

# THE SECOND BOER WAR AND THE EVENTS LEADING UP TO IT



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## LITERATURE REVEIW

### Introduction

The Boer Wars as the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century significantly influenced not on the history of South Africa, especially in respect to the conception of the apartheid system, but it also transformed the possibilities of warfare. The armed conflicts between the British Empire and the two independent Boer republic –Transvaal (South African Republic) and the Orange Free State too place between from 1880 to 1881 and from 1899 to 1902. Even though the two wars are connected, the focus of this review is on the Second Boer War (1889-1902) also known as the South African War or the Last of the Gentlemen’s Wars. The war was caused by a number of interrelated factors including the scramble for Africa, conflicting political ideologies of republicanism and imperialism; the discovery of massive deposits of gold in Transvaal’s Witwatersrand; outlander-Boer tensions and the Jameson Raid. For this reasons, the review covers the period before the Second Boer War, the discovery of gold, the Boer offensive, the British offensive, the annexation of the Orange Free State and Transvaal, Guerilla warfare, Scorched Earth Policy, Concentration camps and the Treaty of Vereeniging.

# Conflicting Political Ideologies

One of the causes of the Second Boer War is linked to the political ideologies of the British and Boers. These ideologies are traced back to industrialization in Europe, which led to the scramble for Africa in order to secure raw material and mineral for the European industries. At the peak of imperialism and the scramble for Africa, the British Empire was at crossroads with other colonial powers such as Belgium, France and Germany in the fight for control of the continent's minerals and other natural resources. By 1880, the Empire had already secured two colonies in the southern region of the continent: Natal and the Cape Colony. The Cape Colony and Natal were annexed from the Dutch through British military expeditions. At the center of the region was two independent republics established by the Boers, who had migrated further inland away from the British in what was termed as the Great Trek. The Boers are descendants of the French, German and predominantly the Dutch settlers. Their contact and ideological conflicts with the British is traced to the Napoleonic wars. While the British defined its expansionist policies and war in terms of geography, the Boers fought the Boer Wars for freedom and nationalism ideology. Subject to the British expansionist policies led by Cecil Rhodes, the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, the British pursued their interest by inducing control over the Boers.<sup>1</sup> The attempted annexation of the Transvaal by the British in 1887 resulted in the tensions between the Boers and the British. Initially, the Boers in Transvaal embraced a policy of passive resistance, but the British adopted an armed approach in their attempt to annex Transvaal. In

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<sup>1</sup> Archibald Paton Thornton. *The imperial idea and its enemies: A study in British power.* (London: MacMillan, 1959)

response, the Transvaal Boers also adopted an armed approach in their resistance against the annexation of their land by the British Empire. As of consequence, the First Boer War (1880-81) emerged. In 1881, the British suffered one of the most humiliating defeats at the Battle of Majuba Hill during the First Boer War. The defeat is attributed to the efficacy of the Boer “commando” system, which had evolved from previous conflicts. The Boer force is an apt example of a civilian army, whereby any person above 16 years was eligible and mandated for unpaid military service. Additionally, most of their Boers were farmers, growing up with guns; hence making them better marksmen than the British soldiers who reached the battle ground exhausted and ill-prepared. As of consequence, the Boers won and the Boer republics sustained their independence subject to some conditions but relations remained tense. After the defeat at the Battle of Majuba Hill, the British were still determined to unify the southern Africa under its rule. In sharp contrast, the two Boer republics were committed to the sustenance of their independence. In that regard, the two Boer republics were hurdles in the realization of the Empire’s desires. Consequentially, tension escalated between the British and the Boers.

## The Discovery of Gold and Immigration of Outlanders

A number of gold deposits had been discovered and mined in the Transvaal republic as early as 1870’s, but it was until 1876 that massive deposits of gold were discovered in Transvaal’s Witwatersrand area. Unquestionably, the discovery and extraction of Gold made the Transvaal

an economic power in the region. By 1890, thousands of both Africans and whites were employed in the Witwatersrand mines. As a consequence, Transvaal became a pivotal producer and exporter of gold in the region and the world, resulting in a rapid economic growth and development of its economy. Additionally, the republic became instrumental in the global financial sector because gold was widely used as the standard commodity of exchange in the international financial system. Around this era, the Empire was at the core of international trade and financial system; thus, needed as a secure and seamless source of gold to sustain its strategic and competitive position. As a result, the British oriented its efforts on the gold mines in Witwatersrand, as well as the diamonds in Kimberly. Diamonds were discovered in 1867 near the Vaal and Orange Rivers. These discoveries contributed to the escalation of tension in the already economically and politically unstable region. In contrast to the Cape Colony, the Orange Free State benefited from the proceeds accumulated in the extraction of diamonds in Kimberly and mining of gold in Transvaal. Natal also benefited from the proceeds accrued from the gold and diamond mining business in the Boer republics. What ensued was the growth of the Boer republics as regional economic powers, replacing the Cape Colony. Despite being the richest gold mines in the southern region of Africa, the mines in Transvaal were some of the most difficult to extract because of the complex geography of the region. In contrast to most mines that were open, including the mining of diamonds in Kimberly, the gold in Transvaal had to be mined through shafts. It follows that mining was only effective when approached from a group or company perspective. In the same context, even groups had to have adequate skills and technology to mine the gold. In simple terms, individual miners were squeezed out as local and

international investment groups formed gold mining and export companies.

One of the main challenges that faced the Transvaal gold mining sector was inadequate manpower and expertise to develop the gold resource into a resource that could produce the greater economic rent possible. Consequentially, Transvaal reluctantly accepted the immigration of fortune seekers, who were largely British subjects. The immigration increased the population of the immigrants, escalating tension between the Boers and the foreigners. In response, the Transvaal government limited the political and economic rights of immigrants. One of the areas that was challenged by the expansionist British Empire regarded voting rights. Collectively, tension among leaders as well as civilians escalated.

## Tension among Civilians and Political Leaders

Prior to the Second Boer War, there were a number of conflicts between leaders along their perspective on governance. The variation in viewpoints was majorly about the idea of power and governance. While British leaders advocated the rule of the region under the Empire, the Boers were strong advocates of national independence. Additionally, British leaders, including Cecil Rhodes were more of entrepreneurs and had accumulated a lot of wealth from the mines in the region. As the premier of the British Empire in the region, Cecil Rhodes was mainly interested in the advancement of his personal and Empire's interest. For example, while Rhodes was a supporter of the Empire's plan to rule the



region under the British flag, President Kruger supported the Boer's movements and interests. This is evident that the two influential leaders in the region were in direct conflict. Cecil Rhodes also noted that if the South Africa Republic financially grew on its own, it would in turn seek expansion in terms of size. In other words, Transvaal became a direct threat to the expansion of the British reach in the south. One of the sectors that was threatened was the railway transport system envisioned to connect the British colonies in the South and the Mediterranean Sea through Egypt. As a hurdle to this vision, Kruger had proposed the construction of a railway to Delagoa Bay through Portuguese East Africa; hence, bypassing British controlled ports in Cape Town and Natal. The proposal implied that the Boers would avoid British tariffs, which were essential for the economic development of the British Empire. Additionally, confrontations over the socioeconomic and political rights of the outlanders, as well as the Empire's expansionist initiatives led by Cecil Rhodes led to Cape Colony's intervention in Transvaal. The intervention was in form of an attempted overthrow of President Paul Kruger's government. On the Boer side, President Paul Kruger of Transvaal, the strong conservative founder of the republic was strongly opposed the political aspirations of fortune seekers, mostly entities of British origin that had streamlined into the republic for gold. On the opposite side was Cecil John Rhodes, the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony. Cecil Rhodes was determined to see that the British Empire controlled the whole region. But Rhodes was compelled to resign after a blundered coup attempt on the Paul Kruger government led by Leander Starr Jameson, British colonial statesman. The failed attempt to overthrow the Kruger's government, simply termed Jameson Raid induced a lot of tension among the British and the Boers.

# Boers Offensive and British Reponse

Subsequent Jameson Raid, President Martinus Theunis Steyn of the Orange Free State perceived the attack as the British's attempt to control all the Boer republics; hence joined Kruger in the fight against the British. Alarmed by the botched coup, the governments of Transvaal and the Orange Free State begun arming their forces in preparation of any armed threat from the British. In October 1899, the war between the Boers of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal republics and the British Empire broke following the British refusal to meet the Transvaal's ultimatum. As per the ultimatum, the Transvaal demanded that disputes be settled by arbitration. Additionally, the British troops stationed along the Transvaal's border with the British colony were to be removed. Further, British troops that were inbound from other colonies as a reinforcement were not disembark from their ship. The Orange Free State had joined the fight in line with an alliance that was created in 1897. By summer, the British forces had defeated the Boers and occupied Pretoria and Johannesburg. As the war progressed, the British forces got reinforcements from volunteers and contingents from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Natal, and the Cape Colony. Despite having armed them in preparation of any threat from the British, the Boer went into the war with weapons that had limited functionality in terms of range and magazine capacity. Compared to the Boers, the British had better firepower. Besides weapons, the British army received reinforcements from its colonies; thereby overpowering the Boers. The war seemed over after the capturing of Pretoria and Johannesburg. Instead, the defeat shaped leading to the guerrilla phase. The most predominant feature of the British army counterinsurgency effort was the creation of camps in

which the civilian population from the contested areas were concentrated. Similarly to the protests in the Aceh War (1873-1913), the Boer guerilla struggles against the British represented proto-nationalist proto social movements.

## Annexation of the Orange Free State and Transvaal

Transvaal, also known as the South African Republic was at the center of the war because of its economic competitiveness and political power in the region. The actual war began with setpiece battles, marked by British defeats. For example, the Boers, besieged Mefeking and Kimberly in the Cape Colony, as well as, Ladysmith in Natal, while the British focused on relieving beleaguered garrisons within these key towns. From their camouflaged flanks, the Boers defeated the British in a number of towns, including Colenso and Stromberg. After the relief of Kimberly and Ladysmith, the course of the war changes significantly, as thing started to move in favor of the British forces who had faced stiff resistance in Ladysmith. British forces captured Bloemfontein, Capital of Orange Free State on 13 March 1900. On 28 May, 1900, the British army annexed the Orange Free State Boers, but some of the Boers remained in control of the northern part of the republic. Pretoria, the capital of Transvaal was captured in June. By 3rd September, the Transvaal had been annexed. These developments induced the Guerilla warfare tactics. With the growing manpower and firepower, the Boers abandoned their traditional style of warfare and focused in small, mobile and camouflaged military units. Their mobility enabled them to easily capture supplies, attack



stealthy and retreat to hiding. The mobility also enable the Boers' military units to disrupt communication and raid British garrisons with high efficiency. In response, the British adopted the scorched earth policy to curtail their movements and deprive them supplies.

## Scorched Earth Policy and Concentration Camps

After succeeding Lord Roberts, Lord Herbert Kitchener adopted a three-fold strategy to bring the war to an end. The first aspect of his strategy was to continue with Lord Roberts' "Scorched Earth" policy. The scorched earth policy entailed a deliberate and systematic devastation of the republics to deprive the mobile guerillas supplies, including food, clothing, shelter and ammunition. Following the adoption of the scorched earth policy, most of the towns, farms and homes within one mile from the railway line were ravaged or burnt. The onslaught on the survival of the Boers was amplified by the deliberate destruction of food supplies. For instance, farm animals would be killed and crops burnt. Militarily, the strategy was a success. However, the involvement of the civilian population was the most controversial aspect of the war. The second aspect of Kitchener's strategy was to expand Lord Roberts' concentration camps, where citizens, that is, Boers and Africans in the two republics were confined in camps set aside by the British. Most of the people in the concentration camps were children and women whose houses and farms had been scorched. In Kitchener's perspective, the concentration camps would limit the guerillas' access to supplies. Additionally, the concentration camps would compel guerillas to surrender and reunite

with their families. Africans were also placed in these concentration camps, partly to deprive the guerillas from getting any form of support from them. Besides depriving the guerillas support from Africans, they were place in the camps to provide labour for gold mine that were captured and reopened in 1901. The concept of concentration camps had been used by other colonies powers to suppress local resistance, including Spain in Cuba (1896) and the United States in Philippines (1899). In all these guerrilla insurgencies, locals were resettled. In South Africa, poor administration of the camps under the rule of Kitchener resulted inadequate medical arrangement, poor quality of water and food, and unhygienic conditions. As of consequence, civilians suffered leading to death of thousands of Africans, as well as Boer children and women in the camps. The turning point came after the British government sent a commission of women to look into the allegation raised by Emily Hobhouse that British army was mistreating civilians in the concentration camps. Hobhouse was a pacifist and humanitarian who had visited South Africa in 1900. On her return to Britain, she led other women in protest against the deplorable conditions of the camps. By focusing her campaign on liberal opposition, Hobhouse was instrumental in the Britain's decision to send the women-based commission to look into the situation. Despite not being part of this commission, it was Hobhouse's actions that propelled reforms.

## Treaty of Vereeniging

The turning point of the South African War came after the revelations of the conditions in the concentration camps. The Boers finally surrendered

in May 1902, with delegates from the two republics voting in acceptance of the terms of the peace treaty (Treaty of Vereeniging) with the British. Under the provisions of the Treaty, the Orange Free State and Transvaal were considered part of the British Empire, but with the promise that they would have their independence in the future. The promise was realized in 1910 with the creations of the Union of South Africa. To recap, the Second Boer War had a lasting impact on British domestic and foreign politics, as well as the politics of southern Africa. The end of the war also resulted in an emigration of most of the Boers out of South America with others settling in East Africa, including Kenya and Tanganyika.

## Summary

The Second Boer War (1899-1902), as referred to as the South African War changed the not only the history of South Africa, but also the possibilities of warfare. As the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the scramble for Africa was in full swing. Britain, Belgium, France and Germany involved a in the fiercest period rivalry for the control of Africa's mineral riches. In southern Africa, Natal and the Cape were already British colonies. At the center of the region lay the Orange Free State and Transvaal where the Boers - descendants of the early Dutch, French and German settlers – had established independent republics. The British had an old score to settle with the Boers. In 1881, and the peak of their mighty power. The British suffered the first major humiliating defeat at the Battle of Majuba Hill during the First Boer War, leading to the sustenance of the Transvaal's independence. Half a decade later in 1886, the discovery of gold in the Transvaal republic induced a political and economic power that

threatened the interests of the British Empire to control the entire southern Africa region. Following the escalated tension, the Boers attacked the British. The British mighty firepower and numbers led to the annexation of both Transvaal and the Orange Free State. These annexations were met by Guerrilla warfare tactics from the Boer. From the late years of the nineteenth century, considerable guerrilla insurgencies had also arose in Cuba and Philippines. In South Africa, Lord Roberts and Kirchner introduced the “Scorch Earth policy” to counter the threats from the Boer Guerillas. The immediate impact were a weakened Boer guerilla-based resistance and the creation of concentrations camps. The British then systematically conducted military raids against the few remaining mobile Boer guerilla units. The South African war ended in May 1902 following the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging. In conclusion, the Second Boer War was caused by series of interrelated factors but the discovery of massive gold deposits in the Witwatersrand region of Transvaal contributed significantly in the start of the war.