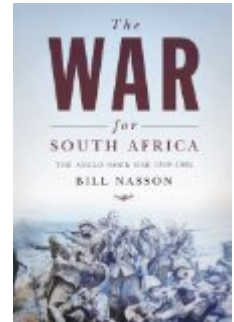


Bill Nasson. *The War for South Africa: The Anglo-Boer War*. Cape Town: NB Publishers: Tafelberg, 2010. 352 pp. + 16 pp. of plates \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-624-04809-1.



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The meanings of wars evolve over time. We can identify these changes by how the contemporary population refers to them. The Great War remained the “great war” for only twenty years until a greater war—World War II—eclipsed it. In the 112 years since the armies of the two Boer republics (Transvaal and Orange Free State) of southern Africa invaded the neighboring British colonies of Cape Colony and Natal, this British-Boer conflict has gone through many names. For most of the twentieth century, the “Second War of Independence/Freedom” (following the earlier 1880-81 British-Boer conflict) birthed the modern Afrikaner people. To the British then and in subsequent decades, the “Boer War” demonstrated that they and not uncivilized farmers controlled southern Africa. More recently in the waning days of Apartheid and its democratic aftermath, academics and politicians have used “South African War” as an inclusive device showing that the war involved all South Africa’s peoples, not just the whites. Bill Nasson, in his *The War for South Africa*, returns to an earlier name for the conflict.

He sees it as the (Second) “Anglo-Boer War” (p. 13), a white civil war in Africa, fought by Europeans with European means to settle the colonial order of southern Africa once and for all.

As Nasson points out in his preface, *The War for South Africa* unofficially serves as the second edition of his 1999 *The South African War 1899-1902*.^[1] The work stands primarily as a military and political history of the war; six of its eleven chapters focus on the maneuvers of the conflict itself. The other chapters introduce and conclude the work and relate the war’s causes, social aspects, and commemoration since 1902. The updated volume absorbs much of the new material published surrounding the centennial of the war and expands the introductory and commemoration chapters. Nasson succinctly and superbly narrates the war and lets his readers grasp British and Boer strategies, tactics, and actions in its three stages: the opening Boer invasion of Cape Colony and Natal (October – December 1899); British commander-in-chief Gen. Frederick Roberts’s march to Bloemfontein, Johannesburg,

and Pretoria (January – June 1900); and the ensuing guerrilla war (July 1900 – May 1902). As Peter Warwick and Nasson have pointed out elsewhere, it was not a white man's war but rather a war fought by all South Africans for white men's goals. [2] Nasson's inclusion of new research on *agterryers*, the 10,000 plus African servants who followed their Boer masters on commando and supported the republican cause, confirms this fact.

Nasson neatly tackles the three crucial historiographical questions of the war--its cause, British scorched-earth tactics, and the war's aftermath--explaining their significance, the competing views, and his reasoning. He argues regarding the cause, simply, that the British provoked war. According to Nasson, British imperial and global economic, strategic, and political interests all required a British southern Africa. Imperial administrators could not govern their subject peoples elsewhere effectively if they allowed the Boers to snub their nose at them. The Boer republics therefore attacked the British colonies in October 1899 in a defensive move, a gamble to stave off incorporation into the British Empire that would surely come, one way or the other.

On the British scorched-earth tactics, Nasson does not examine the morality of British actions. Others have entered that political minefield for him.[3] Rather he weighs whether the blockhouses, flying columns of mounted British troops, farm- and crop-burning, stock killing, and, most controversially, removal of civilians to "refugee" camps helped the Boers surrender. They did, as civilian deaths in the concentration camps hurt Boer morale in the field. But these tactics formed only one piece of the surrender puzzle. In Nasson's view, the growing African resistance to and collaboration against the Boers additionally led to the negotiated 1902 Peace of Vereeniging.

The British won the war, but who won the peace? Both sides won and lost the war, according to Nasson. The British got their loyal state with the 1910 Union of South Africa, but suffered a dif-

ficult and humiliating trial in the process. While the Boers lost the actual war, they cemented their nation and soon controlled the politics of the new South African state. Nasson concludes that if the Boers had initiated guerrilla-style warfare before Roberts's capture of the main cities, they might have achieved victory on the battlefield as well. However the real losers of the war were the Africans, Coloureds, and Indians who falsely believed that imperial control would lessen, and not tighten, discrimination.

Nasson's explanation of republican strategy provides the strongest aspect of his narrative. The British at the outset had no true strategy, a point that Nasson credits to the lack of political will in Whitehall. As British officials, except for South African high commissioner Alfred Milner, hoped that Transvaal president Paul Kruger would submit at the last minute and compromise, no one planned for war. Poor decisions, outdated tactics, and inadequate intelligence-gathering led to British setbacks in the early months of the war, as did the initial republican strategy. Here Nasson outshines other works on the war. Most English-language works on the period analyze British mis-cues, neglecting why the Boers could (or in Nasson's opinion, should) have secured a stronger military position in the first few months of the war. In the years prior to the war, the republics procured rifles, ammunition, and field guns to the point that they had better quality and more up-to-date equipment, in greater numbers, than the British Army.

The problem for the republics came not with their war plan--quick, deep thrusts into Cape Colony and Natal--but with their military leaderships' execution of it. Boer commanders Piet Joubert and Piet Cronjé, in their positions more for their connections than merits, made poor strategic decisions in besieging Mafeking, Ladysmith, and Kimberley. The strength of the democratic republican commando came from its mobility, not its siege abilities. During Roberts's campaign and

its aftermath, newer Boer leadership--Christiaan De Wet, Koos De la Rey, and Louis Botha--adopted guerrilla tactics, taking advantage of their commandos' mobility and knowledge of the countryside to attack and bleed the British. Nasson criticizes the Boer leadership for their lateness in coming to those tactics. If they had turned to mobile, small-band, harassing methods earlier in the war, before British reinforcements started to land weekly in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, and Durban, then the republican forces could have besieged those coastal cities instead of worthless inland ones.

Nasson is less good when it comes to the contested nature of British reactions to guerrilla warfare. He suggests that the shift towards scorched-earth and civilian-displacement tactics was the only choice available to the British. While Roberts and his replacement as commander-in-chief (in December 1900), Gen. Horatio Kitchener, held the upper hand in the decision-making process, High Commissioner Milner (the top British civilian official in South Africa) and the Colonial Office in London advocated a different way to prosecute the guerrilla war: protection of population rather than their displacement and destruction. After months of seeing little progress, with high human and financial expenses, the cabinet supported Milner's position and gave Kitchener in July 1901 three months to turn the war effort around. The war improved for the British by the end of the year, as Kitchener partly incorporated Milner's protection schemes around the large population centers, starting in Bloemfontein, then expanding to Johannesburg and Pretoria, while maintaining the blockhouses, flying columns, and concentration camps outside those areas.[4]

Nasson concludes that the Anglo-Boer War loses its significance in contemporary rainbow-nation South Africa. He's right; a white civil war to establish the means of white domination no longer holds any attraction for democratic, majority-rule South Africa. So where does its signifi-

cance lie? Nasson finds it in the ironies of warfare and the parallels to imperial-like conquests in today's world (e.g., Iraq).. I find those explanations insufficient. The war's importance instead comes from the guerrilla stage of the war, of how states undertake counterinsurgency tactics. For the first time, a large army fought a well-trained, well-armed guerrilla force--the first modern guerrilla war. How would policymakers and military leaders react to guerrilla war? I find three choices: lay waste to civilian areas so guerrillas have no supplies; protect and gain the support of the civilian population so they do not supply and/or support the guerrillas; or give in to guerrilla demands. The majority of the literature on the war misses this strategic significance, as authors dwell on either the early conventional battles and sieges or the later massive civilian deaths in the camps. British policymakers used the means of total war to make the commandos submit, although they had the resources available to end the war through protection. The two world wars notwithstanding, most of the wars and conflicts since 1902 have been (and will continue to be) ones of low-scale violence, i.e., guerrilla wars. And most states fighting insurgencies have followed the Roberts-Kitchener example of choosing the iron fist over the velvet glove. The velvet glove method is difficult--just ask the United States, as it has discovered in Iraq and Afghanistan. But one has to believe that the more successful, long-term strategy to end insurgencies comes from protecting civilians rather than creating new enemies for the next generation.

Overall, Nasson's updated account of the Anglo-Boer War is a smooth read and excellent introduction to the strategies, tactics, and social history of this captivating period of modern global history. Notes

[1]. Bill Nasson, *The South African War 1899-1902* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[2]. Peter Warwick, *Black People and the South African War 1899-1902* (Cambridge: Cam-

bridge University Press, 1983); and Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[3]. For example, see S. B. Spies's classic *Methods of Barbarism?: Roberts and Kitchener and Civilians in the Boer Republics, January 1900-May 1902* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1977). For more recent works, compare Owen Coetzer, *Fire in the Sky: The Destruction of the Orange Free State, 1899-1902* (Johannesburg: Weltevreden Park: Covos-Day Books, 2000) with Helen Dampier, "'Everyday Life' in Boer Women's Testimonies of the Concentration Camps of the South African War, 1899-1902," in *Crime and Empire 1840-1940: Criminal Justice in Local and Global Context*, ed. Graeme Dunstall and Barry S. Godfrey (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2005), 202-223.

[4]. Thomas Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London: Abacus, 1991 [1979]), 510-512, 536-537.

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