

‘What shaped the political resources of the Boers at the end of the 1899-1902 South African War?’

Adam Moolna, 30th November 2008

Southern Africa prior to European colonialism was already in a dynamic state of racial change, conflict and migration. Established African tribes in the eastern part of southern Africa, such as the Tswana, were being pushed back and repressed by violently expansionist Bantu tribes, such as the Zulus. Into this context came the settlement of white farmers at the Cape of Good Hope with the establishment of a trading and refuelling post by the Dutch East India Company in 1652. These farmers, or ‘Boers’, experienced a mixture of conflict and cooperation with surrounding native tribesmen and evolved a nascent Afrikaaner identity, distinct from their Dutch roots, as they reverted to a pastoral mode of society more reminiscent of the black African tribes. The Cape Colony passed under British control in 1797 (with a brief return to Dutch sovereignty from 1803-1806) and a limited number of British settlers became established around Cape Town. Conflict with the authoritarian tendencies of the British colony resulted in the ‘Great Trek’ of groups of nomadic Boers northwards into the continental interior between the 1830s and the 1840s. Here, they established the two Boer republics of the Transvaal (Zuid Afrikaanse Republik) in 1852 and the Orange Free State in 1854. Economic symbiosis with black Africans (as well as racial miscegenation) contrasted with the development, as a fragile minority within hostile black surroundings and threatened by British imperial forces, of a ‘siege mentality’ within the Boer republics.

The new Boer republics had an uneasy relationship with the British Empire, which surrounded the Boers with the protectorates of Cape Colony, Natal, Bechuanaland and Rhodesia. Britain’s declared sovereignty over the Transvaal in 1877 conflicted with the effective independence of the republic – underlined with the successful repelling of British military forces in 1880-1 in what became known later as the ‘First Boer War’. Gold was then discovered in the Transvaal in 1886 and there was a dramatic economic transformation with the rapid development of industrial mining centres along the Rand. These gold reserves were envied by British imperialists, including Cecil Rhodes, and the stubborn autonomy of the two Boer republics conflicted with imperial ego. The unsuccessful 1895 ‘Jameson Raid’ on Johannesburg (a coup attempt by Cecil Rhodes with the poorly disguised support of key British politicians) followed and in turn fuelled a reactive radicalisation of Boer nationalism. New immigrants came with the gold rush and these ‘Uitlanders’, including British citizens, soon outnumbered the Boers in the Transvaal. Citizenship and the voting franchise for these Uitlanders became a problematic issue both within the Boer territories and in diplomatic relations with the British Empire. The Boers feared that assimilation of the Uitlanders as citizens would lead the nascent Boer society to be swallowed up and dominated as a British outpost. Yet Boer resistance to this gradual dissolution of their identity provoked a professed concern by the British Empire for the rights of Uitlanders who were British citizens. This coincided with imperialist concerns for gold and, no less significantly, the international impression of Boer impertinence to the mighty British Empire and led, eventually, to war.

The 1899-1902 Anglo-Boer War consisted of three phases. The first phase from October to December 1899 was the Boer offensive as Orange Free State and Transvaal forces poured across the northern border of British Natal in an attempt to secure a position of strength that the British would be unable or unwilling to retake. The second phase of the war followed, however, with the British counter-offensive from January to September 1900. The fall of Pretoria in June 1900, the seat of the Transvaal government, marked an important change as the Boer leadership then shifted to a fluid mode of existence alongside the Boer forces. The subsequent flight to the Netherlands of Transvaal Prime Minister Paul Kruger in October 1900 was to have important consequences for the shaping of the post-war Boer politics by allowing a new cohort of leaders to come to the fore, tempered by the fires of war. Guerrilla warfare characterised the third phase of the war, which dragged on from October 1900 until the conclusion of a ceasefire at Vereeniging, a mining town south of Johannesburg, in May 1902. The peace secured for the Boers a number of key political resources that, in conjunction with the political leadership shaped by the war, would shape the future of South Africa in the 20th century. Foremost among the political gains was the maturing of the Boer nation and the security it gained with its effective recognition as an equal white race by the British Empire. This came in no small way because both sides in the ‘white man’s war’ were conscious of the native context within which the struggle for pre-eminence was fought. Importantly, the ‘native question’ of whether to give non-whites voting rights was deferred until after the quick transition to (white) self-rule that the Boers were promised – essentially securing the establishment of a Boer-led South African Dominion under the protection of the British Empire.

Secondly, a cohort of Boer leaders emerged during the war (and particularly the guerrilla third phase), established in military command, who became key political figures. Both Jan Smuts and James Hertzog, for example, had been lawyers before the war (State Attorney for the Transvaal and High Court judge in the Orange Free State, respectively) and were subsequently thrust into military and then political leaderships. Jan Smuts went on to form the Transvaal *Het Volk* political party in 1905 with Louis Botha and to be Prime Minister of South Africa for 1919-1924 and 1939-1948. As an anglophile, Jan Smuts played an important role in shaping the Union of South Africa’s position and standing within the British Empire – and would indeed be a member of the British War Cabinet for the First World War. Realignment of Boer political nationalism within the wider framework of the British Commonwealth was perhaps necessitated by the British victory. In contrast, however, James Hertzog championed an aggressive brand of Boer nationalism that emerged in angry reaction to continued British rule. The war, therefore, also led to the split of the Boer ‘nation’ into conciliatory and nationalist camps. The latter went on to develop the fierce Afrikaaner nationalism and formal apartheid system that was to characterise the youthful independent South Africa. If not for the 1899-1902 war, the early Boer communities might instead have been subsumed into a British southern African behemoth – and 20th century South African history might have been quite different.