

## **The Boers of South Africa (2)**

For much of the 19th century the British Empire was the only dominant power in the world. She had risen to the pinnacle of her glory. Her industrial pioneers were secular missionaries, helping to transform society in her image.

Britain occupied the Cape, initially from 1795 to 1803, and permanently from 1806. After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, the colony was officially ceded to Britain. The Dutch and the Huguenots were the main ethnic inhabitants. Only British officials went to the Cape until 1820, when a few thousand British emigrants arrived. The British and the Dutch continued to inhabit the coastal area. The majority of the British settlers came from London and the cities, though there was a good sprinkling of farm workers and skilled workers. The Boers offered the hand of friendship to the British newcomers. The high interior plains, cut off by the mountains, were unknown except to hunters and missionaries.

### **The Boers**

Who are the Boers? The word Boers (literally farmer) is a synonym used at times for Afrikaners or to denote the independent-minded Afrikaners who trekked into the interior to escape British-rule and survived as migrant stock-farmers, driving their cattle over vast distances and living out of their wagons. When and if they settled, the poor grazing land in so much of South-African interior necessitated huge farms up to 6000 acres. It was a grim and hard existence. Unlike the American individualistic frontier life, the South African frontier life was family oriented.

### **Slagtersnek**

Immediately after the British take-over, attempts were made to Anglicise the colony. This decision created a deep animosity between the English and the Afrikaners. English teachers and Scottish ministers arrived in the colony. But the Dutch did not want to be British subjects. Furthermore, the British permitted the indigenous peoples to possess land, offered equal rights to Mulattoes and Europeans, and rejected the use of the Dutch language in the administration. These actions by the government added fuel to the fires of resentment. The Boers wanted to keep their own language and their traditions. They feared the loss of the national identity. They also believed that their Reformed heritage was threatened. But the British policy in the race question was predominantly the issue that led to the Boer withdrawal from the colony. The alleged abusive treatment of coloured slaves and servants by the Boers became a bone of contention. In 1813, a commission was appointed to investigate the allegations. The subsequent use of coloured troops in an attempt to arrest and even shoot a white farmer provoked the frontier rebellion of Slagtersnek in 1815. Five of the Boer ringleaders, including Theunis Christiaan de Klerk, were sentenced to

death. Theunis was allowed to attend the baptism of his youngest child before he was hanged, and used this opportunity to write a very moving poem with the following verse:

I thank you Lord for all this good  
that You still do me every day.  
God has always done me good  
What my God does is always good.

The five men were sentenced to be hanged in front of their families, but the gallows broke under their combined weight. Appeals for clemency were then brushed aside by the British officer in charge of the proceedings. Half dead, the condemned men were forced to wait "many hours" until a second gallows was constructed and the grisly process could be concluded.

Slagtersnek would not be forgotten. It joined the Afrikaners' growing litany of bitter complaints about the attitude of the British. Although English became the colony's official language in 1822, the Boers never accepted it. When South Africa became the Union of South Africa in 1910 English and "Dutch" became the two official languages.

### **The Great Trek**

Some twenty years after Slagtersnek the anti-British sentiment reached such proportions that a large party of the Cape's population decided to leave and migrate into the uncharted wilderness. Their migration has become known as the Great Trek. Ten thousand Boers and their ox wagons travelled across vast tracts of land. According to some of them, the inadequate compensation after their slaves were freed sparked the mass exodus in search for a new Promised Land. The pace of the Boer trek was that of their oxen.

Many full spans of sixteen oxen drew the heavy wagons over the grasslands, loaded with the earthly possessions of their owners. (The ox wagon became an emblem of South Africa's history more than anything else.) It was a very difficult journey, but it created a sense of unity and solidarity.

The Boers believed they were a people in the process of creating their identity. They had with them no other book than the Bible, but that Bible was read. And their children learned how to spell and read from it. But not all Boers were motivated by the Reformed faith. Political, national and social factors dominated. Only a small but determined minority of Calvinists had as their primary aim the freedom to worship the Lord in a free church according to His Word. In other words, the Boers had mixed motives. But all accepted their hardships for the sake of an ideal - the establishment of their state and society. In one of the parties in the Great Trek was a young man who would become a well known Boer leader. His name was Johannes Paulus Kruger.

## **The Zulus**

The migrations of the Boers were facilitated by the disturbance and the consequent reduction of the population in the area where the Boers (Voortrekkers) were going. One group of Boers moved eastwards across the Drakenberg mountains into an area of violent conflict between black and black. Their most fiercely fought engagements with black Africans were those against the Zulus, who were then occupied with their own era of imperial expansion from a power base located in the present-day northern KwaZulu-Natal. Their actions contradict the picture of an idyllic world, which some have of the natives before the coming of the white Europeans. About 1817 the Zulus had become a powerful, totalitarian, military society. Zululand was covered with military kraals, each one the station of a certain regiment. A series of bloody wars and forced migrations had made the Zulus, under Shaka and his half-brother Dingaan, the dominant power in the region. In 1818 Shaka became the real founder of the Zulu nation. In ten years his army devastated Natal where several tribes had lived since the 15th century. It is estimated that more than a million lives were lost through these wars. Large sections of territory became depopulated. In 1828 Shaka was assassinated by Dingaan, who continued with the same murderous policies.

## **Blood River**

In 1837, Piet Retief took his column of ox-wagons over the mighty Drakenberg Mountains into the lush green valleys of Natal. In February, he went to the capital of the Zulu king, Dingaan, to negotiate a treaty that would grant the settlers land rights in Dingaan's kingdom. After the treaty was signed, Dingaan invited Retief's party of sixty-six men to join him for celebrations in his great kraal, a circle of beehive huts surrounding a large parade ground. They were told that protocol required them to leave their weapons outside. While they enjoyed the singing and dancing of the Zulu warriors and maidens, one of the most dramatic events in South Africa took place. Suddenly, in the midst of the festivities Dingaan shouted "Kill the wizards." Retief and his party were clubbed and stabbed to death and their corpses were dragged to a nearby hill where they were devoured by vultures. Afterwards, the Zulu regiments attacked the unsuspecting wagon trains where Retief and his men had left their women and children. Ninety-seven men and women and 185 children were slaughtered. The Boers subsequently called one of the massacre sites "Weenen" - or the place of weeping.

The Zulus were determined to exterminate all the Boers. In 1838, twelve thousand Zulus attacked 470 Boers, with Andrew Pretorius as commander, in a well-sited lager on the bank of the Ncome River in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The Boers prayed for victory and promised that their deliverance would be remembered forever as a day of solemn Thanksgiving.

Clubs and spears could not stand up to massive firepower, even from the unreliable muzzle-loaders of that time. The battle ended with some 3000 Zulus killed and only three Boers slightly wounded. The Ncome River ran red, and is known still as Blood River. The day - 16 December- became the Day of the Vow, and was kept as such annually until 1994. Still a public holiday, it is now known as the Day of Reconciliation. The covenant of Blood River sealed Afrikaner history with the Old Testament image of a chosen people. Consequently, Afrikaners began to view their history as sacred.

In 1840 the victorious Boers proclaimed their Republic of Natalia in KwaZulu-Natal. But the republic was annexed by Britain two years later. The Boers trekked again, to found the landlocked republics Orange Free State and Zuid-Afrikaanse Republiek (Transvaal). These, too, were annexed with the discovery of diamonds and gold. Independence was restored to the Transvaal after the Anglo-Transvaal (first Anglo-Boer) War. A badly led British force was defeated at Majuba Hill in 1881. Britain quickly made peace, restoring a self-government to the Transvaal and limiting its control to "native and frontier policy."

Although the Boers were courageous, and determined to reach their objectives, we should not idealize them as many did in the Netherlands in the first decades of the 20th century. They had their faults and sins, like all human beings.

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