

Republics born and conquered

Written by Jon Phillips

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In my last column, “Afrikaner Footsteps: White Africans, a contradiction in Terms?”, I sought – hopefully successfully – to demonstrate that not only are we white Africans, owing allegiance to no other land, but also that our forefathers landed in a largely deserted land. They did not come with fire and sword, but with peace in their hearts and a yearning to negotiate; to buy land rather than take it by force of arms.

Murder and massacre

I mentioned how the *voortrekker* (pioneer) leader Piet Retief and his followers were treacherously massacred by the Zulu King Dingaan – *after he* had signed a treaty with Retief granting his settlers land in what is now modern-day KwaZulu-Natal. The massacre of Retief and all of the men of his pioneer column was followed by a Zulu attack on the defenceless women and children left behind at the *voortrekker* camp. They were massacred and the site of the camp became a town named Weenen (Weeping) in their memory. Other voortrekkers were forced to come to avenge them and fight a series of actions against the Zulus, culminating in the Battle of Blood River, in which 470 *voortrekkers* decisively beat between 10 and 15 000 Zulus.

The first Boer Republic, Natal, was then born in 1839 but didn't last long. The British government seemed to persist in regarding all of the Dutch settlers as its subjects, due to its annexure of the Cape and despite the fact that ordinary Britons in the Cape lived in harmony with their Dutch brothers and wished them well when they trekked away from British rule.

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At the same time, other Boers, trekking north, had crossed the Orange River, but they too were pursued by the British government, which annexed the area in between the Orange and Vaal Rivers in 1848, naming it the Orange River Sovereignty.

Independence given

In the 1850s British policy changed and they began to look for ways to lessen their responsibilities in southern Africa. This led to a convention being signed in Bloemfontein in 1854, in which independence was given to the Boers and the area being renamed the Boer Republic of the Orange Free State. North of the OFS, the Boers in the Transvaal also set about organising themselves and the Transvaal Republic was established by the Sand River Convention, between the British government and the Boer leaders in 1852. Natal, however, had been flooded with British immigrants and became a predominantly English-speaking area. Thus, Britain itself granted independence to the Boers.

Diamonds and greed

The discovery of diamonds at Kimberley changed the picture somewhat. Diggers came from all over the world in search of a fortune, but ownership of the diamond fields was disputed between Boer republics and several Griqua and Tswana chiefs.

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Seeing an opportunity when it presented itself, Britain annexed the diamond fields in 1871 and established the Crown Colony of Griqualand West – an act that was seen as both cynical and opportunist in the Orange Free State. British foreign policy suddenly seemed to take a new interest in southern Africa and after the failure of British diplomatic initiatives the Transvaal was annexed by Britain in 1877.

First blood

The annexure met with almost universal opposition from the Dutch-speaking inhabitants of both the republics and, indeed, in the Cape Colony itself. In the course of the next couple of years the resentment grew until a full-scale war broke out in 1877, known in South Africa as the First War of Liberation and in the UK as the First Boer War. It wasn't a long and bloody affair – the Boer commandos quickly brought British forces to battle and scored an overwhelming victory at the Battle of Majuba Hill. This ended the war and independence was achieved under the name of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (South African Republic). Boers believed the issue resolved but Britain pressed ahead with its plans to federate South Africa and Zululand was added to the Imperial Crown in 1879 after the Zulus were finally defeated in the Anglo-Zulu Wars, but not before dealing the British a humiliating defeat at the battle of Isandlwana.

Gold and The Raid

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Yet another dimension was added to an already complicated situation with the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand – the area surrounding modern-day Johannesburg, just south of the Boer capital, Pretoria. The reef was quickly swamped by foreign prospectors and the bantu that they brought with them, the population quickly growing to 100,000 causing great consternation to the ZAR government.

Not content with mining, the prospectors began to claim political rights within the ZAR and, despite concessions granted to them by ZAR President Paul Kruger, nothing seemed to be enough to satisfy their demands.

The discontent on the reef was being fiercely stoked by arch-imperialist and Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, Cecil John Rhodes, who dreamed of the land between the Cape and Cairo coming under the control of the British flag. A private entrepreneur and multimillionaire, Rhodes undeniably had strong supporters within the British government in this aim, most notably Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain.

Unhappy with the slow progress he was achieving on the reef, Rhodes instructed his most trusted colleague, Leander Starr Jameson, to organise a flying column of cavalry troopers from what had then become Rhodesia to prepare to launch a lightning strike into the ZAR, ostensibly to come to the aid of the “oppressed” British subjects in Johannesburg, led by, among others, Rhodes' brother Frank.

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In 1895 Jameson launched his attack too soon and his movements were known to the Kruger government, which mobilised commandos to intercept the raiders. After a brief fight, Jameson and his men surrendered and were taken to prison where, despite their deeds, they were treated leniently and quickly freed.

War and conquest

Kruger, by now thoroughly alarmed at the turn of events, entered into an alliance with the sister Boer republic of the Orange Free State.

British demands for voting rights for the 60,000 foreign whites on the Witwatersrand were rejected by Kruger, who called for the withdrawal of British troops from the border of the ZAR. The British, however, refused withdrawal and Kruger declared war.

I do not intend to cover the Second Anglo-Boer War except to say that once the might of the British Empire was brought to bear on the two republics, despite early successes, they were quickly overrun and their capitals occupied. Irritatingly for the British, however, the Boer Commandos did not abandon the struggle along with the occupation of their capitals, as could be expected from a European opponent; instead they fought on by means of mobile commandos living off the land.

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In an attempt to curb this, Lord Kitchener had a series of blockhouses built to pen the Boer commandos in and established the world's first concentration camps when he sought to deny the commandos sustenance by the scorched-earth policy of burning farmhouses and herding the old men, women and children into the camps. Despite heroic efforts by nurses, including the British woman Emily Hobhouse who quickly became a Boer heroine, 26,000 Boer women and children died in the camps, due largely to disease and malnutrition. This inhumane policy created a bitterness that lasts to this day.

The Boer forces, seeing inevitable defeat and the total devastation of their countries, finally surrendered and the treaty of Vereeniging ensued in 1902 under which the republics lost their independence and were soon incorporated into what Britain had always wanted: the Union of South Africa, in which they were forced along with the Cape Colony and Natal.

International precedent for a return to autonomy

The trend in recent years has been away from imperialism towards the self-determination of peoples. The collapse of communism in 1990 highlighted this and many of the states that were subjected to Soviet imperialism have been granted self-determination and are now independent countries.

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The former Yugoslavia shows great similarities with the South African situation. Both were artificial states cobbled together after war: the First World War in the case of Yugoslavia, which sprang from the defeated Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Anglo-Boer War in the case of South Africa. In both countries, states that were formerly independent but internationally recognised prior to imperial conquest, were forced into a union against their will.

Yugoslavia now longer exists; it has now reverted to its pre-imperial collection of independent states. The question must be asked: Why not the same in South Africa? Why cannot at least the independence of the Orange Free State and Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek be restored? Is it a question of double standards or merely hypocrisy because the world cannot accept that white men came in peace, made treaties, and built modern countries in a continent where the bantu have never built anything left to their own devices? Is it just because we are white, because, if so, that can only be called racism.