

Why did the Boers lose the South African War 1899-1902?

The South African, or 2nd Boer War was a conflict fought between the British Empire and the 'Boer Republics' of the Orange Free State and the South African Republic or 'Transvaal'. The war was a result of British imperial politics in Southern Africa but the *casus belli* was the Transvaal's denial of political rights to expatriate workers in the Rand gold fields around Johannesburg, known as *Uitlanders*. The war was fought over three years and was eventually won by the British after conventional and unconventional warfare.

The British and the Transvaal had already fought one war over the political control of the Transvaal in 1880-1. Britain had annexed the bankrupt Transvaal in 1877 but after the British refused to return its independence the Transvaal Boers declared a republic in December of 1880. Their burghers outnumbered British troops, both regulars and locals, nearly two to one. British garrisons in the Transvaal were besieged but none were overwhelmed, but a British column was annihilated south of Pretoria¹.

British strategy was poorly conceived and implemented, and an attempt to invade the Transvaal was defeated soundly at Majuba Hill. A peace was agreed before British reinforcements could gain revenge for Majuba. This experience of fighting the British was to shape the way the Boers would see the later conflict. Their political and military leaders in the 1st Boer War, Paul Kruger and Piet Joubert, would also lead the Transvaal in the 2nd Boer War².

Boer policy in the lead up to the 2nd Boer War was shaped by the leaders of the Transvaal. The leaders of the Orange Free State had initially tried to act as honest brokers between the Transvaal and Britain. However they had signed a mutual defence

¹ R. Homes, *Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford 2001), pp.137

² P. Haythornthwaite, *The Colonial Wars Sourcebook* (London 1995), pp.194-195

agreement with the Transvaal and so would enter the war on their side.³ The build-up to the 2nd Boer War began in 1885 with the Jameson Raid. This was an attempt to force an overthrow of the Transvaal government by provoking an *Uitlander* rebellion. The Raid, financed by the imperialist Cecil Rhodes then Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, backfired badly, failed and forced Rhodes out of his post.

President Kruger increasingly felt that war with the British was inevitable especially after the appointment of Sir Alfred Milner as High Commissioner in the Cape⁴. British policy in the confrontation was aimed towards forcing the acceptance of the Boers of political rights for the *Uitlanders*. This they believed would result in a change in the political makeup of the Transvaal which would set the conditions for expanded British influence, if not control, in the region. Milner believed that increasing the British military force to 'rattle the sabre' would force the Boers to be more co-operative⁵. Consequently the British garrisons in the Cape were reinforced by the dispatch of 10 000 troops from India and Mediterranean bases. This force was to comprise the Natal Field Force under Sir George White.

This naturally alarmed the Boers and the republics mobilised their forces on the 27 of September 1899. In response the British finally approved the dispatch of the 1st Corps from the United Kingdom on 7 October. Two days later President Kruger sent an ultimatum to the British. The ultimatum demanded that the British withdraw their troops from the border and turn back the troopships that were already en-route. He received no reply and on 11 October the war began.

The Boer forces were mostly mounted infantry, armed with Mauser magazine-fed rifles. These forces were organised into Commandos drawn from the districts of the Boer republics and were manned by citizen-soldiers known as burghers. The

³ T. Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London 1979) pp.40-42

⁴ B. Nasson, *The South African War 1899-1902* (London 1999) pp.34

Commandos elected their officers and discipline was very loose. They operated by riding close to the enemy provoking them into attacks which they would then subject to rifle fire before moving away again. The burghers were reinforced by the only regular forces the State Artillery of the republics who manned their heavy guns, some of which were very modern. In total the Boers could muster 40 000 troops, 25 000 from the Transvaal and 15 000 Orange Free Staters⁶.

In opposition the British troops were predominantly infantry of the British Army. Those deployed in the early stages of the war were regular troops hardened to colonial soldiering. These were reinforced by soldiers of the 1st Corps who included a large number of reservists called back to the colours to bulk up understrength units. The reservists had been out of the army for some time and would need time to regain their skills and become hardened to marching and field operations. These forces were backed up by locally raised forces who were usually mounted infantry and used by the British as scouts and vanguards.

The first action of the Boers was to cross the border and launch attacks on the British. In the west they reached and surrounded the towns of Mafeking and Kimberly on the railway line from the Cape to Rhodesia. The British forces defending these two towns were small and easily forced onto the defensive. The Boer forces were unwilling to press their attack and settled into sieges of these two towns.

In the east the Boer commandos entered Natal in a campaign designed to defeat the poorly positioned 10 000 strong Natal Field Force stationed at Ladysmith and Dundee. Despite initial British tactical successes the Boers soon gained the upper hand, and after roundly defeating a British counter-attack the Boers penned the British into a siege in Ladysmith. In the space of three weeks the Boers had made the most of their

⁵ Pakenham, *Boer War*, pp.71

⁶ Haythornthwaite, *Colonial War Sourcebook*, pp. 204-205

significant advantage in numbers and mobility to gain a significant victory. Almost the entire British garrison was now bottled up in Ladysmith. The reinforcements of 1st Corps were only just landing in the ports of Cape Town and Natal.

In this initial phase of the war the Boers had attempted to repeat the success of the battle of Majuba during the 1st Boer War. There a success against the small advanced British force had resulted in a favourable political settlement of the war before British reinforcements could come into action⁷. In 1899 Cronje's attack across the border was designed to cause a repeat of that outcome. However the British retreat into Ladysmith, whilst humiliating to their military pride, played to their strengths and to Boer weaknesses.

In the 1st Boer War the Boers had besieged numerous small and isolated British forts in the Transvaal and failed to take even one. The Boer military system, based on volunteer forces, was not well adapted for all-out assaults on defensive positions. Instead they settled down to prolonged and relatively loose sieges, hoping to starve the garrisons out. The sieges required a large number of Burghers to maintain the perimeters and this static role removed the Boers' key asset of mobility. In addition many Burghers took the opportunity to return home from the front-lines, further eroding the Boer strength⁸.

With their attempt for a 'super-Majuba' foiled the Boers now looked around for an alternative strategy. Cronje, Commandant-General of the Transvaal, waited with his burghers around Ladysmith. Some firebrands amidst the Boers wanted to push down into Natal and take the war into the British colony, hoping to raise the local population, some of whom were sympathetic to the Boer cause. However Cronje faced political constraints; the Orange Free State government had decided that its troops would not go

⁷ Pakenham, *Boer War*, pp.105-107

⁸ Pakenham, *Boer War*, pp.170

further into Natal. He also worried about British counter-attacks and was worried by the losses his forces had already taken⁹.

Finally, after three weeks of debate a force of 2000 burghers led by Cronje and Botha crossed over the Tugela on the 13th of November. This force ranged down the railway line almost unhindered by the British, capturing an armoured train as they went. However on the 21st of November they met the vanguard of 1st Corps moving up from Natal. After a sharp skirmish the Boers fell back and retreated to the easily defended line of the Tugela river.

This belated attempt to take advantage of the victories in northern Natal had come to nothing. The force used was little more than a reinforced raiding party that could harass the British but not stop them. Although Botha later claimed that Cronje had stopped him going all the way to Natal, it must be debatable what he could have achieved whilst there. As the first wave of reinforcements were already landed in Natal and could have easily have defended the port from Botha's burghers. Even had he somehow taken Natal the British still had a number of other ports on the coast through which they could land troops.

Whilst an attempt to forestall British reinforcements was doomed to fail, attempts to encourage pro-Boer citizens of the British colonies to rise up could have perhaps greatly aided the Boer cause. This threat certainly worried the British colonial authorities¹⁰ and they retained many local troops in the colonies rather than committing them to the war on the front. However Botha's November raid had very limited time to try and foment an insurrection.

The retreat of Botha's raiders north freed the way up for the expanding force of the British 1st Corps to begin its counter-offensive from the southern ports. The Boer

⁹ Pakenham, *Boer War*, pp.168-169

¹⁰ Pakenham, *Boer War*, pp.159

sieges of Ladysmith, Kimberly and Mafeking was now also affecting the British conduct of the campaign. Lieutenant-General Sir Redvers Buller, Commander-in-Chief of British forces in southern Africa, had to change his strategy. Originally had planned to advance directly up the railway line from Cape Town and advance to and through the Boer republics and occupy their capitals.

He now faced political and popular pressure to relieve the sieges. To do so he split his forces, reducing the powerful 1st Corps into a group of smaller field forces which were unable to support each other. His force advanced towards the besieged towns and came up against Boer defensive positions. The tenacity and skill of the Boer defence had been underestimated and the British received a bloody nose. The defeats at Colenso, Magersfontein and Stormberg became known as the British Army's 'Black Week' and caused a furore. Massive reinforcements would be despatched, including troops from the Dominions and command was given to Field Marshal Lord Roberts, one of the leading British soldiers of his generation.

In reality Black Week wasn't actually the disaster it first seemed. Casualties were relatively small, at Colenso the six British battalions most heavily engaged lost a mere 15%¹¹. Black Week was a reflection of the British Army learning the hard way against a style of enemy it had never faced before. The Boers had certainly won morale boosting tactical victories and delayed the British advance. However they were unable to gain decisive victories and only managed to reinforce the will of the British and the wider Empire to defeat the Boers. Men from across the globe volunteered to serve against the Boers and British popular support for the war increased even further.

The arrival of the 1st Corps had already meant that the Boers were now outnumbered, if only slightly. The despatch of a 2nd regular army corps from Britain

¹¹ F. Myatt, *The British Infantry 1660-1945 The Evolution of a Fighting Force* (Dorset 1983) pp.157

and the influx of volunteers, mostly mounted infantry, would decisively tip the balance against the Boer Commandos in the field. With Lord Roberts, a most practical general, now in command the Boers faced a British force that would begin to impose its will upon the battlefield rather than dancing to the tune of the Boers.

Roberts began his offensive in February and swiftly relieved Ladysmith, out-maneuvred General Joubert and forced his surrender at Paardeberg. In the meantime in Natal Buller had finally learned how to break the Boer defences and relieved Ladysmith. Roberts had then gone on to invade the Orange Free State and occupy its capital of Bloemfontein. It was clear that the conventional defence for the Boer republics was collapsing and no longer viable.

In response on 17 March 1900 a Boer council of war was held at Kroonstadt where the Boer presidents and commanders determined to fight on. They agreed to a proposal by De Wet, the new Commandant General of the Orange Free State, to fight a guerrilla style war. Mobile commandos without heavy baggage or families encumbering them would attack British lines of communication and isolated posts¹². The Boers put this into effect while the British continued to consolidate their hold on the republics, annexing the Orange Free State and occupying Pretoria. Fast moving commandos savaged a number of isolated British units but were unable to prevent the occupation of their country.

The main points in the Transvaal and Orange Free State were soon under control and President Kruger went into exile. The British thought that their job was done and that the enemy would soon come to terms. Indeed Lord Roberts handed over to his Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Kitchener, and returned to Britain to collect his laurels.

¹² Pakenham, *Boer War*, pp.387

The remaining Boer commanders, men like De Wet, De La Ray and Smuts were extremely difficult for the British to track down. They were highly mobile, unlike the slow moving British infantry columns, and required little in the way of logistics and were easily supported off the land or even from supplies taken from the enemy. Like all guerrillas the Commandos aimed to defeat their enemy by a long running process of low level attrition that would eventually make the cost of occupation untenable. They also had distant hopes of outside intervention.

Kitchener was well aware of the problems they would pose and put together a range of measures that would counter the threat of the commandos¹³. These included the establishment of lines of blockhouses to protect the lines of communications, mobile columns of mounted infantry to hunt for the commandos and established concentration camps to house the families of those Boers 'on commando'. The blockhouses were eventually extended into a system that covered much of the veldt across the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. The mobile columns were then used to sweep between the lines of blockhouses attempting to trap the Boers. The concentration camps aimed to remove sources of support, both physical and moral, from the commandos.

Such a counter-insurgency policy is extremely costly in terms of both manpower and money. In addition the use of concentration camps, incompetently administered rather than deliberately brutal, had its moral price. However these were prices the British and their Empire were ultimately willing to pay. The massive numbers of troops needed to man the extended blockade lines and mobile columns was found from across the globe. The policy on concentration camps was reversed after a

¹³ Pakenham, *Boer War*, pp.499

public outcry, but the return of the families to the veldt proved perhaps more effective as the Burghers were forced to look after their families.

The British policies ultimately resulted in the attrition of the Boer's will to continue the fight. Many were captured and others killed. The chances of outside intervention had long faded, and while they achieved occasional tactical victories against the British they were unable to gain any initiative. Throughout the unconventional phase of the war sporadic attempts were again made to provoke pro-Boer sympathisers in the Cape to revolt against British rule. However these expeditions were always pursued and harried by British columns and were unable to gain much success¹⁴.

Eventually the cost of maintaining the fight told on Boer society and eventually a generous peace was agreed and the war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging on 31 May 1902. Nearly 20 000 'Bitter Einders' surrendered to the British, twice the number suspected by the British.

Ultimately the Boers lost the war due to the vast resources that the British could bring to bare against them. The only chance the Boers had was to win a political victory in the early stages of the war before the British could bring their resources to bear upon them. The earlier experience of war with the British coloured their expectations. In the hope of another 'Majuba' would again cause the British to climb down from military action which would almost inevitably result in their being overwhelmed.

However they failed to realise that the scale of the crisis was on a much greater scale than the 1st Boer War, a mere 365 British soldiers fought at Majuba¹⁵, and that the British political leadership and public opinion were much more robust. The only possibility of a Majuba was if the Boers could have decisively defeated the Natal Field

¹⁴ Nasson *South African War* pp.227

¹⁵ Haythornthwaite pp.194

Force in late October 1899. Once White had retreated back into Ladysmith that chance had passed and the strategic, if not tactical, initiative passed to the British.

The conventional defence of the republics against Buller's somewhat clumsy advance was ultimately never going to be able to win the war. The tactical defeats inflicted only increased the British resolve to finish the operation and brought about a massive reinforcement of their forces. The defeat of the Boers became even more than before, a symbol of the health of the Empire. The stakes were now so high that the British couldn't risk the possible decline in prestige brought on by a defeat.

The guerrilla phase of the war was winnable only if the will of the British began to fail. However the iron will of Kitchener and his leadership of this style of war kept the British troops firmly to his plan. Similarly he received the backing and manpower he required from his government.

The Boers only ever had a small chance of winning the war against the British, and that would be a political victory. However this chance had faded in the first month of the war. Against the vast resources the British could bring to bear and with a resolute government in power, the Boers' defeat was only a matter of time.

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