

# ANGLO-BOER WAR (1899-1902) — I&S Summative

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## 1.0 INSTRUCTIONS / QUESTIONS

1. What were the interests the British Empire had in the Boer Republics?
2. What led to the Anglo-Boers War / Why did the Boers revolt against the British?
3. What advantages and disadvantages did the British face in the war?

## 2.0 ESSAY

The first Anglo-Boer War (1880-1881) was an inevitable conflict that came as a result of strained relations of the colonials and locals towards the British and European nations.

The colony at the southern end of Africa was formed by the Dutch, though not immediately. They were well aware of the unclaimed lands but had no intention of colonising it until two sailors of the Dutch East Indian Company were stranded on its shores and established an outpost, and thus the territory was turned into a Dutch colony. There were many disputes between the colonisers and the locals called Khoikhoi, or as they were called by the colonisers, *Hottentots*, which roughly translates to 'idiots'. The disputes were mainly about landownership and livestock, which resulted in three small-scaled wars that ended in 1677.

Although the Anglo-Boer War wouldn't start until the 19th century, the groundwork for it was already present from the beginning. The Dutch had strained relations with the British and were at each other's throats for a very long time, and so this resentment instilled the seeds of resentment that would fuel the conflict down the road. While the British Empire expanded, the Dutch were already preparing their African colonies for potential conflicts: *"The first rumours of war between the Dutch and English surfaced in 1664. By 1666, the fort at Good Hope had begun a transformation into the Castle of Good Hope, a project that wouldn't be completed until 1679. This was one of five fortifications created solely by the Dutch to protect from what was felt to be an imminent war with England,* (Freeman, Henry. *Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End*)."

The colony quickly expanded as French immigrants arrived, and with them arrived also women. Previous to this the colony was largely made of a male population, and thus its growth was stagnant, but with the arrival of women the society grew and flourished and formed its own unique culture. The French culture and language was largely suppressed, as the schools in the colony taught only Dutch. Its population grew, and thus the colony's borders had to expand, but this was not the only reason.

Despite the lack of interest the Dutch Indian Company had in the colony, they were still very much subject to its guidelines and commands. The Dutch Indian Company were not interested in developing the company nor in interfering in its business, but still demanded a large sum to be returned to them as compensation. Ironically, the natives of the colony referred to themselves as the 'free burghers' while still being under the control of the Company. The burghers' were not pleased with this situation, and so began expanding the borders of the colony to escape the Company's influence and control.

While the expansion did not have the desired effect, it did change one key aspect of the small society of burghers. They became adjusted to the cruel terrain and turned into skilled riders, archers, and strategists, – all the skills required to survive in the harsh conditions. They had a firm reputation among their neighbours and became notorious for their efficiency, something that would later be seen in the first Anglo-Boer War.

*"Then in 1795, the burghers, heavily taxed and without protection from the Bantu, expelled the Company. This became a major factor to the bankruptcy of the Dutch East India Company in that same year;* (Freeman, Henry. *Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End*)."

However, this would not mean that the colony was free just yet. In 1795 there were large changes in the political landscape of Europe. Holland fell to the French, and the 'Orange Prince' of Holland fled to England. The prince had newfound interest in his colonies, but when he visited

the colony, he found it in 'barbaric' disarray. *"Upon arrival, they discovered that the "frontier justice" of the Boers had developed a proclivity towards certain atrocities, such as torture during questioning, which the British quelled immediately. They then set themselves the task of governing the colony, in order to bring it back under some kind of control. The Dutch declined the offer and, seeing another tyranny, the fierce Boers began a campaign against the British oppressors,* (Freeman, Henry. Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End)." In an attempt to escape the British influence, two independent nations were formed in 1854: the Orange Free State and the Transvaal, which would last until the end of the century.

The conflict ended with the British taking control of the colony, and they would rule the colony until the escalation of the conflict, one that was considered inevitable by those who were observant of the dynamics.

*"Sir Arthur Conan Doyle said it best: Take a community of Dutchmen of the type of those who defended themselves for fifty years against all the power of Spain at a time when Spain was the greatest power in the world. Intermix with them a strain of those inflexible French Huguenots who gave up home and fortune and left their country forever at the time of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The product must obviously be one of the most rugged, virile, unconquerable races ever seen upon earth. Take this formidable people and train them for seven generations in constant warfare against savage men and ferocious beasts... [...] Combine all these qualities and all these impulses in one individual, and you have the modern Boer—the most formidable antagonist who ever crossed the path of Imperial Britain. – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Great Boer War",* (Freeman, Henry. Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End)."

The British took control of the two independent states in 1800-1803 and turned them back into their colonies, which was not welcomed by the Boers. The annexation of Transvaal was considered to be a rash decision, but at the time the British suspected that if they would wait any longer the Germans would claim the territories for themselves first. Still, this move was costly. Not only was Transvaal already in a dire financial situation, the Boers were also unable to pay the high taxes presented by the British, resulting in a near financial crisis. But the British would not yield and remained a firm grip on the population. This led the Boers to write a letter to England, stating their desire to remain independent. The letter went unanswered, and in 1880 the Boers revolted.

To say that the war was a disaster would be an understatement. The British heavily underestimated the Boers, thinking of them as mere farmers rather than the hardened men and women they were. While the Boers were keenly educated on their terrain and had well-reversed Gorilla tactics, the British relied on their organisation and modern technology to outmatch the natives. Before proper fighting could begin, the Boers freed the Transvaal state and raised their own flag above the castle. They renamed the Transvaal state into the South African Republic.

The British quickly understood that they had underestimated their opponent, though the man in charge of the conflict, did not. The Boers kept winning the fights and caused the British heavy losses, while the Boers lost only a handful of men, sometimes none at all. The situation was dire, and the British were running out of troops and supplies. The man in charge, Sir George Colley, was instructed to wait for reinforcements, but was 'forced' into action when his supply line was endangered by the possibility of yet another Boer attack; It is, however, uncertain why Colley had decided to face the Boers head-first. He had the option of waiting out the inevitable conflict and gain reinforcements, but instead led his men into a massacre. *"Casualties were listed at 283 men, almost half of what Colley had taken up Majuba Hill. The Boers had lost only one man, with a handful injured,* (Freeman, Henry. Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End.)" The answer to why Colley decided to fight against the Boers despite the clear disadvantage is uncertain, and the man died in the fight, so the answer was never provided. It was then that for the first time in a long time the British found themselves as the short end of a war.

*"When the peace treaty was signed on March 23rd, the British had for the first time since the Revolutionary War found themselves on the losing end of a conflict. The Boer were awarded self-government in the Transvaal under British suzerainty, leaving them to handle all foreign affairs and matters of tribal relations. This was signed and then ratified October 25th, 1881, after which British troops withdrew. This Pretoria Convention was then superseded by the London Convention two years later, which gave the Boer the same rights. Things should have been quiet going forward. They might have been, had it not been for the discovery of gold in 1886,* (Freeman, Henry. Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End.)"

Indeed, it was the discovery of gold that sparked the interest of the European powers once more. One could compare this interest to the gold rush in America, but it is far from a fair comparison. Instead of just a few specks of gold, the Boers found themselves in the ownership of gold deposits that were so large they required fine machinery to be extracted and the organisation of companies to handle.

There came an influx of outsiders in the country, who quickly outnumbered the Boers, which did not appeal to the natives. However, the Uitlanders brought in a substantial amount of money that made up the larger portion of the country's economy, and thus the prospect of banishment became unthinkable. Still, the Uitlanders were largely oppressed despite their contributions to the economy. They had no voting rights and were largely pushed out of schools and the public, and were taxed more than the Boers. This led to high tensions between the two populations, and the Boers were forced to subsidize their policies: It was not quite successful. An Uitlander could attain citizenship after five years of living in the country, but somehow that time period expanded to fourteen years a few months after.

Conflict was imminent.

Cecil Rhodes, governor of the Cape, decided it would be best if the Transvaal and the Orange Free State would be once again united under the British rule to put things back into place, but this plan was doomed from the beginning. The Uitlanders were in on this plan and agreed to support Cecil in his man in his conquest, however the Boers were all too familiar with foreigners marching against them, and were quick to action.

*“December 29th, 1895 a troop consisting mostly of Rhodesian police and a certain amount of recruits crossed the border. Their goal was Johannesburg. Their plan was to cross in secret – but the Boers had known from the moment that they set foot into the country where they were and what they were doing. The invading force pressed hard, but were under constant attack from the Boers. On January 2nd 1896 they stopped at Doornkop, a farm in the Transvaal. Sorely needing rest after almost two-hundred miles' worth of hard riding without sleep, they were only two hours from Johannesburg, where they expected reinforcements from the Uitlanders. Here they found out those reinforcements weren't coming. Trapped with the Boers at their back, and a city closed to them to the front, their only option was to fight. As expected, the whole thing ended badly, with 65 dead (more than 10% of the invading force). The rest surrendered and were put in the Pretoria jail, later standing trial for an action they thought had been sanctioned by the British government. Jameson himself served a 15-month sentence, and the British wound up paying over one million pounds in reparations, (Freeman, Henry. Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End).”*

This was only the beginning of the conflict. If relations between the Boers and the British had been strained before, they became outright antagonistic as a result of the crushed Uitlander uprising supported by the British. While the Uitlanders had the support of the British Empire, the Boers found themselves with their own European supporter...

On January 3rd, 1896, President Kruger of the Transvaal received a telegram from Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany stating his congratulations on their victory, and a promise of future support should further conflicts arise. This was the final push of humiliation the British needed to take to war, (Britannica.com).

The three heads of this conflict were Joseph Chamberlain, Sir Alfred Milner, and President Kruger.

Joseph Chamberlain was the Colonial Secretary and his sole goal was to unite South Africa under the British rule, a motive fuelled by the need of the African gold, which Transvaal was in surplus of. Sir Alfred Milner was close to Chamberlain, and was the one to push Joseph to take measures against the Boers and support the Uitlanders. He appointed Milner as the British High Commissioner in South Africa and sent him there along with British troops meant to protect the Uitlanders from the Boer oppression. At first, Chamberlain made attempts to solve the issue diplomatically, but these were unsuccessful.

*“In September 1899, Chamberlain demanded full voting rights for the Uitlanders, a move that would eventually spell doom for the Boer culture. On October 9th, 1899, the President of the South African Republic issued an ultimatum giving the British 48 hours to vacate. By this point the British had planted approximately 20,000 soldiers on South African soil with more on the way. The English government refused the ultimatum. The South African Republic declared war on England, (Freeman, Henry. Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End).”*

The British had learned from their previous crushing defeat against the Boers, but the natives were still a formidable force to be reckoned with. The first siege of the war (the siege of Ladysmith) was the first defeat for the

British, but the Siege of Mafeking was not in the Boers' favour. The siege lasted for 217 days due to the British planting fake mines and barbed wire to fool the Boers. The Boers redirected most of their forces elsewhere, and so once the remaining troops finally made a move against the siege, they were quickly outnumbered and defeated. This victory was a relief for the British, and for some time the word "Mafeking" became a slang for "celebrating excessively".

*"Yet while there had been some success for the British with these sieges, they again faced defeat at Colenso, Magersfontein, and Spionkop, leaving this first stage of the war with the rather unsettled feeling that neither side was clearly winning or losing. This initial phase of the Second Anglo-Boer War is the only stage where the Boer were clearly on the offensive. Subsequently, they would fight a defensive battle against the British. The problems they would encounter would stem from two distinctive factors, the first being a true lack of real organized objective or goal. Allowing themselves to be drawn into these long-drawn-out sieges was not to their advantage, and only tied up men and resources that could have better been used elsewhere. The second problem came from their guns. The Mausers used by the Boers had been purchased from Germany. A mistake in ammunition choice made them difficult to fire with accuracy. This was an error that could not be rectified, as the British very quickly took control of the waters around South Africa, and successfully maintained this blockade throughout the conflict. While many battles were a clear success for the Boers, they would eventually be out-gunned," (Freeman, Henry. Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End)."*

The biggest change in the British approach towards the war was in assigning a man with previous experience with a similar terrain to that of South Africa. Field Marshal Frederick Sleigh Roberts was assigned to lead the war on December 23rd, 1899, and despite suffering heavy losses, managed to overwhelm and outsmart the Boers by adapting to their tactics and exploiting the resources he was provided with by his homeland. It was through his successes in suppressing the Boers and forcing them onto the defensive that the Boers had surrendered, ending the war. Roberts was deemed a hero in England and awarded the title of Earl, and would become one of England's renown generals.

After Earl Roberts returned to England, the Transvaal and the Free Orange State fell into the hands of one Lord Kitchener.

Lord Kitchener decided to employ the same tactics as his predecessor, although the war was considered to be over. His efforts were to demoralise the Boers and destroy any remnants of the uprising. He did this by burning down villages, destroying farmland, and effectively ravaging the country.

*"To make matters worse, he took the families of the Boers – the women, the children and any non-combatative men - and added them all to the "refugee camps." However, these camps had become something much darker and sinister in the meantime. The burgeoning population of these camps had created deplorable conditions. The British could not, and did not, supply adequate medical, sanitary, or nutritional requirements for the people held there. These concentration camps became terrible places of death as the inhabitants succumbed to death in droves from basic illness and starvation. The numbers were horrifying. It was bad enough that 177 women and 1,676 men had died in such places, but it was the sheer number of child casualties that were the most heartbreaking. 22,074 children under the age of 16 died in these camps. To many who looked back on this afterwards, this was a crime, not just of humanitarian proportions, but of genocide. The impact was staggering upon future generations of Boers, (Freeman, Henry. Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End)."*

The war officially ended with the complete Boer surrender.

*"The war finally ended with the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging on May 31st, 1902. The War had ended with 20,000 British troops and 14,000 Boer dead. More disturbing was the loss of 27,000 white women and children – obvious non-combatants. Also not to be forgotten was the deaths of 13,000 – 20,000 blacks, also victims in their own concentration camps, (Freeman, Henry. Boer Wars: A History From Beginning to End)."*

Despite the official surrender, many Boers continued fighting and caused small revolts across the country. Many did this because even after being freed from the concentration camps, they had nowhere to return to. The British "scorched Earth" policy destroyed almost all fertile land and left behind a destroyed country, which was now only worth the gold it had on its territories.

Both wars are a tragic tale of innocents dying due to what can essentially be considered to be greed and the pride-fullness of the British Empire.

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