

## FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

### THE CAUSES OF THE BOER WAR

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The Anglo-Boer War was an event which had a long prelude and the after effects have not completely disappeared as yet. In fact, people who were in some way part of or directly influenced by the Three Years War are still alive.

In the fifties of the 19th Century it was British policy to withdraw somewhat from its colonies in Africa. But almost immediately she realised that this attitude was a mistake. After 1860 British imperialism had simply become so real that conscious attempts were made to expand the British sphere of influence over other countries. Along with this approach an extremely vigorous, enterprising spirit had begun to develop since 1830 on almost every level of life; becoming very noticeable by about 1870.

The result was inter alia a clash between British imperial monetary interests and an awakening Afrikaner nationalism. In 1868 already present day Lesotho as well as the Free State Diamond Fields were annexed, and in 1877 the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek. After 1870 there were also a variety of attempts at federations, protectorates and other bigger political units under British control and influence.

Meanwhile the poets Swinburn and Kipling encouraged the British public to the acceptance of their leadership role. Lord Rosebery's articles of Britain as world-wide good-doer are well-known. In Natal Shepstone colluded with Cetshwayo thus undermining the Boers' previous relationship with Mpande as Zulu Paramount Chief. Richard Southey secretly promoted British trade interest with the Bapedis in the Northern Transvaal districts. In 1868 the Royal Colonial Institute was established to stimulate general British interest in British overseas areas. Throughout Africa British businessmen laid on railways. For years already gunpowder and lead had been refused to the Trekkers and later to the Republican Afrikaners. In 1868 for example, Governor Wodehouse prohibited the supply of weapons and ammunition to the Free State. All this was deliberately done to weaken the British foe and strengthen its own position.

During 1873 gold was discovered at Lydenburg. The Transvaal Government extended hospitality to the hundreds of adventurers who streamed in, from all over the globe, but this gesture was never appreciated. The newcomers established the *Gold Fields Mercury* newspaper and, following the example of London, persistently attacked the Transvaal government. This was to result in President Paul Kruger and his Boer public adopting such a bitter attitude towards the new wave of fortune seekers and foreigners after 1890.

Earlier already Governor Sir George Grey lamented at the existence of and the closer co-operation between the Free State and Transvaal Boer areas. His desire was to bring this whole interior under the British flag. Grey and Wodehouse consequently also labelled any internal interest, no matter between whom, as damaging for the British Cape Colony. In turn Sir Bartle Frere wanted to dominate the whole South African coastline on behalf of Britain after 1877. The occupation of Walfish Bay in 1878 and the administration thereof from Cape Town since 1884 was but part of this plan.

The European Continent's interest in Africa since about 1875, which degenerated in the Scramble for Africa, gave Britain a further opportunity and forced her to become more and more involved after 1880. Again the British public's attention was attracted — hence W.E. Forster's Imperial Federation League. All the more was the feeling of vengeance nurtured and fed after the disastrous British defeat by the Boers at Amajuba in February 1881 during the first Transvaal — British War. It was unthinkable for an imperial world power that its soldiers were completely humiliated in the eyes of the world.

Furthermore, Britain was forced into the Convention of Pretoria with the Transvaal Republic after this war in 1881. With the London Convention of 1884 the annexation of 1877 was completely undone and even more freedom given to Kruger's Boers although Britain still had certain international claims.

The situation became more lively with the discovery of remarkable resources of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886. In London political and financial circles reproaches were hurled at the follies of the Conventions. At any costs the gold treasures of Kruger had to be roped in for Victoria! The gold riches would make Transvaal a sought after international friend and would supply her with the money to build her own economy, army and administration. Britain should therefore strike immediately and completely.

Previously already the inland Boers through British policy had been cut off from the sea by tampering with boundaries, by announcement of war claims and by making vague agreements with tribal chiefs. The password was isolation and strangulation resulting in economic and spiritual impoverishment, a policy which eventually proved most successful. Taxes followed on goods imported via Durban and Cape Town. Further opportunity for this came with the development of the Transvaal gold mining industry.

Also, around 1890, Cecil Rhodes alone had an income of R2 million per year from his mining and other enterprises. This figure represents a quarter of the amount which Kruger's state enjoyed in its most prosperous years. As Prime Minister of the Cape he was also in a strong political position. After 1890 the extension of Transvaal to the Rhodesian areas was at any rate finally terminated. British diplomacy kept the Boers out of Matebeleland as well.

President Kruger therefore wanted all the more to link up with foreign countries by means of railways and the sea to shake off British influence. This explains the contact sought with Portugal, Germany and France. But connection with the two latter countries in particular was unthinkable to Britain as they were competitors in every aspect with Albion. The Transvaal's struggle for contact with the sea especially influenced the Anglo-German relationship.

To develop his country Kruger needed capital. There were companies abroad who could supply this but not without extracting favourable advantages. Thus, for example, the financier De Rothschild, the Deutsche Bank, the Berliner Handelsgesellschaft and the British South Africa Company had a tremendous influence as individuals and as companies on the political climate. If they wanted to help build or set back a state they could give form to the pattern with relative ease. Behind the scenes staggering international disputes and a tug-of-war took place after 1890. Often, too, the most efficient politicians were totally ignorant of this. Men like Leonard, Lippert, Brakhan, Rouliott, Birkenroth and Lionel Phillips because of their money and their power to manipulate labour situations had unknown control in South Africa over the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek.

In 1889 Hermann Eckstein established a Chamber of Mines in Johannesburg. This organization bound together the whole Transvaal mining industry and its by-industries. It soon became a strong political and economical factor which worked very subtly and was anti-Kruger right to the end. The situation already became quite impossible when Kruger established the Nederlandsch Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorwegmaatschappij (N.Z.A.S.M.) in 1887 with German/Dutch capital. In July 1895 the connection between Pretoria over Portuguese territory with a favourable coastal area was completed. For Britain this meant disappointment, humiliation and defeat.

On every other level London politicians tightened the noose around Transvaal's neck. In June 1895 Chamberlain joined the scene as Colonial Secretary. On the Transvaal's western borders men like Mackenzie, Warren and even Scotty Smith were often most presumptuous and acted with or without Cape Town or London authority in land deals. This caused confusion with the result that Britain was later forced, not unwillingly, officially to gain the profits thereof.

Likewise the British became involved in the Zulu disputes in Natal. At last Bulwer annexed St. Lucia Bay which was Boer territory received from Zibhebu in return for assistance given against Cetshwayo. But Germany's Adolf Schiel was also interested in the area and so all the more the British flag had to be hoisted. Similarly Kruger was outwitted in his attempt to get Kosi Bay and it was clear that Britain was gaining the upper hand.

In turn Paul Kruger after this hit back and stipulated that import goods via Cape Town and Durban, that is British ports, could not be transported to the Rand on British railways. The provisions were then taken to the Transvaal border and transported further by ox-wagon. So Kruger merely closed the drifts. But the action also restricted his own men who often acted as transport drivers. This resulted in double the dissatisfaction, a situation which favoured London because it gave her additional reasons to intervene.

In fact there were other conditions within the Transvaal Republic which also created tension. The international instability and British imperialistic dreams merely heightened this. In 1892 the Transvaal National Union was established in Johannesburg to attend to so-called Uitlander interests. The management believed that either the Kruger government must be taken over, or the political order be disrupted. Similarly there was the South African League of 1896, the Reform Union and many others. Thousands had enrolled as members.

When in June 1894, a fire broke out in Johannesburg the inquisitive crowd gathered together in such a manner that the firemen were unable to execute their duties. Kruger's Police were thus requested to help. But the Uitlander crowd shouted them down and cursed Kruger and his people to kingdom come. Yet, when the wife of a Wesleyan missionary was murdered just outside Johannesburg in April 1899, the incident was snatched up as evidence of the unprotected life of the general public, the weakness of the police force and the incompetence of the Kruger government. The tension increased daily.

Sir Henry Loch, the British High Commissioner, in 1894 already had openly given veiled hints of British support to the Uitlanders in their so-called struggle for justice. Hence his request to Lord Ripon for more British soldiers to be sent to South Africa in time to enable them to act immediately when the situation exploded — which was certain to be the case. Ripon in turn ordered Robinson as new High Commissioner to supply weapons and to interfere should the unrest break out. In Cape Town, Prime Minister Cecil Rhodes behind the scenes diligently supported these plans to arm. Port Elizabeth, especially, became a busy harbour in this respect. In passing it should be noted that Rhodes and Chamberlain got on very well since 1895 and worked closely together. Many of their actions were part of the final onslaught but were covered up or interpreted as development schemes of the British South Africa Company.

The abortive attack by Dr. L.S. Jameson in December 1895 against the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek was part of the gigantic conspiracy against Kruger. The defeat, however, meant further British humiliation as well as their international exposure at a most inopportune moment for Britain. Simultaneously Kruger realised the extent of the plot and began to make the necessary preparations. So after 1896 Chamberlain almost openly began to interfere, threaten, demand answers, and accepted Uitlander interests and grievances as his personal responsibility.

On numerous occasions secret discussions and suggestions were blurted out in the British Press, frequently before Kruger himself had received the articles or replied to them. Here the *London Gazette* and *Daily Telegraph* especially supported Chamberlain. But Kruger did not budge and played a difficult role quite diplomatically, asking for proposals in writing, inquiring whether it was official and insisting on more time so as to discuss it in his House of Assembly or with his *Uitvoerende Raad*. This solid democratic action of Kruger and the fact that he did not yield to threats or reacted to incidents and rejected Britain's claim that she was interfering on behalf of all the Uitlanders — knowing very well that thousands of them were not British subjects — frustrated Chamberlain.

English-speaking South Africans such as W.P. Schreiner, Gordon Sprigg, James Molteno and John Merriman deplored and openly disapproved of the war campaign against the Transvaal Republic. Chamberlain, however, enjoyed the action and reaction. Every incident, announcement or report attracted new attention, involved more insecurity and uncertainty, and presented him with the opportunity to build up a war-psychosis.

Likewise, British representatives sympathetic to Kruger were increasingly replaced by Chamberlain's supporters. Sir Jakobus de Wet was replaced by Conyngham Greene in Pretoria, and sir Hercules Robinson in May 1897 by Sir Alfred Milner as British High Commissioner. Paid agents regularly collected signatures in Johannesburg which were directly meant for Queen Victoria. In 1899 the so-called Great Petition with 21 000 names of true subjects, Uitlanders and non-whites against Kruger was nevertheless answered by a counter-petition of 23 000 genuine Uitlander names in support of Kruger. Captain March Philips went along with this when he wrote who the actual forces were behind all the agitations: "The Stock Exchange operators, manipulators of the money market, company floaters ... They voiced Johannesburg, had the press in their hands, worked the wires, and controlled and arranged what sort of information should reach England."

President Steyn of the Free State, whom Britain wanted to leave out of all negotiations — in an attempt to isolate Kruger also from his fellow Afrikaners — together with the Cape premier W.P. Schreiner and J.H. Hofmeyr of the Afrikanerbond almost forced Milner into

meeting Kruger in Bloemfontein in May 1899 to avoid war. Milner realised that he would have to concede but he also decided beforehand that he would be high and mighty, aloof and unreasonable. The discussions for that reason also produced nothing. Milner and Chamberlain wanted their war, or at least a take-over, so they were not at all interested in some agreement at this late stage and after they had manipulated matters so skilfully.

Kruger made known world-wide the contents of the fruitless discussions and internationally it was well received. But Milner and Chamberlain insisted on a show-down and knew that Europe was most reluctant to interfere. The Transvaal House of Assembly and Kruger nevertheless made further concessions and many of the most loyal Britons admitted that Chamberlain after this had everything which was but to be desired.

Again and again attempts were made to trap Kruger offside but he had become too shrewd. The years of taunting and damage and isolation made him increasingly experienced. However, the writing was on the wall. A merciless, very clever but not always honest Chamberlain allowed the precipitous edge to crumble ever further. When Kruger nevertheless complied with every possible demand on September 2, 1899, Chamberlain himself deleted their previous conditions and immediately set new ones.

What is more, Chamberlain was already working on a British war ultimatum. By the end of September 1899 he had re-worded it several times, was satisfied and had obtained the support of Queen Victoria and of the British Cabinet. The contents certainly expected too much of Kruger but that was Chamberlain's strategy. Yet the dilemma was enormous. If Britain declared war then she could be looked upon as the aggressor. But Steyn, Dr. Leyds and other Boer friends in Europe advised Kruger to be first in delivering a Transvaal ultimatum. The quicker the Boers acted, the sooner they would be able to close up and possibly even catch Britain offside militarily — which was of course a dream.

With the correct wording, so they believed, the Z.A.R. would be able to create sympathy as well as exposing Britain as the only aggressor — but which would not occur as London had through the years created everywhere in Europe a reservedness, reluctance and uncertainty towards the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek.

Britain therefore also interpreted to its own advantage the Boer ultimatum of Monday, October 9, 1899. It was handed over at 17h00 that afternoon by the State Secretary Reitz, on behalf of Kruger and Steyn, to Greene as British Agent in Pretoria: see for yourselves, we have always known and predicted that Kruger had desired war against us and here it is!

On the Wednesday, October 11, just before five that afternoon Kruger and A.D.W. Wolmarans were present when Greene gave the British answer to Reitz. The ultimatum was rejected and war had broken out.

For Chamberlain and Milner it was the realization of a thoroughly planned ideal over many years and in many ways, but nobody at that stage realized that it would be a destructive struggle of nearly three years which was being ushered in.

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