

The Boer Wars (1880 to 1881 and 1899 to 1902)

If you refer to the Boer War, many people immediately think of the one that raged from 1899 to 1902. However, the First Boer War took place 9 years earlier and was a precursor to the later events.

What Happened and When – 1880 to 1881

The First Anglo-Boer War is also known as the First Transvaal War of Independence because the conflict arose between the British who were trying to expand the Empire and the Boers from the Transvaal Republic or Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR).

The British invaded the Transvaal Republic (South Africa) in 1877 and on 12th April that year a proclamation of annexation was read out in Church Square, Pretoria. The following month, the Boers sent delegates to England to lay before the Government a petition stating that the annexation was not supported by the Boers. However, the British Government stood firm and so the Boer delegation returned home unsuccessful.

Although a very simple timeline, this should give you a flavour of events that happened next.

1880 The first open conflict between the British and the Boers occurred in November in Potchefstroom. A Boer named Piet Bezuidenhout refused to pay extra tax on his wagon as he said that he had already paid his taxes. The wagon was seized by the British who took it to auction so that the goods on it could be sold in lieu of the taxes. At the auction on 11th November, 100 armed Boers invaded the place, reclaimed the wagon and handed it back to Bezuidenhout. Shots were fired by the Boers at the British troops who had been sent after them.

On 13th December, the Boer leaders announced the reinstatement of the Transvaal Republic and three days later they raised their flag at Heidelberg, thus formally rejecting British authority. The war had started.

The first main battle took place at Bronkhorstspruit on 20th December. The fight lasted just 15 minutes, but during that time, 156 British men were killed or injured, whilst the Boers lost just 2 men with 5 injured.

Between December 1880 and March 1881, British troops were besieged in Rustenburg and Lydenburg, losing many men to the Boers. It is worth bearing in mind that all during this time, the Boers did not have a regular army. Their troops were made up of local men, who had formed militia parties and who each brought his own weapon and horse.

1881 The Battle of Majuba Hill on 16th February was the most decisive battle of the First Boer War. British troops occupied the top of the hill, hoping for a strategic advantage. However, they were outnumbered and outwitted by the Boers and, after their leader Major-General Colley was killed by a sniper, retreated down the back of the hill. Over 200 British soldiers were killed.

Enough was enough. The British had lost 408 men with 315 wounded, whilst the Boers had lost just 41 men, with 47 wounded. The 3rd August saw the British signing the Pretoria Convention giving the Boers 'complete self-government, subject to the suzerainty of Her Majesty Queen Victoria'. This war was finally over.

What Happened and When – 1899 to 1902

Until the First World War started in 1914, the Second Boer War (also known as the Anglo-Boer War) was one of the harshest and bloodiest fought by the British. Many things happened over the 3 years that it ran and so the following is only a snapshot of key events that took place.

1899 Between 31st May and 5th June, the Bloemfontein Conference was held between Britain and the Transvaal, to try to sort out differences between the two governments but they could not reach any agreement. From July to October, troops were mobilised from Britain as well as by the Transvaal after Britain informed their government that they intended to enforce British rule in South Africa.

On October 9th, President Kruger sent an ultimatum to the British government to withdraw their reinforcements within 2 days or face war. This was ignored and so, on October 11th war officially started.

The next 2 days saw the first battle of the war where the Transvaal commandos of 800 men captured the British garrison and railway siding southwest of Mafeking. The sieges of Mafeking and Kimberley had begun.

October 20th - The first troopships set sail from Southampton for Cape Town, landing on 31st October

November 2nd – Ladysmith was placed under siege by the Boer forces, trapping 12,000 British troops.

November 15th - General Botha's commandos destroyed an armoured train between Frere and Chieveley, capturing 60 British prisoners including the almost 25-year-old Winston Churchill, who was working as a journalist at the time.

December 10th - Battle of Stormberg, at which the Boers defeated the British and captured 600 soldiers. This was the beginning of 'Black Week' for the British, by the end of which a total of 700 had been killed, 3,000 wounded and 2,000 taken prisoner.

1900 January 6th saw the Boers attacking British positions at Ladysmith

January 24th – the Battle of Spion Kop. This was the worst defeat for British troops since the Crimean War with 12,000 men killed in less than 48 hours.

February 28th - Ladysmith was finally relieved and a month later, Commandant General Joubert committed suicide by taking poison after a court martial in Pretoria found him guilty of treason.

May 28th – The British annexed The Orange Free State and, on October 25th they proclaimed the annexation of the Transvaal. To many it seemed that the war was over, but this was not so.

December 21st – Orders were received to remove civilians from the countryside and 'concentrate' them into camps. This was so that the Boers could be prevented from accessing food and other supplies that were provided by the women and old men who lived on the farms and ranches. However, lack of experience led to bad conditions in the camps, resulting in sickness and deaths.

1901 Throughout January, the fighting continued with attacks on British positions. February 13th saw the proposal by the British of a peace meeting, which took place in Middelburg with the talks starting on 28th of that month. However, by March 16th, the proffered peace plans were rejected and the fighting continued afresh.

August 7th – Kitchener, after many discussions with the British Government, proclaimed that any armed Boer leaders who were captured after 15th September would be banished from South Africa. He believed that this would force the Boers to surrender, after which peace terms could be negotiated.

September 5th – At the Battle of Groenkloof, Commandant Lotter and his commando unit were captured by the British. Lotter was executed by the British 5 weeks later and, in reflection of this key move, the historian Thomas Pakenham wrote, "In losing Lotter, the Boers had lost more than a tenth of the guerillas in the Colony south of the Orange, and their élite commando at that ... the British Empire was a bottomless well, when it came to replacing lost troops."

October 10th - Commandant Gideon Scheepers was captured by the British and held prisoner at Graaff-Reinet. During his trial the British refused him his rights as an Officer and charged him with war crimes under martial law. The Court sentenced him to death.

1902 January 17th – Scheepers was executed by being tied to a chair and shot.

The Dutch government offered to mediate in peace talks between the British and the Boers, but the British declined this offer.

During February the British launched attacks and pushed further into the Eastern Free State, in the heart of South Africa.

On 7th March, at the Battle of Tweebosch, British Troops again suffered terrible losses: 68 killed, 121 wounded and 205 captured of the 1,250 men to take part in the battle. The Boer losses totalled 51.

Finally, on 20th March, Louis Botha, who had led the guerrilla campaign against the British agreed to the request for peace talks.

March 26th – Cecil Rhodes, who used his wealth to pursue his dream of expanding Britain's empire in Africa, died at Muizenberg, Cape Colony.

From 12th to 18th April, Kitchener held a preliminary meeting with the Boer peace delegates at Pretoria, whilst fighting continued throughout the next 6 weeks..

May 18th – the Boer delegates met with Kitchener and High Commissioner Milner at Pretoria and, on May 31st, the Terms of Surrender were signed, officially ending the war.

This really is a brief account of some of the events that took place during the hostilities. There is much, much more to be read about and some of the items listed at the bottom of these pages will help you to understand more.

Where are the Records Kept?

The National Archives at Kew hold service records and attestation papers for men who joined the Imperial Yeomanry, a British regiment raised specifically for the Boer War. Commercial websites also hold a variety of records and it is also worth checking with County Archives to see what papers they might also hold.

~~~~~

If you would like advice about where to find further information about the Boer Wars and are not sure where to look, someone else might be able to assist you. Register for FREE at <http://www.genealogy-specialists.com/> and post your query. The members will be delighted to try to help you.

There is so much more to discover about the Boer Wars and listed below are some products that will certainly help you to understand what happened, where and why. All of them are available from [www.paritychest.com](http://www.paritychest.com). Just pop the reference number in the website search box to see the details:

- 1902 Hart's Annual Army List - Boer War Issue Ref: YBM-15895
- The War in South Africa 1900 Ref: ARB-CA0011
- With the Flag to Pretoria 1899-1900 Ref: ARB-1204
- Military History Sources for Family Historians: The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902 Ref: NWA-OHM34
- 1923 Debrett's Peerage, Baronetage, Knightage & Companionship Ref: ARB-1341

Parish Chest has a complete section that is dedicated to Armed Forces where you will find Army Lists for the time period covered by both Boer Wars. Don't forget to use the website search box as well and pop in words such as **Army** or **Military**.