

## An Unmitigated Disaster – The Boer War

Lord Selborne, adviser to Joseph Chamberlain, accurately summed up the tide turning against Britain in South Africa at the close of the century. Trouble was brewing in Transvaal where the Boer government rejected British 'suzerainty' for good reason. They were suspicious of this slippery word that implied more than oversight. Unless checked the Transvaal would in a decade become the economic hub of South Africa, leaving Cape Colony and Natal entirely dependent for their business markets. Wealth and prosperity would simply drain away to the benefit of Transvaal, rich in reserves of gold and intent on keeping Britain out.

The Boers were importing weapons from Germany via Mozambique and were stockpiling a sizeable arsenal. Intervention meant war but the Boers were no walkover despite lacking a professional army and with far fewer men bearing arms. The Transvaal regime was insular and repressive too. No Catholics or Jews could vote, all Boers were entitled to and expected to own a rifle. English was banned in official proceedings, judges were appointed by Kruger and most tax fell on Uitlanders, regarded as aliens and 'strangers'.

No open-air public meetings could be held and it was virtually impossible for a non-Boer to obtain full citizenship. Alfred Milner, High Commissioner for South Africa, met with Paul Kruger for several days at Bloemfontein. Deadlock ensured; Kruger would not budge. Milner referred to Kruger as "a frock-coated Neanderthal" and likened Uitlanders to Helot slaves in ancient Greece. At home, Salisbury urged caution and steady pressure but no provocative acts. Britain still asserted its right to suzerainty but Law Officers disagreed, stressing the 1884 Pretoria Convention was a new treaty and not an amendment to the original passed only three years before.

On 2 September 1899 Transvaal would not sanction any form of suzerainty. The battle lines were drawn with the Boers remaining "either as the hewers of wood and the drawers of water for a hated race or as victors, founders of a united South Africa" as Kruger bluntly expressed it. The Boers were greatly incensed by being treated no differently to the black populations under colonial rule. The 43,000 Afrikaaners squared up to the British, ten times that number, whilst the black population exceeding three millions were virtual bystanders.

At its meeting ten days later the Cabinet agreed to send a further 10,000 troops to bolster those in Natal and augment those at the Cape. This action would light the fuse of war and the Cabinet knew it. The riposte was not long coming. Transvaal threatened to commence war at 17.00 hours on 11<sup>th</sup> October unless all British troops massing on its borders were withdrawn, along with all reinforcements sent since 1 June. This ultimatum was a red rag to the bull of the British Empire. In Britain the media message was let battle commence, saying Kruger was the aggressor and instigator.

Faced with a concealed enemy, conventional military formations were no match for the well prepared and dug in Boers. Colenso typified a third defeat in a Black Week in December 1899. Given traditional military tactics Sr Redvers Buller assumed the Boers would not only attack in force but en masse or in large groups.. Buller's 18,000 men, the largest single force deployed anywhere since the Crimean War, clustered in a tight formation, his troops lusting for imperial glory, utterly confident in a leader eulogized by Gladstone as having an ability

superior to Joshua. The Boers had no intention of playing Buller's game of conventional military warfare and of playing by his rules of engagement.

Just across the Tugela River patient Boers waited and watched, safe behind steep banks with trenches hidden from view in the ridges and folds of the landscape. After an abortive flanking movement and barrage of long-range artillery, Buller resorted to what he knew best, all out frontal attack. Like cardboard cutouts in a shooting gallery the British were a sitting target for concealed Boer marksmen with their Mausers. The Boers lost only 7 dead with 22 injured compared to 143 British fatalities with 1,000 wounded. William T Stead, editor of the Pall Mall Gazette was scathing, summarised in three words - "suicide from imbecility."

Worse was to follow with inevitable defeat on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1900 at Spion Kop. Not only were British strategies and tactics outdated and ineffective but British generals were too with Buller earning the nickname Sir Reverse. He was replaced by no nonsense and uncompromising Lord Roberts. After a strenuous march, plagued by fever, sandstorms and flies his 40,000 troops outflanked the Boers, finally overrunning them at Paardenburg with the capture of 4,000 men. Maybe Roberts had found the formula as his success was soon followed by the relief of Ladysmith, much to this dismay of the Boers. Prior to this Kitchener had used a battering ram technique in trying to smash their laager, earning the dubious reputation for being the "most talented murderer (of his own men!) war has produced."

On 5<sup>th</sup> March 1900 the Boer presidents of Transvaal and Orange Free State suggested peace terms with the aim of ensuring Boer independence. The Kaiser offered to mediate. With lofty scorn these proposals were rejected by the Cabinet. Roberts promised all Boers laying down arms and giving an oath of neutrality could return to their farms. Thousands did but some reneged. Who was to know who had and had not?

The relief of Kimberley, Ladysmith and Mafeking portrayed fine virtues of bravery, stiff upper lip and fortitude but were the result of ineptitude. Mafeking, relieved after 217 days on 20 May 1900, would stay in the minds of the British spurred on by the bravado and Kaffirgrams of Baden-Powell, intended to rile and ridicule the Boers and convey an air of impregnability, "All well. Four hours bombardment; one dog killed" said one concise message.

The tide was turning or so it seemed as Roberts took Pretoria in early June 1900 only for the Boers to change to hit and run tactics, commando assaults and sniping. Proceeding through west Transvaal with caution and ruthless determination, a new strategy was deployed to burn farms and obliterate resistance. By September, Roberts was convinced of certain victory but admitted the guerillas seemed everywhere. Remote British outputs were attacked, columns ambushed and railway lines cut. With no end in sight the Government was forced to increase income tax. The national debt rose to a dizzy £800m by the end of 1902 leaving the Treasury wringing its hands in despair.

The Boer invasion of Cape Colony from Orange Free State on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1900 was not in the script and jolted the Government into action and retribution. The policy of farm burning must not only be renewed but stepped up. According to William T Stead the Boers were especially incensed that Lord Roberts, in declaring the end of hostilities, promptly invaded the Cape Colony resulting in the capture of 600 troops within a stone's throw of Pretoria.

Boer raids and sniping continued unabated. Exploratory peace talks were held with the Boers in late February 1901 but Milner resisted compromise. On 14<sup>th</sup> June Milner was invited to meet with a Cabinet determined to go on the offensive. A court-martial death sentence was to be imposed on all rebels not captured in the field claiming neutrality. Within days Milner issued an edict that all those found without licensed arms would be put to death.

Soon Kitchener replaced Roberts and in typical uncompromising fashion began to erect 8,000 blockhouses and 3,700 miles of coiled wire to hamper commando raids. Cabinet patience had evaporated and in Kitchener they had found the very man to spearhead a blunderbuss strategy. Herbert Horatio Kitchener, a collector fine ceramics, was admired by efficient and no nonsense Field Marshall Garnet Joseph Wolseley for his pluck, energy and leadership but for many he was an enigma and intensely disliked. General Hunter, his right hand man in the Sudan, described him as inhuman and heartless and a "vain, egotistical and self confident mass of pride and ambition." Lord Esher felt he would readily "walk over the body of his best friend" whilst Kipling called him a "fatted pharaoh in spurs," loathing him for his "bucherly arrogance."

The battle of Omdurman on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1898 testified to his disregard for human life in the quest for outright and absolute victory. Maxims and continual pounding by artillery cut swathes through the enemy, scything down onrushing hordes in hundreds. Cease fire, cease-fire implored Kitchener. It seemed a humanitarian gesture but his concern was not for 10,000 Mahdi killed and 13,000 wounded but for the extravagant waste of ammunition. The savage death of General Gordon was brutally avenged. British casualties were 47 killed. Not a battle as one eyewitness commented but an execution.

Henry Campbell Bannerman, Liberal leader in the Commons, criticized Government policy in saying barbarism was not war. Burning farms and homesteads continued and there was little option but for families to be housed in secure camps. On arrival many were in a desperate state, prone to disease and fever and malnourished in the compressed squalor as congestion in the fifty camps grew daily.

Completing the erection of camps was the priority rather than the logistics of resourcing and management that grew ever more complex with each new camp. Bungled administration, inadequate food supplies, appalling sanitation, minimal security and lack of understanding of the scale of the problem as well as sheer indifference all conspired to devastating and deadly effect.

By October 1901 the authorities were overwhelmed as 160,000 people were incarcerated in cramped, sparsely equipped and disease-ridden camps. Farm burning was not confined to the British as General Louis Botha threatened his men that if they laid down their arms their farms would be burnt and all contents confiscated. This order served only to compound the misery as families split up with women and children living in dire poverty. Squalid conditions became even more unbearable and cross-contamination flourished as the abysmal sanitation was not helped by the Boers rustic and rural hygiene standards.

As food became scarcer, resistance to infection lowered even further. Epidemics of measles, cholera and pneumonia became rife and typhoid made an unwelcome appearance and so did malaria, compounding a wretched existence. Estimates vary but well in excess of twenty

thousand Boers, one sixth of the entire Boer population mostly women and children, died from the ravages of disease and malnutrition or a combination. Some died from starvation but it is difficult to assess how many since accurate records were not maintained consistently. Even where available there was great reluctance to record the cause of death as starvation as invariably other life-threatening illnesses were present. Besides it would lay authorities open to not only criticism but legal action and a witch hunt for the perpetrators.

A fine distinction exists between minimal food, malnourishment and starvation, especially as those surrendering received higher rations than "bitter enders" failing to see the folly of their ways. This unfolding tragedy was predictable and avoidable but the Government appeared detached, if not impervious, and clearly anxious to link the majority of mounting fatalities to the unhygienic habits of the Boers.

Blame was swift. In October 1901 Milner insisted on removing the dictatorial and strong-minded Kitchener, the characteristics Milner himself possessed in abundance. Kitchener had failed to set up the protected areas efficiently and had ignored escalating problems in the camps. Milner wanted to continue the war until capitulation but Chamberlain, worried by the mounting cost of war, disagreed.

Kitchener met with a Boer delegation on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1902 in Pretoria with precise instructions not to accept anything which did not include British annexation of the Cape. Negotiations broke up nine days later only to resume on 15 May when the Boers met Kitchener and Milner. The eventual terms signed on 31 May 1902 required all Boers to lay down their arms and to desist from any resistance to the authority of H. M. King Edward VII as their lawful sovereign. All Boer soldiers would be allowed home without confiscation of property, Cape rebels would be afforded an amnesty, other than some leaders, Afrikaans would continue to be spoken in both republics, farmers could hold licensed firearms and a civil administration to be set up.

Until self-government was introduced no decision would be made on enfranchising black people, contradicting Chamberlain's statement peace should not place the civilian population in the same position as before the war. The sum of three million pounds was allocated to repair war damage, most of which was to Boer homes. Salisbury and the government would distance themselves sufficiently to ensure they were not held accountable. He knew full well an inquiry would be set up soon into conduct of the war. Scapegoats were relatively easy to find with British generals deemed expendable as findings would demonstrate a catalogue of failure, blunder and incompetence. In private Salisbury blamed Lord Carnarvon for annexing the Transvaal in 1877.

Africans were the real victims of the peace settlement at Vereeniging, a small community just outside Johannesburg, as areas allocated were to have clear demarcation that would mean segregation from whites. This was apartheid by another name and soon to be the tinderbox for unrest. It sowed the seeds of self-determination by the black African population, not only to abolish this inhumane practice but to remove the white manner completely but this would take another sixty years.

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