

# THE BOER WAR: A COUNTERINSURGENCY

BY  
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Tiago Mauricio, *South Africa between 1899-1910*, 2009  
<http://unimaps.com/sth-africa1899/>

I. INTRODUCTION: 2 DISTINCT PHASES AND THE EVOLUTION OF COIN  
DOCTRINE

The Boer War must be separated into two distinct periods, a conventional and unconventional period, in order to fully understand the operations the British army undertook in response to changing modes of warfare. The British were victorious only after enormous casualties and expenditures which made the Boer War a poetic opening to the grandeur of fighting and the merciless use of non-adaptive tactics that occurred later in the century. The size and significance of the war itself would dwarf all other colonial wars. By late 1900, 240,000 British troops were deployed in the region to combat security issues arising from attempts to finish the war despite Boer commitment to outlast total war.<sup>1</sup> The British response to guerilla warfare can be characterized as a three pronged approach: a scorched earth policy, sweeping drives within a system of blockhouses, and the creation of concentration camps.

Counterinsurgency is a modern term used to describe many protracted engagements since 1945; however, the struggle in fighting insurgents within a population is much older than the term. The U.S. State Department defines the term counterinsurgency as, “the blend of comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously contain insurgency and address its root causes. Unlike conventional warfare, non-military means are often the most effective elements, with military forces playing an enabling role.”<sup>2</sup> Although this definition expands from what the British Army fought in South Africa, especially concerning the civilian sector, the definition still holds merit for this analysis. “Non-military” means were the British troop’s implementation of concentration camps and a scorched earth policy to affect the public sector that accompanied the ‘sweeping drives’ by the more conventional usage of the British Army. In the unconventional phase of the war, the Boers operated in highly mobile and mounted detachments called commandos and utilized raiding tactics. Lord Kitchener’s response was based on population and resource control measures in order to separate commandos from their logistical support.

Published over thirty years after the conclusion of the war, Major-General Sir Charles W. Gwynn expanded more on this topic and the resources needed to combat guerilla tactics. He wrote in, *Imperial Policing*:

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Townshend, *Britain’s Civil Wars: Counterinsurgency in the Twentieth Century* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1986), 172.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2009), 7.

Revolutionary movements more often imply guerilla warfare, carried on by armed bands acting possibly under the instructions of a centralized organization but with little cohesion. Such bands depend for effectiveness on the capacity of individual leaders . . . Their actions take the form of sabotage, of ambushes in which they inflict loss with a minimum of risk, and attacks on small isolated detachments. The suppression of such movements, unless nipped in the bud, is a slow business, generally necessitating the employment of numbers out of all proportion to actual fighting value of the rebels, owing to the unavoidable dispersion of those and the absence of a definite objective.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of the war, this description was a relatively accurate portrayal of how the war had been conducted: individual Boer leaders were holding the cause together and acted in small bands sabotaging British logistics. The future of guerilla warfare as exemplified by the Boer war would form the basis of twentieth century Counter Insurgency (COIN) doctrine.

## II. PHASE 1: A BOER PREEMPTIVE STRIKE: OCTOBER 1899

Before one can analyze the fundamental shift in British tactics, one must first understand the failure of conventional British forces. At the start of the war, Britain had only 14,000 men in Natal, with 47,000 additional men in the process of mobilization.<sup>4</sup> Numerically superior, the Boer army took to the offensive—hoping to achieve a rapid victory (much akin to the idea behind German Blitzkrieg) in Natal and the Cape Colony. The strategic objective of the Boer army centered on control of the railway system—the Boers were to sever railway routes to the coast to prevent the British from moving reinforcements from the ports to an interior theatre of operations.<sup>5</sup> The bulk of Boer forces were organized into ‘commandos’—small units whose strengths varied from a few hundred to several thousand men who usually held a connection to a particular town (living off the land was a life-style for commando forces).<sup>6</sup>

At the outbreak of the war, the Boer Army held a tactical advantage: they had a vast knowledge of terrain, were highly mobile, and acclimatized to the scorching temperatures. Eventually, the numerical

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<sup>3</sup> Major-General Sir Charles W. Gwynn, *Imperial Policing*. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1934), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories: The Boer War 1899-1902* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Nasson, *The Boer War: The Struggle For South Africa* (Brimcombe Port Stroud: Spellmount, 2011), 98.

<sup>6</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories*, 26.

power of the British Empire, supplemented by complete command of the sea, would lead to British victory. However, until the arrival of reinforcements, the Boers not only outnumbered the British, but held a large majority contingent of mounted troops making Boer initial victories unsurprising.<sup>7</sup> The first phase of the war, lasting around six months, is characterized by conventional warfare that highlighted the power of the modern rifle to transform battle into an awful instrument for defensive positions. This allowed the Boer army to besiege three key towns early in the war before British reinforcements arrived: Ladysmith, Kimberley, and Mafeking.<sup>8</sup> Boer failure to capitalize on initial successes and remain idle devastated Boer momentum.

During the first battle of the war, we see the prominence of conventional warfare at Talana Hill. Men under Penn Symons employed traditional tactics—preparatory artillery bombardment followed by a frontal assault, and finished with a cavalry charge to further disperse Boer forces.<sup>9</sup> Although technically a defeat for the Boers as the British took the high ground of Talana, the British loss of life far outnumbered that of the Boers. This unfortunate success of the frontal attack would prove a false and catastrophic command lesson learned. Conventional tactics employed by Britain proved to be outdated in subsequent battles. The success at Talana Hill using traditional tactics, although extremely costly in British lives, may have given the British false hope about the success of these tactics which would be utilized until the second period of the war.

#### THE EMPIRE'S RESPONSE AND BULLER'S INCOMPETENCE

Much of the first phase of the war was marred by horrific British commanders who utilized poor reconnaissance, misjudged Boer strength and disposition, and showed lackluster ability to perform. General Buller arrived in Cape Town on 31 October 1900 with a strategy focused on the need to save Natal.<sup>10</sup> Buller divided his forces, but he himself would be in charge of relieving the situation in Natal taking more than half of his units with him.<sup>11</sup> Arguably the most fatal tactical blunders of the war involved engagements under the command of Buller, such as at Colenso, where an artillery bombardment was used as a preamble to a frontal attack which gave away not only the element of surprise but also the direction from where the attack was to come.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Townshend, *Britain's Civil Wars*, 175

<sup>9</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories*, 36.

<sup>10</sup> Nasson, *The Boer War*, 132.

<sup>11</sup> Nasson, *The Boer War*, 133.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

Many British commanders suffered devastating losses through the utilization of the frontal attack. General Lord Methuen lay victim to inaccurate maps, a lack of screening, and bitterly fought initial engagements such as Graspan where Boer engagers withdrew only after high British casualties—the British cavalry was unable to pursue withdrawing Boer detachments.<sup>13</sup> It was the Boers' ability to regroup post battle by abandoning positions that would continue to elude their British counterparts. Another of Methuen's blunders occurred along the Modder River and again at Magersfontein Hill, when he ordered heavy artillery shelling to eliminate Boer defenses. However, deep trenches and pits proved the shelling ineffective. When his forces moved on the offensive after the shelling, the majority of his kilted forces had to cling to the base of the hill where there were badly burned from the sun and short of water—culminating in Meuthen ordering a full retreat.<sup>14</sup> Lieutenant General William Gatacre also stumbled upon a Boer defensive position at the Stomberg disaster.<sup>15</sup> "Buller, Methuen, and Gatacre misunderstood the realities of the new form of fighting, which consistently spelled disaster for any commander who failed to gather adequate intelligence of troop dispositions, and who recklessly sent his men forward straight into the teeth of camouflaged and entrenched positions."<sup>16</sup> Meuthen and Gatacre were both on the verge of defeat while Buller was preparing for his Natal offensive; which he was allowed to continue despite his replacement by Field Marshall Roberts in January 1900.

When multiple attempts to launch an offensive large enough to reach Ladysmith had failed, even General Buller realized that a successful attempt would require other forms of tactics. Moving forward had little to do with formidable battles and sieges; rather, it required better logistics, mobility, and more rehearsed tactics (including better coordination between moving infantry and artillery).<sup>17</sup> Instead of confronting Ladysmith with a frontal attack, the British sweep towards the area took the form of rehearsed assaults against defensive posts east of Colenso.<sup>18</sup> Despite heavy fire on the road to Ladysmith, Buller finally managed to open a passage way and relieved Ladysmith on 28 February 1900.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Darrell Hall, *The Hall Handbook of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1999), 130.

<sup>14</sup> Nasson, *The Boer War*, 145.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>16</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories* 49.

<sup>17</sup> Nasson, *The Boer War*, 163.

<sup>18</sup> Nasson, *The Boer War*, 165.

<sup>19</sup> Darrell Hall, *The Hall Handbook of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, 135.

## THE ARRIVAL OF ROBERTS AND THE END OF CONVENTIONAL WARFARE

The arrival of Roberts accompanied by his Chief of Staff Major-General Lord Kitchener on 10 January 1900 brought a new spark to the western front.<sup>20</sup> The overall strategy remained similar to the original one; however, the difference was the tactical aspect of the war – namely that encirclement would replace frontal attacks.<sup>21</sup> Accompanying imperial reinforcements now provided for an Army with a strength of 180,000 soldiers (about the size of the combined white population of the republics) and marked a fundamental change in strategy; a shift in the manner of advance away from railway lines which played into Boer hands, to movements through the open countryside.<sup>22</sup> Roberts stressed marksmanship, rapid movement, concealment, and more individual initiatives against the enemy (this also involved the creation of a new cavalry division to improve reconnaissance capabilities and mobility).<sup>23</sup> Roberts had two main objectives: the defeats of Bloemfontein and Pretoria. These methods, along with the sheer manpower of the British army, led to eventual Boer surrender. On 27 February 1900 Cronjé surrendered at Paardeberg (ten percent of the Boer army). After sweeping encirclements, Bloemfontein surrendered on 13 March 1900 and Johannesburg was peacefully handed over on 31 May 1900 as the remainder of the army retreated to Pretoria which would later be evacuated.<sup>24</sup>

## MOVING TOWARDS ADAPTIVE WARFARE

Adaptive warfare refers the dramatic changes that British forces utilized in order to end the war after the conventional phase of warfare was complete. By February 1900 the tides of war had changed—British Forces thwarted Boer offensives in the Cape and Natal.<sup>25</sup> Buller would continue his slow advance into Natal as the Boers appeared to retreat. Boer leaders such as Kruger and Botha had telegraphed their opposites in the Free State Government to point out the futility of further resistance.<sup>26</sup> Other Boer generals, such as General Christian Rudolph de Wet and General Jan Smuts, were convinced that one more option could first be implemented— guerilla warfare.

The fall of Bloemfontein and Pretoria did not end the war, which continued for two more painful years. The estimated 25,000 remaining

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<sup>20</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Nasson, *The Boer War*, 167-168.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-180.

<sup>25</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories*, 58.

<sup>26</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories*, 59.

Boers proved elusive and determined. Initially, Roberts tried to end the Boer resistance through proclamations he made on 31 May and 1 June to persuade those remaining Boers to hand in their weapons. He followed this with his 16 June decree proclaiming that if the Boers struck railway and telegraph lines and stations, homes and farms in the area would be torched.<sup>27</sup> This scorched earth policy continued to be employed by Robert's successor, Lord Kitchener. To some degree, however, Roberts was successful in enlarging the complement of enlisted 'Judas Boer' as he put around 2,300 of these 'joiners' under arms who would vitally help the progression of British intelligence.<sup>28</sup>

### III. PHASE TWO: THE RISE OF GUERILLA WARFARE AND KITCHENER'S THREE PRONGED RESPONSE

The most enduring, although not immediately realized, lessons of the war spawned from the period of irregular warfare which followed.<sup>29</sup> Lord Roberts handed over South African Command (210,000 troops) to Lord Kitchener during November 1900 after announcing that the war was 'practically over' The Boer switch to guerilla tactics, however, would take the British Army by surprise.<sup>30</sup> A downtrodden and diminished Boer army was led by young, determined, and imaginative leaders whose forces were no longer obliged to defend capitals. No longer confined by the defense of major cities or strategic locations (and eventually not even the safety of loved ones), remaining commandos acted as irregular guerillas—with a superior understanding of terrain against an enemy still reliant on railroads. Kitchener's strategy to defeat these guerillas contained three elements: internment, scorched earth, and containment.

#### SCORCHED EARTH

With the loss of major supply centers, the Boers turned dependent on farms for logistical support. These farms and the civilian population that worked them, in a sense, became combatants aiding the enemy. Scorched earth now became a full scale policy to destroy the Boer means of supply, including the wholesale devastation of both republics. Livestock was scattered and slaughtered and grain storages were burned. By the end of the war, this policy destroyed an estimated 30,000 Boer farmhouses and damaged or cleared forty townships.<sup>31</sup> Official targets for

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<sup>27</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Nasson, *The Boer War*, 237.

<sup>29</sup> Townshend, *Britain's Civil Wars*, 175.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Malcolm Archibald, *Aspects of the Boer War: Boers and Horsemen* (Edinburgh: Fledgling Press, 2005), 58.

demolition were farms occupied by families of those on commando duty, but the destruction soon grew indiscriminant; “both proportionately and in total number, rural destruction bore most heavily on non-combatant homesteads which did not necessarily have any direct link to the operational commandos in particular districts.<sup>32</sup> Kitchener’s collective approach hardened the resolve of many of the ‘bitter-enders’ (those Boers who remained on commando) that decided to carry on despite civilian suffering.

#### INTERNMENT

The policy of internment came more from practical and humanitarian reasons than an attempt at genocide. However, the response in Britain to the poor conditions of the camps was drastic. Originally meant as a measure for protection, many Boers were forcibly removed from their homes. The camps were for mainly non-combatants (women, children, and elderly inhabitants) which otherwise would be left to ‘predatory natives’ and the environment after the scorched earth policy destroyed everything. Refugee camps, known as “concentration camps,” were overpopulated, unclean, and short of food—disease and malnutrition became a leading cause of death. Out of an estimated Boer population of 200,000, 26,370 died in the concentration camps; 22,000 of which were under sixteen years of age.<sup>33</sup> Military control of the camps ended in 1901, and Kitchener ordered his column commanders to not bring in any more civilians. Instead civilians remained in the areas where there farms had been burned, livestock slaughtered, and crops destroyed. Meant to be a practical remedy for overcrowded concentration camps, the end of these camps placed an even greater burden on Boer commandos, who now were responsible for taking care of their own families. In the long run, however, there is little doubt that civilian internment contributed to the cessation of hostilities.

#### DRIVING SWEEPS AND BLOCKHOUSES

The last phase of the war showed a constant struggle to combat mobility limitations evident in the wars origins. Difficulties of conveying supplies added to the need to secure railways in May 1900 to protect the Cape Town-Bloemfontein railway which gave rise to the blockhouse system because the countryside surrounding the railways could not be controlled.<sup>34</sup> The blockhouse system, originally intended as protection for

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<sup>32</sup> Nasson, *The Boer War*, 240.

<sup>33</sup> Archibald, *Aspects of the Boer War*, 59.

<sup>34</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories*, 66.

railway lines, became a gigantic network of barbed-wire fences.<sup>35</sup> Blockhouses were built on intervals along the railway lines and garrisoned from as few as seven men, but usually more. This idea was then extended from railways to roads and continued as it became necessary to divide the county into fenced-in and workable areas for driving sweeps.<sup>36</sup> Royal Engineer factories that made the material blockhouses required were established across the country and utilized a system of interchangeable parts for the basic building blocks. The wire extended from the houses at obtuse angles to prevent friendly fire and rifles were clamped down to ensure accurate fire.<sup>37</sup> Alarm systems were used to alert attempted breaches, although it was impossible to completely restrict Boer movement. However, when used in conjunction with the sweeping drives of the regular army, the system proved vital to the eventual defeat of the Boers.

By the end of the war, the blockhouse network extended for 6,000 km.<sup>38</sup> Blockhouses were normally about 900 meters apart: each within sight distance.<sup>39</sup> In the last few months of the war the drives were much quicker and columns, in turn, needed to be more mobile. “When it became apparent that the collapse of the Boer armies, the capture of all the more important points in the Transvaal and Orange Free State, and the appropriation of the railway communications throughout the country, did not mean that the war was over, but that it was going to definitely assume a guerilla character, an elaborate system of flying columns were set on foot.”<sup>40</sup> Originally, these columns were self-contained in terms of supplies—they were slowed by the ox-wagon, a heavy gun, and operated only in a small sphere of operation.<sup>41</sup> The amount of loss these columns inflicted on enemy personnel was minimal.<sup>42</sup> Kitchener’s first large scaled drive started on 28 January 1901: it involved seven columns totaling 14,000 men with fifty-eight guns and moved through the Transvaal between the Delagoa and Natal railway lines.<sup>43</sup> By the time Kitchener’s forces reached the Natal border in mid-April, the area was swept void of civilians, and the landscape was ruined. In terms of an impact on the

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<sup>35</sup> Townshend, *Britain’s Civil Wars*, 182.

<sup>36</sup> Hall, *The Hall Handbook of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, 214.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>38</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories*, 65.

<sup>39</sup> Hall, *The Hall Handbook of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, 214.

<sup>40</sup> C.E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1906), 139.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>42</sup> Callwell, *Small Wars*, 140.

<sup>43</sup> Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories*, 65.

actual commando forces, the consequences were minor. However, the columns were successful in terms of clearing the area of livestock and supplies. Later mobility advancements to the flying columns greatly benefited the response to the guerilla insurgency. Kitchener instituted his “new model drives,” which were huge sweeps involving multiple columns that sub-divided the theater of war.<sup>44</sup> As Callwell later stated, “The ‘drives’ instituted in the closing days of the South African war may be called the last word in strategy directed against guerilla antagonists.”<sup>45</sup>

Eventually mounted troops formed the entirety of columns, and supply depots were dramatically increased and scattered over the theatre of war to keep up with an increasingly more mobile Army.<sup>46</sup> The supplying of these depots insisted on the need for a system of additional blockhouses to facilitate convoy movement in addition to the original role of securing railways. The effect of this increased mobility was the ability to capture prisoners in an extended theatre (not just the livestock)—a feat that other warring countries had simply never been able to accomplish. Columns worked through the night and relentlessly surprised and scattered Boer detachments.<sup>47</sup> The effectiveness of blockhouses increased dramatically as the size of Boer formations diminished and they abandoned artillery.<sup>48</sup>

#### COIN AT HOME AND POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS

British pro-Boer and anti-war activism during 1901 focused on the policy of concentration camps (mainly for women and children).<sup>49</sup> Despite conservative control of the government during this time, the work of activists such as Lloyd George hoped to raise awareness of human rights violations that were occurring during the war. The Committee of the South African Women and Children’s Distress Fund sent Miss Emily Hobhouse to the area to conduct an investigation on the conditions of the camps. However, the results of her investigation created no productive measures to improve camp conditions. Perhaps the worst camp she reported on was at Mafeking, where she found in the medical reports that on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1901, detailed that “there were 2,420 children under 12 years in the camp, and of this number 381 died during the month.”<sup>50</sup> Sir

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>45</sup> Callwell, *Small Wars*, 143.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>48</sup> Townshend, *Britain’s Civil Wars*, 182.

<sup>49</sup> Nasson, *The Boer War*, 243.

<sup>50</sup> Jennifer Hobhouse Balme, *To love one’s enemies : the work and life of Emily Hobhouse, compiled from letters and writings, newspaper cuttings and official documents* (Hobhouse Trust, 1994), 394.

Henry Campell-Bannermon in an address to the National Reform Union in response to the publications of Miss Hobhouse's findings coined the term "methods of barbarism" to describe how the war was waged. He questioned the policy of scorched earth when he cried:

What was the policy? That now that we had got the men we had been fighting against down, we should punish them as severely as possible, devastate their country, burn their homes, break up their very instruments of agriculture, and destroy the machinery by which food was produced.<sup>51</sup>

This activism, however, would not create an environment where the populous was unwilling to support the war effort.

#### IV. FINAL CONCLUSIONS: HOW THE WAR ENDED—AN EVALUATION OF COIN

The finishing of the war was a political rather than a military issue which involved many failed negotiations.<sup>52</sup> Two final battles took place before the conclusion of hostilities, both of which held some degree of Boer success not expected by Kitchener. They both demonstrated however that the sheer weight of numbers and supplies in favor of the British Army made the war's conclusion inevitable.

Kitchener's response to the guerilla problem was counterproductive during the onset of COIN operations—it hardened the resolve of the "bitter-enders" to carry on in spite of civilian suffering.<sup>53</sup> The policy of concentration camps themselves took a burden off the shoulders of Boer commandos as it removed their responsibility to protect their property and family; "The lesson of the South African war was the extraordinary difficulty of adapting regular armies to cope with 'intelligent' guerillas"—"the guerilla concept revolutionized the revolution, creating a new threat to governments everywhere"<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps a pivotal question not answered by Kitchener's COIN policy was how to reintegrate the subversive portion of the population back into the society, and more importantly the British Empire after the war's conclusion. The answer to this question would be fostered by the suppression of black minority rights to reach a Boer compromise in later

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<sup>51</sup>Sir Henry Campell-Bannerman, "Methods of Barbarism" in *The Anatomy of an Antiwar Movement: The Pro-Boers*, Stephen Koss, ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973), 215.

<sup>52</sup>Townshend, *Britain's Civil Wars*, 183.

<sup>53</sup>Fremont-Barnes, *Essential Histories*, 65.

<sup>54</sup>Townshend, *Britain's Civil Wars*, 13, 183.

42 : *Report*

years. The death toll and brutality displayed by the British Army would have long-term ramifications for the relationship between the Dominion of South Africa and the Empire.