

12 L.P. 025/0152/12

See "Originals" Folder

British Supremacy in South Africa: III

FINAL EXTRACT FROM G.H.L. LE MAY'S BOOK **PEACE, AND ITS TRAIN OF BITTERNESS**



Lord Milner . . . his grand design failed.



Boer soldier surprised in a donga—one of the many scenes made by British war artists on the battlefield.

THE "three-month war" was dragging into its third year. Six thousand Boer guerillas were occupying the attentions of a quarter-million Imperial troops. Lord Kitchener, a law unto himself, was wrecking all the carefully laid plans of Sir Alfred Milner.

In Britain the people were disillusioned and weary of war; the Government feared that its very large majority would be toppled and that it would be put out of office.

No other solution than the utter rout of the Boers in the field presented itself, for the Boers would not yield the independence of their republics. And the Boers refused to be routed. Milner was near despair, but refused to surrender his vision of a great, British South Africa.



A group of Lord Milner's kindergarten. Back row: Lionel Curtis, Nel Hichens, Peter Perry, Hugh Wyndham, Herbert Baker, Geoffrey Dawson. Sitting: Lord Selborne, Robert Brand, Patrick Duncan, Lady Selborne, Richard Feetham. On floor: Philip Kerr (later Marquis of Lothian), John Dove, Douglas Malcolm.

The failure of Milnerism

THE first direct challenge to Milner's administration came not from the Boers but from the British. The Boers were too busy with the business of personal survival for politics; the returning Uitlanders came as

most certain to fall at the impending elections and that the Liberals with rather more liberal ideas would succeed it (he was right).

The bitter taste of defeat was in Milner's mouth

was especially bitter about "the British."

He claimed that serious injury had been done to the "best interests" of the Transvaal "by this trick—and it is often nothing more than a trick—of not

Bannerman stopped the importation of Chinese labourers. This appeared to be a demonstration of the authority of the "imperial factor," for it violated contracts legally entered into.

BY the beginning of 1902 the Transvaal and the Orange Free State were a wasteland of wrecked farms, dotted with blockhouses and criss-crossed with hundreds of miles of barbed-wire fencing. The Boer commandos were in tatters, arming and feeding themselves by raids on British wagon trains or even on tribal kraals.

The policy of separating "tame" from "wild" Boers in the prison camps was beginning to show results; more and more prisoners were demonstrating an eagerness for peace.

By March, nearly 2,000 prisoners had taken service with the British as National

and suggested that they fall in with this.

The Boers refused, but Kitchener agreed to send their terms in a modified form to London. The British Cabinet rejected the terms but instructed Kitchener to press for further proposals.

The Boers came back, and this time Milner was present. But the talks faltered on the rock of independence. Then the Boers agreed that if they had to yield they could only do so on a mandate from the "people," who were defined as the commandos still in the field.

Kitchener promised them facilities to consult the commandos.





on camp at Norval's Pont — a contemporary photograph.



Transvaal and Free State were a checked farms. This is a war artist's of the storming of a farmhouse.

more prisoners were demonstrating an eagerness for peace.

By March, nearly 2,000 prisoners had taken service with the British as National Scouts. Their value was out of proportion to their scanty numbers; they knew the country, they knew the habits of the commandos, and they were particularly valuable as guides and scouts. And they were increasing in numbers.

British public opinion—and it included King Edward VII—was becoming increasingly critical of the prolonged war and the British Government's demand: unconditional surrender.

Word of this filtered back to the commandos and on April 9 representatives of the two Republican governments met in Klerksdorp to discuss the possibilities of peace in the new circumstances.

The previous difference between the two republics arose again. The Free Staters, who had come into the war on a point of honour, refused to yield

"The average Boer really is the most good-natured, manageable creature in the world as long as he clearly realizes you have got the thick end of the stick."

—Milner, 1902.

unless their continued independence was assured. The Transvaalers saw it differently: if they fought on their leaders would be exiled and their land thrown open to the Uitlanders and the "hands-uppers." Timely surrender was the only means left of preserving the core of Afrikanerdom.

The argument swayed back and forth, under a British truce, and two days later it was decided to ask for a meeting with Kitchener.

He agreed at once and two delegations—British and Boer—left for Pretoria that night by train.

The anti-Milner faction in the British Cabinet was able to arrange for the exclusion of Milner from these preliminary negotiations.

GRIEVANCE

Kitchener opened the talks "as one with a grievance."

He complained that he had been unjustly described as one who wished to exterminate the Afrikaner people. Then, abruptly changing his mood, he asked for the Boer proposals.

Kitchener showed surprise when he realized that the Boers were demanding independence. Speaking as a "candid friend," he said that military rule would be followed by self-government,

were defined as the commandos still in the field.

Kitchener promised them facilities to consult the commandos.

On May 15, the Boer Assembly of the People met at Vereeniging and the argument began again, with the Free Staters still proposing a fight to the bitter end.

"The Boers are the cleverest nation in the world in politics. He will be found to be as able with the vote as with the Mauser, as formidable with a portfolio as with a Long Tom."

—Progressive candidate R. Orpen, as reported by *The Star* (1905).

Schalk Burger of the Transvaal answered them: "Perhaps it is God's will that the English nation should suppress us, so that our pride may be subdued and that we may come through the fire of our troubles purified."

The negotiators moved to Pretoria. Several of the Boer leaders still would not yield, but at last a compromise was hammered out in which military rule by the British would be replaced by self-government "as soon as circumstances permit."

On May 31, 1902, in Pretoria, the "Treaty of Vereeniging" was signed. The Boer War was over.

Kitchener gave figures showing the Boer losses: 20,000 dead in the concentration camps, 3,800 killed in the field, 31,600 taken

J. C. Smuts, photographed in London in 1906 during his visit to plead for Transvaal self-rule.



Johan Rissik . . . General Louis Botha chose Smuts, J. de Villiers and Rissik as Het Volk representatives in the first Transvaal Cabinet, 1908.

prisoner (of whom 600 died).

Twenty-one thousand burghers still in the field surrendered: more than three times the number estimated by Milner.



General Louis Botha and Mrs. Botha. As leader of Het Volk, he formed the first Transvaal Government after the war. The wheel had turned full circle, the Boers were in command again. But Botha promised: No revenge.

came from the Boers but from the British. The Boers were too busy with the business of personal survival for politics; the returning Uitlanders came as conquerors and found Milner too benevolent.

His officials were regarded as brash and juvenile intruders; Merriman spoke in the Cape Parliament of a "kindergarten" of young men from Balliol, and the name stuck. (As a matter of record, New College was predominant.)

Prosperity was slow in returning. Gold production was substantially lower than in 1899, and the expected influx of British settlers did not occur.

Depression was ascribed to the shortage of Black labour; the labour force was 33,000 down on the pre-war figure. Attempts to find labourers elsewhere in Africa failed.

UNITED

Milner then made the decision that hastened his departure from South Africa: the importation of Chinese mine-workers. He made it reluctantly because he saw no alternative. And the last chance his grand vision had of surviving was prosperity for the Transvaal; prosperity built on the Chinese labourer.

The Chinese influx united Boer and Briton in opposition to Milner.

The rising tide of opposition to Milner's rule was communicated to the British Cabinet; disenchantment grew.

Alfred Lyttelton, Colonial Secretary in succession to Chamberlain, warned Milner that the ruling Unionist government was al-

liberals with rather more liberal ideas would succeed it (he was right).

The bitter taste of defeat was in Milner's mouth.

By May, 1904, the demand for self-government was so insistent that Milner reported to Lyttelton that something had to be done about it. The constitution he proposed would have given a majority to the Boers. He saw the risks but saw no way out.

This was an admission of defeat; the grand design had failed.

SHOCKED

The Cabinet had little taste for Milner's proposals and asked for new ones.

Milner replied: "The Dutch are clearly entitled to the advantages of their common origin and capacity for acting together. The non-Dutch must take the consequence of their original heterogeneity and fissiparous disposition."

This was not the British Race Patriot talking. The dispatch was received in the Colonial Office with shocked surprise. The Parliamentary Secretary wrote: "Nowhere else in the British Empire has 'Downing Street' been so unanimously condemned, though in no Crown Colony has it interfered less."

The corollary that Milner had failed, though unsaid, was plain enough.

Milnerism was dead, and in no place other than his land of birth was Milner becoming more dishonoured.

The Chinese issue meanwhile boiled under the surface.

The Boers, arising from their wounds, began to organize politically. Louis Botha and Ewald Esselen began to form Het Volk.

Lord Milner retired from the South African scene in April, 1905, with the knowledge that his work had fallen far short of its purpose.

The Transvaal had not been transformed into an outpost of England. The Boers had neither been cowed nor persuaded into acceptance of the Empire; indeed they were better organized and more subtly led than ever before.

BITTER

He could point to remarkable achievements—to new railways built and planned, to improvements in agriculture and irrigation, to the foundation of local governments, to telegraphs and telephones, to better police and prisons—but these were only the beginning of the grand design.

In his last address in Johannesburg he made a plaintive plea: "Defend my works, when I am gone."

He blamed his failure on developments which he considered outside his control. He

claimed that serious injury had been done to the "best interests" of the Transvaal "by this trick—and it is often nothing more than a trick—of perpetual fault-finding, this steady drip, drip of depreciation, only diversified by occasional outbursts of hysterical abuse."

In only one respect did Milner admit publicly to error: he referred obliquely to Article VIII of the Treaty of Vereeniging when he said in Johannesburg that he believed "as strongly as ever that we got off the right lines when we threw over Mr. Rhodes's principle of 'equal rights for every civilized man'."

Milner had not been able to avoid the dilemma which he had described to Asquith in 1897: that any move to establish the equality of the races would produce a united opposition.

He had done much to improve the racial laws, but he had not been able to persuade the South African Whites to distinguish be-

"The rule of the capitalist is another thing to which both races (Boer and Briton) are equally resolved not to submit."
—John X. Merriman, in a letter to Campbell-Bannerman's adviser, James Bryce.

tween the civilized and the uncivilized African.

He had hoped, by exempting the educated African from the requirements of the pass laws, that gradually White opinion would change and that the "superior" African would be admitted to something approaching equality, if not in political at least in personal rights.

The Indians complained that although their rights were largely unchanged, the British were much more efficient in the administration of their restrictions than were the Boers.

And so Milner left the wreckage of his grand design, a war on his conscience and little achieved of his great plan for southern Africa.

The Lyttelton Constitution, based on an alternative proposal by Milner, was about to be put into practice when the Unionist government fell and the Liberals under Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman came into power.

This constitution, among other points, allowed for the loading of rural constituencies. The clause was carried through in the Campbell-Bannerman constitution.

A great deal of argument, discussion and debate ensued before this constitution went into effect. The Liberal Party, imbued with the new spirit of humanism, found that its theories did not always fit the facts.

Immediately on taking office in December, 1905, Campbell-

appeared to be a demonstration of the authority of the "imperial factor," for it violated contracts legally entered into.

It was perhaps no coincidence that he announced, two months later, the granting of self-government to both former republics.

That, at least, was the Conservative view; undoubtedly a jaundiced one. The Liberals basically were opposed to rule without consent.

'FOR EVER'

The first elections for the Transvaal were fixed, after an extraordinary set of manoeuvres by the interested parties, for February 22, 1907. The main contestants were the Progressives (the mining interests) on the one side, and Het Volk joined in alliance with the Responsible Government Association (English-speaking but not concerned with mining), on the other.

Lord Selborne (who had replaced Milner) reported: "Personal considerations operate as usual in the direction of fissiparousness as far as the British and in the direction of solidarity as far as the Boer section are concerned."

The election results were received by the "British party" with horrified surprise. Het Volk won 37 of the 69 seats, the Progressives 21, the Responsible Government Association 6, Labour 3 and Independents 2.

Smuts exclaimed: "We are in for ever!"

Louis Botha, leader of Het Volk, was asked to form a Ministry.

From Het Volk he chose Smuts, J. de Villiers and J. Rissik; from the Responsibles he chose E. P. Solomon and H. C. Hulls.

The wheel had turned full circle; the Boers were in command again. But Botha promised: No revenge.

Milner had set out to break the power of Afrikanerdom. He succeeded in uniting it as Kruger had not been able to do.

During the prolonged resistance the patriarchs, the takhaars, disappeared; a new, young elite emerged as the leaders.

That is what Milner did for Afrikanerdom.

Extracted from *British Supremacy in South Africa, 1899-1907*, by G. H. L. Le May (Oxford University Press).