

The crisis of the Empire

The Boer War (Britain's Vietnam) was a deeply significant event in the history of the Empire, with far reaching consequences.

The cause of the war revolved around an argument between Britain and the Transvaal over voting rights for European immigrants employed in gold and diamond mines.

The British government wanted the independent Boer republic to grant full citizenship rights to these mainly British immigrants.

The Transvaal President believed that this issue was used by the British government as a way of ending the independence of the Boer Republics.

If the immigrants had been given full voting rights they would have grown strong enough to elect a government of their own choosing.

The immigrants dispute was the final straw in a long-standing antagonism.

In the late XVIIth century the Dutch East India Company had set up a small trading station near the Cape of Good Hope.

The poorest members of this community were farmers searching for land.

The Boers viewed themselves as a unique group of pilgrims, called themselves «Afrikanders» (the people of Africa), spoke a variant of Dutch (Afrikaans) and were hostile to both Africans and Europeans.

In 1806 the British navy captured Cape Colony.
In 1834 British abolished slavery. A group of 5,000 Boers refused to accept the decision, crossed the Orange and Vaal rivers, and set up 2 independent states.
The Boers were determined to exclude Africans from voting.

By 1855 the British government had recognized the independence of these 2 countries.

In 1877 Britain took control of the Transvaal (over the Zulu threat).

In 1881 the Transvaal President attacked the British because they refused to restore the independence to the Boer Republic.

After a Boer victory, the British government restored partial independence.

Boers and British signed a treaty which contained provisos:

- 1) Britain supervised foreign policy.
- 2) Britain retained the right to intervene in domestic matters.

The dispute over the immigrants issue revolved around the interpretation of the wording of this agreement.

Furthermore there were economic reasons for the dispute.

In the late XIXth century diamonds and gold were discovered in Cape Colony and the Transvaal.

However much of the Transvaal's wealth was in the hands of British and German gold and diamond mineowners.

It seems that the mineowners supported the immigrants claims, because they believed it would be difficult to attract skilled workers to an area in which they were denied civil rights.

The roles played by Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, and Sir Alfred Milner, British High Commissioner for South Africa, remain the most important elements in explaining why Britain went to war.

They expressed concerns about the dangers for British interests in South Africa.

By the autumn 1899 Chamberlain, the Cabinet, the majority of the MPs and the press had all swung around to Milner's view that the Boers needed «teaching a lesson».

British troops were sent to South Africa.

On 9 October 1899 Kruger (the Transvaal President) sent a telegram demanding Britain remove its troops from the Transvaal border or he would declare war. At the same time he offered to settle the matter at an international conference.

Britain did not even reply.

At the beginning Britain suffered a series of defeats. These setbacks shook British confidence.

The British underestimated the Boers and had failed to ensure that adequate troops and supplies of food and ammunition were in place .

The solution was to send more troops, to improve supplies lines and to dispatch Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener.

By June 1900 British forces were moving towards complete victory.

Johannesburg and Pretoria were occupied and the Transvaal President took flight to Europe.

Kitchener and Roberts returned to Britain sure that the war was finished, but the Boer armies had not given up. They refused to surrender.

Lord Kitchener returned to deal once and for all with the guerilla tactics of the enemy.

He divided the country into zones and sectioned them off with barbed wire.

In order to prevent the Boer soldiers from replenishing their stocks of food, Kitchener burnt Boer villages, destroyed crops, captured cattle and collected the civilian population in something called «concentration camps».