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The Political Conflict of the Anglo-Boer War

Matthew C. Fesmire

The Anglo-Boer War left a confusing, apathetic, and almost ambivalent political atmosphere in Great Britain from the beginning of 1899 to the end of the colonial conflict in 1902. For Great Britain, the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century was the conclusion of the great Victorian era. However, the close of the Victorian era was unfortunate because the Anglo-Boer War (Boer War) changed the course of British politics. The ending of British colonialist expansion was the result of the Boer War. But why did the war have this effect after an entire century of rapid colonial expansion?

The answer is found in the rapid changing of British opinion concerning imperialism that occurred during and after the Boer War. Before the war, British opinion was generally in favor of colonialism. On the eve of the war, British opinion favored imperial paramountcy, the supersession of the authority of the Kruger Boer government in their rights as British citizens, over avoiding war. Most Britons felt

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the war would be over quickly because politicians and the media assured them that the Boers were outmatched. However, that was not the case. The Boer War became an ugly conflict that changed the course of warfare in British history.

The reversal of British opinion on imperialist expansion was the result of several factors. The first was the issue of British imperialism at the close of the nineteenth century. The second was the political theory of British paramountcy in regards to British subjects in non-British republics or colonies. The third was the effect that the tragedies of the Boer War had on laying the foundation for political change after the war. The fourth was the apathy of the working-class in Great Britain concerning the nature of the conflict in the Boer War. The fifth was the Election of 1900 in which the Liberals mounted no opposition to the Conservatives in power. Finally, the last factor was the accusation that the wealthy were behind the Boer War for economic gains.

Boer War Imperialism

A statement by author Rayne Kruger about the Anglo-Boer War summarizes the confusing nature of the political conflict between Great Britain and the Boer states. He concluded, "Yet there never was

a less necessary war and nothing is odder about the strange conflict which was to follow than the ignorance on both sides as to what it was all about.”¹ The politics of the Boer War are difficult to explain because of the complex nature of the feelings that British politicians and citizens had toward the Boer War as a colonial conflict. The important figures of the British government within the conflict were Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain and High Commissioner Sir (eventually Lord) Alfred Milner. Some important secondary figures were Prime Minister Lord Salisbury, Arthur Balfour, St. John Broderick, Field Marshal Kitchener, Field-Marshal Viscount Wolseley, and Liberals Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, David Lloyd George, and Lord Rosebery. From the perspective of Joseph Chamberlain and Alfred Milner, the Boer War was not about white domination in South Africa; rather the war was about who would exercise paramountcy over South Africa.² At the close of the nineteenth century, Great Britain was looking to foment its place as a leading imperialist power moving triumphantly into the twentieth century.

¹ Rayne Kruger, *Good-Bye Dolly Gray: The Story of the Boer War* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1960), 57.

² Eversley Belfield, *The Boer War* (Hamden: Archon Book, 1975), xxiv.

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The Boer War was a seminal, albeit tragic, close to the Victorian era of Britain. What the Boer War marked for politicians in Britain was the spirit of imperialism, which dominated the 1890s in Great Britain.³ From 1895-1900, the British government felt a rise in imperial enthusiasm amongst the British population. However, after 1900, the enthusiasm quickly turned into apathy, and then into disdain for imperialism.⁴ After the “Khaki” election of 1900, the Conservatives maintained power. The Liberals were able to seize opportunity in 1906 by pursuing a vigorous campaign against aggressive imperialism. This strategy worked because of the British people’s change of heart against imperialism after the Boer War.⁵ Some British historians have labeled this short period the “braggart years,” because the British government and people went away from what was deemed as acceptable British standards of morality for imperialism.⁶ For the British government, the rejection of imperialism was a result of the tactics of Field Marshal Kitchener and the implementation of his scorched-earth policy of burning Boer farms, as

³ Theodore C. Caldwell, “Introduction,” in *The Anglo-Boer War: Why Was It Fought? Who Was Responsible?* edited by Theodore C. Caldwell (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1965), vii.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

well as the establishment of concentration camps. Those two sets of events were major factors in ending support for imperialism after 1900. Those two policies were unbecoming of a civilized society like Great Britain and were two issues that allowed Liberals like Campbell-Bannerman and David Lloyd George to excoriate the imperialist policies of the Conservatives in power.

British Paramountcy

In the mind of the Conservative British politician, there was a single issue at the heart of the Boer conflict: British paramountcy in southern Africa. The goal of the British government was to assert their paramountcy in the Transvaal (South Africa Republic) and the Orange Free State in South Africa, both of which were under Boer control. Why the conflict between the Boer and the British even arose is as confusing as it is convoluted, but from the British perspective, it was for the protection of their subjects in the Boer states. These Uitlanders (Outlanders), as the Boers called them, were primarily British subjects. They were held in contempt by the Boer people because they were foreigners who came to the Transvaal in search of great wealth following the discovery of massive gold deposits on the Witwatersrand (The Rand) in 1886.

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Contempt for the Outlanders resulted in the Boer government's opposition to the massive numbers of British subjects who came to the Transvaal. As a result, Outlanders were denied the right of the franchise (vote) to represent themselves in the Volksraad, the legislative body of the Transvaal. In addition, the Outlanders were forced to pay the majority (around five-sixths) of the taxes imposed by the Boers in the Transvaal, whereas the burghers (franchised Boer voters) paid little to none of the taxes.⁷ Therefore, the idea of taxation without representation was an ironic malady for the Outlanders in the Transvaal republic, and this inequality made many politicians in Great Britain upset. Thus, the British were left with a conundrum of what to do in London: Do we negotiate with the Boers for the franchise in a foreign land for our subjects or do we eventually enter into war on behalf of our oppressed subjects? At first, the answer was negotiate; in the end, it was war.

Concentration Camps and Scorched-Earth Policy

During the Boer War, Field Marshal Kitchener established two policies that seemed sound, but were ultimately disastrous for the political powers in London. The first was the implementation of a

⁷ Belfield, *The Boer War*, 6.

scorched-earth policy against the Boer families of burghers fighting in the war. The second was Kitchener's December of 1900 decree establishing concentration camps for Boer families of combatants and non-combatants. Both policies were toxic for the Conservatives in Parliament after 1900 when the horror stories of each policy made it back to the pro-Boer Liberals and the conscience of the public.

The scorched-earth policy had parallels to William Tecumseh Sherman's "March to the Sea."⁸ Like Sherman, Kitchener left many Boer families to the harshness of the Veld (the grasslands) after the burning of all their buildings, the confiscation and slaughter of their livestock, and the scorching of all their planted crops. In addition, there were the Boer families that were made prisoners of war and sent to concentration camps.⁹ Kitchener wished to demoralize the fighting burghers and their families by taking away everything they had on Earth. Kitchener set ablaze 30,000 farms and slaughtered nearly 3.6 million sheep in the process.¹⁰ The result of Kitchener's madness was an absolute outcry of English indignity from people like Liberal leaders Henry Campbell-Bannerman, David Lloyd George, and even

⁸ Ibid., xxiv.

⁹ Byron Farwell, *The Great Anglo-Boer War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 353.

¹⁰ Ibid.

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Winston Churchill, all three of whom were future Prime Ministers.¹¹

What caused further indignation in the minds of the British people was Campbell-Bannerman referring to the scorched-earth policy as “methods of barbarism.” To call the British barbarous was preposterous, but the policy was, in reality, barbarous.¹²

The other policy that was just as heinous as the scorched-earth campaign was the concentration camps implemented by Kitchener. This was the ultimate tragedy of the Boer War. At one point during the war, concentration camps held about one hundred and sixty thousand prisoners of war comprised of mostly women and children, with some men.¹³ In between sixteen to twenty thousand children under the age of sixteen died in the concentration camps within a single year due to horrible sanitary conditions and rampant disease.¹⁴ Overall, about twenty-five thousand Boers died in the camps, a number that shows that the overwhelming majority were children.¹⁵

The perception espoused by the Boers after Emily Hobhouse exposed the camps was that the British were trying to exterminate the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Denis Judd and Keith Surridge, *The Boer War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 194.

¹⁴ Farwell, *Anglo-Boer War*, 392.

¹⁵ Judd and Surridge, *Boer War*, 196.

Boers.¹⁶ This policy was unacceptable to Liberal leaders Campbell-Bannerman and Lloyd George. The two, along with Hobhouse, railed against Kitchener and the treatment of the Boer people, but Conservatives like Prime Minister Salisbury and Kitchener were unfazed by the allegations. Salisbury believed the Boers should have avoided interfering with the “Queen’s dominions.”¹⁷ In addition, Kitchener said the Boers in the camps had “a sufficient allowance and were all comfortable and happy,” which was an outright lie in the majority of camps.¹⁸ Many Conservatives and advocates of the war defended the concentration camps after Hobhouse’s report, but the damage had been done to the civilized image of British warfare and politics in the eyes of the world. Thus, the two policies created an opportunity for the Liberals to take control in 1906.

The Apathy of The Working-Class During The Boer War

The focus of politicians in wartime is always the consent and support of the people for war. Joseph Chamberlain was no different in this aspect. He wished for all people to support the Boer War wholeheartedly from the aristocrat to the working-class, but therein

¹⁶ Ibid., 194.

¹⁷ Bill Nasson, *The South African War 1899-1902* (London: Arnold, 1999), 222.

¹⁸ Farwell, *Anglo-Boer War*, 410.

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lies the problem. Most of the working-class was not concerned about war; they were concerned about employment, reasonable wages, and eight-hour days. In general, the working-class press was actually anti-war. Those periodicals focused on the death and destruction caused by the Boer War, not on converting popular working-class opinion to an anti-war perspective.¹⁹ Where the working-class man exercised his ability to be political was in leisurely settings as a member of a men's club or union.²⁰ These clubs were important to the Liberals and Conservatives in Parliament as a means to convey their war platforms, but neither group proved to be effective in arousing working-class support for or against the war.

Why political groups seemed to be ineffective in rousing support for their ideologies in these club settings is that the clubs and unions resolved to stay away from politics.²¹ That is not to say that the men's clubs and unions did not have political speakers come in and give lectures; they did do that and would typically have civil

¹⁹ Richard Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class: Working-Class Attitudes and Reactions to the Boer War 1899-1902* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

discussions on the issues of the Boer War.²² However, this desire to hear political lectures did not replace the working-class man's apathy to politics. Normally, the working-class man wanted to avoid politics and engage in recreation after a long day's work.²³ This apathy toward politics led to a lack of jingoism within the clubs and unions.²⁴

Conversely, most of the discussions that were held within the clubs and unions were primarily anti-war because wartime would hurt wages and the men did not support lost income.²⁵

The working-class man was concerned for himself, he was concerned for his family, and he was concerned for his livelihood. Why the apathy of the working-class man for the Boer War is important is his lack of desire to participate in the political process during the 1900 election.²⁶ Neither side was able to motivate the working-class, so the need to participate in the political process was irrelevant in 1900.

²² Ibid., 82-3.

²³ Ibid., 67.

²⁴ Ibid., 70.

²⁵ Ibid., 71.

²⁶ Ibid., 67.

Election of 1900

The Election of 1900 was perfect for Conservatives since the Boer War was raging in southern Africa. Conservatives in Parliament were able to maintain a 134 seat advantage over the combined Liberal and Irish parties in Parliament.²⁷ There are a few factors as to why the Liberals lost the election: the first was that majority party changes usually do not occur during a war; the second was the Liberal party never really mounted a campaign offensive against the Conservatives; the third was the Liberal party was fractured itself; and finally, the Liberal party just wanted to maintain the seats they already held. Why the Election of 1900 is significant is that it was the first time that imperialism and social reform became debated national issues.²⁸

The first reason why the Liberals lost the election of 1900 is the Boer War was underway. Generally, countries do not change majority parties during war, and many Liberals hoped the ‘swing of the pendulum’ theory would work in their favor since the Conservatives won the last election in 1895.²⁹ Unfortunately, the Liberals were mistaken and the Conservatives had won their second

²⁷ Ibid., 97.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

election in a row. It was not until 1906 that the pendulum moved back in favor of the Liberals.

The second reason why the Liberals lost was that the party never mounted anything close to what resembled an offensive campaign against the Conservatives. It was an unexciting campaign in 1900 because jingoism had a hold on Great Britain. Celebrations like Mafeking Night deterred Liberal constituencies from speaking against the Boer War.³⁰ The Liberals allowed many Conservative incumbents to retain power and go unchallenged because the party was demoralized and had fractured in 1900.³¹ Thus, the Liberals allowed 143 seats to go uncontested, compared to just a 109 in 1895.³²

The third reason why the Liberals lost in 1900 was the split of the party into pro-Boer Liberals (anti-war and anti-imperialists) and Liberal Unionists (pro-war imperialists). Much publicity was given to the pro-Boer faction of the Liberals, but it was negative. The media excoriated the pro-Boers by alleging that they were traitors to the Crown.³³ The mayor of Mafeking in the Transvaal went as far to say,

³⁰ Ibid., 98.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Farwell, *Anglo-Boer War*, 313.

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“A seat lost to the government is a seat gained by the Boers.”³⁴ The Liberal Unionists supported Chamberlain and the war, so they were spared the excoriation. However, their support of the opposition created an ideological war in the Liberal party. In short, this political division did not allow the Liberal party the opportunity to contest the 1900 election.

The fourth and final reason the Liberals lost in 1900 was the Liberal party decided to shift the focus from the war, and instead campaigned on social reform to maintain what seats they had in Parliament. The Liberal party decided to criticize Conservative acts like the Workmen’s Compensation Act and the Housing Act, which interested working-class rural constituencies. Voter apathy was still a problem.³⁵ Social reform was a topic that interested the working-class, and as discussed in the last section, the working-class man was concerned about his livelihood, not the “war fever” that had spread throughout England.³⁶ In the eyes of the working-class, the Liberals still held true to social reform, especially the pro-Boer Liberals who depended on constituencies that had a high concentration of working-

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Price, *An Imperial War*, 105.

³⁶ Ibid., 114-16.

class men.³⁷ By the working-class supporting the majority of Liberals through tradition and social reasons, the Conservatives were not able to crush the Liberals like Joseph Chamberlain wanted.³⁸

The Politics of British Wealth Interest in the Boer War

The influence of the wealth-interests in British politics during the Boer War is a controversial aspect of the conflict. Out of all the various points of view that have been researched, this is probably the most debatable aspect of why the British government entered into the Boer War. A prevailing point of view as to why Great Britain entered into war for economic interests concerned the “Park Lane millionaires.”³⁹ The Park Lane millionaires were a group of men that were wealthy diamond and gold magnates. They owned important mines in the Boer republics, including the gold mines on the Witwatersrand in the Transvaal.⁴⁰

Historian Rayne Kruger felt that the central factor to the British involvement in the Transvaal was gold. There was a massive shortage of gold that hit Great Britain during the 1880s.⁴¹ By the 1890s, gold

³⁷ Ibid., 116.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Judd and Surridge, *The Boer War*, 221.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 221.

⁴¹ Kruger, *Dolly Gray*, 19.

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was essential as an everyday currency and the shortage of gold led to trade sagging, wage sagging, and other economic shortfalls.⁴² Because the Rand was vital to the gold magnates of Park Lane, it was essential for the British government to protect their economic interest in the Transvaal.

Historian J.A. Hobson is the first historian to posit that the economics of the Rand was what drove Chamberlain and Milner to be aggressive in asserting paramountcy in the Transvaal. Hobson developed this theory after speaking with a passenger who was an Outlander on a voyage to the Transvaal. The Outlander was active in trying to achieve the franchise in the Transvaal, and told Hobson the grievances faced by Outlanders were for “British consumption.”⁴³ The reason why they disliked the Boers so much was that they felt the Boers were “cocky” and “insolent.”⁴⁴ This was “intolerable” to the Outlanders.⁴⁵ The Outlander felt the Boers deserved an outright “thrashing” so the Boer might know their place.⁴⁶ After interviewing

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Hobson, “A Small Confederacy of International Mine-Owners” in *Boer War: Why Was It Fought?*, 18.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

many Outlanders, Hobson concluded that a sense of arrogance was the general attitude of the British in the Transvaal.⁴⁷

Hobson believed that the Boer War was fought for “a small confederacy of international financiers working through a kept press.”⁴⁸ There is no doubt the press was controlled by the wealthy mine owners in southern Africa, who in turn gave their stories to all British media outlets.⁴⁹ However, the paramount issue to Hobson was the amount of profits the mine owners would make if Great Britain took control of the Transvaal.⁵⁰

Regardless of the criticism regarding how the wealthy had a major role in the invasion of the Transvaal, British capitalists and businessmen who were invested in the Rand felt it was time for change since Paul Kruger, President of the Transvaal and leader of the Boers, was not willing to compromise with the investors in the Rand.⁵¹ Right or wrong, the British government had to intervene in the Transvaal to protect the British diamond and gold interests in the Rand. The economic investments of the wealthy British businessmen and the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁹ Hobson, “The Forces of Press, Platform, and Pulpit” in *Boer War: Why Was It Fought?*, 49-50.

⁵⁰ Hobson, “A Small Confederacy of International Mine-Owners” in *Boer War: Why Was It Fought?*, 21.

⁵¹ Judd and Surridge, *The Boer War*, 224.

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oppression of the Outlanders in the Transvaal motivated Chamberlain to enter into conflict with Kruger and the Boers.

Conclusion

In short, the politics of Great Britain during the Boer War were a multifaceted issue with many internal and external factors. Overall, the British people changed their attitudes on imperialism and colonialization because of the Boer War. Did the Boer War cure the apathy of the working-class voter? No. However, the Boer War made the British people and government aware that atrocities can be committed by the most “civilized” of people. Did British paramountcy outweigh this sense of civility before and during the Boer War? The answer is yes, but the British people and government faced a watershed moment in their history that transformed the future of the country. No longer did the Victorian Briton hold the high ground in civility. The world had changed and the British had morphed into the twentieth century as barbarians from the Boer War. The perception of the British had changed, which led to a Liberal win in 1906 and a desire to return to their place of civility in the world.