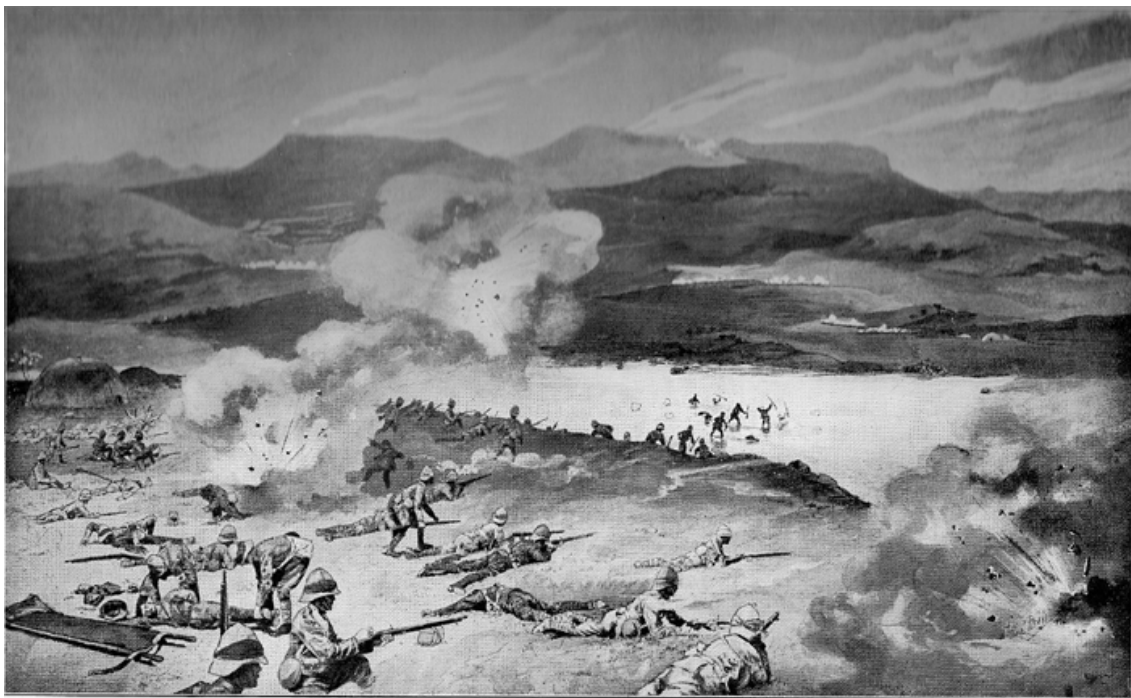


The Anglo-Boer Wars

There were two Boer Wars, one ran from 16 December 1880 - 23 March 1881 and the second from 9 October 1899 - 31 May 1902. Both were fought between the British and settlers of Dutch origin (called Boer, Afrikaners or Voortrekkers) who lived in South Africa. These wars put an end to the two independent republics that the Dutch settlers had founded.

The First Boer War 16 December 1880 - 23 March 1881

The first clash was precipitated by Sir Theophilus Shepstone who annexed the Transvaal (the South African Republic) for the British in 1877 after the Anglo-Zulu War. The Boers protested and in 1880 revolted. The Boers dressed in earth tone khaki clothes, whereas the British uniforms were bright red, a stark contrast to the African landscape, which enabled the Boers to easily snipe British troops from a distance. In February 1881, after a British force under George Pomeroy-Collery was heavily defeated at the Battle of Majuba Hill, the British government of Gladstone gave the Boers self-government in the Transvaal under theoretical British oversight.



THE BATTLE OF COLENZO—THE DUBLIN FUSILIERS ATTEMPT TO FORD THE TUGELA.

Drawing by René Bull and Enoch Ward, R.B.A.

The Second Boer War 9 October 1899 - 31 May 1902

There was continued pressure on the Boers following the discovery of gold in the Transvaal in 1885 at Witwatersrand Reef which resulted in a rush of non-Boer settlers - Uitlanders. The new settlers were poorly regarded by the Boers and in return the Uitlanders sought the removal of the Boer government. In 1896 Cecil Rhodes sponsored the ineffective coup d'etat of the Jameson Raid. The failure to gain improved rights for Britons was used as an excuse to justify a major British military buildup in the Cape. There was another important reason for the British intention to take control of the Boer Republics: the Transvaal Republic's attempt to link up with German South West Africa, a possibility which the British, with an eye to the coming clash with the German Empire, were determined to thwart.

The Boers, under Paul Kruger, struck first. They attacked into Cape Colony and Natal between October 1899 and January 1900. The Boers were able to successfully besiege the British garrisons in the towns of Ladysmith, Mafeking (defended by troops headed by Robert Baden-Powell) and Kimberley. They inflicted three separate defeats on the British in one week, December 10 to 15, 1899, including Colenso, where the British were led by Redvers Buller. On the 15th December 1899 General Sir Redvers Buller tried to cross the Thukela River in order to relieve the Siege of Ladysmith. He was faced by well entrenched Boer commandoes who inflicted a reverse upon the British that ultimately led to Buller being relieved of command.

It was not until reinforcements arrived on February 14, 1900, that British troops commanded by Lord Roberts could launch counter-offences to relieve the garrisons (the relief of Mafeking on May 18, 1900 provoked riotous celebrations in England) and enabled the British to take Bloemfontein on March 13 and the Boer capital, Pretoria, on June 5. Boer units fought for two more years as guerrillas, the British, now under the command of Lord Kitchener, responded by constructing blockhouses, destroying farms and confiscating food to prevent them from falling into Boer hands and placing Boer civilians in concentration camps.

The last of the Boers surrendered in May 1902 and the war ended with the Treaty of Vereeniging in the same month. 22,000 British troops had died and over 25,000 Boer civilians. The treaty ended the existence of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State as Boer republics within the British Empire. The Boers were given £3m in compensation and were promised self-government in time (the Union of South Africa was established in 1910).

The Boers referred to the two wars as the Freedom Wars.