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The South African War: Implications and Convictions of Postwar Politics and Policy

The early twentieth-century was welcomed with an array of wars and conflicts across the globe. From the Boxer Rebellion in China to the Third Afghan War in the Middle East, the world was experiencing turbulent unrest that would shape the politics of countries in the future. More notably and for the purposes of this paper, the South African War from 1899 to 1902 can serve as one of the most illustrative examples of how strategies of warfare can create ripe environments for the political stability (or instability) of the future. The British sought to annex the two Boer states in South Africa in an attempt to remain the economic power that it had been for so many years. Essentially, the British Empire deployed African irregular troops, and adopted a Scorched Earth policy as part of its military strategy in order to subdue the Boer republics of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. These military strategies adversely affected the many Boer civilians and soldiers, and consequentially contributed to the formation of racist policies and politics that would follow in the postwar period.

The causes of the war at the beginning of the twentieth-century were a result of British imperialist and capitalist desires for economic power. Francis William Reitz explains that “in 1886, gold was discovered in great quantities and in different parts of the South African Republic.”¹ This gold rush in South Africa meant that the Boers would be able to develop into one of the most powerful economies in the world, rivaling the imperialist powers of Europe. Within a few years, the South African Republic was “ranked among the first gold producing countries of the world.”² With this in mind, the British sought to acquire the wealth that was in the regions of the Boer Republics, and as a result launched several military expeditions to annex them.

¹ Francis William Reitz, “A Century of Wrong,” in *The South African Reader*, ed. Clifton Crais and Thomas McClendon (London: Duke University Press 2014), 169.

² *Ibid.*

The war, as Smuts described, was in “three [distinct] stages of legitimate warfare, guerilla warfare, and brigandage.”³ The initial phase of the war can be described as set-piece, with the British using “traditional” warfare methods of large foot soldiers that sought to threaten the Boer republics and bring the Boers under its rule. Due to the military intelligence of the Boers and President Kruger, the Boers were able to subdue British attacks. The notorious “Black week” in December of 1899 is telling of Boer success against the British, as the Empire suffered three major defeats and up to 2,000 casualties.⁴ As a result, the British started to change its tactics, and began to recruit able-bodied men from Manchester, and foreign troops from Australia and Canada.⁵ Eventually, the British offensive proved to be strong under the new leadership of Lord Roberts as his imported military and cavalry were able to fight several set pieces of war, which led to the inevitable annexation of the Orange Free State.⁶ The British General Staff were sure of a victory because of its military superiority; however, the Boers were able to adjust. With only parts of the Transvaal under Boer control, the Afrikaners resorted to a strategy of guerilla warfare in an attempt to deter further British expansion.

The Boers initially employed a successful strategy of guerilla warfare, but also forced the British to adopt new strategies of war. In “A Hundred Years of Attitude” the author explains that “like a commando, Afrikaners formed a closely knit and very mobile unit—[with] ears pitches, reconnaissance and were light-footed.”⁷ The guerillas were ready at any moment to change direction, policy, or principle in order to deter British forces. Logistically speaking, the rise of Afrikaan nationalism led many young men to take up arms and rally for the cause of the war. The

³ W. Hancock and Jean Van Der Poel, *Selections from the Smuts Papers* Vol. 2 (London; Cambridge University Press, 1965), 472.

⁴ Professor John Higginson, Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, October 24, 2016.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “A Hundred Years of Attitude” Moodle Site for Power and Violence in South Africa, November 1, 2016, 61.

guerilla phase involved several small Boer armies that targeted British lines of communication, and also used “hit and run” strategies that inflicted minor, but meaningful damage upon the British.⁸ This success, however, was short-lived as the British adjusted and began to use more detrimental policies that would adversely affect the Boer population. Deneys Reitz, A Boer commando in the later phases of the war, mentions that “five months ago we had come into this western country hunted like outlaws, and today we practically hold the whole area from the Olifants to the Orange River four hundred miles away...we had enjoyed a number of success which the British probably regarded as minor incidents...Unfortunately Lord Kitchener’s relentless policy of attrition was slowly breaking the hearts of the commandos.”⁹ Though the Boers were able to gain strength under General Smuts and inflicted damage upon the British, it did not match the war of attrition that Lord Kitchener launched upon the Boers.

The British military under Lord Kitchener used many different strategies and policies in reaction to the guerilla warfare that was launched by the Boers. An important feature of his strategy was the use of African irregular troops in an attempt to weaken and destroy Boer opposition. John Higginson points out in “Hell in Small Places,” that “more than 50,000 Africans were under arms in the Transvaal at the end of the war” and that “Boer generals were claiming that their commandos were fighting a virtually all black force.”¹⁰ Africans performed a lot of the groundwork for the British army as they contributed as “irregular troops and a variety of roles, such as scouting and transport.”¹¹ In “Africans in the South African War”, the author describes how the Barolong people were called to fight on behalf of the British in Mafeking as the Boers attempted to seize control of

⁸ Professor John Higginson, Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, October 24, 2016.

⁹ Deneys Reitz, “A Boer Commando,” in *The South African Reader*, ed. Clifton Crais and Thomas McClendon (London: Duke University Press 2014), 183.

¹⁰ John Higginson, “Hell in Small Places: Agrarian Elites and Collective Violence in the Western Transvaal, 1900-1907.” *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 1 (2001), 99.

¹¹ *Ibis*, 93.

the city. General Boden-Powell enrolled over five hundred armed Barolong soldiers with rifles that joined the British in defense of the black and white quarters in Mafeking.¹² The African forces were successful in its artillery strikes against the Boers, and certainly proved that the British had intended to use the natives as a source of enraged military support. The African people, of course, viewed the Boers as a people that had seized much of their land.

The use of Africans as a military strategy consequently shaped the politics of the future in the postwar period. In 1902 peace negotiations, Boers were frightened by the actions and movements Africans, and Mr. Birkenstock mentioned “there is also continual danger from the Kaffirs, whose attitude towards us is becoming positively hostile...one morning recently a Kaffir commando, shortly before day break, attacked a party of our men.”¹³ In other words, the fact the Africans were part of the British successful offensive forced Afrikaners to think about the future in regards to their position of power. They understood that the Africans recognized the opportunity to remove Boer power from their region, and as a result confronted the issue of power in peace talks. This sentiment is seen throughout African involvement in the war.

In addition, Jan Smuts depicts how the British used Africans as part of their warfare strategy, and ultimately serves as evidence of the fact that the use of Africans played an integral role in the development of policies and politics in the postwar period. In his papers to W.T. Stead, Smuts explains that he was “surprised to find, during [his] march through the Orange Free State that in many encounters with the British Columns, not a single dead or wounded British soldier fell into [Boer] hands, but in all cases armed Kaffirs or colored Cape Boys.”¹⁴ The British Empire deployed mostly African troops as part of its columns that were integral in capturing Boer cities. Not only did

¹² Ibid.

¹³ S.M. Molema, “Africans in the South African War,” in *The South African Reader*, ed. Clifton Crais and Thomas McClendon (London: Duke University Press 2014), 194.

¹⁴ W. Hancock and Jean Van Der Poel, *Selections from the Smuts Papers* Vol. 2 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 483.

using African troops serve to support military numbers, but also forced a divide between African tenants and landowners. Higginson explains that “once the British blockhouses made movement though the countryside impossible for Boer commandos, as well as civilian officials such as *landdrosts* and *veldcornets*, their hold over their African tenants ceased to exist.”¹⁵ The British essentially capitalized on African grievances and desires for better land taxes and conditions, and as a result recruited Africans into their irregular troops.

Furthermore, Smuts recognized the increase in African soldiers as he explains “indeed all the Native tribes in and around the South African Republic had been armed by the British military authorities, and have committed horrible atrocities on fugitive or peaceful women and children.”¹⁶ This statement describes the tensions that were beginning to form between the Boers and Africans that would be reflected in policies in the postwar period. Smuts shows his discontent with the Africans, and tries to create a narrative in which Africans were depicted in a negative, savage light. Indeed this was a ploy for keeping Boer whites in power with the British, while crushing the rights of Africans. He explains that this “understanding is essential to the continued existence of the white community as the ruling class in South Africa.”¹⁷ Essentially, the British employed thousands of African irregular troops to aid in the war against the Boers, recognizing their grievances as a source of power. As a result of the use of Africans, tensions and hostilities rose between the Africans and Boers, resulting in attitudes that would reflect racist policies in the postwar era. S.M. Molema explains that even after the Africans assisted the British in warfare, “it is a fact that their condition

¹⁵ John Higginson, “Hell in Small Places: Agrarian Elites and Collective Violence in the Western Transvaal, 1900-1907.” *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 1 (2001), 99.

¹⁶ W. Hancock and Jean Van Der Poel, *Selections from the Smuts Papers* Vol. 2 (London; Cambridge University Press, 1965), 483.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 484.

has grown worse and worse every year, their rights never many, nor mighty, have been curtailed systematically since then to now, and the future is dark and dreary.”¹⁸

Additionally, the British implemented a Scorched Earth Policy in 1901 after the Boers had resorted to guerilla warfare in an attempt to hasten the end of the war. More specifically the use of concentration camps crippled and destroyed the Boer population, adversely affecting the future of South African politics and ideology. Higginson explains that “at the outset of 1901 Lord Kitchener and the British General Staff sought to isolate the armies of the Orange Free State and South African Republic from the rural population.”¹⁹ By doing so, the British would cut off communications between Boer soldiers and civilians, and as a result would destroy the moral of the fighters. He goes further to explain that “concentration camps and small forts, or block houses, which were strung together by 3,700 square miles of barbed wire fencing, became the chief means of achieving this end.”²⁰ The British created upwards of forty-five camps for Boer internees, in which the majority were women and children.²¹ Of the 118,000 that were interned, close to 28,000 died in the horrible conditions of the concentration camps. Emily Hobhouse explains how “some twenty to twenty five [women and children] were carried away daily.”²² She also explains how many soldier camps were strung around the concentration camps, and with diminishing supplies, became even more difficult to feed the many internees. The British used this policy of concentration camps under the guise of “refugee camps” to mask the cruelty that was enduring in the camps. Higginson explains that “the loss of nearly a generation of [Boer] children in the concentration

¹⁸ S.M. Molema, “Africans in the South African War,” in *The South African Reader*, ed. Clifton Crais and Thomas McClendon (London: Duke University Press 2014), 195.

¹⁹ John Higginson, “Hell in Small Places,” 97.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Emily Hobhouse, “Concentration Camps,” in *The South African Reader*, ed. Clifton Crais and Thomas McClendon (London: Duke University Press 2014), 185.

²² *Ibid.*

camps numbed rural Afrikaners into a stolid hatred of British authority.”²³ The use of concentration camps was an attempt to hasten the war by cutting off communication between Boer civilians and soldiers. This policy detrimentally affected the overall population of the Boers, and in turn affected the relative influence of their political influence and existence. Similarly, the policy of farm burning as part of the Scorched Earth campaign contributed to the overall decline of influence, power, and numbers of the Boer population.

The British resorted to a policy of farm burning after implementing concentration camps as part of the strategy. By burning farms, the British murdered hundreds of Boers, dislocated many women and children, and also destroyed the farming economy which resulted in a schism of classes. Higginson explains that in Marico and Rustenburg, “by 1904 more than half of the nearly 20,000 whites in the two districts were under 15 years old. Death and dislocation had made orphans of many of them after the war.”²⁴ Smuts describes in detail the condition of many Boers, explaining that “throughout both republics all farms and the buildings thereon have been burnt down—all foods or means of obtaining food, such as farming implements of all descriptions have been ruthlessly destroyed... all living animals—horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, fowls, even dogs have been killed.”²⁵ Essentially, the British effectively depleted the population of the Boers by attacking whatever meant Boer sustenance. The British saw this as a strategy to force the surrender of the Boers as its troops would not be able to sustain itself. Since the Boers passed down their farms from generation to generation, burning them would effectively disrupt this cycle, and essentially create a landless class of Boers. As a result, many Boers were displaced and at an economic disadvantage in the future.

²³ John Higginson, “Hell in Small Places,” 105.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ W. Hancock and Jean Van Der Poel, *Selections from the Smuts Papers* Vol. 2 (London; Cambridge University Press, 1965), 467.

Women and children often fled their houses after farms were burnt, ultimately displacing them.²⁶ As a result of displacement and the destruction of farmhouses, many impoverished Afrikaners left the Western Transvaal and Northern Orange Free States for cities “and towns of the Witwatersrand in the tens of thousands.”²⁷ At the same time, “the increasing number of white, poor meant that the sharp social distinction between *heerenboren* and *bywoner* also grew sharper.”²⁸ This would create an internal conflict between the Boers, where the poorer half would be left at an economic disadvantage because their farms were burned and livelihood crushed. The British created a sharp divide among the Boers that left many Boers looking for new land and opportunity out of the Transvaal. With a population in depletion and social distinctions becoming more apparent, Boers would try to be on equal footing with the British at the end of the war. This meant that a defined distinction had to be made in between the Boers and Africans in order to give them an advantage of power since they their farms and cattle were destroyed.

In the end, the use of African troops and farm burning adversely affected the civilians and soldiers alike, creating a sense of urgency to maintain white rule at the end of the war. With the creation of the Union of South Africa, the country began its era of Jim Crow that was far more pervasive than the policy in the United States, as “most black South Africans still lived in impoverished and increasingly overcrowded native reserves.”²⁹ Not surprisingly, the constitution excluded Africans from voting, while whites earned fifteen-times more the wages than blacks by 1920. Many of the policies that followed in the postwar period reflected these anxieties, with creations such as the poll tax of 1906 and Native Land Act of 1913. In “Bhamatha Rebellion” Msime Ka Beje described the horrendous aftermath of the war for the native Africans that led to the

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ John Higginson, “Hell in Small Places,” 106.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Crais, Clifton, and Thomas V. McClendon. *The South Africa reader: History, Culture, Politics*. (2014), 200.

Zulu Rebellion. He explains that “people are caused to be resentful by the whites, a cause of rebellion- because unexplained things are brought about daily,” such as police arrests that were made without warrant or cause.”³⁰

Oppressive systems of taxation and land restrictions were also put into place to assure that South Africa was to remain a country of white supremacy. For example, a poll tax was created “which people said had the effect of separating sons from their fathers by treating them as separately taxable individuals.”³¹ These acts were deliberately put in place to oppress and crush the Africans while maintaining the white supremacist status quo. The Native Land Act of 1913 was another step that the South African Union government took to maintain white power, as Africans were prohibited from buying or renting land outside the native reserves or scheduled areas.³² It was the white farmers from the Transvaal and Orange River that helped to push this legislation forward. By limiting mobility and keeping Africans on reserves, they could never progress and or be on the same equal footing as the white occupants.

The military strategies employed by the British in the South African War heavily influenced racist policies and laws that were enacted in the postwar era. With the use of African forces, the British Empire was able to implement its scorched earth policy of farm burning and use of concentration camps. African forces were the ones on the ground in combat with Boer soldiers and civilians, which ultimately created a further divide between the two. Concentration camps effectively depleted the population of Boers as women and children made up a majority of the internees who were imprisoned and died. This adversely affected many of the Boer soldiers, as it

³⁰ Solomon T. Plaatje, “The 1913 Natives’ Land Act,” in *The South African Reader*, ed. Clifton Crais and Thomas McClendon (London: Duke University Press 2014), 201.

³¹ Msime ka Beje, “Bhambatha Rebellion,” in *The South African Reader*, ed. Clifton Crais and Thomas McClendon (London: Duke University Press 2014), 208.

³² Crais, Clifton, and Thomas V. McClendon. *The South Africa reader: History, Culture, Politics*, 200.

took a toll on their morale in addition to the struggles they faced when the British started to destroy farms. By attacking farmlands and cattle, the British effectively destroyed any form of sustenance for the Boer population, and also displaced thousands of Boer civilians. This created a divide between the Boers as many of them became impoverished and at an economic disadvantage by the time the war ended. In order to maintain the white supremacist status quo, the Boers and British worked in conjunction to enact legislation that would make it nearly impossible for Africans to achieve economic mobility or leave reservations. In all, the South African War serves as a prime example of how military strategies can influence postwar policies. The war can ultimately be seen as a precursor to the apartheid that would follow during the next century in South Africa.

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