

Prologue of the South African Boer Wars 1899-1902

Portuguese sailors became the first Europeans to see South Africa. They sighted it in 1488, rounding the Cape of Good Hope in their search for a water route to India. In 1652 the first European settlers arrived. They worked for the Dutch East India Company, stationed at the East Indies (current Indonesia). A half-way station was set up in South Africa. In 1657 the Company began to allow some employees to leave the firm and start their own farms. These people became known as "Boers", (Dutch for "farmers"). From 1679 more Dutch farmers as well as French and German settlers joined the Cape Colony. By 1795 the whites had spread about 500km north and 8km east of Cape Town. The total population was about 60000. Of those 20000 were whites, the rest natives of which some were killed, others died of Small Pox and most survivors became servants of the whites.

By 1795 France conquered the Netherlands, British troops then occupied the Cape Colony to keep it out of French hands. They gave it back to the Dutch in 1803, but reoccupied it in 1806. In 1814 the Netherlands formally gave the Cape to Britain.

Many Boers decided to leave the Cape Colony to get away from British rule and settled in what is now Natal, the Orange Free State and Transvaal. Britain annexed Natal, but recognised the independence of the other two.

The discovery of gold and diamonds in the Boer Republics in the 1880s intensified the rivalry between the British subjects and the Boers. This led to the Anglo- Boer Wars in 1899-1902. This conflict was generally divided in three phases:

Phase 1; October-December 1899. The British armies, mainly infantry, were defeated or besieged by highly mobile Boer mounted troops.

Phase 2; December 1899-September 1900. A British counter-offensive resulted in the capture of most of the major towns and cities of South Africa.

Phase 3: September 1900-May 1902. This was mainly a guerrilla conflict between British mounted troops and Boer irregulars.

The Australian Colonies, as part of the British Empire, offered troops for the war in South Africa.

(Internet sources)