

# AN ASSESSMENT OF THE BRITISH OFFENSIVE DURING THE ANGLO-BOER WAR, 16 DECEMBER 1899-10 FEBRUARY 1900

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The period from 16 December 1899 (i.e. the day after the last of the British "Black Week" defeats) until 10 February 1900 (i.e. the day before Lord Roberts implemented his elaborate indirect strategy) is still part of the second main phase of the Anglo-Boer War (i.e. the first British offensive), but can also be regarded as a transitional phase. On 17 December General Sir Redvers Buller was replaced as commander-in-chief of the British forces in South Africa by Lord Roberts, but the latter only arrived in South Africa on 10 January 1900. Even then, Buller stayed on as commanding officer of the Natal Army, and continued his efforts to relieve Ladysmith. In the meantime, Roberts planned his campaign, interfering as little as possible with Buller in Natal.

It is the purpose of this article to give a review of the military events during the period of mid-December 1899 to mid-February 1900, and to analyse these events against the background of previous and subsequent operations in South Africa. In the light of the fact that not much of interest happened on the other fronts during this period, the emphasis will fall on Buller and the events at the Natal front.

Before Buller modified his original strategy and divided his army corps at the beginning of November 1899, he anticipated that he would be able to leave Cape Town on 23 December 1899, complete his advance through the Orange Free State (OFS) by 23 January 1900, and occupy Pretoria by 6 February. Then the war would presumably be something of the past.<sup>2</sup> It therefore appears as if Buller had foreseen a reasonably easy advance through the OFS, while he envisaged heavier resistance from the Vaal River to Pretoria. By the time that Buller had anticipated that he would be in charge of both the republican capitals, however, he was still engaged in

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<sup>2</sup> WT Stead, *How Britain goes to war: a digest and an analysis of evidence taken by the royal commission on the war in South Africa* (London, 1903), p. 97.

attempts on the Upper Thukela to lift the siege of Ladysmith, and this was required while Ladysmith did not actually play a significant role in his original strategy.

In assessing the British strategy after "Black Week" (i.e. after Maj.-Gen. WF Gatacre was defeated at Stormberg on 10 December, Lord Methuen at Magersfontein on 11 December, and Buller at Colenso on 15 December 1899), one needs to bear in mind certain very specific aspects:

- (1) The strategic objectives defined by the British after "Black Week" were - for the time being - very limited. They wanted to consolidate their own position, prevent the Boers from capturing more of their territory, relieve the siege of Ladysmith, and prevent a rebellion in the Cape Colony and Natal.
- (2) Roberts did not want to take any chances. He wanted to play for time so that he could complete the preparations for his offensive.
- (3) The British could not win the war before the middle of 1900. The period after "Black Week" was therefore an interim period. Provisionally, the aim was no longer to achieve victory, but merely to ensure survival. Once Roberts launched his strategy, military victory would, once again, be the objective.

To Buller, the weeks after "Black Week" offered the last opportunity to show his worth. He could no longer save his post as commander-in-chief; at best, he could restore some of his pride.

## 2. BULLER AS STRATEGIST

Until 10 January 1900, Buller was still de facto responsible for military activities in all the war sectors. On Roberts' arrival, Buller's responsibilities were restricted to Natal, and there he would succeed or fail as strategist.

From his arrival in South Africa on 31 October, until 15 December 1899, Buller himself was in command only once during battle, namely at Colenso (15 December). From 16 December 1899 to 10 February 1900, he initiated three battles, namely at iNtabamnyama (Tabanyama, 20-23 January), Spioenkop (24 January) and Vaalkrans (5-7 February). During the first two battles, Lt-Gen. Sir Charles Warren was indeed in command of operations; however, Buller was ultimately still the responsible officer. The period after "Black Week" offered Buller, who then had fewer responsibilities that could divert his attention, the opportunity to make up for the Colenso debacle. By the end of the Buller phase (i.e. 10 February 1900),

however, the British found themselves in an even greater strategic impasse than ever before.

Owing to their comprehensive and unwieldy logistical support system, the British could hardly move rapidly and therefore it took them quite some time to move from one place to the next. In this sense, time was on the side of the Boers. On the other hand, however, the British had large manpower reserves available, and their resources and industries could not really be affected by the Boers. If the Boers wanted to achieve success, they had to act rapidly. However, they did not want to do so, because they had no intention of conquering the whole of Natal, and Buller was offered the opportunity to consolidate his position after every defeat, and to try again. On the north-eastern Cape and the Kimberley fronts, the vastness of the fronts placed the limited British forces under great pressure. Whether there were physical obstacles or not, the Boers were not eager to go on the offensive. In Natal, the topography offered good defensive possibilities to the Boers, while it limited the British forces' possibilities for movement. The spatial factor was therefore to the advantage of the Boers.

Even if Buller had been an exceptional strategist, the British forces' tactical shortcomings impeded strategic success. Unlike the independent Boer, with his typically good field craft, mobility and marksmanship, the average British soldier fell below the mark in those disciplines. More particularly, the lack of initiative among ordinary British soldiers created problems.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the British officers generally had little or no idea of the demands of modern warfare.<sup>4</sup> The serious losses sustained in frontal attacks during "Black Week" made the British hesitant to launch similar attacks. However, they could not fully ignore the recognized existing doctrine on tactics, and for this reason, their attempts at outflanking manoeuvres were conducted halfheartedly with hesitant frontal attacks. This led to three fairly undecided battles (iNtabamnyama, Spioenkop and Vaalkrans), but with relatively large losses, especially at Spioenkop.<sup>5</sup>

If the British had achieved tactical successes, they could have achieved a strategic breakthrough on the Upper Thukela. Although the Boers' modern artillery and the use of smokeless gunpowder complicated matters, the British could not claim that they had been unaware of the Boers' tactical abilities. During the Anglo-Boer War, the British tried to compensate for their inferior tactical skills by sending increasing numbers of soldiers to South Africa. In reality, however, there were never adequate numbers of soldiers in the country.

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<sup>3</sup> The German official account of the war in South Africa 2 (London, 1906), p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

Victory has a hundred fathers, but defeat is an orphan.<sup>6</sup> Although Buller retained his prestige for some time in spite of defeats, he received more and more criticism as time passed. Some continued to defend him as a competent, yet aggrieved leader,<sup>7</sup> while others were more realistic. Amery criticizes Buller's actions,<sup>8</sup> but quite rightly points out that his failure should be judged against the background of the problems that the British military system had to face at the time. On the one hand, he was a product of that system, but on the other hand, he also assisted in the build-up of the system. He, and his system, flouted certain strategic and tactical principles, attempting to achieve victories without suffering serious losses, but above all, he did not take the war seriously.<sup>9</sup>

In the official history of the war, Maurice does not really comment on Buller's strategy, but reminds the reader that the morale of the British remained high in the midst of setbacks.<sup>10</sup> According to Breytenbach, Buller's strategy was entirely wrong, and he should have proceeded with his advance through the OFS.<sup>11</sup> Pakenham, on the other hand, discusses Buller's actions without commenting much about the strategy he followed.<sup>12</sup> None of the authors of the consulted sources discusses the basic principles of strategy nor judges Buller's strategy in the light of these principles.

Although a commander will not necessarily achieve success if he adheres to all the principles of strategy, or conversely will not necessarily fail if he ignores them, these principles of strategy provide an interesting starting point in judging a person's strategic success - principles such as superiority, mobility, freedom of movement, strategic initiative, offensive action, concentration of power, military intelligence, morale, and leadership.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> P Wydan, *Bay of Pigs: the untold story* (London, 1979), p. 305. This expression was apparently used for the first time by Italy's Count Ciano as the tide of war turned against his country (September 1942), and later by the USA's Pres. John F Kennedy after the "Bay of Pigs" fiasco (April 1960).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. An Average Observer, *The burden of proof or England's debt to Sir Redvers Buller* (2nd edition, London, s.a.).

<sup>8</sup> LS Amery (ed.), *The Times history of the war in South Africa 1899-1902 3* (London, 1905), pp. 297, 300-2, 326-7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 301.

<sup>10</sup> JF Maurice (ed.), *History of the war in South Africa 1899-1902 2* (London, 1907), p. 422.

<sup>11</sup> JH Breytenbach, *Die geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902 3* (Pretoria, 1973), pp. 568-9.

<sup>12</sup> T Pakenham, *The Boer War* (London, 1979), pp. 306-7.

<sup>13</sup> With regard to the principles of military strategy in general, see e.g. JI Alger, *The quest for victory: the history of the principles of war* (Westport, 1982); EM Earle (ed.), *Makers of modern strategy: military thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (Princeton, 1966); F Foch, *The principles of war* (London, 1918); WH James, *Modern strategy: an outline of the principles*

The British had superior numbers in Natal, but were unable to exploit this advantage in their favour. They had the reserves to cover their losses, and overseas they had an enormous source of manpower. On the other hand, the Boers' manpower reserves were limited. The British, and Buller in particular, had no reason to complain about the free availability of military capacity. He also had the freedom of action to deploy these forces at his own discretion. Even after Roberts arrived in Cape Town on 10 January 1900, Buller had adequate freedom of movement and decision-making powers to engage in meaningful strategic action. Owing to the Boers' passive orientation, the strategic initiative was in any case left in the hands of the British on all fronts.

Infantry formed the backbone of the British Army. The vastness of the South African war zone seriously hampered the mobility of an army that consisted primarily of infantry. Long munitions convoys also impacted negatively on mobility. While Maj.-Gen. JDP French kept the Boers on edge through continuous mobile operations on the Colesberg front, Buller did not apply the principle of mobility in strategic moves. If, from the start, he had requested mounted soldiers, had secured horses locally, and deployed local colonists on a larger scale, or even if he had better utilized the cavalry under the command of Lord Dundonald, he could have unsettled the Boers through mobile operations, and could thus have achieved a larger measure of strategic surprise.

It is to Buller's credit that, in the midst of setbacks, he continued to engage in offensive operations. The Boers actually allowed the British time and again to consolidate their position and to engage in renewed planning, but Buller could just as well have retreated to Frere and Chieveley, and have waited for Roberts' advance. It remains an open question what the Boers would have done if Buller had launched no further operations after the Colenso fiasco. This is exactly what Lord Methuen did on the Kimberley front, and there the Boers remained passive. Although Buller's offensive actions were therefore praiseworthy, there is a possibility that Roberts could have lifted the siege of Ladysmith through an indirect approach, without Buller having to lift a finger. On the north-eastern Cape and Kimberley fronts a defensive strategy was certainly the most advantageous.

Buller did not move his force arbitrarily to the Upper Thukela. The security of his supply lines was of critical importance. At all cost, he wanted to prevent his force on the Upper Thukela from being threatened from the east. By keeping Maj.-

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which guide the conduct of campaigns, to which is added a chapter on modern tactics (Edinburgh, 1904); [AH] Jomini, *The art of war* (Westport, 1971); BH Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (2nd edition, New York, 1967).

Gen. Geoffrey Barton's brigade as a stopper force at Colenso, Buller ensured the safety of his own force. If the Boers had been able to succeed in overcoming or outflanking Barton's force, Buller himself would have found himself in an extremely precarious position. Indeed, it would have posed a threat to the British position in South Africa. However, the Boers generally did not have the will to take such dramatic steps. On the whole, Buller therefore took a calculated, yet justified risk, by advancing to the Upper Thukela. Through his approach he made an important contribution to ensure the security of Roberts' planned offensive. By 11 February 1900, most Boers still found themselves in Natal.

As a result of their long munitions convoys, the British could hardly keep their advance on the Upper Thukela a secret. Nonetheless, they could succeed, at the start of each of the three campaigns, in achieving a surprise to a greater or lesser extent. However, they did not succeed in securing any tactical advantage, and therefore there were no positive strategic results in the long run. Moreover, Buller's planning was too conventional. He had the manpower at his disposal to deploy a part of his force to keep the Boers occupied at Trichardts and Potgietersdrif, while the largest part of his force could have outflanked the Boers' furthest left flank. Such an operation would require mobility, and as soon as the Boers had been outflanked, the road to Ladysmith would have been open. Such an indirect strategy even held the possibility that the Boers who were assembled on the Upper Thukela would be cut off and forced to surrender - an outcome that would have been a serious setback to the Boers.

Buller concentrated the largest part of his force on the Upper Thukela, but when he went on the attack, he was hesitant to deploy his entire force in battle. For this reason, he was unable to achieve a strategic breakthrough. After "Black Week", Buller could have left a containing force in Natal, and returned to the Cape Colony with the rest of his force, whence he could have invaded the OFS or Transvaal either via Kimberley or via the north-eastern Cape. There was a possibility, as he had originally planned, of concentrating the largest possible part of his force in one place.

However, it is doubtful whether Buller could radically have revised his strategy, and whether he could have moved several thousands of soldiers over long distances. It took him more than three weeks to work out an alternative strategy for operations in Natal and to move his force to the Upper Thukela. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that Roberts - who was meanwhile travelling to South Africa with a new strategic plan in mind - would have given approval for such a plan.

Poor intelligence was one of the reasons for the British defeat at Colenso, and it could justifiably be expected that the British would have learnt from this costly error. On both the strategic and the tactical levels, however, they experienced intelligence problems on the Upper Thukela. The troop strengths of Boer forces were overestimated (for example at Vaalkrans), the scope of the Boers' defensive positions was uncertain, and the terrain sometimes held sudden unpleasant surprises (for example at Spioenkop).

Since sound intelligence promotes security and serves as one of the basic conditions for meaningful manoeuvres, it is no wonder that the British movements on the Upper Thukela were somewhat hesitant. The manoeuvres that took place were too limited in scope to have decisive strategic significance. Although the terrain made manoeuvres difficult, the Boers could have been outflanked entirely. If movements on the Upper Thukela had been accompanied by deceptive manoeuvres in the vicinity of Colenso, it is unlikely that the Boers would have been able to maintain their defensive lines for very long.

The protection of own forces should enjoy the highest priority with any responsible commander. However, an experienced and goal-directed commander would realise that losses are the tragic, yet necessary price that has to be paid for victory. Buller apparently did not always operate in terms of this insight; otherwise, he could not face the prospect of sacrificing the lives of his soldiers. He deserves accolades for his concern for ordinary soldiers. He made a conscious attempt to retain his fighting power by meeting the needs of his soldiers,<sup>14</sup> and during the Buller phase, far fewer soldiers died of disease compared to the subsequent Roberts phase. During the war, at least 5 772 British soldiers were killed, 2 018 died of their wounds, 798 died in accidents, while 13 352 died of disease. The possibility exists that the total number of dead may have been much higher; moreover, the number of casualties among black and coloured people who fought on the side of the British is unknown. Nonetheless, approximately 550 British soldiers had died of disease by 10 February 1900: approximately 300 in Ladysmith, 50 in the rest of Natal (in other words, soldiers who were partly under Buller's command), and 200 on the other fronts. During the same period, approximately 1 600 soldiers were killed in action. If the official casualty figures are taken as a measure, only approximately 4,1 % of the soldiers who passed away owing to disease, died during the Buller phase, while 27,7 % of all fatal battle casualties were killed in action during the same phase.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> L. Butler, *Sir Redvers Buller* (1909), p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> Amery 7, p. 25; *List of casualties in the South African Field Force, from 11 October, 1899, to 20th March, 1900 (S.L.S.A.)*, *passim*; *The South African War casualty roll: the "Natal Field Force", 20th Oct. 1899-26th Oct. 1900* (Polstead, 1980), *passim*.

Since Buller did not exhaust his troops with rapid and long marches, and did his best to ensure that under the circumstances the soldiers had good food and shelter and that the wounded received good treatment as quickly as possible, many lives were saved, and time and again after a setback, his forces were able to quickly go on the attack again. Good treatment also kept the soldiers' morale high and contributed to Buller's popularity. As an unidentified person once put it: "Buller ruled his men with a rod of iron, yet while they feared him they had a dog-like love for him."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Roberts drove his force to move rapidly from the Modder River across approximately 240 km to Bloemfontein from 11 February to 13 March 1900. Although, in the process, he had relieved the siege of Kimberley (15 February 1900), trapped, fought and forced Gen. Piet Cronjé to surrender (18–27 February 1900), as well as done battle at Modderivierspoort (Poplar Grove, 7 March 1900) and Abrahamskraal-Driefontein (10 March 1900), his troops were so exhausted, and so many were ill that he had to stay over in Bloemfontein for nearly two months before he could resume his advance to Pretoria. In Bloemfontein alone more than a thousand of his soldiers died of typhoid (then called enteric fever), the result of drinking contaminated water from the Modder River.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of his losses, Roberts achieved strategic successes and swung the tide of war in favour of the British in dramatic terms.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, in the weeks that followed after "Black Week", Buller suffered as many, if not more, losses in battle as Roberts, without achieving the same measure of strategic success as his successor. On the Upper Thukela, Buller suffered approximately 2 100 casualties, including at least 350 dead, while Roberts had at least 355 dead and 1 782 wounded (a total of at least 2 147 casualties) for the period 11 February to 13 March 1900. Most of Roberts' losses were sustained at Paardeberg on 18 February 1900 - when his chief of staff, Lord Kitchener, was temporarily in command.<sup>19</sup> Up to the end of the fourth attempt to lift the siege at Ladysmith (i.e. at Vaalkrans), Buller never attacked on a wide front, nor deployed all his forces.<sup>20</sup> Ironically enough, his excessively cautious attitude and attempts to save lives, led to much larger casualty figures in the long run.

If Buller had utilized all his forces in the conflict during any of his attempts at breaking through, he would probably have suffered heavy casualties, but he would have had a good chance of achieving strategic success in exchange. The economical

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in M Richards (compiler), *Into the millennium: Anglo-Boer War centenary diary* (Pietermaritzburg, 1999), p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> More information with regard to Roberts' advance from the Modder River to Bloemfontein is found in Breytenbach 4 (Pretoria, 1977), p. 182 et seq. and 5 (Pretoria, 1983), pp. 1-128.

<sup>18</sup> The question as to how lasting this success was, falls outside the scope of this study.

<sup>19</sup> Maurice 2, p. 591.

<sup>20</sup> B Collier, *Brasshat: a biography of Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson* (London, 1961), p. 72.



utilization of power implies that various possibilities must be weighed against one another; the meaningful deployment, manoeuvring and exploiting of the available means, and an understanding of the relationship between the value of the strategic objective and the price to be paid for success. A costly victory is indeed of far greater value than a series of relatively cheap, yet undecided battles that yield no positive strategic results.

Undoubtedly, Buller retained his focus on his strategic objective. Up to "Black Week", relieving Ladysmith was a means to an end, namely, to restore the strategic status quo that obtained on the eve of the war, so that the British could commence with the planned invasion of the OFS. After "Black Week", Buller was relieved of his overall strategic responsibilities, and he would henceforth be responsible for operations in Natal only. Although the strategic necessity of recapturing Ladysmith was debatable, this would become the focus of Buller's attention. Sometimes it appears as if the relief of the siege of Ladysmith became an obsession to Buller after "Black Week".

Although Buller had earlier stated very clearly that victory could only be achieved if the Boers were defeated comprehensively in the field,<sup>21</sup> he digressed from this premise in his own strategic planning, especially after "Black Week". If he wanted to destroy the Boers' military power, he would indeed not only have had to break through to Ladysmith, but should also have attempted to destroy Gen. Piet Jonbert's headquarters at Modderspruit.<sup>22</sup> The relief of Ladysmith would then have automatically followed. It appears, therefore, that Buller was blinded by Ladysmith, and failed to see the more meaningful strategic objective. In the light of this situation, his operations on the Upper Thukela were futile in a military-strategic sense. Even if the siege of Ladysmith had been lifted, the largest part of the Boer army would probably have escaped to continue with the war, as indeed happened later after Buller had eventually broken through at Pietershoogte on 27 February 1900 and relieved Ladysmith the following day.<sup>23</sup>

The strategic situation in Natal offered various possibilities to Buller. After his attempt to break through at Colenso had failed, it did not take many adjustments to move his operational headquarters to Springfield, from whence he could launch renewed attacks against the Boers. Although Buller was able to modify his original

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<sup>21</sup> 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. 171: Buller's response to question 14 963.

<sup>22</sup> CM Bakkes, *Die Britse deurbraak aan die Benede-Tugela op Majubadag 1900* (D.Phil. thesis, University of Pretoria, 1971), pp. 225-6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

strategy with ease in the new situation after "Black Week", the British never really succeeded in adjusting to the demands of the topography, nor to the Boers' unconventional methods of doing battle.

The three main war fronts (namely the Natal, Kimberley, and north-eastern Cape fronts) were so far removed from one another that meaningful co-ordination among the various armies was impossible. After "Black Week", however, it was unnecessary for the time being to co-operate on a large scale because Roberts was involved in working out an entirely new strategy. Thus, the British forces merely had to act defensively on the various fronts until the new advance commenced. On the north-eastern Cape and Kimberley fronts, their actions worked well, but in Natal the lack of co-operation between Buller and Warren made efficient command and control impossible.

British Army Command was realistic enough to realise that victory would not be achieved before Roberts implemented his strategy. After "Black Week", the British were not inclined for the time being to impose their will on the Boers, and they wanted rather to strengthen the morale of their soldiers. On the Kimberley front, the lack of offensive operations exercised a negative influence on the soldiers, but the work they had to perform in preparation for Roberts' offensive kept them busy. A series of minor skirmishes in the north-eastern Cape kept Gatacre's force on their toes, while French's operations and successes on the Colesberg front kept his army's morale high.

In Natal, on the one hand, Buller apparently did not have the patience to mark time, but on the other hand, he also lacked the will to launch a concerted attack so that he could force a breakthrough once and for all.<sup>24</sup> During each of the breakthrough battles Buller could have achieved success, but each time he lacked the courage to act decisively. He did not hesitate to continue with his onslaughts, but his fluctuating mood and indecisive action sometimes created the impression that he did not really have the will to achieve victory.

Although Roberts had already on 17 December 1899 been appointed as new supreme commander, Buller would still - as has been pointed out earlier - practically remain in command in South Africa until 10 January 1900. However, "Black Week" caused him to lose more self-confidence and act with less decisiveness.<sup>25</sup> He did not have the moral courage to carry out his strategy properly.

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<sup>24</sup> EKG Sixsmith, *British generalship in the twentieth century* (London, 1970), p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> N Dixon, *On the psychology of military incompetence* (London, 1976), p. 61. According to D Judd, *Someone has blundered: calamities of the British Army in the Victorian Age* (London, 1973), p. 144, there are indications that excessive drinking had affected Buller's judgement.

Many of his problems can be attributed to the fact that he displayed an indiscriminate approach to staff work, strategic planning and leadership. He did too little carefully considered strategic planning. Too many aspects were left to coincidence. He placed too much hope on an approach of eventually arriving at the objective by hook or by crook.<sup>26</sup> To a great extent, Buller lacked strategic knowledge, insight and "common sense", and his abilities as strategist were therefore suspect.

Since the essence of military success is found in the confidence that an army has in its commander, Buller could try time and again, and eventually achieve his objective,<sup>27</sup> albeit that the Boer army escaped after the relief of Ladysmith. Buller was a soldier among soldiers, and among the ordinary soldiers he always enjoyed support. Strategically speaking, however, Buller remained an ordinary soldier, and never came of age. In the light of the Boers' tactical abilities, the vastness of the operational fronts, and the fact that it was actually impossible to dominate these large spaces (and the mounted Boers) with only a single army corps, the question arises whether anyone else could have fared any better. As a matter of fact, in the light of the British Army's state of unpreparedness for war against the Boers, one can argue that whoever had gone to South Africa first as commander-in-chief, would have encountered serious problems and could have failed. By the time Roberts took over as commander in the field, he had many more troops, including many more mounted men, at his disposal, and he could learn from Buller's mistakes.

Buller's sustained support was not only limited to the soldiers under his command. Never before in the history of the British Empire had a general enjoyed so much public support in spite of so many setbacks.<sup>28</sup> However, the British public did not always realise the nature and the scope of his military errors and setbacks. The disillusionment that followed after the publication of the Spioenkop reports was therefore understandable.<sup>29</sup>

The operations on the Upper Thukela tested the British public's morale and loyalty to their army and government to the extreme. Buller was saved by the fact that, in a certain sense, he withdrew time and again, only to try again, never sustaining a comprehensive defeat. Fortunately for Buller, the north-eastern Cape and Kimberley fronts did not yield similar quotas of bad news. In the long term,

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<sup>26</sup> Collier, p. 61.

<sup>27</sup> CH Melville, *Life of General the Right Hon. Sir Redvers Buller* 2 (London, 1923), p. 527.

<sup>28</sup> Butler, p. 78.

<sup>29</sup> The publication of these reports and Buller's statements cost him his post in the Army. However, this only happened in October 1901. See the last paragraph of the Conclusion, *infra*.

nothing but decisive strategic success would save Buller's honour. By the time that the siege at Ladysmith was eventually lifted on 28 February 1900, it was too late for Buller, and somewhat of an anti-climax to the British forces. Strictly speaking, Buller's reputation as a soldier had already been shattered.

### 3. THE STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE MILITARY ACTIVITIES, 16 DECEMBER 1899 – 10 FEBRUARY 1900

The greatest strategic significance of the weeks that followed after "Black Week" is probably found in the fact that the British were able to consolidate their position with a view to implementing Roberts' comprehensive new offensive. That the British were given a breather can mainly be attributed to the Boers' passive defensive strategy. On 16 December 1899, the approximately 60 000 British soldiers in South Africa<sup>30</sup> were neither able to halt a comprehensive counter-offensive by the Boers, nor to put down a possible full-scale rebellion in the Cape Colony. By not following up their successes, the Boers had probably squandered their last opportunity to decide the war in their favour.

"Black Week" made the British military leaders realise that many more soldiers would be required to overcome the Boers. From 16 December 1899 to 10 February 1900, therefore, at least 33 000 soldiers arrived in South Africa.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Roberts had at least 100 000 men at his disposal to implement his strategy. The arrival of so many soldiers paved the way for a new strategic approach: overcome the Boers through strategy and brute force; do not shy away from losses; overcome tactical backlogs through numerical superiority.

The strategic breather that both sides enjoyed after "Black Week" was better utilized by the British than the Boers. Although only a handful of persons had the slightest idea what Roberts' strategy would involve, a large number of soldiers, as well as artillery, ammunition and stores were sent to South Africa, or obtained locally, and as time passed, were concentrated on the Modder River. The strict secrecy that characterized these preparations formed the basis of springing a strategic surprise on the enemy. As a result of Methuen's sporadic artillery bombardments, French's mock manoeuvres, Gatacre's activities and Buller's campaign on the Upper Thukela, the Boers continued to expect a full-scale British offensive on first the one, and then the other front. The logical strategic step that the Boers needed to take was to launch a well-planned attack on one of these fronts so that they could pre-empt any British offensive. Owing to the interior lines on which the Boers

<sup>30</sup> This does not include the approximately 20 000 soldiers and volunteers who had been involved in the three most important sieges.

<sup>31</sup> Maurice I (London, 1906), pp. 478-84.

could operate, they were able to move their commandos with reasonable ease, and could have outflanked any of the British armies. A full-scale invasion of Natal or the Cape Colony could also have jeopardized Roberts' plans.

After "Black Week", British forces on the north-eastern Cape and Kimberley fronts sustained few losses. In Natal Buller still had approximately 21 000 soldiers under his direct command after the battle of Colenso, and up to 10 February, he received a further 5 730 soldiers as reinforcements. His losses are estimated at 2 100 men (killed, wounded and captured), i.e. all Buller's losses came to approximately 7,75 % of the total force at his disposal.<sup>32</sup> The British Army in South Africa was, therefore, largely unscathed, and Roberts was able to utilise almost all these soldiers to implement his own strategy. Thus Buller paved the way for Roberts. Later, however, Roberts also received the credit for those actions in respect of which Buller had performed the work or had taken the initial preparatory action. It remains an open question as to what Buller could have achieved if he had had available to him the same number of soldiers as Roberts had at his disposal.<sup>33</sup> Although Buller achieved no victories up to 10 February 1900, he also did not allow the Boers to spring a surprise on him.

As a result of Buller's sustained onslaughts, the Boers became weary of war. Their economy was not geared for a protracted and costly war; still less was it possible for the average Boer to remain on commando indefinitely. There were in fact farm - or other - interests that had to be attended to. The Boers were wrong if they thought that the British would be willing, after a number of setbacks, to engage in peace negotiations, as they had done in 1881 during the Transvaal War of Independence.

Repeated British attacks exhausted and unsettled the Boers. Although their losses were relatively small, these were larger than the Boer nation had ever experienced before. To see so many dead and wounded had a negative effect on their morale. Since the Boers did not have military discipline in place in the conventional sense of the word, nor a rigid system to ensure military discipline, many Boers left for home without permission. By 10 February 1900, the Boer armies were therefore no longer at the same level of battle readiness as they had been exactly four months before on the eve of the war.

It is interesting to note that, on the whole, the Boers fared better when they went on the attack compared to when they were waiting for the British in defensive

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 478-83.

<sup>33</sup> According to An Average Observer, p. 47, Buller would definitely have been able to overcome the Boers with such a large force, and in less than the 31 months that the war eventually lasted.

positions. At Nicholson's Nek (30 October 1899), Willow Grange (22-23 November 1899) and Spioenkop (24 January 1900), they attacked and achieved victory, and even though their assault was warded off at Platrand (6 January 1900), they nonetheless inflicted serious losses on the British. Later in the war, attacks against the British led to victories at places such as Sannaspos (31 March 1900), Mostertshoek (Reddersburg, 4 April 1900), Roodewal (7 June 1900), Nootgedacht (13 December 1900), Wilmansrust (12 June 1901), Groenkop (25 December 1901), Yzerspruit (25 February 1902), and De Klipdrif (Tweebosch, 7 March 1902), albeit that, since not one of these attacks was ever carried out within the framework of a carefully considered and co-ordinated strategy, they had no lasting strategic significance.

On the other hand, the Boers did indeed halt the British at Stormberg (10 December 1899), Magersfontein (11 December 1899) and Colenso (15 December 1899), but on the long term, they achieved no strategic success through these battles, because they did not follow up their success, while their attempts to halt the British advance at Belmont (23 November 1899), Graspan (Enslin, 25 November 1899), the Riet and Modder Rivers (28 November 1899), Modderivierspoort (Poplar Grove, 7 March 1900), Abrahamskraal-Driefontein (10 March 1900) and Dalmanutha (Bergendal, 27 August 1900) failed. After the events of "Black Week", the Boers should therefore rather have focused on attacks against the British.

In the light of his lack of strategic success on the Upper Thukela, Buller should rather have taken refuge at the strengthened camps at Chieveley and Frere after the battle of Colenso, and could then have marked time from a strategic point of view. After all, Roberts' strategy was directed at relieving the besieged garrisons through an indirect approach. Although Roberts had initially not been in favour of renewed attacks on the Thukela line,<sup>34</sup> he gave in to Buller's requests and, time and again, he sent reinforcements to Natal. However, Buller ensured that the largest part of the Boer force in Natal remained pinned to their positions.

Although the siege of Ladysmith had not been relieved by 10 February 1900, the British had achieved their other strategic objectives. The Boers were restricted in their movements and no further territory was yielded to them, while the rebellion did not spread to such an extent as to become out of hand. In the north-eastern Cape and in the vicinity of Colesberg, the British succeeded in limiting the rebellion, but in the north-western Cape unrest continued. The British succeeded in recovering from their defeats, they consolidated their position and embarked upon preparations

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<sup>34</sup> Breytenbach 3 (Pretoria, 1973), p. 568.

for a new and much more comprehensive offensive. The British had the Boers on the defensive, both physically and psychologically. The strategic initiative was more than ever before in the hands of the British. The period after "Black Week" therefore took a course that, in spite of certain external (tactical) scars, was favourable in a strategic sense to the British cause.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

During "Black Week", total British losses came to approximately 450 dead, 1 550 wounded and 950 captured. On the other hand, the Boers had lost only about 90 dead and 230 wounded. During the weeks that followed after "Black Week", the British lost a total of approximately 700 dead, 1 900 wounded and 400 captured. This includes the besieged garrisons' losses, for example, Gen. Sir George White's serious losses at Platrand. Most British losses (approximately 85 % of them) occurred in Natal. On the other hand, the Boer losses involved approximately 230 men dead and 580 wounded. Although the British losses were somewhat higher after 15 December, they were insignificant from a strategic perspective. With Roberts as the new commander-in-chief and more soldiers than ever before assembled in South Africa, ready to go on the attack, the British chances of success improved by the day.

Although the British position was far better on 10 February 1900 than on 16 December 1899, Buller's personal position had deteriorated further. On 16 December, he was still the supreme commander of Her Majesty's soldiers in South Africa, but by 10 February his area of command was limited to Natal, and he was subordinate to Roberts. Moreover, he was back again at Frere and Chieveley, where he had started with operations two months before. As a result of four failed attempts at breaking through to Ladysmith, it was clear that Buller was not the great field commander that most people thought him to be.

It would be wrong to claim that Buller acted recklessly or had achieved nothing. Within the framework of his available knowledge and insight, and with the means at his disposal, he acted to the best of his ability.<sup>35</sup> However, it was indeed his knowledge and insight that failed him. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that at the end of the Buller phase, the Boers continued to have more respect for Buller than for Roberts. The Boers' memories of the fearless Buller of the Anglo-Zulu War (1879) carried a great deal of weight in their estimation, while Roberts was still unknown to them by 1900.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Melville 2, p. 261.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

Within the next number of weeks, it was, however, Roberts who made the final and decisive strategic moves against the Boers. On 11 February 1900 he implemented his elaborate indirect strategy and outflanked Cronjé's defensive positions at Magersfontein, forcing Cronjé to fall back eastwards all along the Modder River, until he was cornered and forced to surrender at Paardeberg on 27 February, after a ten-day siege. On that very same day - as has already been pointed out - Buller at last broke through the Boers' Thukela line, and relieved Ladysmith the next day. He did not pursue the retreating Boer forces, but preferred to remain in Ladysmith for two months before, as part of Roberts' wide-ranging advance northwards towards Pretoria, he too moved slowly northwards, capturing Botha's Pass on 8 June 1900, Volksrust on 11 June, Standerton on 22 June, and Amersfoort on 7 August, and participated in the battle at Bergendal (Dalmanutha) on 27 August. In October 1900 Buller's field force was demobilized and he returned to England where he received a hero's welcome.<sup>37</sup>

In January 1901 Buller took command at Aldershot, but was soon embroiled in the controversy with regard to the publication (in April 1901) of his Spioenkop despatches, which reflected negatively on his role in Natal. Buller's infamous telegram of 16 December 1899 in which he suggested that under certain circumstances Gen. Sir George White should consider surrendering, was not published, but the content was an open secret. At a luncheon with the Queen's Westminster Volunteers on 10 October 1901 Buller, embarrassed and irritated by all the rumours and allegations, disclosed and tried to explain and justify the content of the controversial telegram. This was deemed a violation of the King's Regulations. Buller was relieved of his command on 23 October 1901, retired on half-pay, and withdrew to his estate.<sup>38</sup> By that time the guerrilla phase of the Anglo-Boer War had already been in progress for more than eighteen months, and more than seven months of protracted warfare still lay ahead before peace was at long last proclaimed on 31 May 1902.

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<sup>37</sup> See e.g. Amery (ed.) 3, pp. 379-597 and 4 (London, 1906), pp. 165-97, 398-401, 408-68, 484-5; Maurice 2, pp. 73-240 and *History of the war in South Africa 1899-1902* 3 (London, 1908), pp. 40-103, 249-85.

<sup>38</sup> G Powell, *Buller: a scapegoat? A life of General Sir Redvers Buller 1839-1908* (London, 1994), pp. 152-5; *South Africa. The Spion Kop despatches* (Cd. 968, London, 1902), *passim*; *Dictionary of South African biography* 2 (Cape Town, 1972), p. 101.