

Thoughts on the origins of the Anglo-Boer War

Written by Johann Hamman

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I first became immersed in the spellbinding tale that encompassed what we knew as the Anglo-Boer war of 1899 to 1902, when I was still very young. This was our version of Boys' Own Magazine, and my late parents, who had many forebears who fought with the Boer commandos, told us children stories about concentration camps and heroic Boers who lived in their saddles for months on end, fighting the mightiest Empire on earth.

This story became part of our psyche in a Rider Haggard-like way and when I grew older, I learned that my grandparents were concentration camp survivors. My school years concentrated on this part of Afrikaner history in a determined manner, and I started to swerve in a more fact-finding direction to establish my personal place in this tale. I learned English, and were introduced to people like Winston Churchill, Redvers Buller, Koos De La Rey, Christiaan De Wet and Jack Hindon, a few notables among the thousands of others that inhabit this fascinating narrative.

I drifted through contemporary South African political affairs on the wrong end of employment equity, and ended up as a professional tourist guide in Kwazulu-Natal, where I could work for my own pocket. Military history permeated my genes from the side of my maternal ancestors, and I found myself doing tours to places like Ladysmith, Spioenkop and Blood River. Hundreds of American and British visitors, among others, ambled through my guiding and teaching efforts, and it soon became necessary to know more about this most destructive conflict that seared through my country and my people's consciousness like the Angel of Death unleashed.

Early in the nineteenth century, when the British took over the Cape and abolished slavery, the Boers moved into the hinterland to escape their rule. They had already developed into a hardy, resourceful, quarrelsome, fiercely independent race with their own language, customs, and system of government. They were a people of, among other, Dutch and French Huguenot descent whose ancestors had gone to the Cape of Good Hope from the seventeenth century onwards. Most of them were dedicated believers in the almost fundamentalist doctrines of the Dutch Reformed Church at the time. These two Boer Republics, the Orange Free State and the South African Republic, also called the Transvaal, carved from a harsh countryside by the Boers, were about a 160 000 square miles in size.

The discovery in 1886 of the largest gold deposits the world had ever seen, led to a massive influx of mostly European immigrants into the Transvaal Republic, and put the fear of God into the old Transvaal president. He feared that this would lead to blood, and he was right. The smell of gold was in the air, in the new taverns and houses of ill-repute that sprung up like mushrooms

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everywhere, and it added much to the war talk of the time. If gold could indeed smell, the air would have been thick with it.

These so-called "Uitlanders" (Foreigners) were a motley crew from almost all English-speaking parts of the world, mainly Englishmen and Americans. Ian Smith wrote that they were disunited, divided by class and certainly not a homogenous group. More importantly, and I quote: "Few were eager to renounce their existing citizenship and take on that of the South African Republic." Olive Schreiner wrote in 1899 that the majority of these Uitlanders are not integral parts of the State, merely temporarily connected with it, have no interest in its remote future, and only a commercial interest with the present. The so-called franchise issue had frequently been played up as one of the Uitlanders' main points of contention, but this problem should be seen from Kruger's point of view as well. There was no way that he could acquiesce, as this could well wrench the Republic from Boer hands. The Uitlander demands for "reforms" were strident, and their numbers soared rapidly. The Transvaal government was indeed ill-equipped to deal with them, but their grievances were caused by annoyances, and certainly not oppression.

The Anglo-Boer War of 1899 tot 1902 saw unbelievable hardship among the civilian population of the Boer Republics. Why did this war start, and what were the origins of this last so-called "gentlemen's war?" The real casus belli of the war was the abortive Jameson Raid. Politics of the time saw to it that an explosive situation developed in the Transvaal Republic during the 1890's. The spurious role personalities like Cecil John Rhodes, Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, and Sir Henry Loch, British High Commissioner, had played in deliberate events leading up to the Jameson Raid, now becomes the focal point here.

The 66 men 'Reform Committee' started to make revolutionary noises, and Rhodes pounced upon their so-called grievances as an opportunity to reannex the Transvaal, and afford him unfettered access to the gold fields. Doctor Leander Starr Jameson, Rhodes's confidant and friend, waited with 500 men at Pitsani, just across the Bechuanaland border. They were mostly Rhodesian policemen and volunteers. They would wait for the Reform Committee to start their revolt against their so-called 'oppression' in a country that was not theirs to begin with, but their plans were an open secret. Everybody knew about it. Chamberlain, in London, and Robinson in Cape Town, knew about it too, but they naturally denied all. Farwell was of the opinion that Milner thought it was somehow morally wrong that Englishmen should be ruled by other races, and the Transvaal would simply have to change its ways, or Britain would go to war with it. There could be no way that Kruger could even consider most of their demands, and English politicians like Sir Alfred Milner and Joseph Chamberlain pounced upon this chance to expand their empire-building gains.

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There was much bickering among the conspirators, and the Americans among them totally rejected the idea of British Rule. Rhodes was growing impatient, and Jameson even more so. Unfortunately, the troop detail that was to cut the telegraph wire to Pretoria, got drunk, cut the Cape line, and Rhodes could not warn them that the game was up. Jameson thought to spur the reluctant Uitlander plotters in Johannesburg into action with his invasion, but after a running battle with a Boer commando, he was forced to surrender about 10 miles from Johannesburg. This fiasco was the source of acute political embarrassment for Britain, and what is more, the Germans started rattling their sabres. The Kaiser's congratulatory telegram to Kruger about dealing with "armed bands that invaded your country," caused a storm of anti-German protest in England. Joseph Chamberlain became colonial secretary a few months before the ill-fated Jameson Raid. He and his jingoist supporters created an atmosphere for war, and he was too powerful a political figure for his cabinet colleagues to disown.

Current issues in Western countries, today, relating to assimilation problems with Muslim people, reminds me well of this. The origins of the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 stem from issues much related to latter day assimilation of Muslim immigrants into Western countries. These Eastern immigrants are loudly clamouring for home government to adapt to the ways of Islam, and they are not above violence, like the hugely offensive poppy burning episode not too long ago. The Uitlanders were also very vocal in their demands for changing the laws, and the right to vote in a country that was not theirs. They also never stopped to contemplate that they were guests in somebody else's home. Farwell wrote that Sir Alfred believed that the British were natural rulers, and it was simply wrong that Britons could be ruled by other people. After all the futile meetings and endless correspondence, Kruger could not really tolerate the intense disrespect shown to his country and his people much longer. The Transvaal Government's ultimatum sped up commencement of hostilities, but the war would have happened without it, anyway. Boer commandos soon streamed into Natal, and the Anglo-Boer War was underway.

This conflict saw the participation of many foreigners, on both sides. American citizens flocked to South African shores in 1900. The self-appointed 'colonel' John Blake is one such American that comes to mind. He commanded the Irish-American Brigade at the disastrous battle of Elandslaagte. The Americans were joined by Germans, Dutchmen, Irish, Russians, Frenchmen, Italians and various other nations. In the course of the next few weeks we will take a look at them.

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PS. There is also a Anglo Boer War facebook group with many stories and pictures:

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#!/group.php?gid=51827154181>