

Review the boer war history essay



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The Boer War of 1899 was a dirty little conflict. It started as a result of cultural resentment between the Boers (Dutch settlers) and immigrating British. At first, the war was fought with the honor typically associated with the British, but, in the end, it turned nasty. South Africa's Cape of Good Hope was colonized in the 17th century by Dutch Boers (farmers). The Boers used African slaves on their farms. Britain occupied the Cape during the Napoleonic wars and took complete control after the Congress of Vienna. Slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833. Many of the Boers then decided that they could no longer live under British rule. They began moving northward and soon established two independent republics the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. There was peace between British and Boers until the Boer republics were found to be rich in diamonds and gold. Fortune hunters, mostly British, poured in to stake claims. The Dutch farmers called these people uitlanders (outlanders) and bitterly resented their intrusion. In 1895 the outlanders in the Transvaal planned a revolt against the Boer government. The British Empire, seeing their subjects mistreated, decided to get involved. Leander Jameson, with a small British force, invaded the Transvaal to aid the uprising. The Jameson raid was a total failure. The angered Boers, led by their president, Paul Kruger, began to arm themselves.

Militarily, the conflict between Boer and British forces can be divided into two phases: first, a period of Boer commando successes, quickly reversed after the arrival of the main British force in January 1900, which captured the republican capitals between March and June. Then came a guerrilla phase when the Boer forces regrouped after the fall of Pretoria and carried on the

conflict for two years before reluctantly accepting peace terms from the British in May 1902 in the Treaty of Pretoria. Though often called a 'white man's war', this conflict involved the entire population of South Africa in one way or another. Boer women and children who were evicted from farms or villages put to the torch by the British, were either sent to concentration camps where many died from disease, or went to endure the exposure of commando life in the field. African ex-miners and farm laborers were also concentrated in camps, and drawn into labor tasks by the British Army. Boers raided the African reserves for food. Africans reasserted control over land and livestock previously taken by Boers, and on rare occasions attacked Boer commandos. Martial law was proclaimed step by step across the whole region, and the movements of people were drastically restricted. For African scouts on the British side, or Boers caught in captured British uniforms, punishments were swift and final, while of the 10 000 Cape Afrikaner rebels convicted of treason, a small proportion of those sentenced to death by military courts were indeed shot.

Under Gruger*s Republic, Natal and the Cape, two of Britain's colonies, were invaded in October 1899 by the Boers. They besieged a British force at Ladysmith. Other troops were pinned down at Kimberley and Mafeking. The second war, which lasted until 1902, was underway. Between September 1900 and the peace of Pretoria in May 1902, Boer commandos fought a prolonged guerrilla war against the British, who responded by putting Boer civilians in concentration camps. Then reinforcements came to the British from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In March 1900 Frederick Sleigh Roberts, the British commander who had been the hero of the Indian mutiny,

captured Bloemfontein, capital of the Orange Free State. In June British forces reached Pretoria, capital of the Transvaal. The greatly outnumbered Boers continued to fight under Louis Botha, Christiaan de Wet, and Jan Smuts. Herbert Kitchener, the new British commander in chief, then decided and eventually proceeded to bring the war to an end. He advanced slowly, burning farms and establishing concentration camps for Boer civilians. The camps had a high death rate, due largely to lack of medical services.

The Treaty of Pretoria (May 31, 1902) ended the war. The Transvaal and the Orange Free State became British colonies. Both Dutch and English were made official languages. Britain then began to restore the devastated farms of the Boers. The Union of South Africa was established as a self-governing dominion in 1910. The Transvaal and the Orange Free State became provinces of the Union. The first prime minister was the Boer general Louis Botha. Having lost the war, the Boers, however, won the peace. British pro-Boers had undermined the moral complacency of the victors, who decided to grant generous terms to the Boers, in order to ensure an enduring influence in southern Africa. This was largely at the expense of Africans (who were excluded from political power and forced to give back much land retaken from Boers during the war years). Britain implemented this decision from 1906 to 1907, by granting constitutions which gave Afrikaners political of both ex-republics – with perhaps more generosity than was intended. But they did not object in 1909 when the South African National Convention opted for a constitution which ensured the retention of political power in white (predominantly Afrikaner) hands.

The first attempted use of wireless telegraphy in war took place during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, according to a paper to be presented by Brian Austin, University of Liverpool in England, at the conference “ 100 Years of Radio” sponsored by the IEE in London Sept. 5-7. His account details the early efforts by the British Army and Navy to use the new technology, which had been demonstrated by Guglielmo Marconi in 1896. The State Archives, located here, record that the Kruger’s Boer Republic placed an order for six wireless telegraphy sets from the firm Siemens and Halske on Aug. 24, 1899. The sets, which cost 110 Pounds Sterling, were supposed to provide communication for the fortifications around Pretoria. They had a guaranteed range of nearly 15 kilometers and used antennas 36 meters high. However, the sets never reached Kruger’s forces because they were confiscated by customs in Cape Town. Later, British forces tried unsuccessfully to use the equipment supplied by Marconi on the arid inland plains of South Africa, possibly plagued by ground conductivity and the lack of matching resonances of the essentially quarter-wave antennas. The British Navy had more luck after installing five of the sets the army rejected in the Delagoa Bay Squadron. Successful experiments over a range of 85 kilometers were recorded on April 13, 1900, and unsubstantiated claims were made for communication between Delagoa Bay and Durban, a distance of nearly 460 kilometers. Lynn Fordred, curator for the Corps of Signals Museum, said parts from the original equipment are in storage at the School of Signals in Heidelberg. Her research for a book dealing with military communications in South Africa highlights the roles of personalities and the problems experienced in coming to grips with the new technology. While the British Army showed a surpassing lack of interest in wireless telegraphy after their

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initial failures, Fordred said the Boer forces were unexpectedly progressive in their use of telegraphy and telephone facilities, and even had a telephone exchange at a time when the British Army had none.

The concentration camps were places where African and Boer women and children and Boer men unfit for service were herded together by the British army during the War. Many of these people had become homeless as a result of the destructive tactics which the British army adopted in the Transvaal and Orange Free State after the last months of 1900 in order to deprive the Boer commandos the means of subsistence and thus force their surrender. Attempts had been first made to burden the combatants with these dependents in the hope of breaking the morale of the commandos. When this proved unsuccessful, it was decided to house then on-combatants in camps. The first two of these were established, as a result of a military notice of 22 September, 1900, to protect the families of burghers who had surrendered voluntarily. As the families of combatant burghers were also driven into these camps, they ceased to be 'refugee' camps and acquired the 'concentration' camp designation, as did other camps established later in the War. Eventually there were 50 camps, in which about 136 000 people were interned. The families were conveyed to the camps by ox-wagon, trolley or railway train – usually in open coal- or cattle trucks without any sanitary arrangements – or they even marched on foot. No proper provision had been made for their housing. Numbers of them had at first to make shift in the open until tents were provided, or were held in the camps. Those who did not receive tents were, according to the report of the British commission of inquiry: “ placed, in every conceivable kind of dwelling, from a church

vestry, hotel and store to a blacksmith's forge". In the opinion of the commission some of the places were hardly suitable for pigs. As there were insufficient blankets, clothes and other means of protection, and sometimes not even beds or mattresses, the internees were exposed, especially on the Highveld of the Transvaal and the Orange F. State, to extreme privations which undermined their strength, more especially in the case of the large numbers of small children. The food supplies in the camps, which were often established on badly chosen sites and were dangerously overcrowded from the start, was wretched. Not only was the food inadequate, but the quality, especially of the meat, sugar and flour, was at first very poor, while vegetables, fruit and other essential foodstuffs were not supplied at all; consequently, many of the inmates, especially children, wasted away to living skeletons within a few months. One British camp doctor felt compelled to report that, "on account of the deficiency in diet the children especially become emaciated and have very little resisting power to disease." The sanitation, too, was very inefficient. No adequate provision was made for the disposal of garbage, and the latrines were so primitive that they became breeding-grounds for germs and areas of infection. So disease, particularly measles, broke out in the camps during 1901 and, as there were not enough doctors or other medical care, the death-rate became appallingly high. The climax was in October, 1901, when the figure was 326 per 1 000 per year for the Transvaal camps and 401 per 1 000 per year for those in the O. F. S. The reports of camp superintendents as well as those of Emily Hobhouse showed that this was due to the bad conditions, and there was an outcry from the whole world, including England itself. This forced the British government to order a full investigation by a committee of prominent women, and sweeping

changes were made in accordance with their recommendations. As a result of these changes, introduced toward the close of 1901, and which included great improvements in housing, sanitation, food-supply, medical attention, and protection against cold, the death-rate immediately dropped and by March 1902, was back to 'normal'. Altogether, approximately 27 927 persons died in the camps – 1 676 mainly elderly men, 4 177 women and 22 074 children under 16. An unknown Boer General wrote the following in his diary. " The terrible prospect...that the continuation of the war would in that manner eradicate our whole generation, was one of the main reasons why the Boers ceased fighting and acknowledged defeat. It left a deeper impression on the Afrikaner's mind than any other event in their history, and strengthened their determination to strive for national self-preservation and the recovery of political independence."

The five battles of Belmont (Nov 23, 1899), Modder River (Nov 28, 1899), Magersfontein (Dec 11, 1899), Colenso (Dec 15, 1899) and Spion Kop (Jan 24, 1900) respectively, were all fought on the soil of British South Africa. That this would be an advantage in terms of morale and military maneuver turned out to be a rather foolhardy expectation. The conventional military goals of the overthrow and occupation of the enemy capitals were not pursued, but rather the relief of Kimberley and Ladysmith became the modus operandi of the British forces. Kimberley, because it could have provided a sorely-needed source of capital for the strained coffers of the Boer Republics, and Ladysmith because it would have given the Boer forces a quick road to Durban and more importantly, its seaport, dramatically increasing the chances of foreign intervention. The political ramifications for British prestige

throughout the Empire, of the fall of either of these towns were not underestimated by those in Whitehall. On a basic military level, these campaigns were hardly successful. However, their impact on the war in terms of the subsequent change of official attitude was immense. The Boer forces were not tribesmen fighting on foot with antiquated weaponry. They were mounted and equipped with the latest rifles and artillery from France, Germany and England. Many of the commandos were veterans of various wars against tribes throughout the region. The battles waged after these campaigns were fought with these hard lessons in mind. These stinging episodes introduced the British army to modern warfare and highlighted the weaknesses of the enemy the Boer forces.