

SOME LESSONS AND EFFECTS OF THE ANGLO-BOER WAR (1899 – 1902)

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Here we will not cover the long-contested causes of the war or its first two phases, nor recount the well-told story of Australia's 'Breaker' Morant. Rather, we will focus on the war's third and final phase and two of its original lessons: the potency of irregular warfare and its ability to prolong conflict, and the importance of media operations for war. We will then touch on Australia's involvement under British command, and four effects of the war.

The Anglo-Boer War straddled Australia's 1901 federation. Ending in British victory on 31 May 1902, it was fought in Southern Africa between Britain and the Boer republic, two Afrikaner republics: the Transvaal and the Orange Free State.¹

In the final phase of the war, faced by superior forces, the Boers (Afrikaans for 'farmer') formed irregular militia units to conduct guerrilla (Spanish for 'little war') warfare to avoid decisive battle. Until then this kind of war had attracted little military interest, not least from the British.²



British Nobel Prize laureate, Rudyard Kipling, in his poem *The Lesson* about the war wrote, "Let us admit it fairly, as a business people should. We have had no end of a lesson: it will do us no end of good...."³

¹ Miller, S. (2021). The South African War, 1899–1902. In S. Miller (Ed.), *Queen Victoria's Wars: British Military Campaigns, 1857–1902* (pp. 281-307). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² *Ibid.*

³ <https://www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/kipling/lesson.html> [Assessed 1 June 22]

The Boers' irregular plan was potent and destructive, and significantly delayed British victory. Their mounted, highly mobile self-dependent 'commando' units continually frustrated the British, with tactics ranging from deep penetrating hit-and-run attacks to the harrying of British lines of communications.⁴

In response, the British launched counter-guerrilla operations that now mostly relied on mounted not infantry troops. A lesson learnt was that irregular warfare required copious quantities of time and resources. The British military strength in Southern Africa reached around 500,000 whereas the Boers mustered only around 88,000.⁵

Forced to adopt a costly strategy, the British established an expansive 'blockhouse' system (small forts linked by barbed-wire fences), a network of concentration camps (to isolate the Boer populations), and a scorched earth policy to break Boer morale and their ability to conduct guerrilla war.⁶

Importantly, the British military's 'media' operations complemented their strategy. They instructed censors in Aden and Durban to prohibit the transmission of all 'uncleared' telegrams. A central rationale was that the Boer had access to the telegraph and newspapers.⁷

This is an example of the early recognition of the media's role in war, which included the British Army allowing accredited correspondents to access its area of operations.⁸

Despite concerns about the level of military-endorsed propaganda, that was reaching the British and Australian press in the form of purportedly objective independent reporting, press reporting later in the war did serve to inspire anti-war sentiment. The supposed negative effect on public sentiment of the press's criticism of Britain's military strategy laid the foundations for the management of the media during WWI.⁹

The six Australian colonies and later the Commonwealth of Australia sent contingents to the war, mainly mounted infantry. In all, around 16,000 Australian troops deployed to Southern Africa. The bulk of those were engaged in the counter-guerrilla operations, particularly in the Transvaal.¹⁰

⁴ Philips, D. (2000). Australia's imperial war: the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902. [Edited text of a lecture given to the Royal Historical Society of Victoria on 20 June 2000.]. *Victorian Historical Journal*, 71(2), 74-93.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Holmes, R. (1988). *The World Atlas of Warfare: Military Innovations that Changed the Course of History*. Mitchell Beazley Publishers, London.

⁷ Childs, SVW. (2020). *The Australian Defence Force in Afghanistan: Media strategy and operations in the age of mediatized war*. (Doctoral dissertation, Monash University).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Philips, D. (2000). Australia's imperial war: the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902. [Edited text of a lecture given to the Royal Historical Society of Victoria on 20 June 2000.]. *Victorian Historical Journal*, 71(2), 74-93.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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A troop of A Squadron of the NSW Mounted Rifles on parade at Cape Town shortly after their arrival from Australia.

Commonly and frustratingly, they swept the expanses of the velds (Afrikaans for ‘fields’), constantly attempting to engage the elusive Boer ‘commandos’.

A Queensland Mounted Rifles trooper wrote, “The work we are doing is anything but what we bargained for - burning houses and commandeering horses and sheep, and never getting a good go at the Boers”.¹¹

In the long end, Britain’s brutal tactics paid off. The Boers accepted loss and signed the Peace of Vereeniging. Controversially, this formed an alliance of Boers and Britons against Africans that laid the foundations for South Africa’s apartheid governments from 1948 to 1994.¹²

The war and technological advances informed British (and by default Australian) military tactics in the lead up to WWI. For example, by 1905 the British Army’s Field Service Regulations emphasised the combined arms approach, and abolished rifle volley-fire in preference for accurate rifle field-fire.¹³ It also set a model for Australia’s military contributions to Allies overseas during the 20th and 21st centuries.

¹¹ Dorward, D. (1999). Major Tunbridge’s Boer War Album: An Australian Construction of ‘the Other’. *Kunapipi*, 21(3), 12.

¹² Philips, D. (2000). Australia’s imperial war: the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902. [Edited text of a lecture given to the Royal Historical Society of Victoria on 20 June 2000.]. *Victorian Historical Journal*, 71(2), 74-93.

¹³ Pugsley, C. (2011) We Have Been Here Before: The Evolution of the Doctrine of Decentralised Command in the British Army 1905-1989. *Sandhurst Occasional Papers No 9*.

282 Australians died in action or from wounds sustained in battle, while 286 died from disease. 38 died of accident or other unknown causes.¹⁴

The war claimed an estimated 100,000 lives, including more than 20,000 British troops and 14,000 Boer troops. Civilian deaths included around 26,000 Boer women and children, most dying in the concentration camps from malnutrition and disease.¹⁵ African deaths in the camps is estimated to range from 13,000 to 20,000.¹⁶

¹⁴ <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/boer> [Accessed 1 June 22]

¹⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/event/South-African-War> [Accessed 1 June 22]

¹⁶ *Ibid.*