

The First War of Independence - Paul Kruger

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In Chapter VIII of his memoirs exiled President explains how the ZAR won back its independence from British imperial rule

CHAPTER VIII

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THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE I 1880-1881

THE first sign of the approaching storm was the incident that occurred at the forced sale of Field-Cornet Bezuidenhout's wagon, on which a distress had been levied. The British Government had begun to collect taxes and to take proceedings against those who refused to pay them. Among these was Piet Bezuidenhout, who lived in the Potchefstroom district. This refusal to pay taxes was one of the methods of passive resistance which were now employed towards the British Government. Hitherto, many of the burghers had paid their taxes, declaring that they were only yielding to force. But when this was explained by the English politicians as though the population were contented and peacefully paying their taxes, some asked for a receipt showing that they were only paying under protest and others refused to pay at all.

The Government then levied a distress on Bezuidenhout's wagon and sent it to public auction at Potchefstroom. Piet Cronje, who became so well known in the last war, appeared at the auction with a number of armed Boers, who flung the bailiff from the wagon and drew the wagon itself back in triumph to Bezuidenhout's farm.

Bezuidenhout and another burgher were sent to me at my farm of Boekenhoutfontein, in the Rustenburg District, to ask me to come at once to Potchefstroom, as the burghers were ready to commence the war of independence. I obeyed this request and found the burghers collected not far from Potchefstroom.

The officer in command of the English troops at Potchefstroom sent to ask if he could speak to me, and, when I answered in the affirmative, he came out, described what had happened at the sale of the wagon and ended with the words:

"You must admit that this is open rebellion."

I answered:

"I should agree with you, if we had acknowledged the annexation ; but that is not the case. We do not look upon ourselves as British subjects, and the question of the tax is not a private question of Bezuidenhout's, but a question of principle which concerns the whole country."

In consequence of these events, I and the other leaders now held a committee meeting at Kaalfontein, at which the secretary of the former Transvaal Government was also present, and it was decided that the mass meeting at Paarde Kraal, which had been fixed for the 8th of January 1881, should take place instead as early as the 8th of December 1880, and that the people should then decide if a peaceful solution of the difficulties was possible.

Two days before, the meeting was forbidden and those who were to take part in it were proclaimed rebels. Nevertheless, a mass of burghers met on the appointed day, and it was unanimously resolved that the Government of the Republic should resume office and summon the Volksraad. The business of government was entrusted to a triumvirate consisting of myself, as Vice-President, Piet Joubert, as Commandant General,[1]and Ex-President M. W. Pretorius. The triumvirate thereupon drew up a

proclamation in which the good right of the Republic was borne out by historical facts and the restoration of the Government of the South African Republic made known to one and all.

[1 Joubert was elected to this post on Kruger's motion, although he long resisted, declaring that he was no general and that he did not feel suited to this appointment. - **Note by the Editor of the German Edition.**]

The proclamation must now be printed, and Commandant Piet Cronje was sent for this purpose to Potchefstroom with about 400 men, while the Government left for Heidelberg, there temporarily to fix the seat of government. Heidelberg was easily occupied, as it contained no English garrison, and the landdrost handed over his office forthwith, under protest. In the meanwhile, Cronje had arrived at Potchefstroom and taken measures to have the proclamation printed. Here the first shot was fired that opened the war. The English fired on a burgher watch posted in the street. A bullet struck Frans Robertse, of Wijsfontein Farm, in the Rustenburg District, and passed through his arm. The members of the newly-appointed Government sent one more petition to the representative of the British Government, the Governor of the Transvaal, and appealed to the "generosity of the noble British Nation" in order to recover their country in a friendly fashion.

The answer was that the local troops were called out to suppress the "revolt." I do not intend to give here a history of the War of Independence, which has been described in its smallest details. It is only necessary to say that, in view of their very small number in all about 7,000 men it was necessary for the Boers to go to work with the greatest circumspection. The plan was to cut off all the villages in which the English had a garrison and to send the rest of the burghers to the Natal frontier, there to arrest the approaching reinforcements of the enemy. Another difficulty was the scarcity of ammunition. At the beginning of the war the Boers had only about 15 rounds per man, so that they had to do precisely as they did in the later stages of the last war, first capture ammunition from the enemy and then fight him with his own ammunition.

In these circumstances, our enterprise would have been madness, the more so as the Kaffirs had also been called out against us, if God had not strengthened our hearts, so that we went bravely to face greatly superior numbers.

Let us linger for a moment on only one fight in this war, the Battle of Bronkhorstspruit, and that for certain reasons. This was an engagement with the 94th Regiment, which was on its way from Lydenburg to Pretoria. The Boer commanders, who had received news of its approach, sent Commandant Frans Joubert, with about 150 men, to meet it.

When the two forces came into touch, Joubert sent a message to the British commander, Colonel Anstruther, asking him to return to Lydenburg, in which case no fighting need take place. The man who carried the message was a burgher, called Paul de Beer, who spoke English well. Anstruther's answer was brief:

"I am on my way to Pretoria and I am going to Pretoria."

Joubert and his men, therefore, had no choice but to attack the English. The field of battle was a bare hill, on which stood a few hawthorn-trees. The English took up their position in a sunk road, while the burghers had to charge across open ground.

The fight lasted only a few minutes. About 230 of the English were dead or wounded; the rest surrendered. Colonel Anstruther, who himself was mortally wounded, sent for Commandant Joubert, told him that he was beaten in fair fight, and asked him to accept his sword as a present. He died a few minutes later. It would not have been worth while to enter into these details, notwithstanding the earlier lying accusations that the English had been treacherously attacked on this occasion, if Field Marshal Earl Roberts of Waterford, Kandahar and Pretoria had not rescued this contemptible calumny from oblivion.

When, in the course of the last war, he arrived at Bronkhorstspuit, he telegraphed to England that he was now at the spot where a British force had been decimated by treachery in 1881. But this only shows what a regular genuine Englishman Lord Roberts is.

The war was continued throughout the territory of the Republic under the able command of the late General Joubert, who was then in the full vigor of his years and displayed his military capacity in a brilliant fashion that aroused general amazement.

Under Joubert stood other capable men, such as General Smit and General Piet Cronje, who distinguished himself in the last war by his heroic resistance at Paarde Kraal. The campaign reached its climax in the Battle of Majuba Hill, on the 27th of February 1881.

During the war, I remained for the most part with the Government at Heidelberg, but I also made several journeys to the commandos, for instance to Potchefstroom, in the Drakensberg, and to Standerton, to exhort and encourage the burghers in those places. I also went to Rustenburg to address the burghers who were besieging the British garrison.

Here I learnt that Magato's Kaffirs, who lived near Rustenburg, had assumed a threatening attitude, and I at once proceeded thither, accompanied by seven men, including my son, Piet Kruger. On arriving at Magato's town, I found the Kaffirs gathered to the number of thousands under arms in their huts, clearly with no good intention.

I went straight to Magato's hut and addressed him in these words:

"Why did you supply the English in their camp at Rustenburg with provisions, although I had told you to observe a strictly neutral attitude in this war, which is a war between white men? "

Magato replied:

"I received a message from the English saying that they had already taken Heidelberg and were on the way here, and that, if I did not obey their orders, they would come to punish me."

I retorted:

"If you won't listen to me, I shall have to bring you before the court-martial," and caught him by the hand.

While I was speaking to the chief in these threatening terms, the Kaffirs stormed into the hut from every side, armed with axes, assegais and rifles. But one of my men, Piet van der Walt, placed himself with his rifle beside Magato, and threatened to shoot him down if the least harm came to me.

When Magato saw that his life was at stake, he ordered his captains to disperse the Kaffirs. The captains had to beat back the crowd with cudgels and knobkerries before they succeeded in separating them. When the riot had subsided, I said to Magato:

"Call in your Kaffirs again; I want to give them my orders."

Magato at first refused, saying that I could tell him, Magato, what I wanted. But I said:

"No, I will speak to your people myself."

Thereupon the Kaffirs were summoned, and approached unarmed and timidly. I spoke to them, rebuked them for their bad conduct and warned them to keep quiet in the future, as "Kaffirs had nothing to do with this war." After that, I resumed my conversation with Magato, told him how reprehensible his conduct was, and eventually persuaded him to promise that he would remain neutral and neither assist nor oppose the English or the Boers.

As I had to go back to Heidelberg, I asked Magato for a couple of horses. Magato beckoned me into his hut and, when we were alone, said:

"I cannot give you any horses, for, if I did, the English would know it to-morrow. But repeat your

request in the presence of my Kaffirs; then I will refuse, and then you must say, 'Very well, then I will take them by force, if you will not give them to me.' Then I shall say in my heart, 'It is good,' but I shall refuse with my mouth."

I did so, and took two excellent horses for my return journey to Heidelberg.

About this time, a messenger came to ask me to come to the Natal frontier, as the English had requested an armistice in order to negotiate for peace.

I at once hastened to proceed to the appointed spot.

It was a very difficult journey. Thanks to the heavy rains, the roads were hardly practicable, and a circuitous route had to be followed in order to avoid the places occupied by the English. The armistice was to come to an end on the 14th of March; but it was impossible for me to reach my destination, Laing's Nek, in Natal, by that date. In the meanwhile, General Joubert, in view of the delay of the journey, obtained a four days' prolongation of the armistice. Together with my companions, Pretorius, Mare and Dr. Jorissen, I was enthusiastically received by the burghers.

Soon after, a conference was held between the representatives of the Boers on the one hand and Sir Evelyn Wood, for the British Government, on the other. It took place halfway between the two camps. During the armistice, Sir Evelyn had received instructions from the British Colonial Secretary which were to form the basis of the negotiations. These were:

- (1) Amnesty for all the Boer leaders.
- (2) The Boers to be entitled to empower persons to negotiate a peace.
- (3) The appointment of a royal commission to investigate all military questions and to hand over the country.
- (4) Self-government under British suzerainty.
- (5) A British resident to be appointed at Pretoria.
- (6) The foreign policy of the South African Republic to be placed under British control.

The late President Brand of the Orange Free State was to be present at the negotiations in order to facilitate a settlement. The composition of the so-called royal commission gave rise to many difficulties. The British Government wished it to consist exclusively of British subjects, with the exception of President Brand, who was to sit on behalf of both parties.

The Boer leaders, on the other hand, desired a mixed commission, consisting of representatives of both parties. Moreover, the British Government wished to keep back for themselves a portion of the Republic, namely, the Utrecht and Wakkerstroom districts. But this I and the other leaders refused to hear of in any case. After long arguments, Sir Evelyn Wood asked:

"Suppose we do not yield on this point, will you go on fighting? "

I replied:

"That is not a fair question. If we do not yield, will you go on fighting?"

Sir Evelyn Wood answered, "Yes" whereupon I took up my hat, rose and said:

"Then we need not discuss matters further."

Thereupon Sir Evelyn took me by the arm, and said:

"No, come back, you must not be so hasty."

General Smit went so far as to say:

"The best thing would be to let the sword decide."

Another difficulty was the question of the withdrawal of Her Majesty's troops from the Republic

and the provisioning of the English garrisons in the villages during the negotiations. It looked for one moment as though the negotiations would fall through, and that was the moment at which Dr. Jorissen, by my order, drew up his so-called third proclamation.[1]

[1 The text of this proclamation will be found in Dr. Jorissen's *Transvaalsche Herinneringen*, 1897. - **Note by the Editor of the German Edition.**]

I caused this third proclamation to be read out to President Brand, who had by that time arrived and who made every effort to induce me to refrain from publishing that document and to continue the negotiations. This was done, at O'Neill's house.

It was a very difficult matter to agree on the different points. Sir Evelyn Wood did his very utmost to get off with verbal assurances ; and, as the armistice had to be prolonged in order to continue the negotiations, he seized the opportunity, while I was engaged in conversation with General Joubert and Dr. Jorissen, to charge an orderly to take the news of the prolongation of the armistice to the camp. But I noticed this and asked:

"Where is the man going?"

As soon as I heard the nature of his mission, I said to one of Wood's aides-de-camp:

"Stop that man!"

I then went in to the tent and said to General Wood that I asked him, as an honest man, first to sign the agreement containing the points discussed between us. The document lay on the table, but Sir Evelyn refused to sign. It was not until I cried, "Burghers, saddle! " that Wood, who now saw that further evasion was impossible, gave in and signed.

The orderly was then allowed to go off with the news of the prolongation of the armistice.

When the provisional peace protocol was signed, the English officers tried to disparage the Boer victory and to make us confess that we had suffered fearful losses and could, therefore, not have continued our resistance:

"How many did you have killed on the Nek? "one of them asked Joubert, confidently.

"I myself had one," answered Joubert, " and one wounded."

The officer laughed and maintained that he had seen more of our men killed with his own eyes:

"Very well," said Joubert, very angrily. "Do you go and dig one of them up and bring him here; and I promise you I'll eat him, skin and all."

A chaplain from Newcastle, on the other hand, expressed to me his regard for the Boers and his admiration of their courage. The officers standing near were meantime saying that the English had fought very bravely and shot down many Boers, until their ammunition gave out; then, of course, they had to give up the fight:

"Our fellows would let themselves be shot before handing over a cartridge."

I made no reply, but again turned to the chaplain and said:

"When you see Her Majesty, mind you tell her that she must give her soldiers a special reward for the care with which they guarded their ammunition supply; we found it on the hill, quite safely packed on the donkeys."

Wood himself put similar questions. He asked, among other things:

"What were the 200 men for whom you were sending to the Biggarsberg? "

"We heard that you were marching there with 12,000."

"And you sent your 200?"

"Yes, we had no more to send ; but I have seen that they would have been enough."

By this agreement, which was signed by myself and Joubert in the name of the people of the South African Republic, the following objects were secured absolutely free autonomy under British suzerainty, with the appointment of a British Resident at Pretoria, and the return of British property seized during the war. The point that nearly led to the breaking-off of the negotiations, namely, the question of the loss of territory, was left to the decision of the royal commission. Sir Evelyn Wood bound himself not to occupy the positions on Laing's Nek, if the Boers abandoned them, nor to send troops or ammunition to the Transvaal.

Moreover, the royal commission was to settle all undecided matters within six months, to confirm the treaty of peace and to restore the country to the Boers. This commission, which met shortly after, consisted of Sir Hercules Robinson, the newly-appointed High Commissioner; Sir Henry de Villiers, Chief Justice of Cape Colony; and Sir Evelyn Wood. They effected a draft treaty, which is known by the name of the Pretoria Convention of 1881. Long and violent discussions took place in the Volksraad, which was summoned to approve this convention. Five months earlier, in an extraordinary session, I had praised England's magnanimity, expressed my full confidence in the commission and pointed to a reconciliation with England as the basis of a happy national existence, in order to appease the burghers.

But I, too, now found myself obliged to protest against certain articles of the convention, and complained by telegram, but in vain, to Gladstone that several clauses of the treaty contained the opposite of what had actually been arranged by word of mouth. Eventually the treaty was only accepted with the reservation that we were yielding to force and that we trusted that, in view of this forced acceptance, the British Government would see their way to alter the convention and to remove the points which made it unacceptable to the Volksraad, notably the imposition of the suzerainty and the unjust curtailments of territory.

One of the points which offended the burghers was that, instead of being called the "South African Republic," the Republic kept the name of the 'Transvaal State.' The country only recovered the title of South African Republic by the London Convention of 1884. But, in the meanwhile, in my official correspondence with the British Resident, I was always accustomed to speak of the South African Republic. One fine day the latter came to me to complain about this, saying that the name of the country was the Transvaal State, and not the South African Republic.

"How do you prove that?" said I.

"Why," answered Hudson, "by the convention, which clearly says, 'Transvaal State.'" "Very well," I rejoined. "If I sell you a farm and, in the deed of sale, I say, 'I, Paul Kruger, hereinafter called the Vendor, and so on,' then, in what follows, I am no longer 'Paul Kruger,' but the 'Vendor.' Even so in this case. In the convention, just as in drawing up a deed, the Republic is referred to as the 'Transvaal State;' but that does not make it its real name, but only its specification. Its real name is and remains the 'South African Republic.'"

Hudson laughed and said:

"Well, call it as you please, only do not mind if I keep to the name of the Transvaal State."

On the 8th of August, after the Volksraad had met, the country was restored in due form and the dear Fierkleur was once more solemnly hoisted.

Source: <http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page71619?oid=646495&sn=Detail&pid=71616>