THE BRITISH VIEW OF A WAR IN SOUTH AFRICA (1899)

André Wessels[1]

On the eve of the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), Great Britain was the world's only superpower. The British Empire possessed colonies right across the globe, and the Royal Navy was unchallenged on the world's oceans. The British Army had a permanent force strength of 249 466 (all ranks) – including 125 105 soldiers stationed in the United Kingdom, 73 157 in India, and 51 204 in the other colonies. There were also 129 572 militia (plus 2 732 Maltese and Bermudan militia, as well as 3 996 Channel Isles militia), 11 891 Yeomanry members, 264 833 volunteers, and about 90 000 other reserves - a grand total of more than 750 000 soldiers.[2]

In contrast the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR; i.e. the South African Republic, better known as the Transvaal) only had a citizen force of approximately 32 000 burghers, while their next-door neighbour, the smaller and poorer Orange Free State (OFS), had approximately 22 000 burghers.[3] Yet, in practice, it took the British Army (with the support of volunteers from Canada, Australia and New Zealand, plus colonial troops from the Cape Colony and Natal, plus more than 5 000 Transvaalers and Free Staters who in due course switched sides, as well as at least 120 000 blacks and coloureds who joined the Army either in a combatant or non-combatant capacity) more than two and a half years to force the republican governments into a situation where they were prepared to accept (generous) terms of surrender. By then more than 22 000 white British soldiers had died, plus an unknown number of blacks and coloureds who served with the British Army; the Boer republics had lost approximately 6000 burghers, but also more than 27 000 women and children in concentration camps; while at least 23 000, but probably many more, black civilians had also died in the camps. Large portions of the

1 Department of History, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

2 **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. 33.

3 JH Breytenbach, **Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902**, 1 (Pretoria, 1969), pp. 36, 68.

Transvaal and Free State were devastated, and the drawn-out conflict left a bitter legacy.[4]

Why did it take the British so long to defeat the Boers? In this article two aspects that should throw light on the matter will be analyzed. The first and main portion will concentrate on the general British view of the forthcoming war in South Africa. This view was influenced by the intelligence gathered by the British Army with regard to the two Boer republics, and consequently the British intelligence problems will be discussed in the second part of the article.

* * *

According to British military leaders, it was indisputable that the British would be required to defend themselves against republican aggression. Whether the British government had any particular political ideals was of less significance. In any event, the British government had kept the military leadership, including Lord Wolseley, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, in the dark about the political situation in, and the objectives for, South Africa.

It was therefore no mean task for the military leaders to devise a military strategy for an imminent war in South Africa. Should the strategy be merely defensive or should it be offensive from the start? What was the final aim: the military and political subservience of both Boer republics, or only of the Transvaal? Until shortly before the start of the war, there was much uncertainty about these issues.

Since the Boers were the aggressors from the British point of view, one can only gain an understanding of their view of the war in South Africa if one analyses their perception of the Boers' proposed strategy and the republics' strategic objectives. The British based their strategy on their view of the Boers' strategy[5] – albeit that, in practice, nothing definite was in place.

In a memorandum, dated 15 April 1897, Sir John Ardagh, Director of Military Intelligence at the War Office, referred to three theories that pertained to the Boers' strategy. The first held that when hostilities broke out, the Transvaal would attempt to destroy the western railway line in the Cape Colony, and would invade

---

4 See, for example, A Wessels, **Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902: 'n oorsig van die militêre verloop van die stryd** (Bloemfontein, 1991), p. 46; A Wessels, "Die traumatiese nalatenskap van die Anglo-Boereoorlog se konsentrasiekampe", **Journal for Contemporary History** 26(2), December 2001, pp. 1-20.

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

Rhodesia. A second point of view was that the Boer attacks would be launched in the direction of Kimberley, Mafikeng and Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe), and would also attempt to blow up the railway lines in the vicinity of Warrenton, Colesberg and Aliwal North. The third theory was that attacks would be launched against Natal.[6]

By the end of 1898, Brig.-Gen. FW Stopford, the Assistant Adjutant-General, notified Gen.-Maj. WF Butler, the British commander in South Africa, by telegram, that approximately 40 000 burghers would be available for military service, including 27 000 who could be used for offensive operations outside the borders of the republics. It was envisaged that the Boers would attempt to capture Kimberley and the northern parts of Natal. Otherwise, only sporadic raids were expected to be carried out by commandos of 2 000 to 3 000 men.[7]

The Intelligence Service argued that if the Boers invaded British territory, the invasion would take place in Natal for political, historical and tactical reasons. However, both the commanding general and the Natal government hoped that the Boers, as had happened in the Transvaal War of Independence (1880-1881), would adopt a defensive strategy, and would therefore not invade Natal in depth.[8] When the war commenced, the Boers did indeed invade Natal, and on occasion they even penetrated as far as Estcourt. This invasion of Natal caught the British unawares. A large British force was placed under siege at Ladysmith, and Gen. Redvers Buller (the British Commander-in-Chief in South Africa) was so perturbed by the situation in Natal that he changed his strategy altogether in order to deal with this emergency.

Two weeks before the start of the war, reasonably detailed information was published with regard to the strength and possible actions of the Boers. In these documents, it was surmised that approximately 3 600 Transvaalers would probably be used to protect the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging area; that 1 700 would be deployed to protect the Transvaal's northern border; and that 1 000 would patrol the Swaziland border. Offensive forces of 1 500 men each would possibly attack Mafikeng and Veertienstrome, while the largest body of the force (approximately 9 000 men) would be available for service in Natal. Apparently, the Boers expected a British incursion alongside the route taken by Dr LS Jameson when he had invaded the Transvaal at the end of 1895; in other words, from the western border,

6 Appendix B, Cd. 1789, p. 167: Memorandum by Ardagh, 15 April 1897.
7 Appendix C, Cd. 1789, p. 201: Brig.-Gen. FW Stopford – WF Butler, 21 December 1898 (telegram).
8 **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), pp. 22 and 27: Lieut-Col EA Altham's response to questions 529 and 656.

via Christiana and Bloemhof in the direction of Klerksdorp, and then to Johannesburg and Pretoria. In terms of this information, the Boers would not be inclined to fight a long way from their districts; moreover, they feared uprisings by the black tribes.[9]

According to this memorandum, most burghers from the western and southern Orange Free State were not eager to participate in this war against Britain. Indeed, the Free Staters also had to consider the possibility of a Basotho invasion by as many as 30 000 warriors, and between 3 000 and 6 000 burghers would possibly be used to protect the Basotholand border. Approximately 1 300 burghers would patrol the southern border, 4000 would possibly attack Kimberley, and 4600 would be available for service in Natal. Most republican burghers (approximately 13 600) would probably be assembled on the Natal border.[10]

In general, the British underestimated the Boers' military capabilities, and especially the Free Staters' will to fight. However, they were correct in their assumption that most Boers would be used against Natal, and partially correct in their assumption that the Boers would not invade British territory very far.

Up to the time of the Jameson Raid, the British had argued that in case of war, the Boers would wait for at least a month before they invaded Natal or the Cape Colony, and that this would give the British enough time to send reinforcements. This assumption was based on the Boers' strategy during the Transvaal War of Independence. However, as early as 11 June 1896, Maj. EA Altham of the Intelligence Service pointed out that the Boers' military power had since increased, and that the ambition had taken root among them to control the whole of South Africa. Shortly before the start of the war, FW Reitz, former OFS president and since 1898 Secretary of State in the ZAR, expressed the ideal in his book, **Een eeuw van onrecht** (A century of injustice), that South Africa would be unified under Afrikaner reign – "Dan zal het zijn van Zambezie tot aan Simonsbaai: AFRIKA VOOR DEN AFRIKANER" (Then it will be from the Zambezi River to Simon's Bay: AFRICA FOR THE AFRIKANER). In these words, he echoed those of Paul Kruger, who had expressed similar sentiments in February 1881. Although it is improbable that the Boers planned to achieve this ideal through military power, it is understandable that this made the British uneasy.[11] Moreover, on the basis of the events that had occurred during the Great Trek, the Boers believed that they were entitled to Natal as their territory, and they would have liked to secure Durban

9 Appendix B, Cd. 1789, p. 179: Memorandum by Col W Everett, 28 September 1899.
10 Appendix B, Cd. 1789, p. 180: Memorandum by Col W Everett, 28 September 1899.
11 FW Reitz, **Een eeuw van onrecht** (Dordrecht, 1900), p. 62. See also EB Iwan-Müller, **Lord Milner and South Africa** (London, 1902), p. vii.

as a harbour. Altham concluded that the possibility could not be excluded that the Boers would indeed launch an attack against Natal.[12]

Altham emphasized that, while a Boer invasion into Natal was possible, the safe-guarding of the Cape could not be neglected. The bridges and fords at various locations on the Orange River (Gariep) had to be defended, and strategic points for an advance against Transvaal had to be protected. Although a full-scale Transvaal and Free State invasion of the Cape Colony was unlikely, it would nonetheless be difficult to keep the Cape Colony's defensive lines intact in the case of such an attack. The advance on Transvaal should preferably proceed through the Cape and the Free State, and at the same time, this would relieve the pressure on Natal. British forces in Southern Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) would need to launch mock attacks on the Pretoria-Pietersburg (Polokwane) railway line, and to blow up telegraph poles and railway lines in the ZAR so that the mobilization of the Transvaal burghers could be hampered.[13]

Since, at the start of the war, the Boers (who initially fielded some 30 000 burghers) outnumbered British forces in South Africa (who initially only had approximately 22 000 men deployed),[14] the British had to follow a defensive strategy until reinforcements arrived. All possible lines of advance had to be defended so that the eventual choice of a line of advance would come as a surprise to the Boers.[15]

Although much speculation had taken place on strategic possibilities and problems before the Anglo-Boer War, ultimately a carefully considered and clearly defined plan had not been drawn up before the time. When Lt-Gen. FWE Forestier-Walker became the General Officer Commanding of the Cape Colony on 6 September 1899, he did not receive any specific instructions, not even with regard to the protection of the colony.[16] Later, neither Gen. Buller (who was Commander-in-Chief in South Africa until December 1899), nor his successor, Lord Roberts, received any specific strategic orders. The various supreme commanders were allowed to work out their strategies in South Africa according to the prevailing circumstances. Lord Lansdowne, the Secretary of State for War, claimed that it was not uncommon for a commanding general not to receive comprehensive or detailed

12 Appendix B, Cd. 1789, p. 162: Memorandum by Altham, 11 June 1896.
13 **Ibid**.
14 Cd. 1789, p. 34.
15 Appendix C, Cd. 1789, p. 183: LH Goodenough – Deputy Minister of War, 30 September 1896 (telegram).
16 **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), pp. 93-4: Forestier-Walker's response to questions 13 660 and 13 661.

instructions;[17] however, the Elgin Commission (appointed after the war to investigate the preparations for the war and other matters regarding the conduct of the war) held the view that even if this meant that a commander's discretion had to be restricted, he should nonetheless be provided with basic plans devised by experts. He could then adapt these plans at his discretion.[18]

The Elgin Commission found that although it was not accepted practice to provide the commander of an expedition force with detailed orders, it would be a sound move if the appointed supreme commander held consultations with his superiors, and discussed alternative plans with them before he left for the war zone. This was indeed what both Buller and Roberts had done. In practice, however, plans devised before the time only remain relevant until the first contact with the enemy.[19] Roberts warned that errors in the initial strategy could have far-reaching consequences, and that such errors could be corrected only with great difficulty at a later stage.[20]

Wolseley admitted that he, as Commander-in-Chief at the War Office, had not given operational orders to the army. The army corps that was sent to South Africa at the start of the war was simply made available to the commanding general (Buller), who was required to deploy the corps at his discretion.[21] Neither Wolseley nor Lansdowne – nor the British government – had devised a strategy prior to or shortly before the start of the Anglo-Boer War. The strategy that was implemented was worked out by Buller himself, and later by Roberts.

Wolseley's argument that a basic strategic plan did not remain relevant beyond the first contact with the enemy's main forces, has some merit; however, his statement that he never tried to control operations in South Africa sounds like a dereliction of duty.[22] Military means are generally directed at achieving a political aim; and from a distance, a supreme commander should be able to develop a detached perspective, and he should be able to provide meaningful advice without compromising the local supreme commander's freedom to take military action – an important principle of strategy.

Wolseley wanted to ensure that an adequate number of soldiers and munitions were available in South Africa; but on the ground, the commanding general had to wage the war himself. The latter had to keep this aim within view at all times, and had to

17 Cd. 1791, p. 514: Lansdowne's response to question 21 234.
18 Cd. 1789, p. 23.
19 **Ibid**.
20 Cd. 1790, pp. 429-30: Roberts's response to question 10 183.
21 Cd. 1790, p. 376: Wolseley's response to question 8 938.
22 Cd. 1790, p. 382: Wolseley's response to questions 9 080 and 9 082.

adapt his strategy to continuously changing situations. Wolseley believed that time and again he had nominated the best person for the job as supreme commander in South Africa, and he was convinced that the persons he had recommended were competent enough to take decisions themselves.[23] Nonetheless, Buller was replaced as supreme commander by Roberts in December 1899 because it appeared that Buller was unable to find solutions to the strategic problems that confronted him.[24]

Before Gen. George White was sent to Natal, he discussed conditions in South Africa with Wolseley; however, Wolseley did not give him any prescriptions. They did not even discuss Ladysmith as a possible defensive position.[25] Although defensive plans were never drawn up in Britain, but indeed by the local commanders, these plans had to be submitted to the War Ministry for approval.[26]

Although the military leaders and government officials had confidence in the above-mentioned system of strategic planning, there were outsiders who felt differently about the matter. For example, Leo Amery, author and editor, held the view that basic strategic planning had to be carried out before an army could engage in battle. Only once this had been done could the particular commander be given a free hand to act at his own discretion. By devising a basic strategy before the time, the possibility of committing serious errors, as happened at the start of the Anglo-Boer War, could be eliminated.[27] After all, any planning process inevitably yields knowledge and insight.

Initially, the British held the view that once the capitals of the republics had been taken, the war would be over. If the British had had adequate numbers of soldiers in South Africa on 11 October 1899, and had immediately gone on the offensive, this could indeed have been the case.[28] If they had taken the capitals within a few weeks, the Boers' morale would probably have declined more rapidly. Given their initial victories, for example at Stormberg (10 December 1899), Magersfontein (11 December 1899) and Colenso (15 December 1899), the Boers were better able to absorb setbacks such as the defeat at Paardeberg (27 February 1900) and the fall of Bloemfontein (13 March 1900) and Pretoria (5 June 1900).

---

23 Cd. 1790, pp. 383 and 395: Wolseley's response to questions 9 082 and 9 366.
24 See, for example, A Wessels (ed.), **Lord Roberts and the war in South Africa 1899-1902** (Stroud, 2000), pp. 10-1.
25 Cd. 1790, p. 376: Wolseley's response to questions 8 939-8 941.
26 Cd. 1790, p. 19: Altham's response to questions 469 and 470.
27 Cd. 1791, p. 467: Amery's response to questions 20 467 and 20 468.
28 Cd. 1791, p. 468: Amery's response to question 20 478.

If the British had devised a strategy in good time, they would have realized, prior to the war, that many more soldiers would be needed to achieve victory in this particular conflict, and more soldiers could then have been sent to bolster their numbers.[29] Although, in principle, it may be plausible that military commanders should be allowed to operate in terms of the practical situation before them, all actions should nonetheless take place within the framework of a basic strategy. The British government and Commander-in-Chief at the War Office did not assume a prescriptive role in terms of strategy. However, the problem was that this eventually led to a situation, on the eve of the war, where there was no strategy in place, and as time passed, this led to several problems.

Although the British entered the Anglo-Boer War without a carefully formulated strategy, they nonetheless thought that they would win the war with ease. The Boers were regarded as primitive,[30] and in 1896, the Intelligence Service – which should supposedly have known better – created the impression that the Boers were not well prepared for war.[31] By 1899, the British apparently thought that the Boers were no longer such a formidable enemy as before. However, the war soon proved the contrary.[32] The fact that the Boers had not undergone formal, conventional military training did not imply that they were not in a state of readiness. Moreover, it must also be kept in mind that the Boer citizen armies were mobile, knew the war zone very well, and could to a large extent live off the veldt. The Boers were also equipped with new Mauser rifles, and although they did not have many guns, their artillery corps were equipped with modern guns, howitzers and pom-poms.

At the start of the war, neither the British government nor the British public realised the potential nature and scope of the conflict.[33] For this reason, they did not take the war seriously.[34] They were lighthearted and optimistic about the matter when hostilities started,[35] and prepared themselves for a limited war.[36] This incorrect approach and psychological orientation towards the conflict possibly contributed to a situation where the military and political leaders did not see the working out of a short-term strategy as a priority.

---

29 Cd. 1791, p. 468: Amery's response to question 20 480.
30 Appendix B, Cd. 1789, p. 165: Memorandum by Ardagh, October 1896.
31 Appendix B, Cd. 1789, p. 163: Memorandum by Ardagh, October 1896.
32 Cd. 1791, p. 525: Lansdowne's response to question 21 348.
33 AT Mahan, **The story of the war in South Africa, 1899-1900** (London, 1900), p. 73.
34 WB Pemberton, **Battles of the Boer War** (London, 1963), p. 17.
35 LS Amery (ed.), **The Times history of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902**, 3 (London, 1905), p. 1.
36 Pemberton, pp. 33-6.

The fact that the British Army had been victorious in more than 200 wars, and had successfully conducted punitive expeditions in the preceding 60 years (against small and, in terms of European standards, primitive nations) in Africa and Asia, convinced the British that the war would not last long. Since he despised the Boers' military capacity, Sir Alfred Milner, the British High Commissioner in South Africa and Governer of the Cape Colony, promoted these fallacious convictions.[37] Sir Michael Hicks Beach, Chancellor of the Exchequer, even informed the British House of Commons that the war would not cost more than eleven million pounds. The eventual cost was approximately twenty times this estimate.[38]

Although Wolseley must have realized that the preparations were not entirely satisfactory, he sometimes showed an eagerness to engage in conflict with the Boers. In a memorandum dated 8 June 1899, for example, he proposed that an army corps be mobilized at Salisbury Plain, and he expressed the hope that operations would start as soon as possible so that the conflict could be something of the past by November![39]

The resurgence in nationalism, patriotism and imperialism, which was associated with Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee in 1897, may have made a war against the two so-called stubborn and insignificant Boer republics on the southernmost tip of Africa more acceptable, and filled the British with more self-confidence. On the other hand, the sixtieth commemoration (on 16 December 1898) of the Voortrekkers' victory over Dingaan bolstered the Boers' nationalism and patriotism; so much so, that they felt that they had the capacity to take on the mighty British Empire.[40] On the basis of their victories during the Transvaal War of Independence (1880-1881), and their defeat of Jameson and his raiders (January 1896), the Transvaalers believed that they were stronger than the British.[41]

The British Army Command were wrong in their assumption that a single army corps would be adequate to achieve victory for the British in this war. Although the Intelligence Service had already warned in 1896 that the Boers had begun to arm themselves, the British were still caught unprepared. There were too few soldiers – especially mounted soldiers – in South Africa, not enough mobile heavy artillery, and on top of all this, the size of the arena of war was wholly underestimated.[42] In due course the Anglo-Boer War would in fact, from a British point of view, degenerate into a war against the wide open spaces of the war zone.

---

37 GN Blainey, **The causes of war** (Melbourne, 1977), p. 46.
38 **Ibid**., p. 47.
39 Appendix D, Cd. 1789, p. 262: Wolseley – Lansdowne, 8.6.1899 (memorandum).
40 Blainey, p. 105.
41 Appendix D, Cd. 1789, p. 226: Appendix V to Wolseley's minute of 22 September 1896.
42 Cd. 1789, pp. 23-4, 30.

The extent to which the British were unprepared, and apparently had no idea of what to expect, is illustrated by the War Ministry's reaction to Australia's offer of assistance.

The War Ministry notified them that infantry – not mounted soldiers – would be preferred![43] The British were obsessed with quantity rather than quality.[44] It was this lack of insight into the situation in South Africa that rendered the limited measure of informal and unofficial strategic planning that had been done totally inadequate, and even unrealistic.

On the eve of the Anglo-Boer War, the British did not have a clear view of their strategic objective, nor of the way in which they could realise this objective. They underestimated the Boers, and incorrectly assumed that the war would soon be something of the past. For this reason, a clearly formulated strategy had not been worked out. In the long run, this state of affairs created several strategic problems for the British.

* * *

It is not possible to engage in strategic planning if those who are responsible for the planning do not have access to sound intelligence.[45] The Order in Council of 1895 stipulated that the Intelligence Service had to assist the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army in order to prepare the army for both offensive and defensive operations. The Intelligence Service had to collect all the requisite intelligence for the protection of the British Empire and for the drawing up of maps. In terms of the Order in Council of 1895, as confirmed by that of 1899, the Director-General of Military Intelligence was an officer of the rank of Major-General on the staff of the Commander-in-Chief. He had to ensure that the relevant information was collected, processed and distributed, and that maps were drawn and foreign documents translated.[46]

---

43 JFC Fuller, **The last of the gentlemen's wars: a subaltern's journal of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902** (London, 1937), p. 8.

44 **Ibid.**, p. 9.

45 Good sources on British military intelligence are TG Fergusson, **British military intelligence, 1870-1914: the development of a modern intelligence organization** (Frederick, 1984); BAH Parritt, **'The intelligencers': the story of British military intelligence up to 1914** (**s.l**, **s.a.**), and J Haswell, **British military intelligence** (London, 1937).

46 Cd. 1789, pp. 14, 127.

The subsection of the Intelligence Service that had to evaluate defensive plans for the home front, as well as for overseas operations, had to draw up an annual report on their findings. They had to evaluate the British Army and Royal Navy, as well as the forces of potential enemies, including the ZAR and the OFS. Prior to the Anglo-Boer War, this work was carried out by only two officers and a clerk. The subsection that had to draw military maps for the entire British Empire, had a permanent staff of only two officers.[47] It is therefore clear that the Intelligence Service was neglected. There was a gap between the Intelligence Service and the policy-makers,[48] while the British government, War Ministry and some generals underrated the value of the intelligence officers.[49] If the Intelligence Service had had a larger staff, they would have been able to do better work.[50] Prior to the war, the British did not make provision for adequate personnel to conduct intelligence-gathering work in the field.[51] In April 1898, the Intelligence Service published a secret handbook, entitled **Military notes on the Dutch republics of South Africa**, and in June 1899, a revised version appeared. However, the book was only presented to the British Parliament in 1900. It was one of twelve manuals that were prepared with a view to the war in South Africa.[52] Lt-Col Altham was primarily responsible for drawing up this highly accurate book.[53]

The **Military notes** outlined the physical characteristics of the two republics, the most important districts and towns, the Boers' military power and arms, their forts, the attitude of the local population, as well as the Boers' military organization and tactics.[54] The accuracy of this manual is evident from the fact that its compilers claimed that the number of Boer guns was 107, while, in reality, there were 99.[55] The British therefore could not claim that they were entirely in the dark about the Boers' fire-power.

Topographic information was not always accurate. The point of departure of the Intelligence Service was that only the basic information on the war zone was provided by the Intelligence Service itself, while the commander-in-chief on site had to obtain more details as the campaign progressed. As in the case of strategic planning, the intelligence function was also left to the local commander-in-chief.[56]

---

47 Cd. 1789, p. 128.
48 Furgusson, p. 120.
49 Cd. 1791, p. 466: Amery's response to question 20 448.
50 Cd. 1790, p. 28: Altham's response to question 685.
51 Cd. 1790, p. 22: Altham's response to question 546.
52 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 156: Statement by the Intelligence Service.
53 Cd. 1789, p.128.
54 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p.156: Statement by the Intelligence Service.
55 Cd. 1789, p. 129. See also Breytenbach, 1, pp. 85-97.
56 Cd. 1789, p. 129 and Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 159: Statement by the Intelligence Service.

A report was already available in Britain on Northern Natal, the mountain passes across the Drakensberg mountains, the communication lines in the Cape Colony, harbours, areas for possible bases, railway lines, immediate stores bases and other bases, as well as other strategic positions. Reports were also available on Basotholand and Swaziland. The entire potential war zone was not dealt with in detail, but important details could nonetheless be provided to the officers who were sent to South Africa.[57]

The means that were available prior to the Anglo-Boer War to gather intelligence on the republics, were limited. On the eve of the war, only £18 000 was made available for intelligence gathering,[58] and too few officers were tasked to engage in fieldwork. Even if adequate funds and manpower had been available, it would still have been difficult to gather the necessary information without incurring the ire of the republics and even of the British colonies in South Africa.[59]

It is neccessary to distinguish between the Intelligence Service that had to gather strategic information in time of peace, and intelligence officers who accompanied armies in time of war to gather tactical information. The local population could be of assistance to the intelligence officers. The intelligence officers also had to provide guides and scouts to the armies.[60]

The intelligence officers emphasized the necessity of making preparations to safeguard the Cape and Natal. Prior to the war, they also made plans to establish a Field Intelligence Service in South Africa when hostilities commenced.[61] As early as June 1899, ten officers were sent to South Africa to establish such a Field Intelligence Service, and to ensure that in case of war, an adequate number of agents, messengers and interpreters would be available. Although they were few in number, these officers gathered valuable information. In Natal, 45 whites – including citizens of the Transvaal and Free State – and 50 blacks were organized into a scout corps. As time passed, this scout corps performed good work under the guidance of White and Buller. In the Cape, a similar corps was founded, namely the Rimington's Guides.[62]

---

57 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 159: Statement by the Intelligence Service.
58 Symons, p. 62.
59 Cd. 1789, p. 129.
60 Cd. 1789, p. 130.
61 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 153: Statement by the Intelligence Service.
62 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 160: Statement by the Intelligence Service. For the history of the Rimington's Guides, see J Stirling, **The colonials in South Africa, 1899-1902: their record, based on the despatches** (Edinburgh, 1902), pp. 150-60.

Since some members of the Field Intelligence Service were trapped with White at Ladysmith, Buller was required to establish a new intelligence staff.[63] Fortunately, during time of war, there is always adequate funding available for intelligence work.[64] By the end of the war, the Field Intelligence Service consisted of 132 officers, 2 321 other white soldiers, and numerous black personnel.[65]

The members of the Intelligence Service in Britain were very much aware of the scope of their task, and they commenced with intensive and sound intelligence work prior to the war. However, their work before the war was undermined by a shortage of funds and staff, and the government and top officers did not always pay attention to their warnings.

* * *

Maps are basic sources of information. From 1896, the Intelligence Service commenced with the drawing up of maps of South Africa.[66] There are differences of opinion about the actual quality of these maps. According to the Elgin Commission, there was a lack of good maps,[67] and the available maps were incomplete and unreliable.[68] However, others contend that although the maps drawn up by the British were poor, the Boers' maps were even worse.[69] The Boers even used British maps when they invaded Natal and the Cape.[70] However, it has to be borne in mind that the Boers generally knew the war zone better and were therefore not always dependent on maps.

Until a small Surveying Section was established in 1901 by the Intelligence Department, the British did not have the means to draw up detailed maps themselves. Large parts of the Free State and the Transvaal had not been surveyed at all up to that point. Maps of a scale of 1 : 800 000 did indeed exist for the Cape, Natal, the Free State and parts of the Transvaal, but it would take approximately five years to prepare a proper 1 : 250 000 survey of the Transvaal.[71] Thus, Roberts was mistaken when he claimed that, as the war had been foreseen by February 1899, there was enough time to draw up or obtain good maps.[72]

---

63 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 160: Statement by the Intelligence Service.
64 Cd. 1789, p. 130 and Cd. 1791, p. 549: Lansdowne's answer to question 21 729.
65 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 160: Statement by the Intelligence Service.
66 JF Maurice (ed.), **History of the war in South Africa, 1899-1902**, 1 (London, 1906), p. 13.
67 Cd. 1789, p. 24.
68 Cd. 1789, p. 130.
69 Cd. 1790, p. 29: Lt-Col WR Robertson's response to questions 712 and 713.
70 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 160: Statement by the Intelligence Service. See also Cd. 1790, p. 6: Lt-Gen. WG Nicholson's response to question 132.
71 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 160: Statement by the Intelligence Service.
72 Cd. 1789, p. 131.

As early as 1896, maps were prepared for parts of Northern Natal. The Director-General of Military Intelligence, Sir John Ardagh, requested the Natal government to extend the survey in a southerly direction, but after a change of government in Natal, the new government did not continue with the work. The Intelligence Service did succeed in surveying the most important parts of South Africa, especially the potential routes for their army's advance.[73] Although many of the British maps were not suitable for tactical purposes, they could be used for strategic purposes.[74] On his arrival in Cape Town in January 1900, Roberts seized a few hundred copies of **Jeppe's map of the Transvaal**. These maps had been printed in Austria for the Transvaal government, but never reached their destination, and became the basis of British military maps of the Transvaal and surrounding areas.[75]

* * *

From 1896 onwards, the Intelligence Service reports pertaining to the Boers' military preparations, the strength of the Boer armies, the political and military ties between the Transvaal and OFS, the Boers' military objectives and the likelihood of incursions into Natal and on the Kimberley front, were drawn up and submitted to the interested parties.[76] The British knew how mobile the Boers were,[77] but the Intelligence Service did not foresee that the Boers would maintain their resistance on such a large scale, nor for as long as they did.[78]

The Intelligence Service repeatedly requested that preparations for defensive operations should be made in South Africa.[79] However, Lansdowne never obtained information via Wolseley, but from Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary. The flow of intelligence was therefore neither efficient nor streamlined, and critical intelligence was not available when planning was carried out.[80]

Some persons conveniently pointed fingers at the Intelligence Service – apparently to cover up their own shortcomings and mistakes. For example, Lord Kitchener accused the Intelligence Service of not providing sound intelligence during the war.[81] However, it appears that the commanders did not always utilise the services

---

73 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 160: Statement by the Intelligence Service.
74 Cd. 1790, p. 32: Lt-Col GCN Grant's response to question 784.
75 GFR Henderson, **The science of war: a collection of essays and lectures, 1892-1903** (London, 1905), pp. xxxv-xxxvi.
76 Appendix A, Cd. 1789, p. 153: Statement by the Intelligence Service.
77 Cd. 1790, p. 25: Altham's response to question 600.
78 Cd. 1789, p. 30.
79 Appendix no. 2, Cd. 1792, p. 14: Memorandum and statement by Lt-Gen. WG Nicholson.
80 Cd. 1789, pp. 22-3.
81 Cd. 1790, p. 13: Kitchener's response to question 257.

of the Intelligence Service, and moreover, they did not take heed of its warnings. For example, the Intelligence Service repeatedly requested that the garrison in South Africa should be enlarged; however, there was no response to this request. Moreover, the Intelligence Service was never asked how many men, in its view, were required to defend the Cape Colony and Natal.[82]

The Intelligence Service actually performed its task very well, especially if its limited means are considered. For example, it was not the fault of Ardagh or any other intelligence officer that the British were not ready for the war. As a result of Ardagh's reserved nature and his low rank, many top officers possibly did not take his memorandum seriously. During the months of crisis prior to the war, Ardagh had been assigned other tasks, namely to serve as the British delegation's technical military adviser at the First Hague Peace Conference (from May to July 1899), after which he became ill with fever, and suffered from exhaustion (from July to October 1899).[83]

The British government and prominent army officers did not realise how valuable the Intelligence Service was to them. The manpower and funds of the Intelligence Service were also too limited for the proper gathering of adequate intelligence, or the drawing up of proper maps. Moreover, the intelligence that they actually gathered was not always recognized for its value, nor used in strategic planning. The result was that the British government and military leaders did not have sound intelligence on the situation in South Africa, nor could they appreciate the task awaiting them in the country. They had a very simplified view of the challenges that would be faced by the British Army in a war against the two small Boer republics. The strategic Intelligence Service was not valued as it should have been, and this held dire consequences for the British. Ironically, the consequences were also catastrophic for the Boers. If the British Army had defeated the Boer republics within the space of a few months, South Africa and all its inhabitants (white, black, coloured and Asian) would have been spared the ravages of a scorched earth policy; the destruction of tens of thousands of homes, and even of towns; the deaths in the controversial concentration camps; the element of civil war that crept into the conflict; as well as all the trauma and bitterness that resulted from this, the bloodiest conflict thus far in the history of South Africa.

82 Cd. 1790, p. 20: Altham's response to questions 472-485.
83 **Dictionary of South African Biography**, 4 (Durban, 1981), p. 8.