

The Second Boer War

The Boer Wars, also known as the South African War, were a series of conflicts between Great Britain and the two Boer republics of South Africa. It involved two wars. The first, lasting from 16 December 1880 until 23 March 1881, ended in a defeat for the British Empire which led to the eventual independence of South Africa.

The second Boer War, lasting from 11 October 1899 – 31 May 1902, ended in a defeat for the South African republic, leading to British administration over the Orange Free states.

This article will talk about in detail about the causes and the course of the second Boer War.

The details of this conflict will be useful in the World History segment of the UPSC Exams.

Who were the Boers?

Before going into detail of the Boer wars, it is important to understand who the Boers were. The term Boer, derived from the Afrikaans word for farmer, was used to describe the people in southern Africa who traced their ancestry to Dutch, German and French Huguenot settlers who arrived in the Cape of Good Hope from 1652.

These farmers settled in the fertile lands that dotted the area around Cape Town. The labour in these farms consisted of slaves brought in from other Dutch controlled territories. After nearly 150 years of administration by the Dutch East India company, the Cape Town colony was taken over by the British during the Napoleonic Wars in 1806, ostensibly to prevent it from falling to their French rivals.

The Boers were not all too pleased with the change of administration and the British were also not pleased with the Boer way of life, especially with regard to slavery. The British attempted with force to change the way of life of the Boers by abolishing slavery in 1834. This was resented by the Boers as they saw slavery as a hierarchy established by God which put white European Christians at the top.

The problem was further compounded when the British made English the official language of the courts. Frustrated with British rule and under attack constantly by local African tribes, many Boers moved north of the Cape Town colony. At least 10,000 migrated to northern lands in what became known as the Great Trek.

Eventually the Orange Free State and the South African Republic was established, with the British recognizing the independence of both in 1852 (South African Republic) and 1854 (Orange Free State).

Cause of the Second Boer War

The cause of the Second Boer war is itself a matter of intense debate amongst historians. On the surface it would seem that the British and the Boers detested each other. The British viewed the Boers as a backward and stubborn people while the Boers regarded the British as foreign interlopers set out to destroy their way of life

However, historians do stress that local economics had a fundamental role to play in the outbreak of the Boer wars. The rich gold-mine of Witwatersrand located in the South African Republic (SAR) had one of the largest gold reserves in the world at the time. A lot of monetary systems of the world, especially the British one, were increasingly dependent upon gold. Thus the British had a roving eye over the gold mines in SAR for a long period of time.

Further the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand boosted the modernisation efforts of SAR that put them on par with Britain for control of the entirety of Southern Africa

In 1897, Alfred Milner, the British high commissioner for South Africa, sought to undermine the SAR political independence by modifying the constitution in order to grant more political rights to British settlers. This would ultimately lead to a more pro-British SAR state policy being formulated in the long run.

This move caused outrage in the South African Republic who did not want outsider interference in their government. A conference was hosted by the President of the Orange Free State, Marthinus Steyn at Bloemfontein in May-June 1899. The meeting between Alfred Milner and the president of the SAR, Paul Kruger, was unsuccessful as the concessions offered by Kruger were deemed insufficient by Milner. Milner requested the British government to send additional troops to the region, a move that alarmed the Boers. Additional concessions were offered but were rejected by Milner.

Realizing that war was inevitable, the Boers decided to take the initiative. They issued an ultimatum on October 9, 1899 to the British government that a state of war would exist between the two Boer republics if the British did not withdraw their troops from the border. The ultimatum expired and so the Second Boer war would begin in October 11, 1899

Course of the Second Boer War

The Course of the Second Boer War can be divided into three stages:

Stage 1: The Boer forces inflicted several defeats on the unprepared British army. The Boer army attacked on two fronts - the northern Cape Colony from the Orange Free State and the British colony of Natal. The problem was made worse when the northern districts of the Cape colony rebelled against the British and threw in their lot with the Boers. In late 1899 and the early 1900 the Boers won several engagements against the British and even besieged key towns such as Kimberly, Ladysmith

Stage 2: Although the Boer onslaught had taken the British by surprise, they recovered quickly enough to mount a counter offensive helped by large numbers of British reinforcements by early 1900. Under Lords Kitchener and Robersts the British armies relieved the sites of towns, beat the Boer armies on the field and eventually occupied a Orange Free State capital of Bloemfontein in February 1900 and in the May and June of that same year, Johannesburg and Pretoria -capital of SAR was overrun by the British. Kruger was successful in his escape from the British but was unsuccessful in gaining assistance in his fight against the British.

Stage 3: The second Boer War entered its most destructive phase at the end of 1900. For 15 months, Boer guerillas held the British troops with hit-and-run tactics. The large rural areas of the Orange Free State and SAR remained under Boer control. Lord Kitchener responded with scorched-earth tactics. Large farms, owned by both Boers and Africans, were destroyed while its inhabitants were rounded up and put in concentration camps. These camps were poorly run and unhygienic, leading to deaths of many Boer women and children.

The Boers under General Jan Smuts kept fighting even striking deep into the British held cape colony. But Kitchener's brutal methods slowly began to pay dividends. The Boer advance slowed down and eventually led to divisions between those who wanted to fight to the very end and those who sought surrender. Thus effectively losing their fighting edge.

End of the Second Boer War

The Boers had rejected an offer of peace from the British in March 1901, in part because it required that the Boers recognize the British annexation of their republics. Fighting continued until the Boers finally accepted the loss of their independence with the Peace of Vereeniging in May 1902. In the end, pragmatic Boer leaders such as Louis Botha and General Smuts trumped the will of the *bittereinders* and opted to negotiate for peace on the basis of British suzerainty, promises of local self-government, the swift restoration and efficient management of the gold mines, and, crucially, the alliance of Boers and Britons against Black Africans.