

The origins of the Boer War

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The question of who would dominate South Africa was disputed throughout the nineteenth century. Black Africans fought each other to establish powerful kingdoms. They were pushed aside or hemmed in by white Europeans who in turn fought among themselves.

By 1806 the British had taken control of the Cape from the Dutch. The British built up two settler colonies, Cape Colony itself and Natal to

the east. But not everybody was happy with British rule. In particular, many Boers, who were the rural descendants of Dutch and other early European colonists, disliked the British policy of ending black slavery. In the 1830s thousands of Boers “trekked” inland, fought off the Zulu, Pedi, Ndebele and Venda peoples, and built up two farmers’ republics called the Transvaal and Orange Free State. These became thinly

Left: British officer sits on a hill overlooking Slingersfontein camp. On 16 January 1900 the Lancers suffered their first casualties of the war in an ambush while reconnoitring Boer positions near Slingersfontein. Only six men managed to flee to safety, two were killed and the remainder captured. (AWM A04416)

populated outposts of an old Europe in which the bible remained more important than the balance sheet. The first war between British and Boers was fought in 1881, as the Transvaal defied an attempted British encroachment on its independence.

Encroachment of a different sort soon followed. In 1886 gold was found at the Witwatersrand south of Pretoria, the Transvaal capital. South Africa was no longer an economic backwater, and the rural Transvaal suddenly became its richest state. A rush of immigrants, often from English-speaking societies including Australia, flooded in to exploit the new riches. Transvaal Boers cautiously welcomed these “uitlanders” (foreigners) but would not grant them the vote for some years lest they vote for British over Boer rule. Soon there was tension between the uitlanders, in their bustling golden fiefdom of Johannesburg, and the dour, suspicious government of farmers in Pretoria. Most white citizens of the British empire were unmoved by the uitlanders’ discontent, being prejudiced in any case against the mine owners, bankers and Jews who made up some of their number. On the other hand, others saw the uitlanders as men who had been unjustly denied the political rights that were every Englishman’s birthright.

The tension between Johannesburg and Pretoria was exploited by powerful men, spiritual descendants of earlier generations of imperial pirates like Walter Raleigh and Robert Clive, who could not rest until all South Africa enjoyed British rule and a modern capitalist economy. A sometimes uneasy alliance of imperial administrators, visiting soldiers and ambitious colonists – men like Cecil Rhodes, a diamond millionaire and fervent imperialist – gradually seized



territories west, north and east of the Transvaal during the 1880s and 1890s, blocking off the republic from the sea and ending forever the chance that the Boers might once again trek to escape British influence.

Rhodes and some leading Johannesburgers tried to channel uitlander discontent into a call for British intervention in the Transvaal. With the tacit consent of Joseph Chamberlain, the ambitious secretary of state for colonies in Lord Salisbury’s imperial government in London, they tried and failed late in 1895 to engineer a revolt in the Transvaal that would induce a British occupation. The resulting fiasco of the Jameson raid, in which Rhodes’ lieutenant led a few hundred invaders out from Mafeking, across the Transvaal border and directly into the arms of the Boer authorities, provoked ridicule across the globe and alarm when Germany’s emperor assumed the role of the Boers’ protector.

The Salisbury government and other powerful supporters and shapers of empire wished to reverse this humiliation and assert British predominance in the subcontinent. Some, like Chamberlain, also wanted to strengthen the British empire by rousing its white men, who unlike their cousins on continental Europe were



Above: Boer troops pose in the field. (AWM 129017)

free from conscription, into forming something like a military reserve behind the small British army. In Cape Town Alfred Milner, the British high commissioner in South Africa, pushed the uitlanders' claims for the vote and goaded the Transvaal into stubborn resistance to any British or uitlander claim. In London the decks were slowly cleared for a possible war as understandings were reached with Berlin that Germany would not interfere in the region; with Lisbon that the Transvaal would be denied access to the sea through Portuguese East Africa; and – via judicious release of documents that painted Pretoria as a ramshackle tyranny – with much of the British and colonial public that the fight, if it came, would be a just one.

Chamberlain asked the governments of the settler colonies, including the six colonies in Australia, to raise tiny contingents from among their citizen soldiers that could fight beside the British army should war break out. This was a political act, not a military one. London did not want war, or even to annex directly the Boer republics. As Salisbury put it, “the point to be made is that we are boss.” The Boers were to be bluffed until they caved in.

But the Transvaal Boers did not want a boss, and they would not be bluffed. Many of their cousins in the Orange Free State felt similarly, and against all expectations the republic made a military alliance with Pretoria. Perhaps the thousands of Boers who still lived within the Cape Colony's borders would overturn British rule there? War was now inevitable, for the imperial government would never back down if to do so would weaken the empire. On 11 October 1899, after London refused a Boer demand to halt the flow of British troops into South Africa, Boer commandos – citizen mounted levies led by civil leaders and professional soldiers – invaded Natal and Cape Colony. The South African war had begun.

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For further reading

Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1979).

See also: L.M. Field, *The forgotten war: Australian involvement in the South African conflict of 1899–1902* (Melbourne University Press, 1979); Rayne Kruger, *Good-bye Dolly Gray: the story of the Boer War* (London: Pan, 1974); R.L. Wallace, *The Australians at the Boer War* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial and Australian Government Publishing Service, 1976).