



The Boer War by Martin Bossenbroek.

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In *The Boer War*,¹ historian Martin Bossenbroek (Univ. of Utrecht) brings his vast expertise² in the subject to a novel consideration of the South African (or Anglo-Boer) War of 1899–1902, the watershed conflict between the British Empire and the two settler republics on the South African highveld.

Bossenbroek claims his history is the first to stress the Dutch (Netherlands) perspective in the war's "full" story (xvii) in a narrative centering on three men: Winston Churchill (1875–1965), as a young war correspondent and then politician; Pretoria Commando volunteer Deneys Reitz (1882–1944), who remained in the field for the whole war; and the South African Republic's (ZAR's) bureaucrat-turned-diplomat Willem Johannes Leyds (1859–1940). This novel tactic allows Bossenbroek to use Dutch-language material that many scholars find difficult to work with. Leyds, for example, was born in the Dutch East Indies and, following the war, retired to the Netherlands and organized a large body of papers and other material meant to shape our historical knowledge of the old Republic he had represented in Europe during the war. Reitz, the son of Francis William Reitz, the former president of the Orange Free State (and later the last State Secretary of the ZAR), left many documents in Dutch and Afrikaans. Much of it, like his three books of memoirs, relates to his significant later political career in South Africa. The tale of Churchill's campaigning, capture, escape, and political ascent is well known thanks to his later prominence, but gains new relevance in light of Bossenbroek's integrative goals.

The "three lives, one narrative" approach makes for a lively narrative and considerable human interest, from the book's opening discussion of the remembrance of the war through its account of the parts played by a large supporting cast, including Cecil Rhodes, Lord Kitchener, and Paul Kruger, to an epilogue describing the postwar legacy of these experiences. The book comprises three chronological acts, with excursive chapters supplementing the larger narrative.

Act 1 covers the lives of the principals during the decades before the war in order to convey a sense of its complicated roots in South African history. Act 2, running from October 1899 to the formal annexation of the republics (31 May 1900), may be considered the "conventional phase" of the war. Act 3 treats the period of guerrilla actions and total war on the highveld (June 1900–May 1902), with a short epilogue. Bossenbroek identifies, without much elaboration, five major themes in histories of the war as, specifically, (a) a climax to British imperialism, (b) a harbinger of the First World War, (c) a model of brutal warfare to come, (d) a devastating transformation of South African highveld societies, and (e) the root of later white-supremacist regimes and resistance to them.

1. Orig. *De Boerenoorlog* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 2012).

2. His previous work includes several books and many essays on the position of the Netherlands in geopolitical affairs, including the relationship of the Dutch state and society to the South African War.

The author's concentration on the story of the war as seen from a Dutch vantage point and his treatment of Leyds and the affairs of the ZAR in Europe are the great strength of his book, all of it based on myriad details regarding public and intergovernmental perceptions of southern Africa in continental Europe before and during the war. At the same time, he astutely interweaves events on and behind the battle lines as they concerned Reitz and Churchill. These include the British defeats of Black Week, the brutal battle of Spion Kop, and, in rich detail, the experience of guerrilla commandos who sought to take the offensive into the Cape Colony as late as 1902. Even those already familiar with Churchill's biography, Reitz's books, or the papers Leyds left in The Hague (with copies in Pretoria) will enjoy and learn from Bossenbroek's contextual retelling of their stories. His perceptive discussion of Leyds's role and the ZAR mission to Europe as integral to the conflict makes his book essential reading for both students and specialists interested in the war.

The book does, however, suffer from limitations inherent in its mission and methods. It tends to reinforce the depiction, so common at the time, of a bipolar "Briton vs. Boer" conflict. In this dichotomy, the Boers are identified with the ZAR and not the Orange Free State, which had been the richer and more populous of the two Boer republics before 1886. Moreover, the majority black, Coloured, and Indian populations of the subcontinent are consigned to purely instrumental roles with no real agency aside from serving one or the other side. This is explicitly *not* what Bossenbroek intended and he emphasizes the need to transcend the old "white man's war" narrative. But his treatment of newer directions in the study of the war depends heavily on Boer memoirs and a few foundational works of secondary literature,³ without delving into rich new studies available since the war's centennial. Thus, notably, Bossenbroek characterizes the Kgatla engagement at Derdepoort as the work of people who

had been overtly pro-British from the beginning of the war. Their attack on Derdepoort on 25 November 1899 had been the Boers' first (shocking) confrontation with African auxiliaries deployed in the war. The incident had been followed by a series of reprisals from both sides. On Kitchener's orders, the Kgatla chief, Lentshwe [*sic*; read "Linchwe I"], had been encouraged to carry out raids on the Transvaal. Towards the end of 1901 the Kgatla were supplied with weapons for that purpose, and had consequently gained control of the entire region north-west of Rustenburg. (359–60)

Pro-Boer apologists long offered this portrayal of Linchwe's kingdom as merely supplicant to British perfidy to prove that the whole fight was unfair. In this instance, it has been convincingly shown that the Boers also wooed Linchwe, who in turn waited to see which way the strategic wind blew before backing the British and pursuing cattle and territory lost in prior decades.⁴ Derdepoort appears here only as a narrative aside, along with most of the author's other discussion of the African armed experience of the war, apart from Reitz's report of an encounter with a Sotho militia in 1901. This is a rare and peculiar oversight by a scholar of Bossenbroek's caliber.

The Boer War is an engaging, useful (and well translated) work that deserves a wide readership. But it should be borne in mind that Martin Bossenbroek's primary intent is to add specific new dimensions to the literature on the South African War, not to produce a comprehensive study.⁵

3. E.g., Peter Warwick, *Black People and the South African War 1899–1902* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 1983), and Bill Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War: A Black South African War in the Cape* (id., 1991).

4. See, among others, Fred Morton, *When Rustling Became an Art: Pilane's Kgatla and the Transvaal Frontier 1820–1902* (Claremont, S.Af.: David Philip, 2009) chap. 9 *passim*.

5. The book's inclusion of excellent maps and photographs will help draw readers into the human experiences Bossenbroek describes.