

## The Anglo-Boer War in a Century of Peace

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From a South African perspective – and, indeed, from the perspective of many South Africans – the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 appears to have been singularly important. After all, few wars had comparable effects on the population, the economy, or the cultural heritage of the country. It is therefore only natural that this war features prominently in the historical consciousness of South Africa, as was also epitomised by the recent evocations on the occasion of the centenary celebrations of 1999-2002. Looking at this war from a wider perspective, however, the importance of the Anglo-Boer War acquires a different, and perhaps less prominent role. The following article discusses first, admittedly in a cursory fashion, some of the military aspects of this war, and then presents an overview of the evolution of the international system in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The main aim of this article is to see how the Anglo-Boer War fits into both the military and political developments of the “Century of Peace” between 1815 and 1914.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to play the importance of this war down for South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Professor Leo Barnard has only recently stressed the role

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1. This article is the result of a series of lectures organised by Professor Fransjohan Pretorius at the University of Pretoria in February 2004. I owe my gratitude to him not only for having made this exercise possible, but also for his continuing assistance and intellectual stimulation over the years since we first met in 1987. Also, I am deeply grateful to the audience of these lectures for the lively discussions and additional information which I was able to get from them. For additional comments, I would like to thank Lizé Kriel and André Wessels, as well as an anonymous reviewer. Because of the distance, intellectual discussion with colleagues in South Africa is occasionally more difficult than between European countries, but it is just the more rewarding.
2. For the war's role in fostering Afrikaner nationalism, see especially Fransjohan Pretorius' insightful essay, “Afrikaner nationalism and the Burgher on Commando”, in G. Cuthbertson, A. Grundlingh and M. Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War Rethinking Gender, Race, and Identity in the South African War, 1899-1902* (Ohio University Press & David Philip, Athens - Ohio & Cape Town, 2002), pp 67-84; as well as, from a different perspective, H. Bradford, “Gentlemen and Boers: Afrikaner Nationalism, Gender, and Colonial Warfare in the South African War”, in Cuthbertson, Grundlingh &

of this war as the “catharsis” for the Afrikaners, and it is beyond any doubt that the Anglo-Boer War, or more precisely, the myths construed around it, played a decisive role in shaping Afrikaner identity.<sup>3</sup> Probably this country and its peoples would have developed differently (for better or for worse) had it not been for the events of 1899-1902. And, of course, this article does not intend to ridicule the horrible sufferings of large segments of the South African population in this war – of the Boers, of numerous pro-British loyalists and, most of all, of the black and coloured people whose experience has often been overlooked in the past.<sup>4</sup> Even though the following text includes the presentation of late nineteenth and early twentieth century European perspectives, it does not aim at offering a “Eurocentric” view as such. Rather, the aim of this article is to look at the war in South Africa in the context of world politics and conflicts at the turn of the century, and thereby helping to understand some of the factors involved in this war better. I would like to see this article as a further contribution to deal with some of the myths still surrounding this war, especially in the way it has often been (ab)used and instrumentalised for political propaganda purposes. At this point, I would like to call

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Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War*, pp 37-66. About the Anglo-Boer War in general, see especially I.R. Smith, *The Origins of the South African War 1899-1902* (Longman, London & New York, 1996); A. Wessels, *The Phases of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (War Museum, Bloemfontein, 1998). Some of the more useful general histories of the war include E. Belfield, *The Boer War* (Leo Cooper, London, 1975); F. Pretorius, *The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Don Nelson, Cape Town, 1985); T. Jackson, *The Boer War* (Channel 4/Macmillan, London, 1999); E. Lee, *To the Bitter End A Photographic History of the Boer War 1899-1902* (Penguin, London, 1985); D. Lowry (ed), *The South African War reappraised, Studies in Imperialism* (Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 2000); B. Naston, *The South African War 1899-1902* (Arnold, London, 1909); T. Pakenham, *The Boer War* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1979); G.D. Scholtz, *Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog 1899-1902* (Protea, Pretoria, 1998); K.T. Surridge, *Managing the South African War, 1899-1902 Politicians v. Generals* (Boydell/Royal Historical Society, Woodbridge, 1998); P. Warwick and S.B. Spies (eds), *The South African War The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Longman, Burnt Mill, 1980); D. Hall, *The Hall Handbook of the Anglo-Boer War* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1999).

3. L. Barnard, “Die ABO en sy naweë – die katarsis in die Afrikaner geskiedenis”, *Knapsak*, 16, 3, December 2004, pp 3-35.
4. An impressive photographic documentation has been published recently by the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein, namely W.I. Direko, L. Changuion and F. Jacobs (eds), *Suffering of War A photographic portrayal of the suffering in the Anglo-Boer War emphasising the universal elements of all wars* (Kraal, Bloemfontein, 2003).

attention to earlier research on the myths about the Anglo-Boer War, notably the work by Fransjohan Pretorius.<sup>5</sup>

Although the position of the Anglo-Boer War in the context of contemporary military developments is important for the argument put forward in this article, it does neither aim to describe the course of the war (this has been done much better and in greater detail elsewhere), nor to examine its potential “relevance” today.<sup>6</sup> In recent years, many observers have fallen back to look at “small wars” or “asymmetrical wars” of the past, searching for applicable lessons for the early twenty-first century. Both the South African War of 1899-1902, and the Spanish-American War of 1898 (followed by the protracted “Philippine Insurrection”) demonstrated clearly that a quick and victorious military campaign is not always synonymous with a decisive victory in the war, as is shown anew in the present insurgencies in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. This could however hardly be termed a new revelation, neither then, nor now.

### The first “modern war”?

The war of 1899 was often called “the first modern war” or “the last of the colonial wars”,<sup>7</sup> but are labels like these really justified? “Modern” usually refers to an advanced state of technology. However, the Spanish-American War of 1898 had already demonstrated many of the features which were regarded as signs of “modernity” at the turn of the century, such as small-bore rifles firing smokeless powder, and machine-guns,

5. See especially F. Pretorius, “The creation of myths about the Anglo-Boer War”, in M. Clasquin (ed), *Myth and interdisciplinary studies* (University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1993), pp 135-152. In this excellent paper, Pretorius examines aspects like Boer marksmanship, (in)discipline, religiosity, and education, but also refutes common myths that this was a “white man’s war” (it was not), and examines the status of the Boer *bittereinders* who remained in the field right through to the end. See also the same author’s authoritative study: F. Pretorius, *Life on Commando during the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1999).
6. For a more general view of these issues, see – among others – the studies by L.H. Addington, *The Patterns of War since the Eighteenth Century* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984); J. Black, *Warfare in the Western World 1882-1975* (Acumen, Chesham, 2002); B. Bond, *War and Society in Europe, 1870-1970* (Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1994); D. Gates, *Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2001); D. Porch, *Wars of Empire, Cassell History of Warfare* (Cassell, London, 2000).
7. This classification one even finds in the excellent collection edited by Cuthbertson, Grundlingh & Suttie, *Writing a Wider War*, p x.

even though the resulting “emptiness of the battlefield” was clearly demonstrated to better advantage on the South African *veldt* than in the tropical vegetation around Santiago de Cuba. Military surgeons had pioneered the use of X-ray machines in the Greek-Turkish War of 1897. Railways had already been used in the American Civil War (the War between the States) of 1861-1865, as well as in the European wars of 1864 (the German-Danish War) and 1866 (the Austro-Prussian and Austro-Italian campaigns). Observation balloons, sometimes hailed by contemporaries as new assets, had made their appearance on the battlefield more than a century before,<sup>8</sup> and trenches had not been unknown to soldiers of the seventeenth century. In contrast, despite occasional experiments such as at Mafeking (now Mafikeng), wireless telegraphy was not yet widely utilised in the Anglo-Boer War; motorised transport was still in its infant stage; and both armoured cars and aeroplanes had yet to appear on (or over) the battlefield. It would be more correct to see the Anglo-Boer War as one of several wars which highlighted technological advances of the turn of the century, including the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. This would also apply to the “lessons” derived from this campaign. Many countries reformed their militaries at this time (after all, army reforms are a constant evolution), introduced new weapons such as machine-guns, or issued more practical field uniforms in subdued colours. Many more “lessons” were also discussed in the military publications without being actually adopted, but it would be very difficult to attribute these reforms and innovations to any of these wars in particular.<sup>9</sup> To give just one example: in Austria-Hungary, pike-grey coloured field uniforms were introduced in 1908. This followed long discussions in the military publications about the usefulness of drab coloured field uniforms demonstrated in all three wars mentioned. It would be impossible to single out any of these campaigns as the one which had effectively “caused” this reform.<sup>10</sup>

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8. In the Austrian Army Museum in Vienna a French observation balloon is on display which was captured by the Austrian forces at Würzburg in 1796.
  9. For a case study on how the Austro-Hungarian military studied and implemented (or, more often than not, neglected) the lessons of the war, see: E.A. Schmidl, “From Paardeberg to Przemysl: Austria-Hungary and the Lessons of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902”, in J. Stone and E.A. Schmidl, *The Boer War and Military Reforms, War and Society in East Central Europe* 28 [Atlantic Studies on Society in Change 51] (University Press of America and Atlantic Research and Publications Inc, Lanham, New York & London, 1988), pp 161-328.
  10. Schmidl, “From Paardeberg to Przemysl”, pp 260-264.

One particular aspect of this war was its duration – it lasted far beyond the “set-piece battle” phase of 1899-1900 and became a protracted campaign when Boer leaders in 1900 carried on the fight despite their obvious defeat on the battlefield. This, the impact of the war upon society in South Africa and the involvement of large segments of a population in the war, was occasionally interpreted as foreshadowing later developments of the twentieth century. Even in this, however, the South African War was hardly “first”. It rather repeated the experience of the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the French-German War (1870-1871), amongst others.

Despite the new technologies, on a tactical level this war was hardly “modern” at all. The Boer offensive of the first phase of the war in particular was more reminiscent of the manoeuvre-style campaigns of the eighteenth century than of modern, mobile operations.<sup>11</sup> European military observers were quick to deny that the British fought a “modern” campaign either, blaming the initial defeats of the British on dated tactics, faulty reconnaissance and communications, and British inaptitude in general to keep abreast with military progress. The public at large took more notice of the Anglo-Boer War than of other contemporary campaigns, mainly due to the propaganda efforts of the pro-Boer movements in Europe and the United States, and the active involvement of the colonies of the British Empire.<sup>12</sup> Within the professional military establishments of Europe, however, the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) was probably followed more closely than the campaign in South Africa.<sup>13</sup>

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11. This is hardly surprising. Boer operational thinking was mainly based on the experiences of the wars against the native populations of Southern Africa, where the Boer commandos normally tried to occupy important positions and force the African warriors to attack, exposing themselves to the Boers’ superior firepower. This was in fact a sound strategy, based on the principle to minimise casualties as much as possible.
  12. In addition to the works cited in note 2 above, for the Empire’s involvement also see P. Dennis and J. Grey (eds), *The Boer War Army, Nation and Empire* (Army History Unit, Canberra, 2000); C. Wilcox, *Australia’s Boer War The War in South Africa 1899-1902* (Oxford University Press, Victoria, 2002); C. Miller, *Painting the Map Red Canada and the South African War 1899-1902, Canadian War Museum Historical Publication 28* (Canadian War Museum & McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 1993).
  13. It is difficult to assess precisely the impact of these wars. This statement comes from a cursory overview of contemporary military literature, but one would probably have to differentiate for different countries. For example, the war in East Asia was followed closely by Germany and Austria-Hungary because it involved Russia, which for these countries was at the time a more likely enemy than Great Britain.

### Colonial or anti-colonial, small war or total war?

Similarly, the classification of the Anglo-Boer War as the last colonial war appears to be hardly justified. Was the German war against the Herero in South-West Africa (now Namibia) in 1904-1905, to quote just one example, not a colonial war? What about the various colonial campaigns or “police actions” of the inter-war years, and the wars of the de-colonisation period after 1945? The only argument in favour of this assertion would be that the Anglo-Boer War was one of the last campaigns of colonial conquest, as opposed to mere policing or pacification operations, but then, where would the Italian conquest of Ethiopia of 1936 fit into this picture? Indeed, not only from a black African perspective, the colonial conquest of large parts of South Africa had already been accomplished in the 1830s and 1840s, courtesy of the Voortrekkers. Even if this was not “colonial” in a narrow sense, it certainly was a conquest.

From a similar, but different perspective, some observers see the Anglo-Boer War as the first “anti-colonial freedom fight” of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Here again, this author begs to differ. Even if one is willing to accept the Boer view of this war as a pre-emptive one to prevent a possible British occupation (and colonisation) of the Transvaal by force, the term “anti-colonial freedom fight” appears too closely associated with the post-1945 situation to use it in this context. If the term is interpreted more widely, though, we would probably have to include the rebellion of thirteen British colonies in North America in 1775-1783, the various Latin American anti-colonial struggles of the nineteenth century, and the Indian Mutiny of 1857 under this heading, all happening long before Boer commandos invaded Natal and the Cape Colony in October 1899.

Another, more romantic, classification is of the Anglo-Boer War being “the last of the gentlemen’s wars”, but then, what comprises a “gentlemen’s war”? True, acts of chivalry were present throughout this war (notwithstanding some of its more sombre aspects), and until mid-1900 both sides were careful to adhere to the Geneva and Hague conventions, as well as to keep the negative effects of the war upon the population as limited as possible, but the “chivalry” aspect would also apply to the cavalry battles on the Eastern Front or the Christmas truce

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14. It is labelled as such in the introduction to the new, monumental work by H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners Biography of a People* (Tafelberg & University of Virginia Press, Cape Town & Charlottesville – Virginia, 2003), p xiii; although this is done more in the sense of citing stereotype images, as the text of the book is remarkably objective.

encounters in the Great War (First World War), and to numerous other occasions in later wars. In view of the brutal guerrilla phase of the war, however, the “gentlemen’s war” label appears hardly justified at all, but rather smacks of cynicism.

Despite occasional statements to the contrary, the Anglo-Boer War was not the first guerrilla war either. Guerrilla or partisan operations had been a common feature of many European wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ranging from small surprise attacks on supply trains to the brief occupation of Berlin by Austrian General Count András Hadik’s hussars during the Seven Years’ War (1757). Guerrilla operations were also a prominent feature of numerous colonial campaigns. Therefore it is not surprising that the measures taken by the British to counter the Boer forces remaining in the field after the end of the regular fighting by mid or late 1900 followed earlier examples. The taking of hostages and the burning of farms after guerrilla attacks were expressly modelled on the German reprisals against the French *franc-tireurs* of the 1870-1871 war. Concentrating the civilian population in internment camps<sup>15</sup> and building blockhouse lines<sup>16</sup> to deny freedom of movement to the guerrillas followed the Spanish example in their operations against Cuban guerrillas in the 1890s, including the naming of these camps as “concentration camps”.<sup>17</sup> The burning of farms and fields, as well as the destruction of livestock were common elements of most “small wars” of the period when it proved impossible to conquer the military forces of the opponent in the field. As British Colonel C.E. Callwell, whose “textbook for Imperial Soldiers” was published in three editions between 1896 and 1906 (and has been re-published since), wrote about these “small wars”:

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15. For an interesting overview of this issue, as part of a larger research project, also see E. van Heyningen, “Women and Disease: The Clash of Medical Cultures in the Concentration Camps of the South African War”, in Cuthbertson, Grundlingh & Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War*, pp 186-212. A new perspective of this – often hotly contested – issue is likely to result from an extensive research project carried out by Professors Van Heyningen and Iain Smith of Warwick University.
  16. See J. Hattingh and A. Wessels, *Britse Fortifikasies in die Anglo-Boereoorlog (1899-1902)* (War Museum, Bloemfontein, 1997).
  17. A.J. Kaminski, *Konzentrationslager 1896 bis heute eine Analyse* (Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 1982), from p 34. On British counter-guerrilla in general, see S.B. Spies, *Methods of Barbarism? Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer Republics January 1900 – May 1902* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1977); S.B. Spies, “Women and the War”, in Warwick & Spies (eds), *The South African War*, pp 161-185.

When there is no king to conquer, no capital to seize, no organized army to overthrow, ... the objective [of the military operations] is not so easy to select. It is then that the regular troops are forced to resort to cattle lifting and village burning and that the war assumes an aspect which may shock the humanitarian.<sup>18</sup>

When some of the Boer leaders failed to acknowledge defeat in 1900 and carried on the war for another two years, it should have been clear to them that in doing so they risked the destruction of their country. While we have to admire the determination and sufferings of the *bittereinders* (those Boers who fought to the “bitter end”) and the leadership skills of their leaders, we have to doubt the wisdom of the latter in prolonging the conflict needlessly for two years.

One might wonder, of course, whether terms like “small wars” or, more recently, “low intensity conflict” are not in fact rather cynical. For a villager whose huts are burned down, for the farmer whose farm is destroyed and livestock taken, for the women being raped, or for the people killed, these wars are neither “small” nor of “low intensity”. Whereas a war might appear to be just another “splendid little war” (the term used by United States’ Secretary of State John Milton Hay to describe the Spanish-American War of 1898) from the privileged viewpoint of the metropolis, the impact in the country concerned is more likely total, rather than limited. In fact, this author is convinced that cases of “total warfare” overseas played an important role in shaping the military mind of the early twentieth century, and that colonial campaigns (including the war in South Africa) form part of the sad ancestry of the “total war” concepts of the 1940s.<sup>19</sup> Here again, however, the South African War was unique in only one respect: that many victims of the counter-guerrilla were “white”, and therefore called for more attention among observers in Europe and in America than other colonial campaigns. Contemporaries opposed these counter-guerrilla measures

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18. C.E. Callwell, *Small Wars A Tactical Textbook for Imperial Soldiers* (Greenhill, London, 1990), p 40.

19. I have written about this aspect in more detail in my contribution: “Kolonialkriege: Zwischen großem Krieg und kleinem Frieden”, in M. Rauchensteiner and E.A. Schmidl (eds), *Formen des Krieges Vom Mittelalter zum Low-Intensity-Conflict, Militärhistorische Forschungen 1* (Styria, Graz, Wien & Köln, 1991), pp 111-138. A short summary was published in the proceedings of the 2000 Stockholm conference: “Kolonialkriege zwischen ‚Low Intensity‘ und totem Krieg”, in Anonymous, *La Guerre Totale – La Défense Totale, 1789-2000, XXVIème Congrès International d’Histoire militaire* (Svenska militärhistoriska kommissionen, Stockholm, 2001), pp 412-416.



not only because they were inhuman, but rather because they were counter-productive, motivating the Boers to carry their war on, instead of contributing to a quick end to the fighting.<sup>20</sup> It was still a long evolution for counter-guerrilla strategies to proceed from these senseless policies of destruction (born out of frustration) to the more effective means of trying to win the civilians' "hearts and minds" – although later twentieth century campaigns from Vietnam to Afghanistan showed how difficult it would still be to apply these principles in practice.

The fact that both sides in this conflict were not only "whites" – despite the participation of a significant number of coloureds and blacks on both sides, a phenomenon often neglected in studies of this war before the 1970s<sup>21</sup> – but also left significant written sources, certainly is a distinguishing feature of this war. From both British and Boer combatants and civilians there exists an abundance of diaries, memoirs, letters and books which allow for a more balanced interpretation than is the case in many other conflicts. Taking into account the comparatively small number of participants, the Anglo-Boer War might indeed be among the best-documented, and most highly researched wars. This however refers to the singular position the Anglo-Boer War has acquired in historiography, and not on the battlefield.

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20. This point was for example several times mentioned in the Austro-Hungarian consular reports from South Africa. For more detail, see my article, "Zur Geschichte der K.(u.)K. Konsularvertretungen im südlichen Afrika bis zum Ersten Weltkrieg", *Mitteilungen des Österreichischen Staatsarchivs*, 38, 1985, pp 223-273.
  21. For the participation of black and coloured Africans, see P. Labuschagne, *Ghostriders of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) The Role and Contribution of Agterryers* (University of South Africa, Pretoria, 1999); B. Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902, African Studies Series 68* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991); H.T. Siwundhla, "The Participation of Non-Europeans in the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902." PhD thesis, Claremont, 1977; P. Warwick, *Black People and the South African War* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983 – reprinted Ravan, Johannesburg, ca 1999); P. Warwick, "Black People and the War", in Warwick & Spies, *The South African War*, pp 186-209; B. Mbenga, "The Role of the Bakgatla of the Pilanesberg in the South African War", in Cuthbertson, Grundlingh & Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War*, pp 85-114; J. Lambert, "Loyalty Its Own Reward: the South African War Experience of Natal's 'Loyal' Africans", in Cuthbertson, Grundlingh & Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War*, pp 115-135; M. Genge, "The Role of the EmaSwati in the South African War", in Cuthbertson, Grundlingh & Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War*, pp 136-158.

## Pro-Boer propaganda

The surprising degree of sympathy with the Boers throughout Europe and North America, with the notable exception of the British Empire – where the pro-Boer feelings elsewhere were mirrored in emotions to “rally for the Empire” – is well-known. It was certainly due to the fact that the Boers were not, in the language of the day, just another bunch of natives, but that they were of European heritage. In Germany and the German parts of Austria-Hungary, where the pro-Boer agitation was largely carried out by the radical Pan-German League (*Alldeutscher Verband*), the Boers were portrayed to be really Germans, the German *Brudervolk* (brother people) in Africa, and therefore deserved support against “perfidious Albion”. There certainly were strong pro-Boer feelings, promulgated through the newspapers.<sup>22</sup> This led to the formation of Boer Committees, tokens of sympathy being sent to President Kruger and his generals, and also later to the suffering inmates of the internment camps. A number of volunteers went – for various reasons – to South Africa and joined the Boer forces in the field.<sup>23</sup> Boer hats became fashionable, people sported ribbons in the Transvaal colours, “Boer dances” were popular, and children played “Boer and Brit” instead of “cowboys and Indians”. The prefix “Boer” became an advertising tool, comparable to “eco-” or “bio-” in our times. In Germany, Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands, pubs and even towns were named after the Boer Republics and their leaders.<sup>24</sup> In Vienna, the *Bockwurst* sausage was renamed

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22. See U. van der Heyden, *Diplomasie en politiek die pers, die boererepublieke en Duitsland tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog* (Protea, Pretoria, 2002). I am indebted to André Wessels for drawing my attention to this study.
  23. About foreign involvement in the war, see among others A. Davidson and I. Filatova, *The Russians and the Anglo-Boer War* (Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, 1998); M. Lupini, *Camillo Ricchiardi Italian Boer War Hero* (Scripta Africana, Melville, 1988); T.J. Noer, *Briton, Boer, and Yankee The United States and South Africa 1870-1914* (Kent State University Press, s.l., 1978); B. Pottinger, *The Foreign Volunteers They fought for the Boers, 1899-1902* (Scripta Africana, Melville, 1986); G. Sani, *History of the Italians in South Africa 1489-1989* (Zonderwater Block, Edenvale, 1989); E.A. Schmidl, “Österreicher im Burenkrieg 1899-1902.” PhD thesis, University of Vienna, 1980.
  24. An interesting example of this Boer hype can be found in the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein, in the form of the Dutch tiles representing different scenes and personalities of the Anglo-Boer War, originally created for the “Cinema Transvaalia” in Amsterdam. I am indebted to Johan Wolfaardt of this museum for additional information. Other examples of gifts of sympathy can be found in the War Museum in Bloemfontein, as well as in the Kruger House Museum in Pretoria. See also U. Kröll, *Die internationale Buren-Agitation 1899-1902 Haltung der*

*Burenwurst* (“Boer sausage”) and marketed as being similar to the food eaten by Boers on commando – it is still known under that name today, perhaps a lasting testimony to the Boer hype of more than a century ago. To some degree, this was more a fashion than a deep or lasting sentiment though.

Actually, this pro-Boer movement was, if anything, more anti-British than pro-Boer. In this disguise, with the brutal counter-guerrilla measures of 1900-1902 serving as one more proof of British viciousness, fragments of the pro-Boer agitation survive to this day, having been reinforced by the British-American bombing campaign of the Second World War, and only recently re-surfacing in the context of the American-British War against Iraq of 2003. Interestingly enough, these anti-British tendencies find the extreme right and the extreme left united in their opposition against whatever might be the enemy of the day. In discussions with “old Nazi types”, the argument that “it were the British who invented the concentration camps” regularly comes up – as if the existence of internment camps by that name would be any excuse for the horrors of Nazi or Soviet death camps four decades later. Common features of the anti-British and anti-American attitudes are anti-democratic, anti-Semitic and anti-modern sentiments and fears. It is no coincidence that the Boers were portrayed in the pro-Boer propaganda as traditionalistic, religious peasants – as opposed to the (British and Jewish) business-oriented, liberal city-dwellers.

In any case, the pro-Boer movement was a comparatively short-lived phenomenon, despite its lasting propaganda effects. This actually coincides nicely with the recent assessment by Andrew Porter, who demonstrated in his essay of 2002 that the impact of the Anglo-Boer War on British public opinion at the time was probably likewise exaggerated. As Porter wrote, most contemporaries in Britain “had only a limited or passing interest in South Africa and the war”, and the war in fact “diverted attention away from the empire and refocused it on the makeup and constitution of Britain itself”.<sup>25</sup> Actually, many pro-Boer writers of the day were perhaps more interested in utilising the Boers as positive examples to improve the moral and martial potential of their own peoples, rather than being overly concerned with the complex situation in

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*Öffentlichkeit und Agitation zugunsten der Buren in Deutschland, Frankreich und den Niederlanden während des Burenkrieges, Dialog der Gesellschaft* 17 (Regensburg, Münster, 1973).

25. A. Porter, “The South African War and Imperial Britain: A Question of Significance”, in Cuthbertson, Grundlingh & Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War*, pp 287-302, quotes from pp 298, 300.

South Africa itself. In pro-Boer propaganda, the Boers were usually depicted as superhuman, saintly beings, embodying all positive qualities of humble and pious peasants – and more than one visitor to the country were rather shocked when they found out that the Boers were, after all, quite normal human beings, with negative as well as positive characteristics.

### **The attitudes of the European governments**

Pro-Boer sympathies in Europe were largely confined to certain strata of society, mainly the middle classes and the petty bourgeoisie. For the lower classes, the ordinary peasants and workers, the Anglo-Boer War simply was too far removed to worry about it, with the exception of some Social Democrats seeing it as yet another example of imperialistic expansionism. On the other end of the social spectrum, the higher nobility usually were more distanced, or even outright pro-British – partly due to existing family ties and intermarriage. In Austria-Hungary, for example, British Ambassador Sir Horace Rumbold reported that “the high nobility were never once led astray” in their sympathies for Britain’s cause. Emperor Francis Joseph openly declared – at the illustrious *Hofball* at the Imperial Palace in Vienna in January 1900 – that “*dans cette guerre, je suis complètement Anglais*”.<sup>26</sup> This attitude was not unlike that of the other European (and the American) governments. Officially neutral, they were really pro-British. This would include “looking the other way” as far as possible when the British military purchased certain goods – like cannons or horses – which, strictly speaking, could have been interpreted as violating these countries’ neutrality.

From the point of view of the Boer republics, the pro-Boer agitation in certain countries obviously led to the belief that these countries – including their governments – supported the Boers and might even have been willing to intervene diplomatically or militarily on behalf of the oppressed republics.<sup>27</sup> This hope for foreign intervention was

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26. “In this war, I am completely English”. Schmidl, “From Paardeberg to Przemysl”, from p 173; H. Rumbold, *Final Recollections of a Diplomatist* (Arnold, London, 1905), from p 359.

27. It is not quite clear, whether and to which degree *bittereinder* Boer leaders actually believed in the possibility of European intervention. Following his trip to Europe in late 1901, the young Breton nobleman and Boer volunteer Robert de Kersauson de Pennendorff stressed the unlikelihood of a European intervention, despite the strong pro-Boer sympathies he had encountered in Belgium. R. de Kersauson, *Le dernier commando boer Un volontaire*

occasionally cited as the rationale behind the Boer leaders carrying on with the war beyond mid-1900, after the British had occupied the Boer capitals. Hopes for foreign intervention however were in vain, as the members of the Boer delegations touring the European capitals and the United States in the later stages of the war painfully found out.

In fact, the European powers always hoped for an early end to the war, mainly because they considered it a waste of human and material resources, and a disruption of economic progress, endangering the stability of the times. At this point, a little excursion on the general background of European cooperation at the time of the Anglo-Boer War appears useful. The “Concert of Europe”, as it was then called, went back to the peace system established for Europe in 1815, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. In clear contrast to the “balance of power” system which had actually become a source of instability in the eighteenth century, the system created by the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815 proved remarkably stable.<sup>28</sup> It actually lasted for nearly a hundred years, despite occasional interruptions such as the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, and the (comparatively minor) wars of 1854-1856, 1859, 1864, 1866, 1870-1871, and 1877. If we follow data cited by Paul W. Schroeder, ten times as many men were killed in war during the eighteenth century than between 1815 and 1914, and this despite the increased populations of the nineteenth century. The system of 1815 even more or less successfully proved capable of integrating the newly formed “national” states of Italy and Germany. However, tensions grew from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as illustrated by the Fashoda incident of 1898 (with French and British interests clashing in the Sudan), the Morocco crises of

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*français dans la guerre anglo-boer 1900-1902* (Editions du Rocher, s.l., 1989), p 188. Already in an earlier interview with Free State President Steyn in October 1900, the latter had expressed doubts that public opinion (in this case, referring to France) could bring European governments to intervene. De Kersauson, *Le dernier commando boer*, p 59.

28. Here I am following the writings of P.W. Schroeder who convincingly showed the differences between the eighteenth century “balance of power” system and the post-1815 European order. Especially see his major oeuvre, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763-1848* (Clarendon, Oxford, 1994). However, aspects of “balancing power” were still a factor outside of Europe, and it might not be a mere coincidence that the disrapture of the European order started at the end of the nineteenth century, when the era of colonial conquest was by and large over and balancing became more difficult. On a more philosophical level, one might argue that it was exactly this lasting peace which led many of the younger generation to actually long for a new war, for the “cleansing power” of the *Stahlgewitter* (“thunderstorms of steel”, to paraphrase Ernst Jünger).

1905 and 1911 (when Germany eventually had to accept French colonial ambitions there), and the “annexation crisis” of 1908 (following Austria-Hungary’s annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina which nominally still belonged to the Ottoman Empire). Growing suspicion between the European powers led to the creation of a “bloc” system which was characterised by a deadly automatism. Eventually, the European system collapsed in the crisis following the assassination of Austria-Hungary’s Successor-Designate Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914, leading to the outbreak of the First World War.

Before 1914, however, the efforts to stabilise Europe were as important as the growing tensions – at least for Europe, the 99 years between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the start of the First World War truly amounted to a “Century of Peace”. Throughout the nineteenth century, the cooperation between the European powers had proven able to defuse potential crises. Lacking the basis of an international organisation like the League of Nations, created after the First World War, or the United Nations Organisation formed at the end of the Second, coordination of policy took place in conferences either specifically convened at foreign ministerial level (such as the Berlin Conference of 1878 achieving a compromise solution for South-Eastern Europe), or arranged between the ambassadors of the powers (like the London Conference of 1913 overseeing the outcome of the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913).

Stabilisation of the “fringe” zones of Europe was among the major concerns of the Concert of Europe in the decades before the outbreak of the First World War, and this included the launch of the first international peace operations on Crete (1897-1905) and in Albania (1913-1914).<sup>29</sup> In this spirit of European cooperation, there clearly was little room for outside disruptions such as the war in South Africa. One should also note that in 1900, the European powers (together with America and Japan) jointly intervened in China to suppress the Boxer Rebellion – a campaign comparable to some of the “peace enforcement” operations a century later. This assessment explains why the European governments, the clear pro-Boer sympathies of large parts of the populations notwithstanding, observed a pro-British neutrality during the war, and why, as said before,

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29. Earlier interventions had usually been organised by only one or two powers, such as the Austrian intervention in Naples in 1821, or the Austro-British naval action in Lebanon in 1840, but with the outspoken or tacit approval of the others. The 1878 Berlin Conference sanctioned the occupation and administration of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary, and that of Cyprus by Great Britain.

speculations about a possible German or Russian intervention in favour of the Boers remained just that – speculations.

This assessment does not conflict with the true humanitarian concerns for the fate of the Boers, especially in the guerrilla phase of the war, expressed not only by pro-Boer groups (in Britain, as well as on the Continent), but also by some statesmen and monarchs (such as Czar Nicholas II, or Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands). The Boers were however simply not supposed to win this war, their tactical ability and numerous military successes notwithstanding.

Not surprisingly, the end of the Anglo-Boer War was generally welcomed by all, even though it brought European countries and their citizens fewer possibilities for commercial ventures or emigration to South Africa than had been hoped for. In fact, the British administration in its effort to “anglicise” the former Boer Republics,<sup>30</sup> restricted immigration and also commercial relations for non-British subjects to a large degree, without “rewarding” foreigners for their home countries’ pro-British policy during the war. To some extent, one could even say that non-British European foreigners in South Africa, and not the Boers, were the real victims of this war and the policies of “anglicisation” afterwards.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this author is more and more convinced that the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 was not a singular phenomenon, completely different from the other wars of its time.<sup>32</sup> Rather, it was one of several “wars of transition”, fought in the late nineteenth and early

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30. For a recent assessment of Sir Alfred Milner’s policy of “anglicising” the South African colonies, and how this conflicted with Lord Kitchener’s vision of a pacified South Africa, see K. SurrIDGE, “The Politics of War: Lord Kitchener and the Settlement of the South African War, 1901-1902”, in Cuthbertson, Grundlingh & Suttie (eds), *Writing a Wider War*, pp 213-232.

31. This anti-foreigner post-war climate was over and over again described in the Austro-Hungarian consular reports (see the article quoted in note 20), and could certainly be confirmed by looking up other countries’ consular reports. In fact, these reports constitute a still largely untapped source of information about South Africa.

32. When, back in 1978, I first embarked on research for my doctoral thesis on the Austrian participants in this war, I was, like any student, convinced that this war – “my topic” – held a special importance, but working on different aspects of military history for more than a quarter of a century, I have come to see this war from a somewhat different, more balanced, perspective.

twentieth centuries, all introducing various elements which together would gain importance in the Great War (First World War) of 1914-1918. Thereby, it certainly foreshadowed developments of the twentieth century, including the tragic consequences of “total war” policies employed during the guerrilla phase of the war, but, sadly, even in these aspects it was not untypical of its time.

### **Abstract**

From a South African perspective the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902 appears to have been singularly important. Few wars had comparable effects on the population, the economy, or the cultural heritage of the country. Looking at this war from a wider perspective, however, it acquires a different, and perhaps less prominent role. This article discusses some of the military aspects of this war, and then presents an overview of the evolution of the international system in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It examines how this war fits into both the military and political developments of the “Century of Peace” between 1815 and 1914. In conclusion, the author is convinced that the Anglo-Boer War was not a singular phenomenon, completely different from the other wars of its time. Rather, it was one of several “wars of transition”, fought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, all introducing various elements which together would gain importance in the Great War (First World War) of 1914-1918. Thereby, it certainly foreshadowed developments of the twentieth century, including the tragic consequences of “total war” policies employed during the guerrilla phase of the war, but, sadly, even in these aspects it was not untypical of its time.

### **Opsomming**

#### **Die Anglo-Boereoorlog in die Eeu van Vrede**

Vanuit ‘n Suid-Afrikaanse perspektief lyk dit asof die Anglo-Boereoorlog van 1899-1902 van uitsonderlike belang was. Min oorloë het ‘n vergelykbare invloed op die bevolking, die ekonomie en die kulturele erfenis van die land gehad. Wanneer die oorlog egter teen ‘n breër agtergrond gesien word, blyk dit dat dit ‘n ander, dalk selfs minder belangrike rol gespeel het. Hierdie artikel ondersoek enkele militêre aspekte van die oorlog en bied dan ‘n oorsig oor die evolusie van die internasionale sisteem in die negentiende en vroeë twintigste eeu. Dit ondersoek waar dié oorlog in beide militêre en politieke ontwikkelinge gedurende die “Eeu van Vrede” tussen 1815 en 1914 inpas. Ten slotte



kom die skrywer tot die gevolgtrekking dat die Anglo-Boereoorlog nie 'n uitsonderlike verskynsel was wat heeltemal anders as ander oorloë van die tyd was nie. In teendeel, dit was maar een van talle “oorgangsoorloë” van die laat negentiende en vroeë twintigste eeu wat almal elemente bekendgestel het wat eers tydens die Groot Oorlog (die Eerste Wêreldoorlog) van 1914-1918 saam van betekenis sou word. Dit het dus ontwikkelinge in die twintigste eeu, insluitend die tragiese gevolge van die praktyke van “totale oorlog” wat gedurende die guerrilla-fase van die oorlog aangewend is, voorafgegaan, maar ongelukkig was selfs hierdie aspekte nie ontipies van die tyd nie.

### **Key words**

Anglo-Boer War; Century of Peace; colonial war; First World War; military development; modern warfare; pro-Boer propaganda; total war.

### **Slutelwoorde**

Anglo-Boereoorlog; Eerste Wêreldoorlog; Eeu van Vrede; koloniale oorlog; militêre ontwikkeling; moderne oorlogvoering; pro-Boer propaganda; totale oorlog.