

The Second Anglo-Boer War, the Russo-Japanese War and the shifts in the nature of warfare

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SAMUEL BULLEN, OCT 9 2011

The Second Anglo-Boer War was a conflict between the British Empire and the independent states of the Transvaal and Orange Free State. It was a 'clash between forces essentially designed for, and accustomed to, colonial warfare and opponents that lacked even the trappings of regular troops.' [1] An overconfident British expeditionary force was sent to crush the rebellion by the Boers against the British who had established footholds at Cape Colony and, under explorers such as Cecil Rhodes, were attempting to push northwards. The Boers resorted to guerrilla tactics as the best way to force the British out and the war protracted to two and a half years. The conflict, which lasted from 1899-1902, can be seen as a turning point in many ways between the traditional military paradigm that had preceded it, and the more modern, industrial one that came after. This theme is continued in the 1905 war between Russia and Japan which became inevitable when Russia refused to hand over Manchuria and its crucial warm water port at Port Arthur to the Japanese, as they had promised after the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. In retaliation the Japanese launched a surprise naval attack on the Russian fleet in Port Arthur on 8 February 1905 starting a war that cost many thousands of lives. This war, the first of the new century, used tactics and technology next seen in WWI a decade later and it also saw the same level of losses with over 160,000 deaths in the nineteen-day battle of Mukden. With its victory, the first of a modern non-European state over a European one, it also propelled Japan to the status of a world power and seriously damaged Russia's reputation – it was a large contributing factor to the social unrest and workers revolts which began to spring up in Russia, a portent for the future communist revolution. [2]

This essay will examine how, while these conflicts show evidence of fundamental change in the nature of warfare, many lessons were still ignored and turning points missed as the Great Powers moved towards WWI. I will analyse these two conflicts on a thematic basis firstly looking at tactics firstly focusing on the guerrilla and ant-insurgency tactics of the Boer War and then the mechanized trench warfare of the Russo-Japanese War. Secondly, I will discuss technology with the rise of mechanized warfare both on land and sea and modern communications such as the telephone and wireless. Thirdly I will discuss how these changes contributed to wider factors through increased public and media engagements with the wars. Lastly, I will look at how the lack of meritocracy and equality led to disaster and shows evidence of how these conflicts fail to demonstrate shifts in the nature of warfare.

While the guerrilla tactics of the Boers are recognisable to historians now as the same as those used by countless revolutionary and rebel groups from Bolivia to Vietnam during the Twentieth Century they were almost entirely new to the British especially on such a large scale. The Boers were adept horsemen often using their small ponies to stay ahead of the British, dispiritingly just out of reach. They were also adept at blending into the countryside allowing to, among other things bypass the great defensive line constructed of 8000 fortifications and barbed wire built to wall them in – they were truly 'fish swimming in the sea of the population,' [3] and in the vastness of South Africa that was more of an ocean.

To counter the guerrilla tactics of the Boer rebels the British instituted several new policies in an attempt to contain both the fighters themselves and the vital civilian link that helped them survive. 'The British army, first under Lord Roberts, and then under Lord Kitchener...adopted a scorched earth policy, burning down the farms of all those who supported the Boer cause' [4] or were at least believed to do so. By doing this, the British hoped to cut off essential supplies of food and shelter to the enemy and drive them out of the hills and into a pitched battle, in which they were

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confident of victory. The British burned 30,000 farms, dozens of villages, cut down trees and killed or confiscated livestock.[5] While the burning of enemy buildings, homes and indeed entire towns and villages is hardly a shift in military doctrine the sheer scale and principle of the British policy in South Africa can be seen as a small revolution in military organisation as well as an interesting insight into the European colonial mind of the time.

In combination with the scorched earth policy the British employed a brand new form of civilian warfare – a prototype of what would become known as the concentration camp. The British rounded up any suspected Boer sympathisers and forced them into 50 detention centres across South Africa.[6] Including native African prisoners around 280,000 people were interred in the camps where conditions were horrible. There was little clean water (much of it was fouled by human waste), terrible sanitation, overcrowded tents, little fuel and poor food. Things were doubly worse for those who had family members fighting the British, these ‘undesirables’, as the historian Thomas Pakenham called them, were given even less rations than the other prisoners.[7] ‘The bulk of civilian fatalities in the Boer War stemmed from the British policy of confining Boer and African non-combatants to concentration camps.’[8] In fact out of the 280,000 prisoners 45,930 died (17% of Boers and 14% of Africans) of which 94% were female or under the age of 16.[9] This figure includes 24,074 Boer children, half of the population under 16.[10] The use of concentration camps in warfare shows a fundamental shift in the way wars were fought from pitched battles between relatively small armies in bright uniforms and with flags flying, to a more recognisably modern war (the British wore Khaki battledress) in which the population was often hostile to foreign forces who had to employ counterinsurgency (COIN) tactics to win and social and economic warfare became part of everyday life – indeed a type of warfare still uncomfortably relevant in ‘small wars’ of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq.

While both the Boer War and the Russo-Japanese war contain elements of imperialistic warfare they were fundamentally different, especially in the tactics used, in fact the parallels between the Russo-Japanese War and WWI are difficult to ignore. Mechanized trench warfare became an integral part of the land campaigns of the conflict, even more so than during the earlier Boer War. Heavily entrenched machine gun posts and artillery positions were a feature of many battles including that of Mukden where the Japanese assaulted entrenched Russian positions with surge tactics and vice versa, reminiscent of those later seen at the Somme. This, in part, accounted for the terrible casualty rates, with tens of thousands of dead on both sides. The Japanese had a special flair for entrenchment with one British commentator saying that ‘the whole Japanese Army in front seemed to be underground.’[11]

The second theme that links these two conflicts is that of technological advances both in terms of weaponry and logistics especially communications. The introduction and development of new weapons marked a shift from older methods of fighting to ones more reminiscent of the later First World War. Rifled weapons, machine guns and lighter, faster field artillery forced a change in tactics during the Boer War. The advantage now lay with the defending side, which, properly entrenched and supplied, could use these weapons to lay a punishing field of fire against an advancing enemy. One soldier recalls: ‘...they poured such a terrible fire at us that God only knows how I escaped. The bullets passed so close to my face and body that I could feel the rush of air they caused. It was like a small hail of lead, and bullets seemed to rip up the ground for yards around.’[12] This is especially true if the enemy advanced in tight order, as was the norm in previous wars. For example the failure of over 3000 Zulu warriors to capture the small supply base of Rorke’s Drift defended by 139 British soldiers, behind makeshift barricades of meal sacks and biscuit barrels in January 1879 shows the sheer effectiveness of the new weapons.[13] The British lost 17 men, the Zulus lost over 350.

Weapons technologies were advancing quickly during the end of the Nineteenth Century leading to greater casualties. This included field artillery, machine guns and even grenades, brought back into service in the American Civil War, had become more reliable and damaging, leading to one reporter remarking ‘...the ghastly injuries which they inflicted, killing men by the score and blowing them to fragments of flesh.’[14] Similarly, advances in naval technology are evident in the Russo-Japanese conflict. In the opening stages of the war the Japanese used new Whitehead torpedoes to assault the Russian fleet at Port Arthur. While this was not the first use of these torpedoes and they had limited effectiveness it still demonstrates a significant change in how naval warfare could be fought and once again shows the Russo-Japanese War to be the forerunner of things to come, in this case the use of torpedoes by ships and eventually submarines (indeed it was a Whitehead Mark VIII that sunk the *Belgrano* during the Falklands War over 75 years later)[15]. It is also interesting to note that the battle-flag of the lead torpedo-ship

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Mikasa would later be flown on the attack carrier Akagi in another Japanese pre-emptive strike at Pearl Harbour and 'thus we are provided with yet another example of the lessons of war being overlooked or forgotten.'[16]

Another way in which the Boer War marked an evolution in military technology was the introduction for the first time of wireless communications between outposts and between Headquarters and units in the field. Communications had advanced relatively recently before the Boer war with the introduction of the telegraph during the Crimean War that connected military leaders to their respective countries via undersea cable. This in itself was quite revolutionary allowing direct political oversight of a campaign and changed the duties of both military headquarters and Ministries of Defence quite dramatically. While the telegraph allowed political oversight, Marconi's wireless telegraphy would allow strategic oversight of units by a centralised HQ and reduce the time taken for messages to be sent. The wireless available to the British in South Africa was, however, radically different from that of later conflicts; 'the equipment was large and cumbersome, the receivers insensitive and unselective.'[17] However, the introduction of wireless shows once again that the Boer War was 'a transition period from the military ways of past centuries to those of our own.' While wireless was an untested problematic system in 1902 by the start of WWI in 1914 it had become an integral part of the British Army.[18]

In a continuing theme from the Boer War, advances in communications technology also play a part in the Russo-Japanese War. Field telephones and the use of Forward Observers were first deployed during this conflict and were often used to direct the fire of artillery batteries positioned behind the lines.[19] However, the obvious advantages of the new technology, and indeed older equipment such as the field telegraph and heliograph, were not understood by the Russian officer corps who unlike the regular Russian peasant soldier who, while lacking education was still held in some regard by other nations, were 'beneath contempt.'[20] Similarly they failed to understand the importance of the Maxim gun and many infantry units failed to receive the 'increment of machine gun companies.'[21] In fact the failure of the gentry officers to react to 'a Japanese army prepared to fight a modern war'[22] would eventually lead to its downfall with the Bolshevik Revolution.

'As Byron Farwell writes in his book, Queen Victoria's Little Wars, the Boer War, "...was not the usual little war fought by professional soldiers with armies largely composed of native troops, but a major war, a serious war, in which the general public became intimately involved."'[23] The application of the telegraph and the increase in literacy among the lower classes of British society provided a larger audience with up-to-the-minute news of the war. The Times with a readership of around 35,000, and its pro-British Colonial Editor Flora Shaw, was perhaps the most influential paper but many others circulated too providing for the first time a second battle for the British to win, the one for the public mind.[24] Disasters such as the early losses of Black Week were relayed to a relatively uncensored press and fed to a waiting public. The same information also traveled back to other countries that had a much less favorable view of British exploits in Africa. Anti-British feeling was common especially in France, Germany and Russia, Britain's colonial rivals, helped by this new press engagement and media awareness.[25] The fact that it had taken so long for such a large British force to win what was meant to be a quick clean colonial conflict forced the government to recognize that military reform was urgently required. This led to Secretary of State Richard Haldane to set up the British Expeditionary Force 'ready to fight overseas at any time' from voluntary local militias whose usefulness would show in the opening months of WWI.[26]

While both the Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War certainly show fundamental shifts in the nature of warfare there is perhaps one area on which they do not. Both wars are characterised by a Euro-centric, Imperialist jingoism and by a reactionary belief in the superiority of the gentry and the elites in warfare. In the Boer war, sometimes called 'the last of the gentlemen's wars,'[27] this was seen in the belief that the Boer forces were just another imperial enemy to be squashed by superior British forces, just as the Zulus had been several decades earlier. The British army was also far from meritocratic with the officer corps still being comprised mainly of those from wealthier backgrounds. This is even more pronounced in the Russo-Japanese War where the Tsar who was surprised at the outbreak of the war because he had assured the German Kaiser that there would be no war because 'he did not wish it' commanded the Russian army[28] This failing also extended to the officers of the Russian Army; which was described by Colonel Grierson as 'lions led by asses.'[29] A general lack of understanding or respect between officers and men was rampant throughout almost all branches of the Russian military, shown, most famously, by the uprising against the Tsarist officers on the Battleship *Pontemkin* in June 1905.

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In conclusion therefore, both the Anglo-Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War offer evidence of fundamental shifts in the nature of warfare. The Boer War demonstrated a shift between the previous post-Napoleonic traditions to a brand new more modern paradigm. New tactics were employed on both sides, guerrilla warfare by the Boers and early COIN tactics of scorched earth, containment and concentration camps by the British. At the same time the war became more accessible to the public and the outside world fuelled public interest and involvement with the war and encouraged anti-British feeling in her imperial rivals. Advances in technology were also apparent with new rifled weapons, machine guns and the first use of the wireless in warfare. Similarly, during the Russo-Japanese War continuing developments in weapons and defensive tactics created a pre-WWI version on mechanised trench warfare raising the casualty rates from just a few thousand in the Anglo-Boer War to hundreds of thousands by 1905. The use of the field telephone, another technological advance put to use in WWI, allowed greater control over the battlefield especially in the placement and use of artillery support for entrenched troops. Naval advances too changed the way war was fought at sea with the use of torpedoes and faster, more modern ships. However, both wars were still characterised by a jingoistic belief in the nations own prowess and power and an officer class based often more on class than merit. Therefore, while both conflicts show evidence of many fundamental shifts in warfare there were many lessons left unlearnt as the world entered the Twentieth Century and drew closer to the horrors and trials of World War I.

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