitz<sup>17</sup> and Bill Nasson<sup>18</sup> do not refer to him; and no biographical information on Nesor is found in Fransjohan Pretorius's *Historical dictionary of the Anglo-Boer War* (Lanham, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009), or in BJ Barker's *A concise dictionary of the Boer War* (Cape Town, Francolin Publishers, 1999). Nesor also does not feature in the *Dictionary of South African biography* 1-5 (plus two additional volumes) (Cape Town, Durban and Pretoria, National Council for Social Research, and Human Sciences Research Council, 1968-1999) or in the *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa* 1-12 (Cape Town, Nasou, 1970-1976).

Image 1: Japie Nesor



Source: War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein.

Brief references to Nesor can be found in older works such as those of Harm Oost, *Wie is die skuldiges?* (Johannesburg, Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel, s.a.), p. 27; OT de Villiers, *Met De Wet en Steyn in het veld: Avonturen, ervaringen en indrukken* (Amsterdam, Elsevier, 1903), p. 245; GS Preller (ed.), *Scheepers*

13 JF Maurice (ed.) and MH Grant, *History of the war in South Africa 1899-1902*, 1-4 (London, Hurst & Blackett, 1906-1910).

14 T Pakenham, *The Boer War* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 1979).

15 L Creswicke, *South Africa and the Transvaal War*, 1-8 (London, Blackwood, Le Bas and Co., s.a.).

16 AC Doyle, *The great Boer War* (London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1902).

17 D Reitz, *Commando: A Boer journal of the Boer War* (London, Faber & Faber, 1929).

18 B Nasson, *The South African War 1899-1902* (London, Arnold, 1999) and B Nasson, *The war for South Africa: The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2010).

*se dagboek en die stryd in Kaapland (1 Okt. 1901-18 Jan. 1902)* (Cape Town, N.P.B., 1938), p. 138; CJS Strydom, *Kaapland en die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1937), pp. 179, 183; PHS van Zyl, *Die helde-album: Verhaal en foto's van aanvoerders en helde uit ons vryheidstryd* (Johannesburg, Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel, 1944), pp. 319, 331, 371; and M Maritz, *My lewe en strewe* (Johannesburg, The Author, 1938), p. 54. Nesor's role during the guerrilla phase of the war is mentioned in some detail by A de Wet, H van Doornik and GC du Plessis, *Die Buren in der Kapkolonie im Kriege mit England* (Munich, Lehmanns, s.a.), pp. 129, 157, 210, 251 – and the authors indeed indicate that the portion written by De Wet was based, *inter alia*, on information supplied by Nesor. In later works there are brief references to Nesor, for example in OJO Ferreira (ed.), *Memoirs of Ben Bouwer as written by P.J. le Riche* (Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1980), p. 285.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there have been more references to Nesor, probably owing to the fact that his reminiscences were published (in Afrikaans) in 1988.<sup>19</sup> The Anglo-Boer War centenary generated a great deal of interest in the conflict of 1899 to 1902 and a large number of publications were released, including a few that contain references to Nesor, for example T & D Shearing, *Commandant Gideon Scheepers and the search for his grave* (Sedgefield, The Authors, 1999), pp. 145, 194, 215; T & D Shearing, *Jan Smuts and his long ride* (Sedgefield, The Authors, 2000), pp. 135, 155, 157, 162, 170, 177, 179, 181-182, 195-197; J Malan, *Die Boere-offisiere van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog, 1899-1902* (Pretoria, Van der Walt, 1990), pp. 111-112; PG Cloete, *The Anglo-Boer War: A chronology* (Pretoria, J.P. van der Walt, 2000), pp. 254, 276, 306 and F Pretorius, *Life on commando during the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Cape Town, Human & Rousseau, 1999), pp. 274-275. Nesor's activities are also mentioned in the postgraduate studies of PA Pyper, "Generaal J.C. Smuts en die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog (1899-1902)" (M.A., PU for CHE, 1960), HA Shearing, "The second invasion of the Cape Colony during the Second Anglo-Boer War" (M.A., University of Natal, 1989), RJ Constantine, "The guerrilla war in the Cape Colony during the South African War of 1899 to 1902: A case study of the republican and rebel commando movement" (M.A., UCT, 1996) and HA Shearing, "The Cape rebel of the South African War, 1899-1902"

<sup>19</sup> See A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe van kommandant Jacob Petrus Nesor", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 7-134. On the back cover the date of publication is indicated as March 1988, but on p. 5 it is given as October 1987. In practice, the publication only appeared in print in 1988.

(D.Phil., University of Stellenbosch, 2004).

One hundred and ten years after Nesor operated in the Cape Colony, and just over fifty years after his death, it is the purpose of this article to evaluate his controversial role during the Anglo-Boer War in the light of new evidence that has come to the fore since his reminiscences were published more than twenty years ago – and also to introduce people who do not have a reading knowledge of Afrikaans to this fascinating albeit controversial character. His role during the rebellion of 1914 to 1915 will also be discussed. One of the reasons why he is not well-known, is probably the fact that most of what has been written about him is in Afrikaans. The basic information in this article is derived from the four reminiscences that Nesor left behind, which (at the request of Prof. MCE van Schoor) were amalgamated or synthesised by André Wessels in 1978. They were subsequently edited and annotated by Wessels (once again at the request of Prof. MCE van Schoor) and published in 1988. The reminiscences were originally recorded separately by four different persons, on four different occasions; and in this article they will be referred to in the footnotes as:

- Document A – reminiscences recorded by Nesor’s grandson, JP Nesor, Brandfort, 1954-1955 (99 typed folio pages).
- Document B – reminiscences recorded by Pieter de Waal of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, April 1957 (137 typed folio pages).
- Document C – reminiscences recorded by Johannes C Vermaak, Vereeniging, 1930s (14 typed A4 pages).
- Document D – reminiscences jotted down by Dr WS Radley, a teacher, Saaibult farm, Marquard district, 27 April 1933 (33 pages in a school exercise book, in longhand).<sup>20</sup>

These documents are kept by the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein.

In this article, whenever documents A, B, C and/or D are mentioned in the footnotes, there will also be an additional reference to the amalgamated manuscript, as published in the *Christiaan de Wet-annale*. Sometimes the present author will provide a free translation of excerpts from the reminiscences.

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<sup>20</sup> A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 12-13.

## **Neser as rebel and spy in the early months of the war**

Jacob Petrus (“Japie”) Nesar was born on the farm Modderfontein in the Colesberg district in the north-eastern Cape Colony on 18 August 1873, one of the eight children of Frederik Wilhelm Nesar and his wife Regina Catharine Naudé.<sup>21</sup> No information about Nesar’s youth or young adult years prior to the Anglo-Boer War could be obtained.

Shortly before the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War on 11 October 1899, Nesar left the farm Noodhulp, between Colesberg and Steynsburg, where his father was farming at the time. He travelled to Germiston in the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR; i.e. Transvaal), and for a time worked as a conductor on the trains of the Nederlandsche Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorweg-Maatschappij (NZASM) – the company that controlled most of the railway lines in the ZAR. He became ill and returned to his parents’ farm, and was still on the farm when the war broke out. Against the wishes of his parents, he returned to Germiston, but was then transferred to Volksrust, where he served on board the trains that transported Boers to the front. Contact with Boers on their way to fight the British fuelled Nesar’s imagination; and towards the end of October 1899, he and a friend, Charlie Park, decided to voluntarily join the Boer forces. At Newcastle, the two young volunteers seemed to be regarded with distrust; so they travelled to Pretoria, and from there to Johannesburg, where they were at long last accepted and each issued with a horse, Mauser rifle and ammunition. They asked to be sent to the Colesberg front, where they arrived on 15 November 1899; i.e. just after the Boers crossed the Orange River at Aliwal North on 13 November and occupied the town of Colesberg unopposed on 14 November.<sup>22</sup> (For most of the places referred to in this section, as well as in the rest of the article, see Image 2 on the next page – a map of the western and central Cape Colony operational areas.)

As part of the Germiston commando and of the field-cornetcy of Field-Cornet GH Gravett, Nesar comprised part of the Boer army commanded by Gen. Hendrik J Schoeman. Schoeman was a controversial figure and not one of the better Boer generals,<sup>23</sup> and his slack and indecisive attitude,

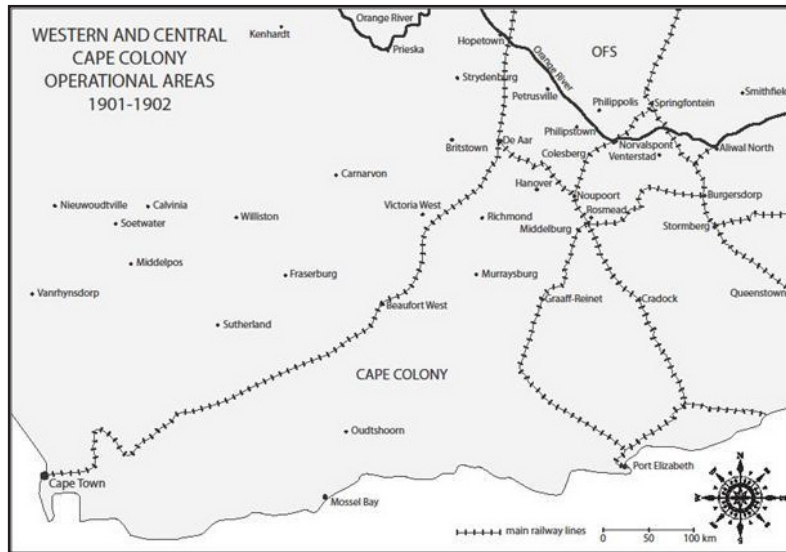
21 A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 9; information supplied by JP Nesar (grandson), Brandfort.

22 Document A, p. 1; Document B, pp. 1-2; Document D, pp. 8-10; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 17-18; JH Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog ...*, 1, pp. 444, 447; LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history ...*, 2, pp. 291-292.

23 See, for example, J Schoeman, *Genl. Hendrik Schoeman: Was hy ’n verraaiër?* (Pretoria, Caxton, 1950).

which was definitely not in the interest of the Boer cause, was a source of frustration to Nesor. But there was not much that Nesor could do about the situation at a strategic level. However, he (Nesor) did take initiatives in terms of reconnaissance work, which he sometimes undertook against the orders of superiors, and he even attacked British patrols. He also took part in the major clashes of 6 January 1900 at Graskop and 12 February 1900 in the vicinity of Slingerfontein.<sup>24</sup>

Image 2: Map of the western and central Cape Colony operational areas



Source: Compelled by A Wessels and drawn by SUN MeDIA, Bloemfontein

The surrender of Gen. PA Cronjé with more than 4 000 men at Paardeberg on 27 February 1900 had devastating consequences for the Boer war effort, which included the withdrawal of the Boer forces from the Colesberg front. The British forces re-occupied Colesberg on 28 February. Nesor was one of the Cape rebels who accompanied the Boer army back to the Orange Free State (OFS). They fell back to the Sand River, between Bloemfontein and Kroonstad, where only half-hearted attempts were made to stop the advancing British forces; and by the end of May 1900, Nesor found himself near Johannesburg. Just before the British occupied Johannesburg on 31 May,

<sup>24</sup> Document A, pp. 1-5; Document B, pp. 2-10; Document D, pp. 10-15; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 21-27; JH Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog ...*, 4, pp. 50-55, 154-160; LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history ...*, 3, pp. 135-138 and 4, pp. 463-466; JF Maurice (ed.) and MH Grant, *History of the war ...*, 1, pp. 396-399 and 2, pp. 251-252.

Neser assisted in transporting a large number of gold bars from the Robinson gold-mine near Johannesburg to Pretoria.<sup>25</sup>

Shortly before Pretoria was occupied by the British forces on 5 June 1900, Nesor left, riding eastwards to Bronkhorstspuit, and in due course to Middelburg, some 110 km east of Pretoria. In this area he met Louis Botha – since 27 March 1900 the commandant-general of the Transvaal forces – for the first time. Nesor and four fellow Colesberg rebels, whom he met in Middelburg, then decided to return to the OFS. They rode to Bethal, some 70 km south of Middelburg, where they met Tjaard Kruger, the youngest of ZAR president Paul Kruger's nine sons. The young Kruger asked Nesor and his companions to take £25 000 in gold and paper money, which belonged to the ZAR government, to the OFS's Gen. Christiaan de Wet, and Nesor agreed. They trekked to Vrede in the OFS, then to Witsieshoek, and from there to the Brandwater Basin, where they arrived on 27 July – the day when, at a council of war, Marthinus Prinsloo was elected as a temporary acting chief commandant of the force in the Basin. Still on the look-out for De Wet – who had escaped from the Basin on the night of 15-16 July – Nesor and company left the Basin just before Prinsloo surrendered with more than 4 000 men.<sup>26</sup>

Nesor and his comrades returned to Vrede, and then went to Heilbron, where the £25 000 was handed to Gen. JBM Hertzog. In the meantime, De Wet had escaped to the north of the Magaliesberg in the Transvaal, from whence he would return in due course to the OFS – which had been renamed the Orange River Colony (ORC) after being annexed by Lord Roberts, the British commander-in-chief in South Africa, in the last week of May. Nesor and his four fellow Colesbergers decided to return to the Cape Colony, on a highly dangerous spying trip, in an effort to monitor the Cape Afrikaners' attitude towards the war, in order to determine whether or not they would be likely to welcome a new, large-scale Boer invasion. They moved southwards through the ORC and crossed the Orange River near Bethulie into the Cape Colony. By this time, one of the original four men who accompanied Nesor had

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25 Document A, pp. 5-7; Document B, pp. 11-13; Document D, pp. 16-17; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 28-31; JH Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog ...*, 5, pp. 413-535; DW Krüger, *Die Krugermiljoene* (Johannesburg, Perskor, 1979), pp. 18, 22-25.

26 Document A, pp. 7-8; Document B, pp. 15-17; Document D, pp. 18-22; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 31-35; LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history ...*, 4, pp. 309-343; JF Maurice (ed.) and MH Grant, *History of the war ...*, 3, pp. 293-306; J de Bruin, "'n Regshistoriese studie van die finale oorgawe van die Oranje-Vrystaat se konvensionele magte gedurende die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899-1902)" (LL.D., University of the Free State, 2009), pp. 173-176.



dropped out. Nesor visited his parents' farm, Noodhulp, and then continued southwards, now alone, since the other three men had by now also dropped out.<sup>27</sup> Eventually he took a train from Dwarsvleihalte, between Rosmead and Graaff-Reinet, to Graaff-Reinet. On the train he shared a compartment with four Colonial troops!<sup>28</sup>

In Graaff-Reinet, Nesor stayed in a boarding-house. He met with a large number of people in the town and district; and most if not all of them were in favour of another invasion of the Cape Colony by the Boers. After a stay of about a month, Nesor left Graaff-Reinet in mid-October 1900 and rode to the Cape colonial town of Middelburg, some 100 km north of Graaff-Reinet. Shortly after he left, the British authorities in Graaff-Reinet took into custody several of the people with whom Nesor had been in contact. From Middelburg, Nesor rode in the direction of Steynsburg, Noupoort, Hanover and Philipstown, and crossed back to the OFS/ORC across the Orange River at Sanddrif, between Philipstown and Philippolis. It is quite amazing how far Nesor trekked through enemy territory, without being captured. But more often than not, he was also very lucky. On the ORC side of the river, he met up by chance with a Boer patrol of some 25 men, and they took him to the commandos led by Gen. JBM Hertzog, near Philippolis in the southern ORC. It was now mid-November 1900. Nesor, who had indeed gathered valuable information during his spying trip in the Cape Colony, briefed Hertzog on the situation in the Colony, pointing out that many Afrikaners were in favour of another invasion by the Boers. Hertzog was impressed by what Nesor had to say and appointed him as his adjutant and staff captain. A few days later, Nesor accompanied Hertzog and a few other men to the farm Goede Hoop in the Smithfield district, where on 3 December they met OFS president MT Steyn and Gen. Christiaan de Wet. Hertzog asked Nesor to inform the president and general about his findings in the Cape Colony, and it was decided that Hertzog would invade the Colony via Sanddrif, while De Wet would cross further upstream.<sup>29</sup> Although the decision to invade the Cape Colony was not solely based on Nesor's evidence, in a small way he did play a role in expanding the war once again to the Colony.

27 Two of them rode to Colesberg and handed themselves over to the British authorities. Document A, p. 15; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 43.

28 Document A, pp. 8-15; Document B, pp. 17-28; Document C, p. 3; Document D, pp. 23-24; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 35-43.

29 Document A, pp. 15-26; Document B, pp. 28-51; Document C, pp. 4-12; Document D, p. 25; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 43-56; OT de Villiers, *Met De Wet en Steyn in het veld: Avonturen, ervaringen en indrukken* (Amsterdam, Elsevier, 1903), p. 55; LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history ...*, 5, p. 127.

## **A guerrilla fighter in the Cape Colony**

On the night of 15-16 December 1900, Hertzog crossed the Orange River at Sanddrif and invaded the Cape Colony with approximately 1 200 men. But De Wet's attempt to cross near Odendaalstroom, between Bethulie and Aliwal North, was thwarted by a river that was in flood. By invading the Cape Colony, the Boers hoped to alleviate the pressure on the commandos in the Transvaal and ORC; to prove to the British and the world that they were still determined and able to continue their struggle for freedom; to take the war back to British territory; to destroy British lines of communication and other infrastructure, and hopefully to recruit many rebels for the republican cause. Hertzog occupied Philipstown on 17 December. At Houtkraal, 32 km north of De Aar, his force clashed with British troops in an armoured train, and occupied Britstown on 22 December, with Nesor and a patrol being the first to enter the town. At Houwater, a clash with a British force under Brig.-Gen. HH Settle took place; Vosburg was occupied on 27 December; and from there Hertzog trekked via Carnarvon and Williston to Calvinia, which was occupied on 7 January 1901.<sup>30</sup>

From Calvinia, Hertzog and his forces trekked to Vanrhynsdorp, which was occupied on 19 January 1901. (See Image 3.) From there they trekked north-eastwards, and on 27 February joined the commando of De Wet. The latter had crossed into the Cape Colony on 10 February 1900, but was relentlessly pursued by some 14 000 British troops (17 mobile columns) in what became known as the third or great De Wet hunt. De Wet's force was stopped by a Brak River that was in flood and he had to return to the ORC. After the commandos of De Wet and Hertzog met near Sanddrif on 27 February, they crossed the Orange River back to the ORC at Bothasdrif, some 25 km west of Norvalspoor, late on the afternoon of 28 February. Some 200 Cape Afrikaners joined Hertzog's commando and trekked with him to the ORC, but De Wet could not recruit any rebels. De Wet divided the ORC into seven military areas, with Hertzog (as assistant chief commandant) in charge of the districts of Philippolis, Fauresmith, Jacobsdal and Petrusburg. Nesor formed part of a

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<sup>30</sup> Document A, pp. 26-27; Document B, pp. 51-53; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 56-59; O Pirow, *James Barry Munnik Hertzog* (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, s.a.), p. 32; CJS Strydom, *Kaapland en die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1937), pp. 95-96; *DSAB*, 1 (Cape Town, National Council for Social Research, 1968), p. 367; LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history ...*, 5, pp. 129-130; A de Wet, H van Doornik and GC du Plessis, *Die Buren in der Kapkolonie im Kriege mit England* (Munich, Lehmanns, s.a.), pp. 87-91; A Roodt, *Kaapse rebel* (Johannesburg, J.P. van der Walt, 1945), pp. 11-12.

commando that operated in the vicinity of Jagersfontein and Fauresmith.<sup>31</sup>

Image 3: Gen. JBM Hertzog (at the back) with members of his staff at Vanrhynsdorp on 19 January 1901. Seated in front, from left to right: Klasie Havenga, Japie Nesor and Willie Hertzog



Source: War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein.

Nesor was keen to return to the Cape Colony as soon as possible, because he knew the territory, and also because he would like to stir up rebellion, but Hertzog was reluctant to let him go. However, when Nesor was able to muster approximately 40 men<sup>32</sup> who were also keen to go to the Cape Colony, Hertzog agreed. He offered to appoint Nesor as commandant of this group of men, but Nesor declined, saying that it was his intention to join the commando of Cmdt Hendrik Lategan, a fellow rebel from the Colesberg district. Nesor and his men joined Lategan south of Springfontein in the southern ORC. Lategan appointed Nesor as a field-cornet; and soon afterwards, in April 1900, the commando, comprised of some 130 men, crossed the Orange River into the Cape. They operated in the districts of Colesberg, Steynsburg, Hanover, Murraysburg and Graaff-Reinet. Several small clashes with mobile British columns took place, and they also sabotaged the railways, which led to the derailment of a train. It is clear that genuine guerrilla fighters were here at work. On 20 (or 21 or 22) July 1901 (sources refer to various dates), Nesor was wounded in his buttock (or hip) in a fight that took place at Tweefontein,

31 Document A, pp. 27-28; Document B, pp. 53-54; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 59-61; LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history ...*, 5, pp. 137-157; JF Maurice (ed.) and MH Grant, *History of the war ...*, 4, pp. 88-90; A de Wet, H van Doornik and GC du Plessis, *Die Buren in der Kapkolonie ...*, pp. 91-93; The Intelligence Officer, *On the heels of De Wet* (Edinburgh, Blackwood, 1903), passim; WL von R Scholtz, *Generaal Christiaan de Wet ...*, pp. 377-378.

32 Between 50 and 60, according to Document B, p. 54.

some 32 km west-north-west of Graaff-Reinet. Lategan then returned to the ORC at the end of August, to invade the Cape Colony once more on 16 September, while four men were left behind to support the wounded Nesor. Nesor's wound became infected, but thanks to assistance provided by families on farms, where he sometimes also stayed for a few days, he fully recovered. He and his companions then joined the commando of Cmdt JJ Smith, and operated in the district of Hopetown, after which they joined Cmdt GHP van Reenen's commando, and carried out activities in the barren northern Cape Colony, for example in the districts of Carnarvon and Calvinia.<sup>33</sup> The long distances covered by Nesor and others should be noted.

### **Eight months as a rebel commandant**

On 25 October 1901, a council of war was held on the farm Kloudskraal, district of Calvinia. Among those present were Gen. Manie Maritz, who was sent to the north-western Cape to properly organise the rebel commandos in that area, and Cmdt SW Pyper. The commandos were reorganised and it was also decided that a new commando should be formed, consisting of rebels from Fraserburg and Sutherland – a total of at least 50 but not more than 85 men.<sup>34</sup> Nesor was appointed as commandant – a position he initially refused, but was eventually persuaded to accept. The men in his commando were glad to go back and operate in their home districts; but only 12 were armed. However, the local Town Guards and armed coloureds were overconfident – Nesor's commando consequently took many of them prisoner and the rebels were subsequently armed with the captured rifles. Many rebels joined Nesor's commando, which soon numbered approximately 300 men.<sup>35</sup> Nesor's operations in the districts of Sutherland and Fraserburg had profound implications for the central Great Karoo region – not only during the latter months of the guerrilla phase of the war, but also for post-war intergroup

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33 Document A, pp. 28-37; Document B, pp. 54-70; Document D, pp. 2, 30; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 62-73; A de Wet, H van Doornik and GC du Plessis, *Die Buren in der Kapkolonie ...*, p. 129; J Stirling, *The colonials in South Africa, 1899-1902: Their record, based on the despatches* (Edinburgh, Blackwood, 1907), p. 108; JF Maurice (ed.) and MH Grant, *History of the war ...*, 4, p. 232; PHS van Zyl, *Die helde-album: Verhaal en foto's van aanvoerders en helde uit ons vryheidstryd* (Johannesburg, Die Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel, 1944), pp. 319-320; B Williams, *Record of the Cape Mounted Riflemen* (London, Causton, 1909), pp. 105-106.

34 50-60 according to Document B, p. 71, and approximately 85 according to Document D, p. 31.

35 Document A, p. 37; Document D, p. 31; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 74; LM Fourie, "Die militêre loopbaan van Manie Maritz ...", pp. 99-100; *DSAB*, 1, p. 513.

relations in the area. For the first time in the conflict, a Boer/rebel commando was in control of that area, frustrating the British forces.<sup>36</sup>

Neser ordered that all the armed coloureds who were captured by his commando should be executed, in what has aptly been described as a “reign of terror”.<sup>37</sup> He used the derogatory term “Hottentotte”, i.e. “Hottentots”, to refer to them: “I had all the armed Hottentots shot.”<sup>38</sup> According to the British, armed blacks and coloureds in British service had to be treated as prisoners of war when captured by the Boers. But the Boers insisted that the war was a white man’s war; and consequently, in many instances, they summarily executed armed black and coloured prisoners. On 12 June 1901, Gen. PH Kritzinger issued a proclamation which stipulated, *inter alia*, that only in cases where black and coloured people voluntarily reported Boer presence, could they be executed as spies. Later on, when Gen. JC Smuts reorganised the Boer commandos in the Cape Colony towards the end of December 1901, he made it clear that only those prisoners who had been found guilty of a crime could be executed.<sup>39</sup> But the summary executions continued – Neser being one of the main culprits. In terms of the law of nations, there is no way in which the summary execution of black and coloured people can be justified; and persons who order such executions are clearly guilty of war crimes.<sup>40</sup> Neser evidently believed that the shooting of prisoners could have a salutary effect on the enemy – thereby placing himself in the company of “Breaker” Morant and his comrades-in-crime.<sup>41</sup>

Neser’s commando operated in the districts of Fraserburg, Sutherland, Vanrhynsdorp and Clanwilliam – sometimes alone; sometimes in co-operation with other commandos. Neser’s commando captured many British troops, including local coloured soldiers. The white troops were stripped of their arms, ammunition and anything else that was of value to the Boers, including horses, and then set free. A certain Captain Fletcher was thus captured three

36 RJ Constantine, “The guerrilla war in the Cape Colony during the South African War of 1899-1902: A case study of the republican and rebel commando movement” (M.A., UCT, 1996), p. 170.

37 RJ Constantine, “The guerrilla war in the Cape Colony ...”, p. 170.

38 Document B, p. 72.

39 Free State Archives Depot, Bloemfontein, Reference A.155/194/2: Proclamation by PH Kritzinger, 12 June 1901; De Villiers, pp. 70, 180; PHS van Zyl, *Die helde-album ...*, p. 320; PA Pyper, “Generaal J.C. Smuts ...”, pp. 100-101; WK Hancock, *Smuts 1: The sanguine years, 1870-1919* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 141.

40 See, for example, G von Glahn, *Law among nations: An introduction to public international law* (New York, Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1965), pp. 697-698.

41 For more on the actions of and murders committed by Morant and his comrades see, for example, A Davey (ed.), *Breaker Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers* (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1987); GR Witton, *Scapegoats of the Empire: The story of the Bushveldt Carbineers* (Melbourne, D.W. Paterson, 1907).

times in one week! On the last occasion, Nesor told him: “Man, you are a very good fellow. You have already brought me so many horses and rifles. Go back and fetch some more.”<sup>42</sup> Nesor even gave the name “Fletcher” to a horse that he used during that period.<sup>43</sup>

However, when armed black and coloured soldiers were captured, they were forced to dig their own graves and were then shot. A coloured soldier captured on the farm of a Mr Tromp near Fraserburg, and all seven coloureds who formed part of a patrol captured by Nesor’s commando on the farm Rheboksfontein, 17 km north-west of Sutherland, were among those who suffered this fate. “For the Colonials who joined me, it was an awful experience, but in due course they got used to it.”<sup>44</sup> Some of his men, such as Abraham van Wijk and Adrian [sic] Vlok, were in due course identified by the British as having shot captured “Native Scouts”.<sup>45</sup> Gen. Jaap van Deventer explicitly ordered Nesor to stop the summary execution of armed blacks and coloureds, but Nesor disregarded the order and continued the executions. As a justification for his actions, he alleged that when coloured soldiers captured Boers, they tortured them to death.<sup>46</sup> Although there were instances where coloured soldiers committed war crimes,<sup>47</sup> that was no excuse for shooting all coloured prisoners; and the Boers were also guilty of war crimes<sup>48</sup> – Nesor being one of the main culprits.

Nesor’s commando clashed on a number of occasions with British columns, for example in mid-November 1901, when he and Jaap van Deventer defeated the column commanded by Lt-Col CE Callwell, at Brandekraal, between Calvinia and Sutherland. The British lost 16 killed or wounded and 30

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42 Document B, p. 88; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 75.

43 Document A, p. 37; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 75.

44 Document A, p. 38; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 75.

45 National Army Museum (NAM), London, Reference 6807-187: Intelligence Papers – South Africa 1901-1902, p. 30.

46 Document A, p. 38; Document B, pp. 84-85; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 86.

47 See, for example, the Naroeegas incident (23 May 1901). J Strauss, “Die veldslag van Naroeegas”, *Kronos*, 21, November 1994, pp. 16-31; M Legassick, “The battle of Naroeegas: Context, historiography, sources and significance”, *Kronos*, 21, November 1994, pp. 32-60.

48 The torture and murder of Abraham Esau can be cited as an example. See K. Schoeman, “Die dood van Abraham Esau: ooggetuieberigte uit die besette Calvinia, 1901”, *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library*, 40(2), December 1985, pp. 56-66; B Nasson, *Abraham Esau’s war: A black South African War in the Cape 1899-1902* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 63, 120-140, 190.

captured.<sup>49</sup> Just after Christmas, 1901, Smuts ordered most of the commandos in the Cape Colony (some 16 commandos; approximately 3 000 men) to assemble on the farm Soetwater, between Calvinia and Nieuwoudtville. The commandos were reorganised and ordered to operate over a larger area, with each one being given a designated area of operations. At the same meeting, Maritz, Malan, Van Deventer and Lategan were promoted as combat generals (“veggeneraals”), each with a number of commandos under their overall command. Nesoer’s commando, plus those of Louis Boshof, Ben Bouwer, Abraham Louw and a certain Jooste, all resorted under Van Deventer’s overall command. The Boers were confident that they could not only continue the war, but that they could indeed still be successful.<sup>50</sup>

In the first week of February 1902, Lt-Col WRB Doran escorted a convoy from Calvinia to Sutherland. On the evening of 5 February, Doran and a portion of his force attacked the laager of a rebel by the name of Geldenhuys, about half-way between Calvinia and Sutherland. While Doran was away, Gen. Jaap van Deventer and 28 men attacked Doran’s convoy at Middelpoort. The attack continued on 6 February, as Gen. JC Smuts, Nesoer and other reinforcements arrived, and the British fled their camp. The Boers captured or destroyed 130 wagons and also captured some 400 horses and mules. The British lost at least nine killed and 22 wounded; Boer losses amounted to four killed and ten wounded.<sup>51</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Van Deventer ordered Nesoer to take half his commando (i.e. approximately 150 men) westwards to Vanrhynsdorp. The other half of the commando was temporarily placed under the command of a certain Gölding. On 25 February 1902, on the farm Windhoek, 15 km south of Vanrhynsdorp, Nesoer’s men took part in an attack on a British post and

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49 Document A, pp. 39-41; Document B, pp. 74-75; Document D, pp. 34-35; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 77-79. Lt-Col (later Maj-Gen.) Charles Edward Callwell (1859-1928) was the author of the influential book *Small wars: Their principles and practice* (London, 1896). Cf. *Who was who, 1916-1928* (London, Adam & Charles Black, 1947), p. 163.

50 Document B, pp. 89-90; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 88-89; JA Smith, *Ek rebelleer* (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1939), p. 99; PA Pyper, “Generaal J.C. Smuts ...”, pp. 96-98, 102-104; LM Fourie, “Die militêre loopbaan van Manie Maritz ...”, pp. 116-118; WK Hancock and J van der Poel (eds), *Selections from the Smuts papers, 1: June 1896-May 1902* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1966), pp. 497-498.

51 Document A, pp. 46-47; Document B, p. 84; Document D, pp. 35-36; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 85-86; A de Wet, H van Doornik and GC du Plessis, *Die Buren in der Kapkolonie ...*, pp. 206-209; PA Pyper, pp. 124-126; LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history ...*, 5, pp. 548-549. According to the *List of casualties in the army in South Africa, from the 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1902, to the 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1902* (s.l., no publisher indicated, s.a.), pp. 9, 13-14, 75, the British lost nine killed and 22 wounded, but according to the Transvaal Archives Depot (TAD; now part of the National Archives of South Africa), Pretoria, LA Nierstras, *Der Süd-Afrikanische Krieg, 1899-1902*, p. 1409, they lost 23 killed and 65 wounded.

achieved a Pyrrhic victory: they captured approximately 90 British soldiers (including some 80 Cape Police), about 100 horses and 25 wagons, and killed at least one and wounded seven soldiers, but lost four officers and eight men killed and ten men wounded. Amongst the prisoners was Lambert Colyn, a colonial who had joined Ben Bouwer's commando around 10 February 1900, but had then gone back to the British to report Bouwer's position. In the early hours of 14 February, the British had surprised Bouwer's force. As a result, the Boers had lost 17 killed or wounded. It is not clear whether there were any British casualties. On the very day of Colyn's capture (25 February 1902), Smuts, who was in overall command of the attack, had him tried, condemned to death and shot.<sup>52</sup>

Neser, who by this time had a ransom of £1 000 on his head for executing armed blacks and coloureds,<sup>53</sup> was now ordered by Smuts to return to the Sutherland district. There, the portion of Neser's commando that had accompanied him was reunited with the portion that he had left behind under the command of Gölding. A number of clashes with British forces took place – mostly with local forces such as the District Mounted Troops and Town Guards; i.e. locally-raised units, which included Cape Afrikaners, blacks and coloureds.<sup>54</sup> It is clear that in the Cape Colony, the war had a strong civil-war character.

Thanks to intelligence and other reports, including one from a secret agent, namely Albertus Johannes Marais, the British knew quite a lot about Neser's commando, albeit that they could not track him down and force him to surrender – or kill him. According to Marais' report, Neser's commando consisted of approximately 110 men in March 1902, all of whom were armed – mostly with Lee-Metford rifles. They had sufficient ammunition and some 400 horses and mules, including some 100 horses that were in a poor condition. On 23 March 1902 it was reported that "The men in Neser's Commando spoke hopefully of winning the War. They procured supplies

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52 Document A, pp. 52-53; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 94-95; OJO Ferreira (ed.), *Memoirs of General Ben Bouwer as written by P.J. le Riche* (Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1980), pp. 241-246, 249-255; OT de Villiers, *Met De Wet en Steyn ...*, pp. 197-198, 227-229; Reitz, pp. 288-294; Pyper, p. 128; LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history ...*, 5, p. 549; *List of casualties ...*, p. 75.

53 *The Boer army list: Cape Colony district. March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1902* (s.l., no publisher indicated, s.a.), p. 89.

54 Document A, pp. 53-57; Document B, pp. 95-101; Document D, p. 37; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 95-100. According to Neser, the last man he killed in battle was an Afrikaner – a Roux from the Boland; probably Private FP Roux, Marshall's Horse, killed in action on 23 March 1902. *List of casualties...*, p. 82.



from all the farms they touched at.”<sup>55</sup> Marais also described Nesor: “He seems to be of a quiet and reserved disposition, and speaks in a civil and pleasant tone.”<sup>56</sup>

In May 1902, while operating somewhere near Sutherland, Nesor received notice from Van Deventer that a peace conference would be held at Vereeniging and that Smuts would represent the commandos that operated in the Cape Colony. Later, Nesor received notice that peace had been concluded (31 May). Nevertheless, he continued with operations. On 3 June, at Groenberg, 45 km east-south-east of Fraserburg, he clashed with and defeated a force of the Colonial Light Horse, killing four and wounding two.<sup>57</sup> A few days later Van Deventer ordered Nesor to take his commando to Soetwater where the conditions under which peace had been concluded, would be explained.<sup>58</sup>

If necessary, Nesor and his commando, like a few others, would still have been able to continue their guerrilla operations for some time. But to what purpose? During the guerrilla phase, they were able to evade capture, and from time to time they killed, wounded or captured a few (mostly local) troops; but basically they were always on the run, and would not have been able to defeat the British – though, even shortly before he died, Nesor still (erroneously) believed that the Boers could have won the war.<sup>59</sup> Strictly speaking, the Boers never had any realistic chance of being victorious. What little possibility still remained in that regard, evaporated after Cronjé’s surrender at Paardeberg; with the final nails in the coffin being the capture of the republican capitals and Prinsloo’s surrender in the Brandwater Basin. Strictly speaking, all further resistance was futile. The guerrilla war merely prolonged the conflict – and led to the British scorched-earth policy, with the concomitant destruction, the internment camps, and the death of more than 60 000 white and black civilians.

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55 NAM, Reference 6807-187: Intelligence Papers – South Africa 1901-1902, p. 133.

56 NAM, Reference 6807-187: Intelligence Papers – South Africa 1901-1902, p. 134.

57 Document A, p. 57; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 100. This was, as far as could be ascertained, the third-last clash of the war. On 4 June 1902, one British soldier was killed and one wounded near Vereeniging, and another was wounded near Athole. *List of casualties*, p. 95.

58 Document A, p. 57; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 100-101. According to WK Hancock and J van der Poel (eds), *Selections ...*, 1, p. 515, Nesor only had some 100 men left in his commando. It is not clear whether the rest had simply drifted away from the commando. In his reminiscences, Nesor does not mention his commando’s strength in June 1902.

59 Document B, p. 137; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 127.

## **Peace – and self-imposed exile in Europe**

After peace was concluded, a number of Cape commandos (some 2 000 men in total) gathered at Soetwater, between Calvinia and Nieuwoudtville. Smuts arrived on 14 June 1902 and conveyed to them the conditions of the peace treaty that had been concluded and signed on 31 May. Until that stage, many if not most burghers and rebels who were still in the field in the Cape Colony had apparently been convinced that the peace proposals would favour the Boers. Consequently, many were shocked to hear that the republics had lost their independence, and that they had to surrender.<sup>60</sup> Naser reacted by telling Smuts in front of those who had gathered to listen to their commanding officer: “You went and betrayed us”, whereupon Smuts reprimanded him.<sup>61</sup>

As a rebel officer, Naser would not be able to go free by simply signing an admission of guilt, thus merely losing his franchise for five years; he would have to stand trial. And then there was also the matter of his execution of a large number of black and coloured men. Consequently, on the morning of 16 June, Naser and seven or eight other members of his commando, most of whom had also partaken in the execution of blacks and coloureds, departed from Soetwater, and trekked to German South West Africa (later South West Africa; today Namibia). They crossed the Orange River at Skuitdrif into German territory on 26 June, trekked to Warmbad, Keetmanshoop and Windhoek, where they arrived on 24 July, and hence took a train to Swakopmund where they arrived on 30 July. En route, some of Naser’s original group stayed behind, while the rest joined up with other fleeing groups. On that same day, Naser and at least 12 others boarded a German ship. Those with him included OT de Villiers (later the author of *Met De Wet en Steyn in het veld*), Cmdt CJF Botha (a Cape Rebel), the French volunteer Robert de Kersauson de Pennendreff (later the author of *Ek en die Vierkleur*), Cmdt Edwin Conroy, Andries de Wet, Hendrik van Doornik (of whom the latter two, together with GC du Plessis, later co-authored *Die Buren in der Kapkolonie im Kriege mit England*), Gen. Hendrik Lategan, Cmdt Louis Wessels, Gen. Manie Maritz, Field-Cornet Floors Muller (from Naser’s commando), Cornelis Plokhooij (a Dutch volunteer who later wrote *Met den*

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60 Document A, pp. 58-59; Document B, pp. 105-7; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 100-103; A de Wet, H van Doornik and GC du Plessis, *Die Buren in der Kapkolonie ...*, pp. 245-246; R de Kersauson de Pennendreff, *Ek en die Vierkleur* (Johannesburg, Afrikaanse Pers-Boekhandel, s.a.), p. 138.

61 Document A, p. 59; A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 103.

*Mauser: Persoonlijke ervaringen in Den Zuid-Afrikaansche Oorlog*) and Jan van Brummelin (another Dutchman).<sup>62</sup>

They sailed via Victoria in Cameroon (at that stage also a German colony, where they changed ships), Las Palmas (on the Canary Islands), Madeira and Southampton to Hamburg in Germany, where they arrived on 29 August to an enthusiastic welcome. They travelled by train to Berlin, where they hoped to meet the Boer generals Christiaan de Wet, Koos de la Rey and Louis Botha, who had gone to Europe in an effort to raise money for the Afrikaner victims of the war. The generals would only visit Berlin at a later stage, and consequently Nesor and some of those who were with him went to the Netherlands, where Nesor, Botha and Muller in due course rented rooms in Amsterdam. (See Image 4). Nesor paid for his passage to Europe, and for some time also covered other expenses, with money he had confiscated from Jan du Plessis, a Cape loyalist.<sup>63</sup>

Image 4: Japie Nesor (third from the left), together with Dutch friends, after the war in self-imposed exile in the Netherlands



Source: War Museum of the Boer Republics, Bloemfontein.

62 Document A, p. 62; Document B, p. 111; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 103-108; OT de Villiers, *Met De Wet en Steyn ...*, pp. 247-252; A de Wet, H van Doornik and GC du Plessis, *Die Buren in der Kapkolonie ...*, p. 267. Document B, p. 111 also mentions a Browne, who might have been George Brown, a rebel from the Cape Colony town of Aberdeen; or Brown(e) may possibly have been an American. Document B, p. 111 does not provide clarity in this regard.

63 Document A, p. 62; Document B, p. 113; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 108-109; OT de Villiers, *Met De Wet en Steyn ...*, p. 251; A Roodt, *Kaapse rebel*, p. 271; JH Breytenbach (ed.), *Gedenkalbum van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1949), pp. 440-442; GTW Omond, *The Boers in Europe: A sidelight on history* (London, Black, 1903), p. 93 et seq.; Maritz, p. 55.

Neser, Lategan, Conroy, Botha and Muller went to see the three Boer generals in the Hague to ask for financial support, but this request was not granted. Nesar in due course received some money from his parents in the Cape Colony, and later he and Muller paid a visit to Dr WJ Leyds, the ZAR's ambassador extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary in Europe, who agreed to pay Nesar and a few others a certain amount of money on a monthly basis for subsistence. In due course Nesar's companions all returned to South Africa, leaving a very lonely and frustrated Nesar behind. He was also somewhat resentful and embittered, because he believed that the post-war Boer leaders had neglected and basically forgotten the former Cape rebels. After spending approximately 17 months in Europe, Nesar returned to South Africa at the beginning of 1904.<sup>64</sup> In the course of the Anglo-Boer War, Nesar had covered a distance of some 8 000 km, mostly on horseback. After the war, he travelled a further distance of approximately 35 000 km before again setting foot on South African soil.<sup>65</sup>

### **Farmer, and once again a rebel**

By the time Nesar arrived back in South Africa, rebel officers had still not received amnesty. For this reason, and also because of the charges against him with regard to the execution of blacks and coloureds, he could not safely return to the Cape Colony. He therefore went ashore in Durban, travelled by train to the ORC, and went to farm on Driekuil, near Senekal – under the assumed name of Frans Smit. After the Cape parliament granted general amnesty to all rebels on 14 August 1906, Nesar at long last returned to the Cape Colony to farm for two years on Oorlogsfontein in the Victoria West district. He then moved back to the OFS, where he farmed in a number of areas.<sup>66</sup> He married Maria Elizabeth Delpont (1893-10 October 1917), and they had two sons. In due course he was a grandfather to four grandsons and a granddaughter.<sup>67</sup>

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64 Document A, pp. 63-70; Document B, pp.114-124; Document D, p. 40; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 109-118. For Leyd's role abroad in the interest of the Boer cause, see LE van Niekerk, *Kruger se regterhand: 'n Biografie van dr. W.J. Leyds* (Pretoria, Van Schaik,1985), pp. 310-361.

65 A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 10.

66 Document A, pp. 71-76; Document B, pp. 126-137; Document D, p. 40; A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 119-127.

67 Information supplied by JP Nesar (grandson), Brandfort; Master of the Supreme Court, Bloemfontein, estate 534/59: JP Nesar.

Neser was farming on Driehoek in the district of Boshof in the OFS when the Great (First World) War broke out in July 1914. When the South African government of Gen. Louis Botha decided to declare war against Germany and to invade German South West Africa, many former republican officers and burghers objected, and some of them rebelled by taking up arms against the government – in the hope of restoring republican independence.<sup>68</sup> Shortly after news of the planned invasion of German South West Africa surfaced, Neser visited members of the Union Defence Forces (UDF) in the north-western OFS to enquire how they felt about the planned invasion. After visiting the towns of Boshof and Bultfontein, he returned to his farm to be with his wife, who had become seriously ill. He took her to a hospital in Bloemfontein and stayed there for a time.<sup>69</sup>

Thereafter, Neser and a man by the name of Van der Walt went to Dealesville, west of Bloemfontein, where they confiscated arms and ammunition handed in at the local magistrate. Neser and five other men then joined the rebel force of Gen. Christiaan de Wet, who appointed Neser as assistant commandant-general for the Boshof area, and sent him to Hoopstad to recruit men to join the rebels; but no-one responded to Neser's pleas. Neser's small band clashed with government troops at Zandspruit in the OFS, crossed the Vaal River at Leeukrans in the company of the commando led by FGA Wolmarans, and rejoined De Wet's force. They were relentlessly pursued by UDF troops, and on 30 November 1914 De Wet, Neser and the rest of the rebel force surrendered at Waterbury near Vryburg.<sup>70</sup> In June 1915 Neser was sentenced to a term in prison, but after serving only six months, and having been in detention for a total of thirteen months, he was released in December 1915, together with De Wet and others. He went back to his farm, never to return to the public arena.

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68 For more on the causes and course of the rebellion of 1914-1915 see, for example, Union of South Africa, *Report of the select committee on the rebellion* (SC1-'15, Cape Town, Cape Times, Government Printers, 1915); Union of South Africa, *Report on the outbreak of the rebellion and the policy of the government with regard to its suppression* (UG 10-'15 Pretoria, Government Printing and Stationary Office, 1915); Union of South Africa, *Report of the judicial commission of inquiry into causes and circumstances relating to the recent rebellion in South Africa* (UG 46-'16, Cape Town, Cape Times, Government Printers, 1916); Union of South Africa, *Judicial commission of inquiry into the causes and circumstances relating to the recent rebellion in South Africa: Minutes of evidence – December 1916* (UG 42-'16, Cape Town, Cape Times, Government Printers, 1916). See also A Grundlingh and S Swart, *Radelose rebellie? Dinamika van die 1914-1915 Afrikanerrebellie* (Pretoria, Protea Boekhuis, 2009).

69 A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 11.

70 A Wessels (ed.), "Die oorlogsherinneringe ...", *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 11-12; H Oost, *Wie is die skuldige?*, pp. 324-346. See also PJ Sampson, *The capture of De Wet: The South African rebellion 1914* (London, Edward Arnold, 1915); GD Scholtz, *Die rebellie 1914-15* (Johannesburg, Voortrekkerpers, 1942).

After the death of his first wife, Nesor married a Ms Bezuidenhout, in respect of whom no other information could be obtained. This marriage, which was childless, ended in divorce. His third wife was Maria Magdalena (“Dalene”) Joubert (22 March 1887-29 June 1954). No children were born from this marriage. After retiring from farming, Nesor lived in Philippolis and later in Brandfort. He died in Bloemfontein on 30 March 1959 and is buried in Brandfort.<sup>71</sup>

## **Conclusion**

During the Anglo-Boer War, Japie Nesor took up arms against his lawful British/Cape colonial government, and became a rebel in the interest of the republican Afrikaner’s cause. When the Great War broke out in 1914, Nesor once again took up arms for what he believed was in the interest of the republican-minded Afrikaner. One may question the morality of rebellion; but from a military point of view, Nesor was an exceptionally bold fighter who did not shy away from danger. During the Anglo-Boer War, he proved himself to be an excellent commanding officer, who led by example. He was brave, had initiative, knew how to lead and inspire his men on commando, and maintained good discipline in his commando. It is also clear that he correctly identified problems that undermined the Boer war effort, for example certain commanding officers’ lack of initiative, and ill-discipline on commando.

But Nesor’s war record is marred by the fact that in a callous way, he summarily executed black and coloured persons who served on the side of the British. This is a highly controversial matter. According to his reminiscences, he had ordered at least 21 coloureds and six blacks – but probably many more – to be executed.<sup>72</sup> Had he been captured, he would have been convicted of war crimes, and would probably have been executed – as happened to Scheepers. Today, he might even have been labelled a serial killer.

The question of treachery during the Anglo-Boer War was highlighted by Albert Grundlingh in his excellent study of those Boers who surrendered voluntarily and then, in some instances, joined the British forces against

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71 A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, p. 12; information supplied by JP Nesor (grandson), Brandfort.

72 A Wessels (ed.), “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, pp. 75, 86-88, 90.

their former comrades.<sup>73</sup> Recently, Albert Blake has published a fascinating book on the execution of Boer traitors by the republican forces.<sup>74</sup> In terms of the British Cape Colony, Nesor was a traitor, while those white, black and coloured Cape Colonials who served the British cause, were indeed loyal to the British Crown. But when Nesor captured armed black and coloured soldiers, they were summarily executed as if they were traitors relative to the Boer struggle.

AM Davey aptly described Nesor as “a prickly, self-willed man who did not take kindly to constituted authority”; “hot-tempered”, “a tough fighter” and “ruthless”. It is indeed also true that “Nesor’s war, as he recounted it, was fought within limited physical horizons and his vision of it was of the tunnel variety”.<sup>75</sup> Nesor can rightfully be described as “an effective guerrilla commander”. With his arrival in the central part of the Great Karoo, as commander of his own commando, consisting of rebels who knew the area very well, that region indeed “underwent a transformation” – albeit that “the full potential of this area was also never fully realized”, *inter alia* because Nesor did not launch attacks on the strategic main railway line.<sup>76</sup>

Japie Nesor’s war reminiscences are of particular importance. Not many autobiographical sources that deal with the guerrilla phase of the Anglo-Boer War have been published. Nesor takes the reader along with him on commando, gives vivid descriptions of many a clash with the British forces, and also describes several other incidents of note. He describes life on commando, and the guerrilla war in the Cape Colony is dealt with in all its cruel details, including the invidious position in which the local white, black and coloured population found themselves. Nesor met several prominent Boer commanders during or shortly after the war, for example De Wet, Hertzog, Botha, Smuts and De la Rey. In his reminiscences, some new light is shed on the role they played, as well as on the lives of those rebels and others who left South Africa after peace was concluded.

Nesor played no major role in the war effort of the Boers, and no monuments or plaques have been unveiled in his honour, but he did make a noteworthy

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73 A Grundlingh, *Die “hendsoppers” en “joiners”: Die rasional en verskynsel van verraad* (Pretoria, HAUM, 1979; 2nd edition, Pretoria, 1999), and a somewhat expanded English version, *The dynamics of treason: Boer collaboration in the South African War of 1899-1902*, appearing later (Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2006).

74 A Blake, *Boereverraaier: Teregstellings tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2010).

75 See AM Davey’s review of A Wessels (ed.) “Die oorlogsherinneringe ...”, *Christiaan de Wet-annale*, 7, March 1988, in the *South African Historical Journal*, 23, December 1990, p. 265.

76 RJ Constantine, “The guerrilla war in the Cape Colony ...”, p. 175.

albeit small contribution towards the prolonged Boer guerrilla campaign in the Cape Colony – and his reconnaissance trip to Graaff-Reinet is unique. There is no record of any other such trip undertaken by any other Boer or Boer supporter. He moved around a great deal in the course of the war and also after the cessation of hostilities. He met many people, and was thus in a good position to comment on a large variety of matters, such as the limited Boer invasion of the Cape Colony (November 1899-March 1900), the guerrilla war in the Cape Colony (December 1900-May 1902), the way in which the Boers and rebels sometimes dealt with the local black and coloured people of the Cape Colony, and life as an exile in Europe after the war.