

Scramble for Africa

The Great Trek to the Boer War

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In all modern history there can scarcely have been a more

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unnecessary or more futile struggle than that which now engulfed South Africa and was to drag on for the next two and a half years. As they had shown at the time of the Jameson Raid, the Uitlanders, for whose deprivations the British public were being lashed into a frenzy of chauvinistic indignation, did not want to fight their rulers. They were much too busy making money out of the Rand and cared little or nothing for British supremacy in South Africa. Far from helping them, the war crisis caused a severe economic depression and serious unemployment and turned several thousands of prosperous Uitlander families into penurious refugees. Nor did British business require that the Union Jack should fly over Pretoria. The City of London was perfectly happy to invest vast sums of money in the South African Republic regardless of whether Kruger accepted or rejected British paramountcy. The Rand paid handsome dividends; and that was what mattered to the investors. Likewise British traders cared little whether or not their exports to the Republic passed through British territory and were carried on British railways. They were far more concerned to send them by the cheapest route which would make their prices competitive with their rivals. And although the Cape railways had undoubtedly lost a great deal of traffic to the relatively much shorter and more convenient line from Delagoa Bay, this was scarcely a reason for going to war, save perhaps for the more rabid elements of the South African League. True, the loss of rail traffic was only one of many symptoms of the comparative decline in the Cape's former supremacy and of the rising influence of the Transvaal. But this did not mean that a majority even of the English colonists, let alone the Cape Dutch, thought that this decline could or should be arrested by shooting down their competitors with rifles and machine-guns.

The war that was forced on the Boers was the deformed and evil brain-child of three men—Chamberlain, Milner and Rhodes—who were driven by a combination of ambition and fear to compound the notorious errors and injuries done by Carnarvon and Frere some twenty years before. Their ambition had been to create a South African Union under British rule which, together with Canada and Australia, would be a source

of strength and unity to the British Empire and, as such, would promote and enhance the concept of Imperial Federation, so dear to Chamberlain's heart. To this end, the frontiers of British South Africa had to be extended to embrace the two Boer Republics which had for so long impudently refused to be painted red on the map and in which an Eldorado had been discovered incomparably greater than that of all the British territories combined.

Their fear had been that, thanks to its new-found wealth, under the 'malignant' rule of President Kruger, the rapidly growing stature of the Transvaal would shortly eclipse the standing of the British Colonies to a point where British influence would no longer count in any part of South Africa and where the English, not only on the Rand but also in the Cape, Natal and the Chartered Company's territories in the north, would decide to sever their ties with the British family of nations and make common cause with the Boers in a republican union with its capital in Pretoria. Since the Voortrekkers had moved away from the Cape in the 1830s and in between attempts to impose upon them the policy of confederation, successive British Governments had only been prepared to tolerate the existence of another white man's government in South Africa and to accept the Boer Republics, as long as the Boers remained weak, isolated and impoverished. But with the rise of the Rand all this had changed. And as Selborne had put it, it was now feared that 'in a generation the South African Republic will by its wealth and population dominate South Africa. South African politics must revolve around the Transvaal which will be the only possible market for the agricultural produce or the manufactures of Cape Colony and Natal.'

Consumed with their ambitions and obsessed by their fears, Chamberlain, Milner and Rhodes had pulled out every stop in their campaign to arouse their fellow-countrymen. By ceaseless appeals to the jingo spirit, by parading on every suitable occasion the bogey of German, French and Portuguese intrigues and ambitions, and by constantly attributing to Kruger the very desire to dominate South Africa which inspired their own policies, they contrived to overawe a sceptical Cabinet and

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to convert an apathetic public into a chauvinist mob baying for blood and British supremacy. The Liberal Opposition—apart from Rosebery's disciples—remained a notable exception, refusing to be stampeded by such rhetoric and protesting, in the words of their leader, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, that the deprivations of the Uitlanders, however wrong, could never justify 'the senseless appeal to arms' and that to go to war to help British subjects get the vote 'a little sooner' was absurd. But a large part of the press, including *The Times*, the newly established *Daily Mail*, the *Westminster Gazette* and the *Daily News*, plus of course the *Cape Times* and *Argus*, had been stimulated by the publication of Milner's 'helot' despatch to join the chorus of hatred for Kruger's Republic and were demanding extreme measures to gain the Uitlanders their electoral rights. Queen Victoria too, having not forgiven Gladstone for giving away the Transvaal, made no secret of her support for Chamberlain's treatment of the Boers whom she considered a 'horrid people, cruel and overbearing'. To her the war, although regrettable, was a necessary struggle to avoid the intolerable humiliation of seeing the influence of the Transvaal progressively increasing at Britain's expense. In fact, so powerful and pervasive were the fears which Chamberlain and Milner between them had managed to conjure up of South Africa defecting from the Empire that even such a normally severe critic of Pushful Joe's methods as Hicks-Beach was in the end constrained to agree that Britain could not afford to risk the loss of her supremacy for fear of losing the Cape, 'perhaps the most important strategic position in the world and one of the main links of our great Empire'.

Blinded by the dread and distrust of Kruger and his associates which had thus been instilled into them, the British Government and people could not foresee that Chamberlain's pressures and the war which they produced were bound in the end to bring about the very result which they were so desperately anxious to prevent. Ignoring the lessons of the American War of Independence and disregarding Kruger's awesome warning of the price which the Boers would exact for being forced to belong to England, they plunged into war to restore imperial supremacy

by demolishing the Republics. Borne forward on the high tide of jingoism, they could not see that their objective was no longer attainable. For the magic moment during the governorship of Sir George Grey, when the Boers might have been brought painlessly into the British fold, had long since passed and could not now be recalled. And as Ronald Robinson and John Gallacher concluded in their masterly work *Africa and the Victorians*, the restoration of imperial supremacy in South Africa was to prove impossible because it 'cut against the grain of . . . historical experience. The empire went to war in 1899 for a concept that was finished, for a cause that was lost, for a grand illusion.'

After two and a half years of attrition, the futile war came to an end. In 1902 the Boer Republics' endurance was finally exhausted by sheer weight of numbers and, through the peace of Vereeniging, Milner realised his ambition to see the South African Republic 'disappear from the map'. Kruger was a political refugee in Europe and the Union Jack fluttered over the Government buildings in Pretoria and Bloemfontein. But, even with Kruger out of the way and the Boers conceding unconditional surrender, neither Milner nor all the might and majesty of the Imperial Government could achieve what they had set out to accomplish. They could annexe the Transvaal but they could not wipe out its ascendancy in South Africa. They could arraign Cape Dutchmen on treason charges for showing sympathy to the enemy during the war, but they could not turn Boer burghers into loyal British subjects by coercion.

Besides, Britain's reputation in the world suffered grievously from the war. Her armies, which had ultimately to be increased to 400,000 men, including a quarter of a million regular troops, were sadly humiliated as the Boer commandos first pinned them back on every front and then kept them at bay in the long drawn out phase of guerilla warfare which followed the fall of Bloemfontein and Pretoria. More than that, as Merriman had rightly prophesied when the war started, world opinion soon forgot about Kruger's misgovernment and remembered only that Britain had forced a war on 'two petty Republics who

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happened to have the richest goldfields in the world'. Thus the jingo spirit was to wilt before the deadly fire of Boer mausers at Colesberg, Colenso and Spion Kop. As the war and the casualty lists lengthened, the hysteria of 1899 turned to frustration; and when the end finally came, the Imperial Government, now under Balfour's leadership, were more concerned to repolish their tarnished reputation than to exploit their all too empty victory.

The scramble for South Africa had produced its inevitable result. After a hundred years British territory had increased tenfold in area from 125,000 to 1,148,000 square miles. But the purpose for which it had been prosecuted was soon to be lost. Britain might have won the war, but Afrikanerdom was to win the peace. The South African nation which was to emerge from the crucible of British imperialism was to be British in name, but Afrikaner in reality. The Transvaal was confirmed in its supremacy as the focal point of South African industry and commerce. And as the Imperial Government soon relinquished the absolute suzerainty for which Britain had contended for so long, the English communities gradually opted out of the political scene, content as they had always been to conduct their businesses under Boer rule. Afrikaner systems and policies, notably in native affairs, were substituted for British: republicanism and Afrikaner nationalism, Milner's twin nightmares, grew apace. A hundred years of effort to implant an exclusive British dominion in South Africa only proved that the roots of Dutch tradition were everywhere too deep to dislodge; and in the shadow of van Riebeeck's oaks, the 'grand illusion' was finally to wither and die.