

South Africa (4) The Boers vs Britain

The Second Boer War was the most serious conflict in which the British were involved since the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte. The British referred to it as the Anglo-Boer War, but the Afrikaners called it the Second Freedom War. It left behind bitter memories, which impacted the Afrikaners' political debates for generations. The alleged cause of the war was the refusal of the Transvaal Republic to grant unrestricted franchise to the thousands of white immigrants who had streamed to the Witwatersrand after the discovery of gold. In reality Transvaal and the Orange Free State were seen by the British as obstacles to the advance of their imperial interests in South Africa.

The British took measures to incorporate Transvaal. They rejected its claim to be a sovereign State. In effect, the Transvaal Boers were asked to surrender their country. In the midst of the crisis Cecil Rhodes' newspaper, the *Cape Argus*, proclaimed: "War, with all its horrors, is the only solution to the problem of the Englishman in the Transvaal."

War broke out in 1899. The Boers fought because they believed that they had no other alternative if they were to preserve their independence. The odds were against the Boers right from the beginning. By the end of the war the British army had a strength of close to a quarter of a million. The Boers at no time had more than 30,000 under arms.

Canadian Involvement

Canada was also drawn into the Boer War. But it did not become formally involved in the conflict. When the war began, Canadian opinion was sharply divided. English-speaking Canada urged the government to participate, but Quebec strongly opposed. Canada's Prime Minister, Sir Wilfred Laurier (1841-1919), found it impossible to withstand the pressure to send a Canadian contingent. He agreed to equip and transport one thousand volunteers to South Africa, where Britain would take responsibility for them. The first contingent was eventually augmented by some 6000 other volunteers. By the war's end, Canada not only contributed troops, but also \$ 3 million to the cost of raising, transporting and maintaining them. The marching, the heat, the filth, and disease took a heavy toll of the Canadians throughout the war. They suffered a loss of 244 soldiers, and 252 were wounded.

The Battle of Spion Kop

At the start of the war the British were outnumbered. They were defeated at every turn and pinned down from the northern Cape to the midlands of Natal. The Battle of Spion Kop was perhaps the bloodiest, but certainly the most futile engagement of the whole war. In the sweltering heat of a South African summer's day 2000 British infantry, packed without water or cover in the cramped space of the mountain's summit, were blasted by shrapnel directed from surrounding peaks, and showered with bullets from the rifles of the Boers. The British, their dead and dying heaped around them, held out to midnight. By then, according to one estimate, some 1000 officers and men - including the original

commander of the assault - were killed or wounded. The British abandoned Spion Kop during the night. The Boers, who also had suffered heavy losses, were already withdrawing. But general Botha, alone refusing to admit defeat, spurred his men on to one last attempt. When they came to the summit of the hill, they found it, to their great surprise, occupied only by the dead.

Concentration Camps

Although the war began with a string of humiliating defeats for Britain, its imperial numbers and unlimited resources began to tell and the Boers' capitals - first Bloemfontein and then Pretoria - were quickly occupied. The Boer armies had been defeated on the field. They had been dispersed, but they had not been broken. The Boer governments had been dislodged but they retained their authority. And several thousand diehards - the "bittereinders" - served the Boers' cause in a hit-and-run warfare which dragged on for two more years before peace was concluded in May 1902. Their spirit was only broken when the British carried out a scorched earth policy that destroyed farms and livestock, and their women and children were taken off the farms and placed in the world's first concentration camps. It seemed to the Boers that the British were seeking to exterminate them as a people. Both black and white, mostly women, children, and old people, died in epidemics in these camps. According to Thomas Pakenham, "no one knows how many Boers, men, women and children died in the concentration camps. "Official estimates vary between 18,000 and 28,000 out of a population of a few hundred thousand."

The Boers fought to the last. But their families were starving while their men were fighting and they finally had to submit. The Orange Free State and Transvaal were proclaimed British colonies. When the war ended, the Boers were at the brink of despair due to the enormous loss of life, periods of drought and disease among the cattle. Out of this group came the poor white. It was not until after the 2nd World War that this group mainly disappeared.

Churches and Missions

The Boer War caused much damage to churches and missions. Many congregations were disrupted, some members were killed, and some fled to other regions. The people had been disturbed psychologically. Mistrust and hatred had been sown. The British government was suspicious of the Dutch and German missionary societies. Five of the stations of the German societies were destroyed. The work was not resumed at several stations because the people had left the districts. The legacy of the Boer War has to be mentioned to help understand the influences that shaped attitudes and beliefs in South Africa.

Stephanus Johannes Paulus Kruger (1825-1902)

The Boers' unforgettable leader was Paul Kruger, nicknamed Oom (uncle) Paul, Transvaal's president from 1883- 1902. He also was Cecil Rhodes most formidable adversary. Kruger had a marvellous intellect, indomitable will power and great courage. At the age of fourteen he got his first taste of combat during the "Great Trek" and also shot his first lion. He was an expert horseman and hunter, a powerful swimmer and diver. His

reputation for wisdom, coolness and courage was such that in the First Boer War (1881) he was appointed head of the provisional government. In 1883 he was elected President of Transvaal. In 1888, 1893 and 1898 he was reelected and held the post until the Boers' surrender.

Kruger appointed many Dutch people to important posts in the Transvaal Republic because it did not have enough schooled citizens. Furthermore, he did not fully trust the anglicized citizens. After the discovery of gold, he strove to protect the Boer state, refusing civil rights to the "Uitlanders," and resisting British power by seeking alternative railway outlets and arms. He had access to the European press and the means to repudiate falsehoods spread about by Cecil Rhodes. He had also established good relations with some Britain's colonial rivals, particularly Germany. In 1884 he went to London to regain favour for Transvaal. In the same year he also visited Holland.

Kruger had a simple lifestyle. He was a father-figure for the Boers. Everyone was free to call on the President and ask his advice on personal problems. He was not a nationalist but a Christian who did not separate his faith from his politics. His influence on church and state was great. He was a typical representative of the Dutch Afrikaners who wanted to remain faithful to their Calvinistic tradition, their own language and national character. The Boers loved Kruger. But his British opponents were condescending. And the latter attitude has not changed judging by the negative opinion Antony Thomas, the modern biographer of Cecil Rhodes, has of Kruger. Thomas declared that Kruger was "the personification of everything backward, reactionary and ignorant of the Afrikaner tradition. He had only three months schooling in his life. It was his proud boast that he read no book except the Bible, and to the end of his days he believed that the world was flat. He had difficulty writing his own name."

During the Second Boer War, after weeks as a fugitive, the 75 year old president, a broken old man, too old to give leadership, left South Africa on October 19, 1900 on the Dutch battle ship "Gelderland" and toured Europe to seek support for the Boer cause. He was well received and honoured, but did not get real help. Germany, from which he had expected so much in his fight against the British Empire, let him down and the Kaiser went away on a diplomatic hunting trip in order to avoid seeing Kruger. Although there was a great deal of sympathy for the Boer cause, no one dared to engage in a war with the mighty British Empire. Kruger died in Switzerland. His body was brought home, and the last of the great "Puritans" is buried a few yards away from the little Dopper church where he used to preach.

Peace treaty

In 1902 the Boers and the British signed the "Treaty of Vereeniging" (as the treaty became to be called), which was very far from an unconditional surrender. It was a negotiated settlement, in which the Boers were promised self-government, "natives" were excluded from political rights, the Dutch language was safeguarded, and the Boers acknowledged themselves, under protest and with reluctance, to be British subjects. It seemed at the time to be a liberal settlement after a bitter struggle. The Boers could hold that they had remained unbeaten in the field. The spirit of Afrikaner nationalism remained unbroken.

The Union

In 1910 Natal and the Cape Colony and the two old Afrikaner republics Transvaal and the Orange Free State came together to form the new Union of South Africa, a self-governing dominion of the British Empire. With the exception of limited voting rights in the Cape, blacks were totally excluded from participation in the government, as they had been in the individual states before the union.

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