

The Border of the South African Empire

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The paper seeks to contribute to a discussion on the idea of the South African empire by focusing on one of its main borders, the so-called Red Line. This inner-Namibian border, separating northern and central Namibia, developed from a mainly imagined boundary at the beginning of South Africa's colonial rule to a thoroughly fenced-in defence line half a century later. The border functioned as a veterinary and settlement border and as such was meant to control the movement of people, stock, and goods. Policing thus fundamentally defined the border practice long before the border was definitely turned into a military border when the Namibian war of liberation started in 1966. The history of this inner-Namibian border reflects a process of slow but steady spatial and ideological separation of territories, people, stock and minds. Due to its specific characteristics the Red Line does not entirely fit into the classical frontier-boundary dichotomy, as this paper argues. Instead the concept of the imperial 'barbarian border' ('Barbarengrenze') proves to be more fruitful for an interpretation of the history of a border which cannot be framed in terms of the closing of a frontier and the establishment of a fixed boundary alone. An understanding of the Red Line as an African example of an imperial 'barbarian border' leads to the question of which empire had in fact to be protected against which 'barbarians'. Thus, the history of the Red Line becomes, approached in a regional perspective, the history of South African imperialism.