AN ASSESSMENT OF THE BRITISH MILITARY STRATEGY DURING THE ANGLO-BOER WAR UP TO "BLACK WEEK", DECEMBER 1899

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 9 October 1899 Gen. Sir Redvers Buller was appointed commander-in-chief of the British forces in South Africa. He arrived in Cape Town on 31 October of that year. Initially he planned to concentrate the bulk of his Army Corps south of the Gariep (Orange) River, invade the Orange Free State (OFS), capture Bloemfontein, and then advance to Johannesburg and Pretoria. However, soon after his arrival in South Africa, he decided to deviate from this strategy, and divided his force into four smaller armies, taking the largest portion of his troops with him to Natal.

Buller hoped to relieve the siege of Ladysmith before the end of 1899, and to safeguard Kimberley so that British forces could then return to the Cape Colony in preparation of a full-scale invasion of the OFS. However, "Black Week" led to his offensive failing on all three the main fronts. On 10 December 1899 Maj.-Gen. WF Gatacre was defeated at Stormberg, the next day Gen. Lord Methuen was repulsed at Magersfontein, and on 15 December Buller's army was forced to retreat at Colenso.

By the middle of December 1899, a total of 80 000 British soldiers were already participating in the war.[2] Total British losses since the outbreak of hostilities on 11 October 1899, and up to 15 December, amounted to about 900 dead, 3 500

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2 This figure includes the garrison that was in the area prior to the war, and the local as well as overseas volunteers. See JF Maurice (ed.), **History of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902** 1 (London, 1906), pp. 453-4, 471-84. Some soldiers had only just landed and could, therefore, not engage in physical combat straight away. See also SL Norris, **The South African War, 1899-1900: a military retrospect up to the relief of Ladysmith** (London, 1900), p.169; HFB Wheeler, **The story of Lord Roberts** (London, s.a.), p. 155 and **Report of His Majesty's commissioners appointed to inquire into the military preparations and other matters connected with the war in South Africa** (Cd. 1789, London, 1903), p. 37.

wounded and 2 600 captured.[3] Thus, the British had lost approximately 8,75% of their forces. Although this figure is relatively low, the British nonetheless had come unstuck in each of the main war sectors. On all the fronts, the British were therefore compelled once again to follow a defensive strategy.

In the light of the fact that the military course of events from 11 October to 15 December 1899 is well-known,[4] the details of these events are not repeated in this article. However, it is the purpose of the article to provide a critical analysis of the British strategy that was followed up to and including the events of "Black Week", thereby identifying the reasons for the failure of the British strategy; to ascertain what the strategic and other implications of these events were for the British Army in South Africa as well as for the British government, and to apply as far as possible some of the principles of war with regard to the military events in South Africa up to 15 December 1899. These principles include the concentration of force(s), surprise, the economical utilization of force(s), superiority, the strategic goal(s), military intelligence, the offensive, command and control, as well as the position and role of the commanding officer.

2. REASONS FOR THE FAILURE OF BRITISH MILITARY STRATEGY

Although the British were still able to prevent the entire Cape and Natal from being occupied by the Boers, they did not progress at all, in a strategic sense, towards achieving victory. Various reasons may be offered for the failure of British strategy in November and December 1899.

As the commander-in-chief of the British Army in South Africa, Buller was required, in the first place, to take responsibility for the defeats. Since he had issued orders to Methuen and Gatacre, he was also accountable, by implication, for their defeats.

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3 These are estimated losses. The casualties among local troops are included; however, casualties due to disease are excluded. It is interesting to note that the Boer losses for the same period were 250 dead, 600 wounded and 300 captured. If the total strength of the Republican armies is estimated at 50 000 at that stage (rebels included), their losses were 2,3%.

4 See e.g. LS Amery (ed.), **The Times history of the war in South Africa 1899-1902** 2 (London, 1902), pp. 141-467; JH Breytenbach, **Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902** 1 (Pretoria, 1969), **passim** and 2 (Pretoria, 1971), **passim**; T Pakenham, **The Boer War** (London, 1979), pp. 115-253 and A Wessels, **Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902: 'n oorsig van die militêre verloop van die stryd** (Bloemfontein, 1991), pp. 9-19, 21-2.

As military commander, Buller had various weaknesses.[5] He had available to him about as many soldiers as Marlborough had had in Flanders during the Spanish War of Succession (1701-1714), or Wellington in Spain (1808-1814) or at Waterloo (1815); however, by 15 December 1899, he had not yet achieved anything positive with his formidable force.[6] But, of course, Buller was not a Marlborough nor a Wellington. To his credit, it has to be added that the war terrain in South Africa posed greater challenges than those that Marlborough or Wellington had to face. In addition, the more mobile and unconventional Boer forces were a more difficult foe to track down and destroy than the conventional forces of the European armies.

However, Buller failed as a strategist and military leader. He lacked creative imagination[7] and although he should have known better, he underestimated the Boers' abilities.[8] At critical moments, he hesitated, appeared to be undecided and apparently acted in haste or overreacted to events. He also lacked moral conviction. By dividing his Army Corps, he assigned greater responsibility to other officers. However, he did not delegate his authority; instead, he abdicated.[9]

Nonetheless, the British public, as well as the soldiers who served under Buller, did not lose confidence in him.[10] His reputation and personal bravery were enough to keep the British soldiers' morale high.[11] To the more informed and critical person, however, it must have been clear that Buller's former military experience and bravery were not enough to extricate the British from their strategic difficulties in South Africa.

It is interesting to note that, after "Black Week", Buller sent telegraphs, requesting their advice, to Lord Lansdowne (Secretary of War), Gen. Sir George White and Lord Roberts, but not to Lord Wolseley (Commander-in-Chief at the War Office).[12] Perhaps Wolseley should indeed have insisted before the war that someone much younger had to be assigned the commanding post in South Africa. Wolseley and his staff - including Buller - were all younger than 40 when they achieved success in

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5 E Holt, **The Boer War** (London, 1958), pp. 80-1. For an evaluation of Buller as commander in South Africa, see A Wessels, "A military-strategic assessment of the Buller phase (31 October 1899-10 February 1900) during the Anglo-Boer War", **New Contree** 47, September 2000, pp. 136-74.

6 Breytenbach, 2, p. 342.

7 WB Pemberton, **Battles of the Boer War** (London, 1964), p. 36.

8 J Symons, **Buller's campaign** (London, 1963), p. 111.

9 N Dixon, **On the psychology of military incompetence** (London, 1976), pp. 55-7. According to **ibid.**, p. 55 Buller's actions could be compared with those of Field Marshal Raglan during the Crimean War (1854-1856), albeit that Raglan died of a heart attack (1855) during that war.

10 B Farwell, **The great Boer War** (London, 1977), p. 187.

11 Symons, p. 177. A biography such as W Jerrold's **Sir Redvers H. Buller, V.C.: the story of his life and campaigns** (London, 1900) must certainly have contributed to keeping the morale high on the home front.

12 EKG Sixsmith, **British generalship in the twentieth century** (London 1970), p. 29.

the Ashanti War (1873-1874).[13] However, Wolseley and the other persons in positions of decision-making continued to hold on to the old and well-known commanders instead of giving younger men the opportunity to show their mettle.

Buller's most contentious strategic decision was to divide his Army Corps on his arrival in South Africa. Theoretically, his plan looked sound, and one can understand his concern about Ladysmith. Authors such as Cunliffe[14] and Henderson[15] also claim that it was a sound decision to divide the Army Corps. For example, Henderson points out that if Ladysmith or Kimberley had been occupied by the Boers, a fully-fledged rebellion could have broken out in the Cape Colony. Wilkinson[16] supports Buller's decision to go to Natal himself because the largest Boer Army was concentrated in Natal, and the theory of strategy determines that you have to concentrate your forces at the point where the largest part of enemy forces is assembled. According to Wilkinson, Buller should have concentrated his entire Army Corps in Natal.

Melville bases his support for Buller's decision on the fact that if the entire Army Corps was concentrated in either the Cape or Natal, the British government would have been subjected to much criticism because either the one or the other colony would have been left to its own devices.[17] Melville's argument is unconvincing because, although political considerations may never be ignored, the practical military situation must eventually be the decisive factor.

In his testimony before the Elgin Commission, Roberts stated that if he had been in Buller's position, he would also have abandoned the planned strategy and have gone to Natal. However, he would not have allowed Methuen to go further than Orange River Station[18] unless he had certainty about the strength of the Boer forces that were deployed between him and Kimberley.[19]

The arguments in favour of Buller's action sound plausible when they are considered in isolation. Although one has to guard against re-fighting campaigns, and identifying scapegoats in all directions from a retrospective point of view on the basis of facts that have come to light after the event, it would still appear that Buller

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13 **Ibid.**, p. 30.
14 FHE Cunliffe, **The history of the Boer War** 1 (London, 1901), p. 154.
15 GFR Henderson, **The science of war: a collection of essays and lectures, 1892-1903** (London, 1905), p. 368.
16 S Wilkinson, **War and policy: essays** (London, 1900), pp. 414-5.
17 CH Melville, **Life of General the Right Hon. Sir Redvers Buller** 2 (London, 1923), pp. 244-5.
18 **Royal commission on the war in South Africa: minutes of evidence taken before the royal commission on the war in South Africa** 1 (Cd. 1790, London, 1903), p. 467: Roberts's response to question 10 847.
19 Cd. 1790, p. 467: Roberts's response to question 10 848.

had committed a grave strategic error in dividing his Army Corps. Buller had to defeat the Boers militarily. As a result of poor planning prior to the war, the British found themselves in a difficult yet not entirely hopeless strategic situation by the end of October 1899. However, Buller did not read the strategic situation correctly when he arrived because not one of the three garrisons under siege was in real danger. Even after Buller had experienced repeated tactical setbacks in Natal, and the position in Ladysmith had become precarious due to food shortages and disease, the Boers still did not have the will-power to storm and occupy the town. The Boer forces who besieged Kimberley did even less to capture the city, and with someone like Kootjie Snyman in charge of the siege of Mafikeng, the town's garrison could hold out long. In any event, the Boers did not intend to capture either Natal or the Cape Colony.

If the Boers wanted to penetrate deep into the Cape Colony, they could have done so without much trouble even after the start of Roberts's great advance. If the Cape Afrikaners really wanted to rebel, no Army Corps would have stopped them. In December 1900, when there were already approximately 210 000 British soldiers in South Africa,[20] some of the Cape Afrikaners were again prepared to take up arms against them.

Even if one or all three of the towns under siege had been occupied, this would not have meant the end of the war. Indeed, in the past the British Empire had experienced greater setbacks - but had nonetheless achieved victory.[21] The occupation of Pietermaritzburg and Durban would also not necessarily have destroyed British resistance, because as long as they could use the Cape as a springboard, they had a strategic bridgehead from where they could recapture lost territory, and then take on the republican forces on their own turf. The larger the British losses, the more difficult her international position would become; however, the Royal Navy was in place to deter other foreign powers from intervening.

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[20] Amery (ed.), 5 (London, 1907), p. 67.

[21] See e.g. the serious losses at the start of the Indian Mutiny (1857), the setbacks in Afghanistan in 1880 and the death of Maj.-Gen. CG Gordon in Khartoum (1885). During the Anglo-Zulu War (1879), the British suffered a terrible defeat at the beginning of the war at Isandlwana (22 January 1879). During this battle, the British - according to DR Morris's **The washing of the spears: a history of the rise of the Zulu nation under Shaka and its fall in the Zulu War of 1879** (London, 1968), pp. 352-88 - lost approximately 900 out of 950 white and 500 out of 850 black soldiers in action. In other words, more men were lost than during any other battle of the Anglo-Boer War, in fact, more than in the "Black Week". After Maj.-Gen. GP Colley's defeat during the Transvaal War of Independence (1880-1881), the British began to negotiate; however, political considerations were of decisive importance. From a military perspective, the British had not been defeated. There is, however, one exception. In the American War of Independence (1775-1883), the British had indeed been defeated militarily, when they were forced to forfeit their American colonies.

There is no unequivocal evidence that the Boers would have withdrawn from their siege positions around Ladysmith and Kimberley if Buller had kept to his planned strategy, and concentrated his forces along the Gariep River. However, if the Boers' transfer of burghers to the western front, and their hasty retreat from the Northern Cape when Roberts commenced with his advance from the Modder River in February 1900, are considered, it appears that a direct invasion of the OFS would have been a meaningful and calculated strategic risk. Buller could have sent reinforcements to Natal, but even a mock attack against the OFS would probably have been enough to force the Boers, who had invaded the Cape Colony on a limited scale, to retreat to north of the Gariep River. With a small army, Maj.-Gen. JDP French was soon able to pin down the Boers strategically in the region of Colesberg.

By dividing his forces, Buller not only jeopardized, but also weakened his position. As a result of the man-for-man tactical advantage that the Boers had, Buller should have concentrated numerically superior forces against any given Boer force. However, he was excessively cautious. Like the Boers who assigned too great a value to besieging the three towns, and in this way allowing strategic opportunities to be lost to win the war, Buller in turn assigned too much value to lifting the siege at the one place (Ladysmith) and safeguarding the other (Kimberley). In this way, Buller lost a significant strategic opportunity to conclude the war relatively speedily.

Breytenbach holds the view that Buller would have achieved success if he had stuck to his original strategy, especially since the southern front of the OFS was left almost undefended by the Boers.[22] To Buller, key points such as De Aar, Noupoort and Stormberg were of decisive importance. With the Boers concentrated around strategically useless towns, Buller had a strategic opportunity any field commander could only hope for, namely, to strike hard at the enemy at a weak point of defence and to disrupt the enemy strategically. Buller could have achieved a strategic surprise - similar to the surprise that Roberts sprung on the Boers in February 1900 on the Kimberley front - but he was blinded by the besieged garrisons' position; therefore, he abandoned the self-evident and already partially planned strategy. He committed a significant strategic error by elevating his secondary role to a primary goal.

[22] Breytenbach, 2, p. 458.

Musgrave,[23] Pollock[24] and Pemberton[25] also believe that Buller could have relieved the besieged towns through an indirect strategy by invading the OFS with force. Pemberton contends that it would have been better to concentrate on Kimberley rather than Ladysmith.[26] It must be borne in mind, of course, that the British could not achieve a strategic **coup de main** at any particular point, because the Boer forces were not concentrated in one particular place.

According to Head,[27] Wolseley should have intervened and prevented Buller from dividing his forces. Wolseley indeed believed that if Buller had invaded the OFS directly, Kimberley and Ladysmith would automatically have been relieved.[28] However, Wolseley refrained from criticizing Buller's action, because he continued to adhere to his point of view that it was the local commander's prerogative to adapt the strategy according to the local situation.[29] Although he did not agree with Buller's modified strategy, he refrained from interfering.[30] However, after the war, Wolseley continued to believe that Buller had assessed the strategic situation in South Africa incorrectly, and that a direct advance would have speedily terminated the war.[31]

Amery claimed that Buller lost control of the strategic situation when he decided to go to Natal. Each operational area should have had its own supreme commander. Buller could then have played a co-ordinating role, and could then have engaged in proper command and control. It is interesting to note that General Sir Evelyn Wood had telegraphed to Buller shortly before the latter left from Cape Town that he was willing to serve under him (Buller) and take over the command in Natal. Buller would then be free to proceed with his planned invasion of the OFS. However, Buller declined the offer.[32] In the official British history of the war, Maurice, by implication, supports Buller's decision to divide the Army Corps: on each of the three main fronts, according to Maurice, the situation was adequately critical to justify the division of the task force.[33]

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23 GC Musgrave, **In South Africa with Buller** (Boston, 1900), p. 166.
24 AWA Pollock, **With seven generals in the Boer War: a personal narrative** (London, 1900), pp. 83-4.
25 Pemberton, p. 36.
26 **Ibid.**
27 CO Head, **The art of generalship: four exponents and one example** (Aldershot, s.a.), p. 130.
28 Cd. 1790, p. 385: Wolseley's response to question 9 109.
29 Cd. 1790, p. 384: Wolseley's response to question 9 093.
30 Cd. 1790, p. 385: Wolseley's response to question 9 101.
31 Cd. 1790, p. 385: Wolseley's response to question 9 102.
32 Amery (ed.), 2, p. 287.
33 Maurice (ed.), 1, pp. 196-205.

By dividing his Army Corps and going to Natal himself, Buller abandoned the principle of concentration, forfeited the element of surprise, lost effective command and control, and did not utilize his power economically. He did not have to send the largest part of his forces to Natal, and Methuen wasted his time in trying to reach Kimberley. Each of the individual parts of the Army Corps was nonetheless stronger in a numerical sense than their opponents. If they were tactically successful, there would not have been a "Black Week" in the British Army's history. However, while Buller divided his Army Corps, the Boers were given time to recover after the battles of the first main phase. They could be outwitted strategically, but tactically they would be beaten with great difficulty by the British.

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The implementation of the principles of strategy does not necessarily ensure strategic success. There is indeed no recipe that guarantees strategic success. However, when certain strategic principles are ignored in glaringly obvious ways, such negligence may serve as the catalyst for defeat.

At the start of November 1899, Buller was in a difficult position, because he had to convert a defensive strategy into an offensive strategy. It would be difficult to maintain strategic momentum, because all the operational fronts were inside British territory, and the Boers would have to be defeated tactically or outmanoeuvred in a strategic sense, and be forced to retreat beyond their own borders before an offensive could be launched against the republics themselves.

In selecting a route for their advance, Buller could not merely pay attention to military considerations. For example, as a result of Cecil John Rhodes's presence in Kimberley, there was strong political pressure to send military assistance to the city.[34] Owing to Buller's dividing his Army Corps, there could be no concentration of forces. No noteworthy manoeuvres occurred on any of the fronts, and nowhere was the element of surprise achieved. On all the fronts a direct strategy, lacking in imagination, was followed, while the only direct strategy that could have succeeded - a full-scale invasion of the OFS - was abandoned. This direct strategy would, however, have had indirect implications, because it would most probably have led to the Boers withdrawing from their siege positions around Ladysmith and Kimberley.

[34] W Vallentin, **Der Burenkrieg** 1 (Wald-Solingen, 1903), p. 115.

Buller paid the price for poor strategic preparations made prior to the war. On each front, the British war effort was compromised by inadequate intelligence.[35] It was indeed only as a result of "Black Week" that the Intelligence Service was subjected to the close scrutiny of public opinion. For security reasons, the service would only respond after the war, for example, in testimony before the Elgin Commission. The fact that Maj.-Gen. JC Ardagh (Director-General of Military Intelligence, 1896-1901) did not resign as Director-General, showed that he continued to enjoy Wolseley's support.[36]

Buller could hardly co-ordinate operations on all fronts, and therefore there was not adequate command and control on his part.[37] At the tactical level, the Boers were superior to the British, and British attempts to neutralize the Boers' mobility through a superior strategy, failed.[38] Neither Buller, Methuen nor Gatacre succeeded in forcing their will on the Boers. Only French, on the Colesberg front, succeeded in intimidating the Boers in a strategic sense.

According to Langlois, the British had committed the error until the end of the Buller phase of applying the principles of strategy as they did during peace time and in the colonial wars.[39] Since the Crimean War, the British were not required to engage in warfare in the European sense of the word. Moreover, the latter war was waged in a limited war zone, and developments in the arms field since that time held far-reaching tactical and strategic implications.

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Although Buller had the largest British Army under his command since the Napoleonic Wars, he still had too few soldiers, in many respects, to achieve his objective. A basic error that the British made at the start of the war was to think that the numerical advantage that the Army Corps would give them, would allow them to defeat the Boers with a steamroller strategy.[40] If the entire Army Corps was assembled in the Northern Cape, their chances of success would probably have been better.

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35 Amery (ed.), 2, pp. 465-6.
36 TG Fergusson, **British military intelligence, 1870-1914: the development of a modern intelligence organization** (Frederick, 1984), pp. 103-5.
37 Symons, p. 137.
38 L Creswicke, **South Africa and the Transvaal War** 3 (Edinburgh, 1900), p. 3.
39 H Langlois, **Lessons from two recent wars: the Russo-Turkish and South African wars** (London, 1909), p. 63.
40 Amery (ed.), 3 (London, 1905), p. 339.

The sum of the various British armies' potential capacities was far less than the potential capacity of the unified Army Corps. Moreover, the Boers took the sting out of the British attacks by defending well at a tactical level so that the British could not break through their lines. Inadequate preparations and their despising the Boers' abilities were at the heart of the shortage of British soldiers in South Africa.

The British Army was not as strong as generally accepted, and the British military system was subject to various shortcomings. Their obsession with traditional tactical rules - and their rigid strategic convictions - had a high price for the British.[41] Moreover, training in the British Army was not very good, and all the colonial wars did not contribute much to the preparedness of the Army.

Although British imperialism was on the crest of a wave by the end of the nineteenth century, and the British had waged various wars to promote the "peace" of the British Empire in other regions, the British were not really militaristic. In the Anglo-Boer War they would pay the price for their carelessness with regard to military preparedness.[42] "Black Week" also showed how bankrupt the then military organization was.[43] The shortcomings of the Victorian military system were exposed, and the powerlessness of the British Army was demonstrated in practical terms.[44] It was also clear how ignorant most British generals were with regard to the demands of modern warfare.[45] Although the military leaders could not be exonerated from blame, the British military historian Henry Spenser Wilkinson blamed the British Cabinet and the War Ministry for the defeats of "Black Week" because, in his view, they did not handle the military matters that they were responsible for appropriately.[46]

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"Black Week" was not merely the result of poor tactical decisions, but the result of deep-seated problems. In all the Victorian colonial wars, some tactical successes were adequate to achieve strategic objectives. Against the unconventional, yet well-equipped Boers, warfare should rather have been practised scientifically. On the undulating terrain of Stormberg, Magersfontein and Colenso, it was clear that the British were not as well trained in strategy as many had assumed at the time.

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41 **The German official account of the war in South Africa** 2 (London, 1906), p. 343.
42 Amery (ed.), 2, p. 466. It has to be noted that the Afrikaner was also not really a war-like nation.
43 **Ibid.**, 3, p. 4.
44 G Harries-Jenkins, **The army in Victorian society** (London, 1977), p. 2.
45 W McElwee, **The art of war: Waterloo to Mons** (Bloomington, 1974), p. 239.
46 J Luvaas, **The education of an army: British military thought, 1815-1940** (London, 1965), p. 263.

3. THE CONSEQUENCES OF "BLACK WEEK"

"Black Week" had far-reaching consequences for the British war effort in South Africa. Initially, it could have appeared to the uninformed observer or armchair strategist as if the British had suffered an irreversible strategic setback, and would probably have to consider negotiations - as happened in 1881. Although "Black Week" was a serious strategic setback, and events of that week had negative consequences on the short term, they yielded positive strategic results for the British on the long term. Ironically enough, the eventual victory achieved by the British could be traced back to "Black Week", because due to "Black Week", Buller was replaced by Roberts, and under the latter's command the ground work was laid for a strategy that eventually, in Kitchener's term of office as commander-in-chief, would prompt the Boers to admit defeat.[47]

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The three tactical defeats that they suffered from 10 to 15 December 1899, halted the British in a strategic sense, and the dream of an early victory was finally shattered. The British strategic failure and the involvement of one of Britain's most noted commanders, who apparently could not defeat the Boers, held serious implications. The question arose whether Buller and his remaining forces could fend off the Boer offensive - which could start at any moment - until more reinforcements arrived. However, British fears of a Boer offensive were unfounded. The days that followed on "Black Week" - a time that the British could indeed see as the darkest period of the war - could certainly be seen as the period where the British had great luck because the Boers did not go on the offensive.

The Boers showed very little emotion about their victories.[48] Since they were generally deeply religious, these victories were ascribed to the miraculous intervention of God, and they expressed their sincere gratitude to Him. There was no question that they would engage in forceful pursuit of the enemy, and they then reverted to defensive preparations so that a next British onslaught could be warded off from even better defensive positions.[49]

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47 The statement that Britain won the war and was therefore superior in a military sense, is contentious and requires further information. However, this issue falls outside the a scope of this study. For purposes of this article, we henceforth work from the premise that the British achieved a qualified military victory.

48 Amery (ed.), 3, p. 67.

49 See also A Wessels, "Afrikaners at war" in J. Gooch (ed.), **The Boer War: direction, experience and image** (London and Portland [USA], 2000), pp. 73-106.

After "Black Week", the pro-Boer Afrikaners were hopeful that a comprehensive Boer offensive would follow.[50] With the armies of Methuen and Gatacre who were forced to retreat after their defeats so that they could regroup, too few British soldiers to defend a long front, and moreover, thousands of Afrikaners who could form a fifth column, the Boers had a significant strategic opportunity. However, they did not exploit this opportunity.

With the British Army Corps divided into four sections, there was a possibility that the Boers would be able to break through the gaps in between these armies, and could penetrate very deep into both Natal and/or the Cape. Otherwise they could at least exploit the advantage of the interior lines on which they could operate and concentrate the largest part of their forces against one of the British armies at a given time.[51]

Offensive action requires greater strategic skill than is required in defensive action, and apparently the Boers' military leaders were not up to this challenge.[52] Passive defence has not yet yielded a victory in war. For example, the Boers' victories during "Black Week" would not lead to a full-scale rebellion in the Cape Colony. The Boers would have to prove that they could take the strategic initiative, and that they could capture territory on a large scale. As long as this did not happen, the British remained the potential victors, and neither the average Cape Afrikaner nor foreign powers would dare to enter the war on the side of the Boers. In the midst of the "Black Week" defeats, the British were therefore able to retain the political support of most inhabitants of the Cape, the various black tribes, the Indians, as well as foreign powers. By the middle of December 1899, the Boers allowed their last opportunity to win the war to slip through their fingers.

The republican politicians knew the logical next step that had to be taken after "Black Week". However, nothing was done on the various fronts to go on the offensive against the British while they were still disorientated and demoralised to some extent.[53] It is therefore beyond belief why a Boer commander such as Gen. Piet Cronjé, who did not respond to the insistence of Pretoria to go on the offensive, was not ousted from his post.[54] Even Gen. Louis Botha did not follow up his success.[55] Since the Boers lacked knowledge and insight with regard to the theory and practice of strategy, the British were granted a breather, and they

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50 R Kruger, **Good-bye Dolly Gray: a history of the Boer War** (London, 1967), p. 157.
51 Amery (ed.), 3, p. 105.
52 CM Bakkes, **Die Britse deurbraak aan die Benede-Tugela op Majubadag 1900** (D.Phil., University of Pretoria, 1971), p. 205.
53 Breytenbach, 2, p. 534.
54 **Ibid.**, p. 357.
55 **Ibid.**, p. 358.

retained the strategic initiative.[56] Most Boers apparently did not grasp the coherence between tactics and strategy; moreover, they did not have a well-planned strategy as a framework for tactical successes to be converted into strategic success.[57]

The British were merely dealt tactical defeats during "Black Week". Their advance was halted in a strategic sense, but due to the Boers' lack of initiative after their victories, the British were not defeated in a strategic sense. British morale was therefore allowed to recover, while the Boers' morale was beginning to decline in some cases. Passive defence, with the expectation of renewed attacks, has yet to promote an army's morale. Sporadic British bombardments (for example, on the Magersfontein front) and French's mock manoeuvres on the Colesberg front, unnerved the Boers so that, as time passed, they expected large British onslaughts on all fronts. The Boers were wrong by thinking that a defensive position implied strategic success. In this way, the seed of an eventual republican defeat was sown by the Boers themselves during and directly after "Black Week".

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The three tactical defeats of "Black Week" resulted in approximately 450 men killed, 1 550 wounded and 950 captured on the British side - in total approximately 2 950 casualties. This figure represents a loss of about 4,9% in terms of the number of soldiers who were available on the eve of "Black Week".[58] All in all, these losses were very small. The persistent defensive Boer strategy afforded the British the opportunity to rapidly replace their casualties with reinforcements.[59]

The casualties of "Black Week" were especially low compared to those suffered in European wars. What was disturbing to the British - and this fact forced the British command to reflect on events - was that the "mighty" British Army had been defeated by untrained "soldiers". Before the time, the impression was indeed created

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56 Amery (ed.), 3, p. 105.

57 As far as the Boers' strategy (or lack of it) during the war is concerned, see A Wessels, "Die Boere se strategie aan die begin van die Anglo-Boereoorlog", **Tydskrif vir Geesteswetenskappe** 39 (3 & 4), September and December 1999, pp. 227-42.

58 These figures are calculated by expressing the 2 950 casualties as a percentage of the approximately 60 000 soldiers who were available outside the garrisons that were under siege. The figure of 2 950 implies a 6,3% loss if calculated in terms of the Army Corps' strength of approximately 47 000 men. However, only approximately 39 000 soldiers were directly or indirectly involved in the battles of "Black Week" in which case the 2 950 casualties represent a 7,6% loss. It is interesting to note that the British had more soldiers killed in battle and died of wounds during "Black Week" than during the operations of the previous two months, and had almost as many wounded and prisoners of war taken. The Boers' losses during "Black Week" were approximately 2,4% of the number of participating burghers.

59 From 16-21 December 1899, more than 2 950 new British soldiers landed in South Africa. On 16 December alone, almost 1 200 soldiers landed. See Maurice (ed.), 1, pp. 478-9, 484.

that the war against the Boers would simply be another colonial campaign that would quickly lead to victory.[60]

Since the British retained the strategic initiative, they could, theoretically speaking, embark upon an offensive. However, this did not happen because the local British commanders had lost confidence in their troops' tactical abilities.[61] In turn, the British government had lost confidence in Buller's command, and since Roberts had been sent as substitute to South Africa, it would take almost two months before the British would again go on the offensive on a large scale.

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The response in Britain elicited by "Black Week" was out of proportion to the losses that were suffered. However, it has to be borne in mind that the British public were used to relatively cheap military victories. Three defeats in one week, and lists and lists of casualties came as a surprise to the average person in the street in Britain. For several decades, the British Empire was almost continually involved in some or other colonial war, with no fewer than 230 wars, punitive actions, and revolts or some or other military campaign taking place in the 64-year reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901).[62] Enormous territories were added to the British Empire. Suddenly, they apparently did not have the capacity to defeat two small Boer republics. Since the public generally did not have much knowledge of or insight into military and strategic matters, and there was a gap between the public and the military, these defeats were exaggerated beyond proportion. However, British public reaction could have impacted on their military strategy.

It should be noted too that both the newspapers in England and the local English press did not convey to their readers either the full scope of the defeats or the errors that had been committed in the field.[63] Military censureship and communication problems that were typical of the time ensured that it would take some time before the public would be able to form a realistic idea of events, and by that time, the tide of the war had already swung in favour of the British.

The British public were nonetheless disgruntled by these defeats. Especially the fact that it was Buller who had been halted in his strategic advance was a bitter pill to swallow.[64] Before the time, the Army Corps was also seen as invincible.[65] The

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60 Harries-Jenkins, p. 1.
61 Amery (ed.), 3, p. 105.
62 B Farwell, **Queen Victoria's little wars** (London, 1973), pp. 364-71.
63 See the reports and main articles in **The Times** (London), **The Natal Mercury** and the **Cape Times**, 11-30 December 1899.
64 Breytenbach, 2, p. 333.

British realized that these defeats could possibly imply that the British Army was not as strong as had initially been thought, and that if untrained Boers could cause the British to sustain significant losses, the safety of the British Empire, with its vast borders, could be in danger. The question was whether what was lost in terms of prestige could be regained militarily, and the danger was that if this was not done speedily, the British colonies could lose their confidence in the Empire.[66] In the eyes of the public, the unity of the Empire was at risk.[67]

All in all, the British public overreacted to the tactical defeats.[68] In their search for a scapegoat, the focus soon came to rest on Maj.-Gen. WF Butler (commander-in-chief in South Africa, November 1898-August 1899), as if his preparations or lack thereof, meant that he had played into the hands of the Boers.[69] However, this was an unjustified judgement. What was true, however, was that Lt-Gen. FEW Forestier-Walker, Gen. George White and even Buller, had erroneously used Butler's defensive strategic schemes as the basis for their strategic offensive operations.

"Black Week" shocked the British public - as well as the politicians and the military leaders - into a sudden awareness of the military implications of a war against the Boers. Everyone realized that the Boers had been underestimated.[70] In the midst of the depression that set in due to the defeats inflicted on them, it was soon clear that a new resolve emerged to complete what had been started - they would not rest before the Boers were defeated. Thousands of men spontaneously declared themselves ready to go to war, and numerous volunteer corps were established. Whereas, up to that stage, the war had been waged mainly by the War Ministry and the Army, the entire British nation now became involved.[71] The Boers eventually gave way before this onslaught. Wisely, the British government decided not to ignore British public reaction. Buller was replaced by Roberts so that the citizen in the street could see that they did not take the defeats lightly. The government were determined that a new offensive had to be launched as soon as possible, and that this time around they would be successful.

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65 **Ibid.**, p. 334.
66 Amery (ed.), 3, p. 3.
67 **Ibid.**, p. 4.
68 Harries-Jenkins, p.1. According to E Belfield, **The Boer War** (London, 1975), p. 48, it is claimed that even the casualties that had occurred in the First World War did not shock them as much as those that were suffered in "Black Week".
69 E McCourt, **Remember Butler: the story of Sir William Butler** (London, 1967), p. 231.
70 R Danes, **Cassell's history of the Boer War, 1899-1901** (London, 1901), p. 325.
71 Maurice (ed.), 1, p. 380.

From the start, the Boers had quite a number of sympathizers in foreign countries, and the events of "Black Week" promoted anti-British feelings.[72] By 1899, various power blocks were beginning to take shape in Europe, but Britain was still somewhat removed from the process. "Black Week" was therefore not only an embarrassment to the British Empire, but could also have serious political repercussions. Many countries regarded Britain with much jealousy, and the danger existed that a military difficulty in South Africa could convince other countries that the time was ready to launch attacks on British colonies in the East. Nations who were subject to British authority, could even have used the opportunity to discard foreign authority. Fortunately for the British, none of these potential problems were realized. However, if the Boers had followed up their victories and had achieved further success, Britain would have ended up in an untenable international strategic position.

In practice, none of the negative consequences of "Black Week" left lasting strategic scars. However, the positive consequences did have a lasting impact on the British Army, and the advantages were felt shortly after "Black Week". The fact that the weaknesses of the British Army had been exposed, led to incisive self-reflection. Soon the British Army was converted into a modern force that could more effectively face the military challenges of the twentieth century.[73]

Now that the harsh realities of the strategic situation in South Africa had dawned on them, another attitude emerged among the British. From that point onwards, the war would be waged with greater realism, and their strategy would be better planned. The British war machine also came into motion on a large scale for the first time.

Everything possible was done to make the British Army in South Africa look like a winner. For example, the loss of Ladysmith was seen as unacceptable for political, moral and strategic reasons. Surrender could have damaged British interests worldwide.[74] Although the importance of Ladysmith was overrated, White and his garrison were still held under siege by thousands of Boers, while Buller's mere presence across the Thukela River was enough of a deterrent to prevent Boer invasions of Southern Natal.

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[72] As far as the reaction of foreign powers to "Black Week" is concerned, see Amery (ed.), 3, pp. 48-66.
[73] J Barbary, **The Boer War** (London, 1971), p. 54.
[74] Breytenbach, 2, p. 339.

The British soon realized that reinforcements were required on all fronts. The British permanent force was too small, and had too many commitments worldwide to send adequate numbers of soldiers for service in South Africa. Earlier Wolseley did not want to send support troops or soldiers from the colonies to South Africa because, he felt, the honour of the victory over the Boers belonged to the permanent force soldiers.[75] However, they soon realized that many more soldiers would have to be pushed into the field, and thence both volunteers and colonial soldiers were considered for service.

"Black Week" elicited a tidal wave of patriotism. Many men voluntarily reported for service and a quiet resolve to win the war at all cost emerged.[76] To many of the British, the war had become a crusade,[77] a crusade to avenge their defeats, recover lost prestige, to "recapture" the republics, and to show the world and all British subjects that British authority had not been compromised at all. According to the British, "Black Week" was merely a short-term setback, and Britain would not allow the Boers to intimidate them in a strategic sense. However, British military leaders would proceed far more cautiously than before because Britain could not afford another "Black Week". It was unlikely that the British public would be able to deal with two series of setbacks. The excessively cautious Buller would therefore become even more cautious - an attitude that would lead to more defeats within six weeks. Fortunately for the British, these would not take place in the same week.

In a certain sense, the week after "Black Week" was actually the real "black week".[78] During this crisis week, the previous week's defeats had to be processed and decisions had to be taken that would mean either the beginning of the end to the Boers' series of successes, or the beginning of the end to British interests in South Africa. Owing to their patriotism and steadfastness, the British succeeded in overcoming the crisis.[79] Like the Boers, the British would thence be inspired by patriotism.[80] Against this background, the chances of the British achieving strategic success in future began to improve.

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The British Army Corps looked large and impressive when it was sent to South Africa. However, if the vast war zone is considered, as well as the Boers' mobility and the fact that the Army Corps had also been divided, it was clear that the British

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75 Symons, p. 97.
76 Breytenbach, 2, p. 336.
77 CJ Barnard, **Generaal Louis Botha op die Natalse front, 1899-1900** (Cape Town, 1970), p. 69.
78 Amery (ed.), 3, p. 3.
79 **Ibid.**, 2, p. 466.
80 Breytenbach, 2, p. 337.

had sent hopelessly too few soldiers to South Africa. It was necessary to send as many reinforcements as possible to South Africa after "Black Week"; otherwise, the strategic position of the British in South Africa could become critical.

Although the temptation must have been enormous to send Indian soldiers to South Africa, the British had already decided at the start of the war to use only white troops against the Boers.[81] Above all, withdrawing too many soldiers from India could harm British interests on the subcontinent, and the British also did not want to create the impression that they - like the Romans of old - were dependent on subservient nations for their own defence.[82]

In Britain itself, numerous volunteer corps were established, for example the City Imperial Volunteers (CIV) from London.[83] On the basis of Buller's request dated 18 December 1899 for 8 000 non-regular mounted soldiers to be sent to South Africa, it was decided to send 3 000 Imperial Yeomanry.[84] The sending of this élite corps elicited significant public interest.[85] Amery blamed the British government for not better utilizing the surge of emotion after "Black Week" to send more volunteers to South Africa,[86] but then admitted that not too many volunteers could be accommodated. There was no proper system in terms of which they could be trained rapidly for service overseas. By sending too many persons overseas, the defence of the motherland would be compromised.[87] However, the selection, training and sending off of volunteer units captured the imagination of the public, diverted their attention from the defeats, and decreased criticism levelled at the government and the military.[88] As more and more soldiers arrived in South Africa, the British were able to consolidate their strategic position, and could commence with preparations for a new offensive.

The British colonies took note of the defeats of "Black Week" with much shock, and renewed offers of assistance were made by Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This time, the British were eager to make use of these offers, and eventually approximately 80 000 colonial troops, including some 50 000 Cape and Natal

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81 Amery (ed.), 3, p. 6. Later in the war, the British increasingly armed black and coloured people. See e.g. P Warwick, **Black people and the South African War, 1899-1902** (Cambridge, 1983).
82 Amery (ed.), 3, p. 6.
83 **Ibid.**, pp. 19-20. As far as the role of the CIV is concerned during the war, see WH Mackinnon, **The journal of the C.I.V. in South Africa** (London, 1901).
84 Amery (ed.), 3, p. 14. Eventually, approximately 10 500 Imperial Yeomanry were sent to South Africa.
85 **Ibid.**, p. 17.
86 **Ibid.**, p. 7.
87 **Ibid.**, p. 13.
88 **Ibid.**, p. 12.

volunteers, would participate in the war.[89] These soldiers, who were mostly mounted, were tactically better equipped to deal with the Boers than their British counterparts, and adjusted better to local conditions. While these volunteers flooded into South Africa on a daily basis, the Boers continued to sit back and wait. The British strategic position therefore improved by the day.

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The most far-reaching strategic consequence of "Black Week" was Roberts's appointment as commander-in-chief in place of Buller. By dividing his Army Corps, and going to Natal himself, Buller placed his military career on the line. He has to be accorded respect that he did not shy away from his responsibilities; however, this does not hide his lack of strategic insight.

If Buller's dividing the Army Corps had led to reservations with regard to his position as supreme commander, then his defeat at Colenso and his telegram to White that pertained to possible surrender[90] were the decisive factors. By considering surrender at Ladysmith, Buller actually shot down his own strategy, and it then became clear that he was not competent to deal with the demands of his post. On the basis of the notorious Ladysmith telegram of 16 December 1899, Lansdowne, the British Secretary of War, decided immediately to appoint Roberts in Buller's place, and with Balfour's support, he turned to Salisbury, the Prime Minister, for assistance.[91] Roberts, who had already made himself available for the post,[92] was summoned to London on the same day. On 17 December, Lansdowne offered him the post on behalf of the British government, and he accepted.[93] Objections that Roberts was too old for the post were overcome by appointing Kitchener, who was then the commander-in-chief of the Egyptian Army, as his chief-of-staff.[94]

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89 **Ibid.**, pp. 23-47; Breytenbach, 2, pp. 349-53, and J Stirling, **The colonials in South Africa, 1899-1902: their record, based on the despatches** (Edinburgh, 1907), p. x.

90 **South African War, 1899-1902: confidential telegrams 12th October 1899 to 1st October 1902** (s.l., s.a.), p. 490: Buller - White, 16 December 1899.

91 D James, **Lord Roberts** (London, 1954), p. 265 and D de Watteville, **Lord Roberts** (London, 1938), p. 26.

92 British Library Manuscript Room (London), Lansdowne Papers, I.(5)47: Roberts – Lansdowne, 8 December 899 (letter).

93 James, p. 265 and Breytenbach, 2, p. 344. On the afternoon of 17 December, Lansdowne had to inform Roberts that his son, who had been mortally wounded at Colenso on 15 December, had passed away.

94 Maurice (ed.), 1, p. 381.

Roberts was appointed behind Wolseley's back, and Queen Victoria, who held Buller in high esteem, was also not consulted.[95] Wolseley had turned down attempts to replace Buller, and insisted that Buller was the best commander-in-chief.[96] There was a possibility that Wolseley himself could be sent to South Africa as commander-in-chief, but the government claimed that they could not do without his services in Britain, and that his health was not satisfactory anyway. Wolseley denied that there was anything the matter with him.[97] Roberts's appointment meant victory to his ring over the Wolseley ring.

On 16 December, Buller was informed that Roberts had been appointed in his place.[98] It was a great humiliation to him; however, he did not resign, and had already decided to make another attempt at relieving the siege of Ladysmith.[99] Pemberton contends that Buller received the news of Roberts's appointment with much relief;[100] however, Bakkes claims that Buller could never (in a psychological sense) come to terms with the appointment of Roberts above him.[101] In any event, he could never understand that his telegram to White could have led to his undoing.[102] Since he had been relieved of duties outside Natal, he would henceforth be able to devote all his attention to relieving the siege of Ladysmith - an objective that kept him busy for the ten weeks that followed and, after several reverses, eventually led to the relief of the town on 28 February 1900.

Roberts's appointment as commander-in-chief, and his departure to South Africa on 23 December 1899,[103] introduced a new chapter in the strategic course of the Anglo-Boer War. Provisionally, Buller would still act as commander-in-chief, but he had to obtain Roberts's permission before he could make any strategic moves.

4. CONCLUSION

There is a difference between being in a corner and being defeated. According to Napoleon, the British never knew when they were defeated.[104] After "Black Week" the British were, technically speaking, in a tight situation in a strategic sense, but

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95 British Library Manuscript Room (London), Lansdowne Papers, L(5)44: Sir Arthur Bigge – Lansdowne, 18 December 1899 (letter).
96 Breytenbach, 2, p. 344.
97 JH Lehmann, **All Sir Garnet: a life of Field Marshal Lord Wolseley** (London, 1964), p. 387.
98 Breytenbach, 2, p. 344.
99 **Ibid.**, p. 345.
100 Pemberton, p. 153.
101 Bakkes, p. 190.
102 Cd. 1791, p. 206: Buller's response to question 15 374.
103 Maurice (ed.), 1, p. 381. Kitchener joined him at Gibraltar.
104 **Royal commission on the war in South Africa: minutes of evidence taken before the royal commission on the war in South Africa** 2 (Cd. 1791, London, 1903), p. 137: Lt-Gen. A Hunter's response to question 14 563.

they had certainly not been defeated strategically. Owing to the Boers' lack of strategic initiative and forcefulness, the British were once again given the opportunity to recover from their errors.[105]

When Roberts arrived in South Africa on 10 January 1900, he used the first four weeks to reorganize the British Army in South Africa and to plan for the second British offensive. On 11 February 1900 he launched his indirect strategy against the Boer forces on the Kimberley front by outflanking their Magersfontein position, relieving the siege of Kimberley (15 February), trapping Piet Cronjé's army at Paardeberg and forcing him to surrender after a ten-day siege (27 February), capturing Bloemfontein (13 March), and eventually also Johannesburg (31 May) and Pretoria (5 Junie).[106] So, out of the "Black Week" defeats, a new British strategy was born, which soon led to a strategic turn of the tide in the war.

Buller failed as a commander in South Africa. His strategic planning left much to be desired, because he did not concentrate his numerically superior forces well, was unable to surprise the Boers, and did not utilize his forces economically. His military intelligence (and that of his subordinates) left much to be desired, his offensive failed, and by the middle of December 1899 he had not been able to reach any of his strategic goals. If Buller was unsuccessful in applying the principles of war, that was so much more true of the Boer commanders, albeit that they were not trained officers. The Boers were unable (or unwilling) to transform their tactical victories into strategic successes. Their last chance to win the war (i.e. force the British to the negotiations table) was in the weeks following on "Black Week", but they left the British off the hook, and in due course suffered the consequences.

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105 As far as Buller's actions after "Black Week" are concerned, see A Wessels, "An assessment of the British offensive during the Anglo-Boer War, 16 December 1899-10 February 1900", **Journal for Contemporary History** 25(2), December 2000, pp. 100-15.

106 See e.g. A Wessels (ed.), **Lord Roberts and the war in South Africa 1899-1902** (Stroud, 2000), pp. 26-88.