

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Voracious Frontier: Policing, War, and Mercantilism in Dutch South Africa, 1652–1830

Paul T. Clarke 

Independent Scholar, USA
Email: pclarke14@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article explores the systems of policing that emerged in the early Cape Colony (1652–1830). Contrary to previous historical scholarship that understood the institution to be largely nonexistent or of marginal importance to the colony's political economic development, this article argues that the Cape colony's systems of policing, which doubled as *ad hoc* military organizations, were not so much weak as privatized. It shows how this persistent tendency was motivated by the Dutch East India Company's desire to maximize profits—though it manifested differently in different parts of the colony. Moreover, this article demonstrates that the mercantile economy that the company installed at the Cape ensured that private policing would become a vehicle of indigenous dispossession. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the field of African carceral studies and understandings of processes of racialization in the early Cape.

Keywords: Southern Africa; South Africa; policing; imperialism; war; slavery; the frontier

The Inception of Policing and the Emergence of the Frontier

On 19 May 1659, Jan van Riebeeck, the governor at the Cape of Good, called an urgent meeting of free burghers and his fellow officials of the Dutch East-India Company (VOC) to discuss “malicious robbing and thieving” they had suffered at the hands of the Goringhaiqua people. In the seven years since the company's arrival at Table Bay, relations with the Khoi had been tolerable, but not warm. When they came to the summer pasturage at Table Bay, the Goringhaiqua would trade away some of their cattle and sheep, but never in large enough quantities. The governor noted with annoyance how the Goringhaiqua grazed their cattle and sheep right up against the wooden walls of the fort and ignored altogether the hedges that encircled the outpost's newly planted gardens. But when van Riebeeck granted freeholds in the Liesbeek Valley to a handful of his former employees in the hopes of increasing the production of produce, the tenor of relations turned. The Goringhaiqua began seizing crops and livestock in a clear attempt to tip the outpost into ruin.

Neither van Riebeeck nor the farmers in the Liesbeek Valley were wholly surprised by this development. For at least two years, the farmers, who had been granted the status of *burghers* (“citizens”), had been going about their duties armed. In recent days, they had petitioned van Riebeeck to sanction their formation into a militia, modeled on those in the VOC's colony at Batavia (present-day Jakarta), a demand that he granted.¹ But even so, the burghers continued to lose their newly gained

¹ Jan van Riebeeck, *Journal of Jan van Riebeeck* 3 (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1952): 35, 38–39, 55.

property—cattle, sheep, tobacco, and even the shares of their plows. As they argued during the 19 May meeting, it was clear that peace and security would only be achieved through war.

The governor, however, was more wary. Any course of action, he cautioned, must be made to “ensure the greatest benefit of the Honorable Company.”² War could disrupt trade, cutting the outpost off from an essential supply of food and resources. Moreover, in war, the burghers might face “greater hardships...than they could think of.”³ After all, the Goringhaiqua leader Doman had been to Batavia and witnessed the people of Java burn the VOC station there to the ground. Should something similar happen to the burghers, the company would not compensate them for their losses nor release them from their debts. He informed them, “Each would have to bear his own burden.”⁴ But despite the governor’s cautions, the freemen were adamant. Van Riebeeck reported the burghers’ words to his superiors in Amsterdam: “They were prepared to face all dangers at their own risk. Indeed, this would be far better than continuing to live in such insecurity.”⁵

With the terms settled, the entire outpost mobilized. Alliances with neighboring Khoi groups were formed and dissolved, the enslaved people who had been recently brought from Angola and Guinea were armed, and the company garrison and burgher militia attacked the Goringhaiqua in a series of clashes that ended with Doman wounded and his people dispossessed. To seal their control over the land, van Riebeeck ordered that an almond hedge be planted in the shape of a wall like those used by the lords of Cologne.⁶ The remnants of the hedge, which briefly marked the colony’s frontier, still survive in Kirstenbosch National Botanic Garden today. The institution founded by van Riebeeck and the burghers would be less enduring. Still, the militia or *commando* system, as it was often later known, would serve as the colony’s primary police force for the next two centuries.

Of all of the early European colonial settlements on the African continent, the Cape Colony has perhaps received the most sustained scholarly attention. Yet despite this wealth of scholarship, little has been written about the systems of policing that operated under Dutch rule. Not a single monograph or article has been dedicated to policing. Where it is mentioned, it appears only in passing. Facing this gap, one is left to conclude that policing either did not exist in the early Cape or that it played a marginal role in the colony’s economic and political development.

Such a view has been—perhaps unintentionally—reinforced by leading historians of the period. In their brief discussions of policing, Shula Marks and Hermann Giliomee emphasized the weakness of the colony’s police apparatus. Marks writes: “The authority of the full-time magistrate or landdrost...was *without adequate police force* and could hardly control the trekboer, who was accustomed...to taking law into his own hands.”⁷ Giliomee echoes the point: “The Company’s authority was further undermined by *the inadequacy of its military and police force*...the landdrost could not remotely claim to monopolise the use of force.”⁸

Though factually accurate, both Marks and Giliomee implicitly hew to a definition of policing that has become outmoded. As historians like Micol Seigel have argued, policing—though often associated with the state—has never been fully monopolized by the state nor done exclusively by its agents.⁹ Indeed, as any number of Africanists have documented, private actors—like for-profit security firms, vigilante groups, and militias—have come to supplement, and in many cases supplant the state’s police

²Ibid., 46–47.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., 185–86.

⁷Emphasis added. Shula Marks, “Khoisan Resistance to the Dutch in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *The Journal of African History* 12, no. 4 (1972): 67.

⁸Emphasis added. Hermann Giliomee, “The Eastern Frontier, 1770–1812,” in *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1820*, eds. Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 428.

⁹Micol Seigel, *Violence Work: State Power and the Limits of Police* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

in much of the continent today.¹⁰ In light of this reality, scholars of policing have abandoned the conventional definition of policing used by Marks and Giliomee and proceeded from the understanding that the practice can and often is carried out by non-state actors.

This article draws on this insight to reframe the historiography of policing in the early Cape Colony. It argues that the systems of policing that developed in the colony under Dutch rule (1652–1806) were not so much weak or incapable as they were intentionally privatized—as evidenced by van Riebeeck's negotiations with the burghers in May 1659.

Beginning with an examination of Dutch imperialism, this article explores how, within the empire, profit-making was inseparable from war-making and how waging war was indistinct from policing. It goes further to show how the VOC's focus on reducing costs at the Cape created a persistent tendency to outsource the risks of war and policing by privatizing the control over legitimate violence in the colony. Privatization manifested differently as the frontier expanded outwards from the company's center of power in Cape Town to its agricultural core around Stellenbosch and Paarl and the pastoral frontier beyond. But in detailing how policing developed differently in these different zones of the colony, I also show how the company's tight control over the market at the Cape ensured that, for most of its subjects, security required domination and survival necessitated ever-escalating dispossession of indigenous land, livestock, and labor. In this sense, policing formed a crucial intermediate mechanism, translating the pressures of mercantile capitalism into a voracious and ever-expanding frontier—one that not only dispossessed indigenous communities but also incorporated them into its structures of domination and accumulation.¹¹

In doing so, I seek to advance the field of African carceral studies, which has been interested in the evolution of police and prisons on the continent. By offering the first account of the systems of policing that developed in Dutch South Africa, I venture into uncharted territory within the subfield. While previous scholarship has focused on the function and evolution of these institutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I show how the oft-noted militarized character of policing in Africa has deep origins.¹² By showing how the commando operated as both a police *and*

¹⁰Jan Beek, Mirco Göpfert, Olly Owen, and Jonny Steinberg, eds., *Police in Africa: The Street Level View* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017); Paul Higate and Mats Utas, *Private Security in Africa: From the Global Assemblage to the Everyday* (London: Zed Books, 2017); David Pratten, ed. "The Politics of Protection: Perspectives on Vigilantism," Special Issue, *Africa* 78, no. 1 (2008).

¹¹The topic of the frontier and its significance in shaping later racial formations has been the subject of intense debate in Southern African historiography. On the one hand, there was an earlier liberal historiography that held that the violence of frontier society provided the germ of what became Southern Africa's Manichean racial order. Later scholarship, spearheaded by Martin Legassick and Robert Ross, argued that the relative power of non-white polities like the Griqua demonstrates that the Manichean racial order that became predominant later simply did not exist on the frontier. While Legassick and Ross are certainly correct on this point, in emphasizing the contrast between the social formations on the frontier and later formations like apartheid, they inadvertently render processes of racialization on the frontier as embryonic—in need of further historical development before becoming systematic. In contrast, I argue that processes of racialization on the frontier were no less mature than they were under apartheid. Rather, the seeming fluidity of racialization was itself a product of the political economy of the Cape, which ensured control over the distribution of violence, and the group-differentiated vulnerability that such violence produced was far less monopolized and thus, able to be claimed by non-white groups. A group's position within the processes of mercantile predation, then, defined how they were positioned within processes of racialization. For example, the Grikas' ability to claim the power granted by the commando allowed them to elevate themselves above the meanest rungs of the Cape's social order. But at the same time, it was their persistent vulnerability to settler raids that marked their position as never fully white. The Grikas' intermediate racial position, then, can be seen not as evidence of the immaturity of processes of racial stratification, but rather that such processes were constituted differently than they were under apartheid. Martin Legassick, "The Frontier Tradition in South African Historiography," in *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa*, eds. Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore (London: Longman, 1980), 44–79; Robert Ross, *Adam Kok's Grikas: A Study in the Development of Stratification in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). See also Howard R. Lamar and Leonard M. Thompson, *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

¹²For work in African carceral studies, see Jocelyn Alexander and Gary Kynoch, eds., "Histories and Legacies of Punishment in Southern Africa," Special Issue, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 37, no. 3 (2011): 395–413; David Anderson and David Killingray, *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority, and Control, 1830–1940* (Manchester: St. Martin's Press, 1991); Florence

military institution, I argue that the militarization of African police forces can be traced to the early mercantile Atlantic, where war was indispensable to the construction and maintenance of empire. More critically, however, I seek to illuminate the tight relationship between policing, mercantilism, and processes of racialization in the early colonial world. By documenting how policing was used to forcibly integrate indigenous wealth, land, and labor into global markets, I show how policing as an engine of domination and dispossession became a primary mechanism through which race—as a group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death—gained everyday force in the early Cape.¹³

One final note on periodization. While I am primarily interested in the forms of policing that emerged under Dutch rule (1652–1806), my analysis extends up to 1830. I adopt this somewhat unconventional periodization for a simple reason that the social and political processes unleashed by the mercantile economy installed by the VOC, which shaped policing and gave rise to the frontier, did not terminate with the beginning of British rule. Indeed, as we will see, these processes continued to have significant effects, especially in the Southern African interior, where British control was either weak or nonexistent well into the nineteenth century.

War and Profit in the Private Empire

As the first conflict between settlers and indigenous people at the Cape, the First Khoikhoi-Dutch War of 1659–60, recounted above, offers a tempting starting point for understanding the society that emerged at the Cape. But the company's early beginnings at the Cape cannot be understood in isolation. If one traces the threads that link the Cape to Cologne, to Batavia and Bantam, Angola and Amsterdam, it becomes clear that war did not erupt spontaneously between the Goringhaidqua and the Dutch. When they arrived at the Cape, the Dutch were already at war.

When the VOC was formed, the Dutch Republic was thirty years into what would be an eighty-year war against the Spanish Habsburg Empire, which had ruled the lowland countries since 1506. When the republic finally won its independence in 1648, war did not cease. Indeed, during the seventeenth century, the republic at some point fought against nearly every major European power, including France, England, and Portugal.

War served to preserve the Netherlands' delicate sovereignty and established the tiny state as a global economic powerhouse. The growing power of the Dutch navy, constituted by the VOC and the Dutch West India Company (WIC), allowed the republic to corner markets across the globe.¹⁴ War was seen as the driving force behind the republic's success. As a 1650 pamphlet addressed to the Dutch people put it: "War, impoverishing all other nations and Empires, has made you rich, has flooded your country with silver and gold, peace makes you poor. War has made all industries and traffics grow and prosper, peace makes them disappear and decay. War has been a bond of union and accord, peace of strife and discord."¹⁵ This tight relationship between war and commerce was a

Bernault, ed., *A History of Confinement in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003); Mathieu Deflem, "Law Enforcement in British Colonial Africa: A Comparative Analysis of Imperial Policing in Nyasaland, the Gold Coast, and Kenya," *Police Studies* 17, no. 1 (1994): 45–68; Marie Muschalek, *Violence as Usual: Policing and the Colonial State in German Southwest Africa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Martin Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹³Here, I draw on Ruth Gilmore's definition of race as the condition of being subject to "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group differentiated vulnerability to premature death." See Ruth Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

¹⁴Marjolein 't Hart, *The Dutch Wars of Independence: Warfare and Commerce in the Netherlands, 1570–1680* (London: Routledge, 2014), 126–47.

¹⁵IPENEYM ΦΙΛΑΛΕΘΥΜ, *De na-wēen van de vrede, ofte ontdeckinghe, vande kommerlijcke ghelegentheyten onses lieven vaderlands* (1650), quoted in Pepijn Brandon, *War, Capital, and the Dutch State, 1588–1795* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 7–8. Such sentiments were not uncommon at the time, and consequently, the notion that war and prosperity were tightly tied together has become broadly accepted within the historiography of the Dutch Republic. For more recent work in this vein, see Brandon, *War, Capital, and the Dutch State*, 7–10; Marjolein 't Hart, *The Dutch Wars*, 165–66; for more classical texts, see Robert Fruin,

general feature of the early mercantile Atlantic. In Vincent Brown's words, it was "imperial militarism [that] made the growth of commerce possible and profitable."¹⁶

Dutch prosperity came at the expense of those it dispossessed. Wars against European rivals aimed at commandeering their colonial possessions; imperial clashes were followed by wars against those whose land, wealth, and people the VOC and WIC sought to plunder. In the seventeenth century, the VOC fought wars against indigenous people in present-day Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, Taiwan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Japan, and South Africa.¹⁷

But even when it secured a foothold, Dutch rule was always tenuous and under threat. The extractive nature of the societies it forged produced new populations of the desperate and disaffected—pirates, bandits, the enslaved, and the otherwise dispossessed—who sought constantly to reverse their position. Under these precarious conditions, any challenge to Dutch rule was tantamount to war. And those institutions that were deployed in war, like the burgher militia, were the same that were deployed to impose order internally, giving them, in the words of historian John Laband, a "quasi-police, quasi-military" quality.¹⁸

Contemporary observers, however, only rarely described these institutions as "police."¹⁹ The modern Dutch word *politie* (Dutch: "police"), at the time, meant something like "administration" or "policy" and was used to describe all manner of governance.²⁰ Within the Dutch Republic, the institution charged with keeping the peace—upon which the burgher militia had been modeled—known as the *schutterij* (Dutch: "shooting guild" or "civic guard") had both civil and military duties. During times of peace, the male citizens who manned its ranks were charged with night patrols of the town's streets, while during times of war, they joined the republic's standing armies on the town's battlements and in the fields on campaigns.²¹ In the colonies where the empire's subjects were yesterday's enemies, the distinction between wartime and peacetime duties broke down entirely, ensuring that what we today would call policing in the early Cape was wholly indistinguishable from war-making.

If the militia was a product of the wars that pervaded the Dutch empire, it was also an artifact of the empire's approach to making war profitable and sustainable. As Pepijin Brandon observes, the Dutch Republic defies familiar narratives about the relationship between war and state formation. Despite fighting several long, globe-spanning wars, the republic did so without a centralized government or extensive bureaucracy. Rather, the Dutch state operated as what Brandon calls "a brokerage and contractor state," outsourcing most of governance to financiers, military recruiters, small-scale producers, shipbuilders, and mega-corporations.²² It was these private enterprises that marshaled the labor, capital, materials, and expertise necessary for the empire to survive and thrive.

The largest of these enterprises—the chartered trading companies like the VOC and WIC—operated abroad as states in their own right. Under Dutch law, the VOC was empowered

Tien Jaren Uit den Tachtigjarigen Oorlog, 1588–1598 (s'Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1906), 199–200; and C. R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600–1800* (New York: Knopf, 1965), 209–240.

¹⁶Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 20. See also John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State, 1688–1783* (New York: Knopf, 1988); Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

¹⁷Indeed, as Pieter C. Emmer and Jos J. L. Gommans note, the VOC was "embroiled in a violent conflict somewhere in its widespread monopoly area almost every year." Pieter C. Emmer and Jos J. L. Gommans, *The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600–1800* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 45.

¹⁸John Laband, *The Land Wars: The Dispossession of the Khoisan and AmaXhosa in the Cape Colony* (Cape Town: Penguin Books, 2020), 61.

¹⁹For notable exception, see Otto Friedrich Mentzel, *A Geographical and Topographical Description of the Cape of Good Hope* 2 (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1921), 86 and 124.

²⁰Emmer and Gommans, *The Dutch Overseas Empire*, 43; see also William Garriott, *Policing and Contemporary Governance: The Anthropology of Police in Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 4–6.

²¹Laura Combie, *Archery and Crossbow Guilds in Medieval Flanders, 1300–1500* (Suffolk, UK: The Boydell Press, 2016), 4, 146.

²²Brandon, *War, Capital, and the Dutch State*, 5. See also Emmer and Gommans, *The Dutch Overseas Empire*, 49.

to coin money, establish colonies, and wage war. But while it outstripped the Dutch state in military power and administrative capacity, VOC's economic interests tied it to the interests of the state. The state often subsidized the mega-corporation in times of financial hardship, and the VOC lent its ships, weapons, and capital to the state in times of war.²³ These sorts of mutually beneficial relationships between the state and its many private contractors formed a web that joined the diverse interests of merchant capital to the interests of the nation, blurring the lines between the two in the process. Contractors controlled their own profits and operations, while the state enjoyed a lower fiscal and administrative burden.²⁴ And while companies and state administrators sometimes argued over taxes and lending terms, the system of public-private partnerships worked well. The wealth from the imperial periphery flowed into Dutch ports. The nation's sovereignty was secure, and its elite became the world's leading capitalist class.

Martial Entrepreneurs on the Imperial Frontier

So, when Jan van Riebeeck granted his former employees land and approved their petition to form a private militia, it was a solution that all involved would have found familiar and favorable. Many of the burghers entered into the company's service in Amsterdam through military recruiters and, as will be seen, had strong incentives to become landowners. The VOC's board of directors—known as the Heren XVII (Dutch: “the seventeen gentlemen”)—certainly would have seen the benefits of turning some of their employees into private contractors.

Indeed, the decision aligned with the company's strategy. Though instrumental to commercial success, the VOC's wars in Southeast Asia were also expensive; the Heren and their shareholders repeatedly objected to the size of military expenditures.²⁵ Since it was impossible to avoid war, VOC administrators sought to reduce its impact on profits. The pressure to keep costs down was particularly acute at the Cape. As the waystation for the company's ships coming and going from the Indian Ocean, the outpost was crucial to trade, but ultimately ancillary to profits. Any investment beyond what was required to refresh ships was better returned to investors or spent elsewhere in the empire—as the Heren XVII often reminded the governor.²⁶

The early outpost's failure to become self-sufficient put van Riebeeck in a bind. Repeated crop failures led the governor to consider taking Khoi livestock by force, writing: “Would it matter so much if one deprived them of some 6 or 8 thousand cattle?”²⁷ Releasing some of his employees from their service did not increase the military or economic power of the outpost, but it did allow the company to shift the costs of war. With each burgher bearing “his own burden,” the governor could redistribute risk, enjoying war's dividends while others paid its costs. In feudal Europe, militias were based on the social contract between lord and peasant; on the edge of the Dutch empire, it became a thoroughly commercial affair—one formed by a consensus about the productivity of mortal risk.

Citizen militias were a common feature of colonial societies; across the Atlantic and Indian Ocean basins, colonial officials offered the castoffs of Europe a similar bargain—expropriated land in exchange for military service.²⁸ But the Cape's ancillary position in the empire ensured that the burgher militia would play a larger role than their counterparts elsewhere. In the wars of dispossession waged against the Cochoqua people in the late 1600s, free burgher militiamen fought alongside

²³Emmer and Gommans, *The Dutch Overseas Empire*, 19 and 34.

²⁴Brandon, *War, Capital, and the Dutch State*, passim.

²⁵Ibid., 107. See also Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire*, 118–19.

²⁶Nigel Worden, Elizabeth van Heyningen, and Vivian Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town: The Making of a City* (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2012), 27.

²⁷Van Riebeeck, *Journal* 1, 116.

²⁸Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 10–38; Brown, *Tacky's Revolt*, 59–62.

company soldiers.²⁹ By 1715, commandos made entirely of burghers were being dispatched.³⁰ By the end of Dutch rule, it was burgher infantry and cavalry, not the garrison, who made up the bulk of the force defending Cape Town against British assault.³¹

The company came to rely more and more on burghers simply because it allowed them to dedicate more men to the East Indies where, in their words, “the preservation of our possessions is of much greater importance than at the Cape.”³² Instructions written for the incoming governor in 1670 encapsulated company policy nicely. It stated: “Our principal force and support in this place should actually consist of burghers and farmers... Your Excellency will need to continue to apply every faculty and effort to increase the number of colonials...so that our garrison may gradually be reduced, but our fortress still defended without concern.”³³ Unlike company employees, burgher militiamen were compensated in expropriated land, not wages, and expected to provide their own uniforms, weapons, horses, and provisions—despite taking time away from their fields and herds.³⁴

What the militia gave the company in profits, the company lost in control. For the more affluent, militia duty offered an opportunity to show off their newly gained status as burghers. Visitors described how burghers on parade “loaded [their uniforms] on each side with coat buttons, pieces of money, and the like” and were “puffed up with pride” in comparison to soldiers in the garrison.³⁵ But for the majority, militia duty was a serious inconvenience and a drain on resources. Many refused to attend. Some destroyed the placards calling them to muster, others ignored them altogether.³⁶ The *landdrost* (Dutch: “VOC district magistrate”) could levy fines for these acts of defiance, but they were often more rumor than substance. Burghers exercised considerable say over when, how, and whom they would serve. As befitting their status as citizens, burghers elected their own leaders, known as *veld-kornets* (Dutch: “field captains”).

While *veld-kornets* had the unilateral power to order a punitive expedition or “commando,” as Susan Newton-King shows, they rarely did so without their men’s consent.³⁷ Because military success depended, in large part, on the number and fortitude of the men involved, commandos’ aims usually aligned nearly with its members’ own self-interest. On the pastoral frontier, where burghers lived more-or-less nomadically, commandos became explicitly entrepreneurial. For reasons discussed below, burghers often refused to go on commando without the promise of cattle, captives, or new pastureland. Far from dutiful subjects, the militia became something beyond the control of officials in Amsterdam or Cape Town. It was a machine of dispossession, expanding the settlement far beyond the modest designs of the company.

²⁹H.C.V. Leibbrandt, *Precis of The Archives of The Cape of Good Hope: Journal 1662–1670* (South Africa: Richards, Government Printers, 1901), 142, 191, 240, 294, 300.

³⁰Petrus Borchers, *An Autobiographical Memoir* (Cape Town: Africana Connoisseurs Press, 1963), 146.

³¹Less than half of those mustered were VOC soldiers—a number that would have been smaller if Graaff-Reinet were not in rebellion. Borchers, *Memoir*, 31.

³²“Despatch from the Chamber (Heren) XVII to Commander Borghorst and Council,” 20 Nov. 1677 in Donald Moodie, *The Record: or a series of official papers relative to the condition and treatment of the native tribes of South Africa 1* (Amsterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1960), 299.

³³Cape Town Archives Repository (KAB), Cape Town, Company Records (C), vol. 2334, Memorandum for Governor Borghorst or his expected successor Pieter Hackius from Commissioner Van der Bronck at Cape, 14 Mar. 1670.

³⁴Anders Sparrman, *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, towards the Antarctic Polar Circle, Round the World and to the Country of the Hottentots and the Caffres, from the Year 1772–1776 1* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1975), 36. See also William Kelleher Storey, *Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 35–36.

³⁵Sparrman noted how many veterans of the Seven Year’s War were among the burgher militia in Cape Town. He writes of the annual burgher parade: “[M]any of them were Europeans, who had served in Germany in the last war, and since that time had been in garrison at the Cape.” *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁶H. C. V. Leibbrandt, *Precis of The Archives of The Cape of Good Hope: Journal 1699–1732* (South Africa: Richards, Government Printers, 1901), 200; Sparrman, *A Voyage 1*, 200.

³⁷Susan Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Eastern Cape Frontier, 1760–1803* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 66.

Labor, Debt, and Discipline from Amsterdam to Cape Town

It was, in no small part, the VOC's dependence on indentured labor that drove these expansionary pressures in the early years of Dutch rule. While men like van Riebeeck were from upper-class families, the majority of the company's employees at the Cape came from the lower rungs of European society. Otto Mentzel, one of the foremost chroniclers of life at the Cape in the eighteenth century, described the typical enlistee as someone "who, through poverty and through the utter absence of all other means of help, is driven to go to Holland, and from there as a soldier to the East."³⁸ Throughout the period of Dutch rule, there was no shortage of men in such dire straits. In the mid-seventeenth century, the Thirty Years' War had wreaked devastation on central Europe. The Thirty Years' War was followed by the Nine Years' War and the War of Spanish Succession. These wars were in turn followed by the Seven Years', French Revolutionary, and Napoleonic wars, each one supplying a new generation of young men with at least some martial experience and little in the way of economic prospects.³⁹ Mentzel who was himself a German-born enlistee, described how such men "forced their way into the service of the company" in the courtyard of Amsterdam's East India House:

As soon as the door is opened all the men who are near enough try to force their way inside, and it frequently happens that men are killed in the crush...The men who are admitted go into the room where enlistment is taking place. There they find a musket lying on the floor; each man in turn has to pick it up and perform certain exercises...to the satisfaction of the Commissioners.⁴⁰

Would-be recruits bribed officials, leaped over the heads of their peers in the crowd, and clung desperately to the façade of the building to secure a place as a soldier of fortune.

These men did all this not just because they were destitute. They were also in debt to Amsterdam's ruthless labor brokers, who waited for the penniless on the outskirts of town. In exchange for a share of their future salary as a soldier for the VOC, these labor brokers offered food and lodging. Originally designed by the company as a way to send remittances to wives and families in Europe, these shares, known as *transportbriefs* (Dutch: "transport letters"), were tradeable. Because the death of the debtor rendered the letter void, labor brokers preferred to sell their *transportbriefs* to "rich capitalists [who] hazard their money on this kind of venture." Since a shipwreck or smallpox outbreak could wipe out an entire portfolio, *transportbriefs* were inherently risky assets to own. But those buyers who could securitize them with less volatile assets stood to make a killing. If the employee served the full five years of their contract, the holder made a 2150 percent return, some 172 guilders on an eight guilders investment.⁴¹ These profits were not without significant cost to the debtor; 172 guilders amounted to a year and a half of wages.

Those recruits who were lucky enough to escape the labor brokers soon found themselves indebted to the VOC. Soldiers' room and board at the Cape was paid out of future wages. Beds, linen, socks, shoes, and replacement uniforms were not provided; all these, too, had to be bought. Nicked, dined, and indebted, company soldiers, Mentzel estimated, lived on less than two stuivers a day (.10 guilder)—an allowance insufficient to buy "a little portion of meat at the meanest eating-houses."⁴²

Poverty drove many to extremes. Many sought to stow away on homebound ships. Some tried to escape overland. Others contemplated suicide. Siegfried Allemann, a friend of Mentzel, at one point became so delirious after days of low rations that he turned his musket on himself, escaping death only when two passing soldiers snatched away his gun. Mutinies, too, were a serious threat; in 1649,

³⁸ O. F. Mentzel, *Life at the Cape in Mid-Eighteenth Century: Being the Biography of Rudolf Siegfried Allemann* (South Africa: Darter Brothers, 1920), 13.

³⁹ Sparrman, *A Voyage* 1, 36–7. See also Emmer and Gommans, *The Dutch Overseas Empire*, 48.

⁴⁰ Mentzel, *Life at the Cape*, 16–17.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 27.

van Riebeeck discovered a plot by a group of soldiers in the garrison to capture the fort, murder its inhabitants, and sail away on the *Erasmus*, a ship at anchor in Table Bay.⁴³

Despite this, the company relied on the garrison to impose order in Cape Town. As the company militia, they manned the fort and guardhouse that stood across the main road into town. There, soldiers recorded and taxed all goods entering the city, ensuring that the company's monopsony—its position as the only buyer for agricultural produce—was unchallenged.⁴⁴ Within the city itself, the company militia patrolled regularly to deter deserters and mutineers. If caught, the militia would hand the culprits over to be imprisoned, tortured, or executed at the town's gallows, whose size and frequency of use shocked even well-traveled visitors like Anders Sparrman.⁴⁵ The company militia was also charged with interrupting the more run-of-the-mill disturbances like theft, gambling, drunkenness, and brawling that often erupted in the town's taverns. In this, they were unreliable. Their miserable lot made them prone to drink and gamble on duty, so much so that the company had to pass a regulation banning soldiers from entering taverns while on watch.

Wary of their soldiers' lack of discipline, the VOC ordered the formation of a burgher night watch, which became known as the *ratelwagt* (Dutch: "rattle-watch"), after the wooden alarms they carried on their rounds. These nightly patrols were charged with investigating fires and thefts, ensuring the city's canals remained clean, and arresting any Khoi or enslaved person on the street after nine o'clock who was found without a lantern to announce their presence.⁴⁶ After 1754, they helped enforce the company's pass laws, which required indentured Khoi and enslaved people to carry letters from their masters permitting them to travel. Until 1722, the *ratelwagt* was made up of both white burghers and freed Black men, when the two were segregated. The new Black militia was prohibited from carrying arms and charged with preventing crimes like arson and the looting of shipwrecks, which were associated with enslaved people. As Robert Ross writes, this was hardly coincidental. It was a clear message that "manumitted slaves had to justify their freedom by combatting the efforts of their former fellows in bondage."⁴⁷

The change spoke to the rising salience of race in a colony that was becoming ever more dependent on slavery. Indeed, enslaved people fast became the main preoccupation of policing in town. In the early days of the settlement, the Heren XVII had been hesitant to allow shipments of enslaved people to the Cape when enslaved labor were more profitably directed elsewhere. But in 1657, the Heren finally relented; and the following year, ships carrying enslaved people from Angola and Guinea were permitted to sell their human cargo to the company and burghers.⁴⁸ By 1731, enslaved people made up more than 40 percent of the colony's population.⁴⁹

As with everything it did, the company sought the most economical way to control enslaved people. In Cape Town and Stellenbosch, the *fiscal*, who was the legal officer in charge of investigations, prosecutions, and punishment, employed convicts, known as *caffers*, to serve as jailors, watchmen, and executioners.⁵⁰ Drawn from the colony's *bandieten* (Dutch: "bandits"), men who had run afoul

⁴³Van Riebeeck, *Journal* 3, 163–71.

⁴⁴In the 1700s, the Company's monopsony operated indirectly by licensing burghers as sole provisioners for the Company and any foreign ships. The effect, however, was the same, exerting downward pressure on prices. See Ross, "The Cape of Good Hope and the World Economy, 1652–1835," in Elphick and Giliomee, *The Shaping of South African Society*, 247.

⁴⁵Sparrman, *A Voyage* 1, 9.

⁴⁶William J. Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* 1 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1822), 22; see also Worden, van Heyningen, and Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town*, 71.

⁴⁷Robert Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony, 1750–1870: A Tragedy of Manners* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.

⁴⁸Van Riebeeck, *Journal* 2, 269.

⁴⁹Worden, van Heyningen, and Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town*, 50.

⁵⁰This title seems to have originated in Batavia where the position of "caffer" was first created. There, it was staffed by deported Africans. These men were likely either named by the local population who saw them as "*kafirs*" or "non-believers" or by the Dutch, using the demonym for Africans from Arabic by way of Portuguese. See G. L. Balk, *Archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Local Institutions in Batavia (Jakarta)* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 67–68. For a history of the demonym,

of the company in other parts of the empire and had been sentenced to hard labor at the Cape, these men were unpaid and lived in the Slave Lodge, where enslaved people owned by the VOC were locked in each night. According to Petrus Borchers, they went about town on regular patrols, clad in gray uniforms and armed with swords and whips.⁵¹ While they worked primarily as overseers for the VOC, they also carried out executions, assisted private slave owners with beatings, and arrested any troublemakers in town, including white burghers.⁵²

The men who worked as *caffers* were reviled, in part, because they confounded the racial hierarchy in the colony. Enslaved people hated them for their brutality, while burghers, too, chafed at the power that they held over them. For some of those men who worked these jobs, these contradictions and the brutalities of the job could be deranging. In 1786, one was driven to insanity and “ran amok,” killing several people on the streets of Cape Town.⁵³ In 1709, another by the name of Jan Roskan opened the doors of the jail he was guarding, and escaped with his charges, before turning himself in for reasons that went unrecorded.⁵⁴ Others were able to turn their position of isolated impunity to their advantage to run prostitution rings and robbery syndicates in Cape Town.⁵⁵ The profits they extracted could be transformed into something like respectability, allowing some to integrate into the city’s free Black community after completing their sentence.⁵⁶

Slavery in the Agricultural Core

The men who worked as *caffers* were not alone in pursuing their own personal fortunes in town. Most of Cape Town was engaged in some form of hustle—licit or illicit. Mentzel wrote, “Every man in the town, be he free burgher, or official, *pasganger* (Dutch: “artisan”) or free worker, yea even a common soldier, is at the same time a huckster and trader.”⁵⁷ Enslaved people caught fish and grew produce to sell on the street. Some burghers set up taverns, while others played on the fluctuations of the city’s commodity market, illicitly buying soap and tobacco from sailors on eastbound ships and reselling to sailors bound for Holland. To scrape together some money for their next meal, drink, or dice game, soldiers trekked around Table Mountain to cut firewood, hunted wild animals for meat, and worked as overseers on burgher farms.⁵⁸ Because of the company’s iron grip on trade at the Cape, these hustles were the only means of profit for those without land or a VOC contract.

For soldiers, hustling offered a cushion against debt and poverty—and, if one was lucky, a head start on life after the VOC. Because promotions were rare and salary increases paltry, most soldiers chose to leave the company at the end of their five-year contract. Few, however, returned home to Europe. Ever cost-conscious, VOC ships charged twenty guilders for return passage. Consequently, ships leaving the Cape carried a third as many passengers as those leaving Holland.⁵⁹ If even they could afford passage, few ex-employees were willing to spend what little they had on a journey that could just as likely see them shipwrecked as safely delivered home. Most preferred to become burghers, increasing the colony’s population in their aspiration.

see Jochen Arndt, “What’s in a Word: Historicizing the Term ‘Caffre’ in European Discourses about Southern Africa between 1500 and 1800,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018): 59–75.

⁵¹ Borchers, *Memoir*, 202; Katherine Elks, “Crime, Community and Police in Cape Town, 1825–1850” (Masters Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1986), 24; Robert Ross, “The Occupations of Slaves in Eighteenth Century Cape Town” (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 1980), 4; see also Robert Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 189–194.

⁵² Mentzel, *Description* 2, 124.

⁵³ H. C. V. Leibbrandt, *Precis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope: Memorials 1715–1806* 1 (Cape Town: Richards, Government Printers, 1905), 20–21.

⁵⁴ Leibbrandt, *Precis: Journals 1699–1732*, 1–2, 200.

⁵⁵ Ross, “The Occupations of Slaves,” 5.

⁵⁶ Worden, van Heyningen, and Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town*, 61.

⁵⁷ Mentzel, *Description* 2, 75.

⁵⁸ Mentzel, *Life at the Cape*, 46; Mentzel, *Description* 2, 78.

⁵⁹ Mentzel, *Life at the Cape*, 26.

Those who had worked as overseers for burghers or seen the farms of the agricultural core that surrounded Cape Town knew the kind of comfortable life they could secure at the Cape. After the lean years of the early outpost, many burgher landowners became rich, some fabulously so. “Many Boers,” Mentzel noted, “possess two hundred or three hundred oxen, one hundred, one hundred-and-fifty or more cows, two thousand to three thousand sheep, forty or fifty horses, twenty, thirty, or more bond slaves, and a large estate.”⁶⁰ Many former soldiers leveraged burgher status to great success. Siegfried Allemann, the aforementioned soldier who nearly committed suicide, used the social connections he made as an overseer on a burgher plantation to marry rich. Henning Hüsing, another former VOC soldier and overseer, came to own the winery Meerlust, eventually becoming the colony’s wealthiest citizen.⁶¹

The wealth of the emerging burgher gentry was built on slavery. While the Heren XVII still balked at re-directing their own slave ships to the Cape, their decision to allow non-VOC slave ships to sell at the Cape allowed slavery to flourish—especially in the rich, arable land around Cape Town, Stellenbosch, and Paarl. Despite the artificially low fixed prices set by the company for agricultural produce, slavery at the Cape was immensely profitable. As Nigel Worden estimates, “arable slave production [in the Cape] produced profits comparable to, and possibly even exceeding, those calculated for the British Caribbean or the southern United States.”⁶² The profitability of slavery fed a persistent demand for land and enslaved people. Mentzel observed, “The expansion of the colony demands an ever increasing number of slaves. Every farmer requires many more slaves than members of his own household to grow his crops and develop his land.”⁶³

While the VOC benefited immensely from the abundant wheat, wine, fruit, and meat grown by burgher plantations, the company expected the burghers to supply the violence necessary for production. Burghers were then responsible for instilling terror in those they enslaved. As masters, they were empowered to beat enslaved people for refusing to work, show proper deference, or otherwise submit to their whims. Because they were often outnumbered by those they enslaved, burghers hired overseers or *knechts* (Dutch: “male servant/mercenary”) who were invested with their patriarchal authority as master. As one *knecht* who worked at a plantation near Babylonstoren put it: “I am here in the place of a master to them and am obliged to punish them whenever they behave ill to me or to each other.”⁶⁴ Towards the latter half of the eighteenth century, *mandooers* (Malay: “overseer or slavedriver”) who were themselves enslaved, came to replace white overseers, though they were not permitted to use *sjamboks*, horse whips made of hippo leather.⁶⁵

In theory, masters and their agents were restricted in the violence they could use against enslaved people. Under Roman-Dutch law, enslaved people could not be tortured, killed, or otherwise mistreated without cause. But in practice, these restrictions carried little force. Because it was the landdrost who was charged to be “judge between master and slave,” slave owners who violated the law were rarely prosecuted.⁶⁶ The landdrost had little in the way of investigative capacity, and often

⁶⁰Ibid., 39. Not all were well-off, but the comforts enjoyed by the burgher gentry were much commented on. Sparrman wrote, “[T]hough [Boers] do not, indeed, differ in rank from our Swedish peasants...they are however for the most part extremely wealthy.” Sparrman, *A Voyage* 1, 36; see also Leonard Guelke and Robert Shell, “An Early Colonial Landed Gentry: Land and Wealth in the Cape Colony 1682–1731,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 9, no. 3 (1983): 277–80; Wayne Dooling, *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule in South Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007), 16–57.

⁶¹Mentzel, *Life at the Cape*, 72; Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People* (Cape Town: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 24–25.

⁶²Nigel Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 65. Plantation profitability was supported in no small part by Khoi who began to work for pay in kind as their communities collapsed. See Johan Fourie and Erik Green, “The Missing People: Accounting for the Productivity of Indigenous Populations in Cape Colonial History,” *The Journal of African History* 56, no. 2 (2015): 195–215.

⁶³Mentzel, *Description* 2, 126.

⁶⁴Sparrman, *A Voyage* 1, 53.

⁶⁵Burchell, *Travels* 1, 86. See also Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 10–24, 180–85.

⁶⁶Borcherds, *Memoir*, 185–86.

less inclination to use it. After all, he was often a wealthy slave owner himself, and more inclined to help his peers cover up their brutalities than punish them.

More commonly, state agents worked in concert with slave owners. Fiscals ordered the men who worked as caffers to assist burghers with floggings, landdrosts used the company's jail to imprison "unruly" slaves, and veld-kornets called commandos to retrieve runaways and suppress rebellions. With the passage of the aforementioned pass laws, responsibility for repression was further distributed to citizens who were empowered to apprehend and shoot any enslaved or Khoi person found without a pass.⁶⁷

Slave owners' extreme brutality was, in part, a measure of the fear they felt regarding those they enslaved. Anders Sparrman observed of Stellenbosch: "Everybody in this country is obliged to bolt the door of his chamber at night, and keep loaded firearms by him, for fear of the revengeful disposition of his slaves."⁶⁸ To Sparrman, slave owners' restless nights were a sign of their unconscious guilt. But the records of the colony show slave owners' fear was not misplaced. Enslaved people were persistent in fighting the conditions of bondage. They refused to work; broke tools; ran away; stole food, alcohol, and money; set fire to farms and homes; killed livestock; beat *knechts*; poisoned and killed their owners; and took their own lives.⁶⁹ It was enslaved people who, day after day, appeared on Cape Town's gallows, as the governors' journals attest. If empire made war a general condition of life, then slavery brought war into the household itself, bottling its violence into the close air of burghers' homes.

Because of the speed of commandos, the war in the household rarely exploded into full-scale insurrection. But enslaved people who ran away waged what amounted to a low-level guerilla war throughout the eighteenth century. Burghers lived in "continual dread" of these runaways, who were known as drosters (Dutch: "those who have absconded").⁷⁰ Droster communities were agile survivors, living in the caves and gullies of the Cape Fold Mountains, foraging for food and infiltrating the colony to steal weapons and other supplies.⁷¹ In the 1730s, drosters were suspected of setting fire to homes in Cape Town. In 1760, droster attacks led to a ban on enslaved people climbing Table Mountain. Throughout the eighteenth century, raids in Stellenbosch and Swellendam by drosters who joined with the Guriqua—a Khoi people who lived north of Table Bay—triggered repeated commandos.⁷² Indeed, it was fear of drosters that precipitated the passage of the pass laws and made running away the most frequently punished crime in nearly every district of the colony.⁷³ But despite these efforts, droster communities, Robert Ross shows, survived until emancipation.⁷⁴ Among them was the Guriqua, who eventually became the most feared military force on the colony's northern frontier.

Commandos on the Pastoral Edge

Ironically, it was the profitability of slavery that allowed drosters to evade capture for so long. A range of geographic and economic factors ensured that the agricultural areas that surrounded Cape Town,

⁶⁷Burchell, *Travels* 1, 4. The pass laws were first imposed on enslaved people in 1708 and expanded to Khoi people in the 1790s, see André Du Toit and Hermann Giliomee, *Afrikaner Political Thought: Analysis and Documents* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1983), 45.

⁶⁸Sparrman, *A Voyage* 1, 53.

⁶⁹Leibbrandt, *Precis: Journal 1699–1732*, 1–2, 64, 67–68, 77, 92, 189, 199, 255, 260, 262, 266, 271–72, 278–79, 286; Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, 130–37.

⁷⁰Leibbrandt, *Precis: Journal 1699–1732*, 1–2, 411.

⁷¹Sparrman, *A Voyage* 1, 26, 52–53; see also Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa* (Boston: Routledge, 1983), 54–72.

⁷²Leibbrandt, *Precis: Journal 1699–1732*, 1–2, 56, 200, 272–73, 303–4, 329; Borchers, *Memoir*, 147–48.

⁷³These statistics are from 1818–23. While categorization was inconsistent, punishments for running away almost always topped the list in every district. George McCall Theal, *Records of the Cape Colony* 33 (London: Printed for the Government of the Cape Colony, 1905), 326–39.

⁷⁴Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 41, 70–71.

Stellenbosch, and Paarl were thinly populated with burghers. Limited arable land, the high costs for purchasing enslaved people, and the company's fixed price for produce gave the wealthier slave owners an advantage over their less fortunate peers.⁷⁵ These lucky few plowed their profits into more and more land, expanding their property into expansive states and, in the process, opening wide corridors for drosters to travel and maneuver.

Consolidation of land ownership jeopardized not only the colony's security but also its economic stability. According to Leonard Guelke and Richard Shell, by 1705, the landed gentry made up only 7 percent of the free population, while 40 percent of burgher households reported no assets at all.⁷⁶ By 1715, much of the arable land within a day's ride of Cape Town had been occupied; by 1751, the districts surrounding Stellenbosch and Paarl were beginning to run short of pasturage; by 1775, officials judged arable land in the districts to be entirely settled or exhausted.⁷⁷ Land expropriation had been extensive, but it was not enough when so few owned so much and so many so little.

Slavery had once offered a path to affluence for the landless, but by the mid-eighteenth century, it had become an obstacle to the aspirations of the crush of ex-soldiers, landless burghers, and disinherited sons at the Cape. Undercut by slaves in the labor market and outbid by the gentry for property, many found themselves living off alms or credit.⁷⁸ This mounting crisis forced the VOC to rescind its ban on grazing stock more than a day's ride from one's freehold and allowed burghers to lease "loan farms" in the land over the Cape Fold Mountains. Owning land was preferable to leasing it, but leased land offered a chance at a livelihood—and perhaps as importantly, a wife. The VOC's recruitment strategy ensured men outnumbered women for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With suitable partners in short supply, some 35 percent of men in the colony never married. But men on the frontier did better than those elsewhere; frontiersmen were more likely to marry and to marry young.⁷⁹

The loan farm system was designed as a release valve for the desires of the colony's young men and the expansionary pressures they embodied.⁸⁰ In practice, however, it acted as an accelerant for those pressures. Unlike the agricultural core, the land beyond the mountains was dry and better suited to raising livestock. Because they were renters, burghers worked to grow their herds rather than improve their plots. With little invested in any one piece of land, burghers in the arid interior lost nothing when the soil was exhausted. They could simply load up their wagons and trek to pristine pastures.⁸¹

For these *trekboers* (Dutch: "nomadic pastoral farmers," lit. "pull-farmers"), as they became known, overstocking was as much a matter of survival as enrichment. Many were in deep debt. Distant though they were from Cape Town, they could not escape the gravitational pull of the city's markets, where they sold their livestock at a fixed price and bought essential goods like clothing, guns, ammunition, and wagons at a premium.⁸² According to one merchant in the eastern Cape, nearly every farmer in the district was "deeply in debt," some to the tune of 6,000 rixdollars—250 times the annual rent for a loan farm.⁸³ Debt necessitated overgrazing, and overgrazing required an endless supply of fresh

⁷⁵ Leonard Guelke and Robert Shell, "Landed Gentry," 276–77; Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, 77–78.

⁷⁶ Guelke and Shell, "Landed Gentry," 270; Johan Fourie and Dieter von Fintel, "A History with Evidence: Income Inequality in the Early Dutch Cape Colony," *Economic History of Developing Regions* 26, no. 1 (2011): 16–48.

⁷⁷ Guelke and Shell, "Landed Gentry," 273; Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, 20.

⁷⁸ Robert Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 19.

⁷⁹ Leonard Guelke, "The Anatomy of a Colonial Settler Population," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21, no. 3 (1988): 462–63.

⁸⁰ Nigel Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist and Khoisan on the Cape's Northern Frontier in the 18th Century* (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), 16–18, 44.

⁸¹ Hermann Giliomee, "Processes in the Development of the Southern African Frontier," in Lamar and Thompson, *The Frontier in History*, 97.

⁸² Sparrman, *A Voyage* 1, 263.

⁸³ Indebtedness was widespread though it was not equally onerous. Landed burghers often used debt for long-term investments, while those without property, particularly on the frontier, often complained of being "loaded with debt." Borchers, *Memoir*, 148; John Barrow, *An Account of Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798* 1 (London:

pastures. For their part, burghers recognized that this process was rooted in the peculiar market at the Cape—though they apportioned more blame to the company's monopsony than to the plantation economy. In 1779, a group of burghers complained to the VOC that “this defective condition [of the company's monopsony] has brought about a situation in which many colonists who are not able to subsist on arable farming have had to trek over the mountains.”⁸⁴

In this way, the loan farm system took the internal contradictions of the colony's economy and transformed them into a centrifugal process of land dispossession. By 1720, settlers had dispossessed the Cochoqua, Guriqua, Chainouqua, and San communities who lived south of the Olifants River and east of the Breede River. By 1750, they had taken the land of the Hessequa, Gouriqua, Attaqua, Gamtoos, and Little Namaqua people who lived south and west of the Gamtoos and Buffels rivers. By 1778, trekboers had reached the westernmost Xhosa polities who lived along the Bushmans River, some 700km east of van Riebeeck's almond hedge.⁸⁵

Trekboer militias and the commandos they organized were essential to this process of dispossession. Tight connections with the market at the Cape gave trekboers a sharp military advantage over the Khoi, San, and Xhosa communities on the frontier.⁸⁶ As Martin Legassick shows, while indigenous peoples quickly adopted commandos' hit-and-run tactics, they could not access the same supply of horses, guns, and ammunition from the Cape.⁸⁷ As trekboers moved further away from Cape Town, the commando became the central institution of settler life, suffusing the everyday with anticipation of war. Trekboers lived in a constant state of fear and readiness—not unlike slave owners in the agricultural core. A traveler to the mountains near Graaff-Reinet wrote, “An inhabitant of Sneuberg not only lives under the continual apprehension of losing his property but also is perpetually exposed to the danger of being put to death. If he has occasion to go to the distance of 500 yards from the house, he is under the necessity of carrying a musket. He can neither plough, nor sow, nor reap, without being under arms.”⁸⁸

Company officials attempted to constrain the pace of land dispossession, fearing it would destabilize the colony. But trekboers argued that their commandos were necessary for the security of their households, property, and the colony at large.⁸⁹ However, it is clear that commandos were used not only to defend settlers' ill-gotten gains. Commandos were often used offensively to release new pastures, and to capture livestock and captives. For example, the first commando sent against Xhosa communities gathered some 2000 cattle and 2500 sheep, which by custom were divided among commando members.⁹⁰

Trekboers in Graaff-Reinet, according to the British traveler John Barrow, used commandos as *de facto* slaving expeditions in their efforts to “extirpate” the San communities they had displaced.⁹¹ San women and children were captured *en masse* and sold westwards to the plantations where demand for unfree labor was high. Others were “apprenticed”—forcibly indentured—to trekboer households, where they were forced to work herding livestock or manufacturing soap.⁹² Soap, unlike cattle, could be sold quite profitably at the Cape, and, as Elizabeth Eldredge shows, it was, in part, the VOC's

Cadell and Davies, 1801), 51; Johan Fourie and Christie Swanepoel, “‘Impending Ruin’ or ‘Remarkable Wealth’? The Role of Private Credit Markets in the 18th-Century Cape Colony,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 44, no. 1 (2018): 7–25.

⁸⁴“The Burgher Petition to the Dutch Chamber of Seventeen,” 9 Oct. 1779, in Du Toit & Giliomee, *Afrikaner Political Thought*, 40.

⁸⁵Laband, *The Land Wars*, xii.

⁸⁶Sparrman, *A Voyage* 2, 143.

⁸⁷Legassick, *The Politics of a South African Frontier: The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana, and the Missionaries, 1780–1840* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2010), 44.

⁸⁸Quoted in Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners*, 62.

⁸⁹Theal, *Records* 4, 297–98.

⁹⁰Laband, *The Land Wars*, 72.

⁹¹John Barrow, *An Account* 1, 274; Sparrman, *A Voyage* 2, 142–43; Donald Moodie, *The Record* 3, no. 1, 29, 35–38; See also Newton-King, *Masters and Servants*.

⁹²This practice of forcible apprenticeship became known as the *inboekelinge* system. Barrow, *An Account* 1, 163.

monopsony that drove what amounted to an internal slave trade—one prohibited *de jure*, but licit *de facto*.⁹³ Initially focused on Khoi and San communities in the north, commandos raided indigenous communities across the interior of Southern Africa especially after the British banned the maritime slave trade.

Veld-kornets became crucial brokers in the internal slave trade. As commando leaders, they decided how captives were distributed.⁹⁴ At times, burghers often begged commando leaders to supply them. One burgher sent his Khoi servant on commando with this message for his *veld-kornet*: “I have desired my Hottentot to catch a little one for me, and I beg of you that if he gets one, he may be allowed to keep it.”⁹⁵ For others, the ability to take captives became their condition for joining commandos; during the Anglo-Xhosa wars, some trekboers would only join British-led expeditions if they were promised its captives as servants.⁹⁶ The commando, in short, became an engine of theft— theft of land, livestock, and people. Through violence, it reopened a path for accumulation that the inequalities of the mercantile economy had closed.

The commando’s transformation from a technique of imperial cost-cutting into a machine of settler accumulation had a devastating impact on indigenous communities. Wars reverberated deep into the interior of Southern Africa, as communities close to the frontier staged raids on those farther away to replace the land and livestock lost to white settlers. Constant war deprived Khoi and San peoples of the most basic means of collective social reproduction. Most crucial among these was water. As Leonard Guelke and Robert Shell argue, settlers’ expropriation of the springs and streams of the interior caused many Khoi and San communities to simply disintegrate.⁹⁷ Some fled north and east to integrate into Bantu-speaking communities, while others were forced south and west, where they sought work on burgher farms.

Most were indentured and treated little better than enslaved people, but some were integrated into the machinery of the commando. The company had long permitted burghers to evade militia service by sending a servant in their place.⁹⁸ These men, known as *agterryers* (Dutch: “after-riders”), were charged with cooking, tending to the wagons and the wounded, minding any plundered livestock, and reconnaissance.⁹⁹ As indigenous societies collapsed, men of Khoi heritage came to make up the bulk of the commando and did much of the fighting.¹⁰⁰ As a racial underclass within the commando, they served as shock troops, fighting in positions where the likelihood of death was highest. As H.C.D. Maynier, the landdrost of Graaff-Reinet, noted: “I have always found that when there were not a considerable number of Hottentots with them to be placed in the front and the first to be exposed to danger, [commandos] never succeeded.”¹⁰¹ Fear of conscription caused many Khoi to flee the colony, but for some, the risks of war had dividends. Members of the commando were entitled to some of the plunder, albeit a lesser share than burghers.¹⁰²

Even those frontier communities that remained intact could not avoid becoming imbricated in the circuits of war and dispossession. In 1820, Gontsi, a Rolong chief living some 1300km northeast of Cape Town near Mahikeng, reportedly told the missionary John Campbell that “he had been on

⁹³Elizabeth A. Eldredge, “Slave Raiding across the Cape Frontier” in *Slavery in South Africa: Captive Labor on the Dutch Frontier*, eds. Elizabeth A. Eldredge and Fred Morton (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), *passim*.

⁹⁴Ibid., 100–101.

⁹⁵Moodie, *The Record* 3, no. 1, 104.

⁹⁶Barrow, *An Account*, 291.

⁹⁷Leonard Guelke and Robert Shell, “Landscape of Conquest: Frontier Water Alienation and Khoikhoi Strategies of Survival, 1652–1780,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18, no. 4 (1992): 803–24.

⁹⁸Moodie, *The Record* 3, no. 1, 104.

⁹⁹Barrow, *An Account* 1, 254, 269–70; Theal, *Records of the Cape Colony* 4, 306.

¹⁰⁰Moodie, *The Record* 3, no. 1, 26–27.

¹⁰¹Theal, *Records* 4, 306.

¹⁰²Ibid., 286.

commandoes [sic] all his life.”¹⁰³ Campbell, who visited the area before the so-called Difaqane, noted how war had penetrated deeply into Rolong life, defining how men told their own life stories. In another interview with another man, Campbell wrote: “Commandoes, or plundering expeditions, being the greatest events which happen in the interior countries of Africa, they are generally the first thing noticed in the life of a South African; of course, in relating his life, he began telling us of the first commando in which he had been engaged.”¹⁰⁴ Because missionaries often served as informal agents of the Cape government, war stories like the one above also served as oblique appeals for ammunition, which Rolong needed to defend themselves from their neighbors, the Griqua.

The aforementioned Griqua were a Khoi people who originated from the coast area north of Table Bay between present-day Malmesburg and the Olifants River. As they fought and subsequently fled advancing settlement, they absorbed others who were fleeing the depredations of the colony—mostly drosters but also company soldiers who deserted.¹⁰⁵ As the frontier marched northwards, the Griqua, as they came to be known, found themselves subject to the pass laws, cattle raids, and conscription.¹⁰⁶ Seeking autonomy, they moved east into the dry areas across the Gariep (Orange or Senqu) River where, as Legassick shows, they formed independent states. However, even across the Gariep, they were not immune to commando raids. Sovereignty on the voracious frontier required ammunition. And ammunition which was tightly controlled by the company could only be bought with cattle, ivory, captives, or credit.¹⁰⁷ As they militarized, the Griqua—alongside related groups like the Koranna—became key players in the internal slave trade and gained a fearsome reputation.¹⁰⁸ Thomas Arbousset and Francois Daumas, who were on missions in the area, wrote of the Griqua: “From the time of their emigration to the banks of the Gariep, no tribe in the neighbourhood has enjoyed a moment of repose. Furnished with firearms and mounted on good horses, they have pillaged all of the tribes around them in quick succession... Their chiefs have filled all their neighbours with terror. They speak of them as *wolves*.”¹⁰⁹

In the eyes of Arbousset and Daumas, Griqua peoples’ investment in war was a sign of their need for Christ’s salvation. Only through “Christianity and civilization” could they hope to abandon their odious notion that “a horse and gun” made one rich. In their writings, however, the missionaries also noted how men in Griqualand often complained of their “debts and loans,” briefly illuminating the momentum of the market that made war their hosts’ means of survival.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the Griqua who were both Khoi and commando, slave traders and drosters knew imperial “civilization” better than most.

Race and Dispossession on the Voracious Frontier

From where they stood at the northern extreme of the colony’s frontier, the Griqua represented a certain endpoint for the processes unleashed by mercantile extraction. As seen above, the *modus operandi* of the Dutch empire produced a situation at the Cape where policing and war-making tended

¹⁰³ John Campbell, *Travels in South Africa: Being a Narrative of a Second Journey in the Interior of That Country* 1 (London: London Missionary Society, 1822), 303.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁰⁵ Burchell, *Travels*, 248, 497–98; Martin Legassick, *South African Frontier*, 52–58.

¹⁰⁶ Legassick, *South African Frontier*, 53, 58–60.

¹⁰⁷ Martin Legassick, “The Northern Frontier c. 1840: The Rise and Decline of the Griqua People,” in Elphick and Giliomee, *The Shaping of South African Society*, 372.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Arbousset and Francois Daumas, *Narrative of an Exploratory Tour to the North-East of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope* (London: George & Robert King, 1852), 280, 301–2, 327. See also Nigel Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier*; Robert Ross, *Adam Kok’s Grikwas*.

¹⁰⁹ Hyenas were often described as “wolves” by Europeans. Arbousset and Daumas, *Narrative*, 52. See also Margaret Kinsman, “‘Hungry Wolves’: The Impact of Violence on Rolong Life, 1823–1836,” in *Mfecane Aftermath* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 1995), 363–94.

¹¹⁰ Arbousset and Daumas, *Narrative*, 31 and 42.

to be privatized—becoming available for a wide range of people and political units, all of whom used violence towards their own ends. The challenge for state actors lay not so much in imposing their political will on these martial entrepreneurs, but by hinging their accumulation to the empire's through relations of economic dependence—the labor contract, debt, the land lease, the monopsony on produce, the monopoly on ammunition. By and large, this strategy worked well. Emanating outwards from Amsterdam to Cape Town and from the Cape to the agricultural core, the pastoral edge, and beyond, these relations of dependence ensured that the market moved the commando, and the commando fed the market.

But at the same time, these relations of dependence produced unstable contradictions. Insofar as mercantile capital required artificially cheap produce and labor, it generated a political economy that was profoundly unequal, even for settlers. The colony had a surplus of men, whose economic survival was continually under threat, and whose aspirations it could only displace to the frontier. However, because this frontier was outside of the formal political control of the company, but not beyond the reach of its markets, individual accumulation required dispossession of indigenous land, livestock, and labor.

In the process, war and policing became central to the incipient processes of racialization in the colony. As the indigenous societies came under the onslaught and the deprivation, enslavement, and extermination the onslaught brought, they became systematically vulnerable to the forms of premature death that is the hallmark of racialization. It was a process that even those relatively powerful polities like the Griqua could not escape. Enveloped by the colony's circuits of debt and plunder but deprived of the easy ammunition that was the cornerstone of burgher privilege, the Griqua had no choice but to risk their lives in war, joining the voracious frontier that had once dispossessed them.

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