

*The Boer War*

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**Martin Bossenbroek (Translated by Yvette Rosenberg)**

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Martin Bossenbroek's *The Boer War* is a particularly well-written general overview of the South African War 1899-1901 which aims to explore the oft neglected Dutch perspective of the War. In addition, the War is explored more broadly from the perspective of the Boers and the British. It manages to confidently join the ranks of the likes of Thomas Pakenham's *The Boer War* and Bill Nasson's *The War for South Africa*.

What sets it apart from the others is its approach. Bossenbroek took the decision to explore the War from the perspective of three protagonists: William Leyds, Winston Churchill, and Deneys Reitz. In this way the author adds a crucial human element and allows him to explore different perspectives in the overall narrative. Often the reader finds the weight of the narrative relieved through judiciously inserted personal experiences and comments, which manages to provide the reader with a unique glance at how different individuals perceived their world.

In the first part of the narrative the young Dutchman William Leyds is the keystone of the narrative. Bossenbroek skilfully and seamlessly weaves Leyds into the broader historical context and uses him to connect the narrative to the Dutch perception of the Boers. Before the first Anglo-Boer War of 1880-1881 the Dutch public were rather ambivalent about their "Boer cousins", but after the surprising victory of the tiny Transvaal against the British in 1881, the Dutch rediscovered their "cousins" in South Africa and became avid supporters of the Boer republics. The Boers were subsequently incorporated into the broader wave of Dutch nationalism sweeping the Netherlands. Even before the war of 1880-1881 ended the Dutch's positive image of the Boers was fuelled by various prominent Dutch academics; most notably by Pieter

Harting, who was a famous professor at the University of Utrecht. Afterwards the Dutch also provided more than morale support. The ZAR employed Dutch teachers and administrators, and the Dutch also played an especially important role in the development of the South African Republic's (ZAR) rail network, which culminated in the completion of a line to Lourenço Marques in 1895.

Leyds is also the focal point through which the events leading up to War are explored. In 1884 he accepted the position as State Attorney of the ZAR. He later became the State Secretary as well and eventually rose to the position of Special Envoy to Europe by the beginning of the war. He was therefore at the centre of the political events leading up to the War and was often involved in the various diplomatic manoeuvres which preceded hostilities. The narrative includes the most prominent theories regarding the origin of the war and manages to discuss the various factors in a balanced and comprehensive manner. Just before the beginning of the War, Leyds was appointed Special Envoy to Europe, where he believed he could be of more use. He soon realised that although the Dutch were enthusiastic supporters, they would never intervene in any meaningful way should hostilities erupt. The other powers could also not be relied on. The first part of the narrative ends on the eve of the War with Leyds' growing feeling that the British were not interested in conciliation and that war appeared inevitable.

The second part of the narrative swings to the young, energetic and glory-seeking Winston Churchill, whose adventures forms the fulcrum of the British perspective, and once again reveals Bossenbroek's talent at integrating the larger narrative into the personal experiences of his chosen subjects. Churchill is an inspiring choice around which to form the narrative, since he was in South Africa from 30 October 1899 and moved around quite frequently in his pursuit to write memorable articles as the war correspondent of *The Morning Post*. His attitude was also suitably imperialistic, militaristic, patriotic, and stingingly critical of the local generals and politicians. His adventures in South Africa introduce the reader to a variety of important aspects surrounding the British offences during the conventional phase of the war. The material is not groundbreaking, but includes perspectives from the most influential works on the War and proves an effective overview of the main events and considerations during this phase of the War. Churchill left South Africa shortly after one of the last conventional battles at Diamond Hill on 11-12 June 1900. Leyds is not entirely forgotten, however. Every once in a while the narrative shifts away from

Churchill to Leyds, who was trying to organise diplomatic intervention and a negotiated end to hostilities. The Dutch perspective, however, slowly recedes into the background; no doubt because they were unable to provide more than morale and humanitarian support during the hostilities.

The last part of the narrative orbits young Deneys Reitz through whom the Boer perspective of events is explored. The author uses Reitz's perspective to discuss the main events of the last phase of the war, including the concentration camps and the increasingly important role of Africans serving in various capacities with the British forces. The British had taken Pretoria on 5 June 1900, and the Boer forces, especially the Transvalers, were dejected. However, Christiaan de Wet and others were ushering in a new phase of the war and managed to reignite the Boer fighting spirit. The war subsequently dragged on and Reitz was an active combatant throughout and eventually landed up with Jan Smuts and his campaign in the western part of the Cape Colony, and was present when the Boers finally decided to agree to peace at Vereeniging on 31 May 1902. In-between the narrative focused on Reitz, it shifts to Leyds and even to Churchill to provide an overview and context of affairs abroad. Dutch attempts to broker peace in January 1902 eventually allowed Lord Kitchener and the Boer leaders to successfully negotiate peace. This was at the expense of the Africans, who soon lost all hope of ever gaining a measure of political recognition, and ultimately set the scene for the rise and fall of the Apartheid government.

Bossenbroek clearly managed to achieve his stated aims, although the perspectives of the Dutch are largely overshadowed by the general narrative which deals with the main events of the War, and this may disappoint some readers hoping for a more substantial discussion of the Dutch outlook. There are few glaringly obvious problems in this thoroughly researched narrative, but some readers might be a little concerned by the author's tendency to sometimes confidently "reveal" the thoughts of his main protagonists. This is certainly an excellent literary and dramatic device, but no-one really knows for certain what went through the mind of an individual. When General Buller, for instance, boarded the *Dunottar Castle* on 14 October 1899, it is doubtful whether he kept repeating the phrase "Do not go north of the Tugela" over and over in his mind (p.138). Regardless of some minor concerns, this is an engaging, comprehensive, and excellently paced overview of the War, and despite knowing how the conflict ends, the reader will eagerly look forward to each new chapter.