

# To name a war: The war of 1899-1902

by

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## **Introduction**

This year, on 11 October, it will be a hundred years since the war between the two Boer republics in South Africa and Great Britain erupted. Quite a few names have been used in the past with reference to this conflict. Today, in planning for the commemoration and with a new attention focused on this war, a sense of controversy surrounds the issue of a 'correct name'.

Through the centuries names for wars usually had a spontaneous origin among the people who were involved in a particular conflict. The name often differed from the official name given to the war. There is however an unwritten rule according to which wars are named. A country (its people) will never refer to itself in the name given to a war in which it was involved, because that would imply that it had been instrumental in causing the war. Instead the name will always refer to the enemy.

Traditionally a war was declared between two countries and it was then henceforth regarded as a war between the respective parties. The peace treaty, at the end of the war, was usually concluded between the belligerent countries. As a rule the name given to the war, would have to reflect the specific state of affairs which gave rise to the war. During the war other countries or other people might become involved - more often than not by chance. The war will, however, be remembered as a war between the two countries who declared war on each other and who eventually signed the peace accord.

Names of wars can be classified into five categories:

Names referring to the duration or date of the war, e.g.

*The Hundred Years War* (1337-1453) between England and France;

*The Thirty Years War* (1618-1648) between the Catholics and the Protestants;

*The War of 1812* between the USA and England.

Names referring to the cause(s) of the war, e.g.

*The War of the Spanish Succession* (1701-1714) England, Austria, the Netherlands and Prussia against France and Spain;

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*The American War of Independence* (1775-1783) American colonies against England.

Names referring to a specific feature or characteristic of the war, e.g.

*The Wars of the Roses* (1455-1485) in England;

*The War of the Axe* (1846) on the Cape Eastern Frontier in South Africa.

The two World Wars can also be placed in this category.

Names referring to the place where it was fought, e.g.

*The Crimean War* (1854-1856) Turkey, England and France against Russia;

*The Border Wars* (late eighteenth century-1835) - also known as the Frontier Wars on the Cape Eastern Frontier;

*The Falklands War* (1982) between England and Argentina.

Names referring to the enemy and/or the countries which were involved in the war, e.g.

*The Spanish-American War* (1898) between Spain and the USA;

*The Franco-Prussian War* (1870-1871) between France and Prussia;

*The Napoleonic Wars* (1796-1815) in Europe.

The names of many wars have become generally acceptable to people all over the world. Examples are the *Second World War* (1939-1945) and the *Napoleonic Wars* (1796-1815). However in many countries specific groupings of people (such as for example ethnic entities) use different names for the same wars. Some wars, in fact, have quite a few names and are often known only by one name in certain quarters. This state of affairs can be very confusing. Such a war is the war that was fought from 1899 to 1902 between Great Britain and the two Boer republics in South Africa.

### **The war of 1899-1902**

There exists at least one name for the war of 1899-1902 for each of the above-named categories:

Names referring to the duration of the war:

*The Three Years War* (*Die Driejarige Oorlog*).

Names referring to the causes of the war:

*To name a war*

*The Second War of Freedom; The Second War of Independence, (Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog); and*

*The Boer Mutiny.*

Names referring to a specific feature or characteristic:

*The Gold War (Die Goudoorlog).* This name can also be classified under category 2, depending on whether one regards gold as the cause of the war.

Names referring to the place where it was fought:

*The South African War (Die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog).*

Names referring to the people who were involved or to the enemy:

*The Boer War (Die Boereoorlog);*

*The Great Boer War;*

*The English War (Die Engelse Oorlog);*

*The Anglo-Boer War (Die Anglo-Boereoorlog);*

*The Second Anglo-Boer War;*

*De Engelsch-Zuid-Afrikaansche Oorlog* (used in many Dutch books at the time).

There might be more names. Some are names that have been used only by one or two writers. The above listed ones are however those that have been used by many authors and therefore names that can be considered for official recognition. Let us now consider which one is the most acceptable.

Names referring to the duration of the war:

*The Three Years War (Die Driejarige Oorlog).*

Some Afrikaners used the name *Driejarige Oorlog* in the past and one still hears it occasionally. Basically there is nothing wrong with this name. *Driejarige Oorlog*, just like *Hundred Years War* and *Thirty Years War*, emphasises the duration of the war and from an Afrikaner perspective it actually underlines the important fact that it took the mighty British Empire (almost) three years to subdue the two Boer republics.<sup>1</sup> Still this name wasn't used by many writers and will probably never become widely accepted. If the motivation for naming a war according to its duration - as something to be proud of - the *Three Years War* compares rather unfavourably. Many other wars in the course of history lasted much longer. Using

1. M.C.E. VAN SCHOOR, "Boereoorlog. Engelseoorlog of Anglo-Boereoorlog", *Knapsak*, Nuusbrieff van die Oorlogsmuseum, Bloemfontein, 9(1), July, 1997, p.5. *Historia*, 44(1), May 1999, pp. 101-09.

the specific name in the South African context can also be misleading. There are quite a number of wars in history that lasted approximately three years.

2. Names referring to the cause(s) of the war:

2.1 *The Second War of Freedom (Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog)*

*Die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* still has great emotional value amongst certain sections of the Afrikaner people. With the coming commemoration of the war many of the more conservative Afrikaners - especially as a result of the present uncertain political climate and the fact that they feel suppressed - regard the centenary as an opportunity to express their sentiments. As one of their leaders said "it is just another chapter in the history of the freedom struggle of the Afrikaner". The emphasis is therefore on the word 'vryheid' (freedom).

Many prominent Afrikaner historians have in the past used this name and often without political motives or undertones.

The main complaint against using this name for the Boer-British struggle of 1899-1902 is that it actually only recognises the Transvaal's (ZAR's) involvement in this war. To the Transvaalers the name has a bearing on the second time they stood up against British suppression. (The first time was the *Transvaalse Vryheidsoorlog 1880-1881*). To the thousands of burgers from the Orange Free State (and even to the Cape rebels) this was the first war of independence. It therefore implies that by calling it *The Second War of Freedom (Tweede Vryheidsoorlog)* one actually denies the contribution made by the Free Staters (also Afrikaners and republicans) who ironically were prepared to continue with the war when most Transvaalers were in the process of capitulating.<sup>2</sup> *Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* can therefore be seen as a name which suggests a Transvaal-centered chauvinism.<sup>3</sup>

As far as could be ascertained, this name was used for the first time in the 1930's when Dr. C.J.S. Strydom published his *Kaapland en die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*.<sup>4</sup> The name probably originated during the upsurge of Afrikaner nationalism at the time of the centenary celebrations of the Great Trek in 1938.

The Afrikaner historian, Dr. G.D. Scholtz, probably shared these sentiments because he also used *Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* ever since his first publication on the war in 1939. The same can be said about the late Dr. J.H. Breytenbach. He used the title *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* in his (unfinished) series of the war for which he was appointed as State Historian by the South African Archives Commission.<sup>5</sup> He was severely criticised when the first volume appeared under this

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2. *Ibid.*, p.10.

3. J.G. PRETORIUS, Unpublished paper on the names of the war of 1899-1902.

4. M.C.E. VAN SCHOOR, "Boereoorlog, Engelseoorlog of Anglo-Boereoorlog", p.10.

5. J.H. BREYTENBACH, J.H. BREYTENBACH, *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, 6 vols., (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1969-1996).

title, especially because he conducted the work under government commission.<sup>6</sup> In fact Free State historians and many others have always complained about the Transvaal's chauvinistic name for this war. The name was, in any case, never widely used. Only a few books appeared under this title.

## 2.2 *The Boer Mutiny*

This name for the war of 1899-1902 is obviously an example of extreme prejudice. It was, as far as could be ascertained, used by very few authors, writers whose objectivity is under suspicion. It is a name that contradicts all the noteworthy scholarly publications on the war and will probably never become acceptable. It therefore needs no further discussion.

### 3. Names referring to specific features:

#### *The Gold War (Die Goudoorlog)*

As far as is known the name *Goudoorlog* was first used by the Afrikaner historian, Gustav Preller. Because he wrote so much about this war and had some influence on the historians who came after him, this name needs some consideration. It is however an obvious attempt to blame the discovery of gold as the only (or at least main) cause of the war. The name will never become widely acceptable simply because it simplifies the whole issue and creates the impression that the country would have been better off if gold never was discovered.

### 4. Names referring to the place where it was fought:

#### *The South African War (Die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog)*

The latest addition to the list of names for this war is the name *The South African War*. Although P. Warwick and S.B. Spies were not the first to use this title for their book, published in 1980, it seems that they sparked off the belief that this is the more correct name for the war. For the first time in a book, of such prominence, much was made of black involvement in the war. This might have created the belief that by calling it *The South African War* the involvement of people other than only British and Boer (Whites) will be recognised.<sup>7</sup>

Many writers since then followed the example and today *South African War* is becoming more and more used in writing as well as at conferences.

This name however has certain political undertones. It creates the impression that, under the present political dispensation, it is an effort to be 'politically correct'. The war of 1899-1902 was a white man's war and by admitting that does not imply that the involvement of the indigenous population other than whites, is being discarded or denied. The war was declared between Great Britain and the two Boer republics and will always be remembered as such. The black population became involved mainly because they were used or abused by both sides. They were 'caught in the

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6. M.C.E. VAN SCHOOR, "Boereoorlog, Engelseoorlog of Anglo-Boereoorlog", p.10.

7. See P. WARWICK and S.B. SPIES (Eds.): *The South African War*, (Longman, London, 1980), pp.186-208.

*Historia*, 44(1), May 1999, pp. 101-09.

crossfire'. It was a mistake to involve them, as even a black historian himself puts it:

(T)he hostilities which broke out on 11 October 1899 must be regarded as a 'domestic quarrel of the white people' irrespective of whether the African people were ordered to participate in it or not. The quarrel remains the *Anglo-Boer War*. The term *South African War* is misleading, erroneous and not based on historical facts.<sup>8</sup>

It is true that past historians have to a large extent neglected the involvement and role that the black population played in this war. This oversight is, however, at present being rectified by a number of scholars who are doing research on the topic.

It is a false argument to say that by changing the name to that of *The South African War* will give recognition to the indigenous involvement. What then about the thousands of Canadians, Australians, Irish and New Zealanders who fought and died in this war and can therefore, on the basis of this argument, also claim to be recognised in the name?<sup>9</sup> In fact the opposite can be true: By using the name *South African War*, for this reasons, can create the impression that other nations other than Boer and Brit were involved in the declaration of war and the signing of the peace accord.

It seems as if the insistence for this name comes mainly from whites, trying to be 'politically correct' and that very few black people claim that the war was also their war. What they do claim is recognition for their involvement.

The Spanish-American War will always be remembered as a war between two countries - the United States of America and Spain. They declared war on each other and eventually signed the peace treaty at the end of the war. The fact that thousands of Cubans and Filipinos fought and died in the war, is not being denied. It will however not change the fact that it was a war between the United States of America and Spain. Neither will it give cause for the name to be changed.

The American Civil War of 1861-1865, to mention another example, was fought between the Northern States and the Southern Confederacy because the North disputed the right for the South to secede from the Union and although the black people of America were caught up in the war and suffered a great deal, the war will always be seen as a white man's war.

It is also interesting to note that under the new political dispensation in South Africa many people are more frequently referring to the war that South Africa waged in Angola as *The South African War*. Some even refer to the 'freedom struggle' of the black people as such.

It seems therefore that the name *South African War* for various reasons should not be used in reference to the war of 1899-1902 and will probably never really become

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J. MAPHALALA, "The Zulu People and the Anglo-Boer War" (A paper read at the UNISA Library Conference on "Rethinking the S.A. War", 5 August 1998), p. 3.

9. J.G. PRETORIUS, Unpublished paper, p.2.

widely acceptable. After all, in essence, all wars that have been fought on South African soil were South African wars and never in history did a people use their own country in a name for a war that was fought on their own soil.<sup>10</sup>

Most one can say in favour of this name for the war is that it will not be altogether wrong for the British to use such a name because after all it refers to the arena where they went to wage the war. For South Africans it cannot however be correct.

5. Names referring to the enemy and/or the countries involved:

### 5.1 *The Boer War (Die Boereoorlog)*

Of all the names given to this war the name *Boer War (Boereoorlog)* was one of the most popular, especially in books and articles written by British and American authors. In this name the principle of referring to the enemy in the name that you use for the war comes into play. A country, or a people, will never refer to itself in the name given to a war in which it was involved because that would imply that it admits that it has been instrumental in causing the war. Instead the name will refer to the enemy. Thus, it would be wrong for South Africans (especially Afrikaners) to use the name *Boer War (Boereoorlog)* whereas it would be quite acceptable for the British to do so.

A good example of this 'rule' can be seen in British history books where reference is made to the seventeenth century (1652-1674) wars between England and Holland - the name *Dutch Wars* is used throughout whereas in Dutch books the name *Engelse Oorlogen (English Wars)* is used for exactly the same war.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that we still find today that many 'uninformed' Afrikaners use the name *Boereoorlog (Boer War)*, illustrates the influence the then victor had on the Afrikaners. For the Afrikaners therefore *Boer War* is wrong - after all you cannot regard yourself as the enemy, can you?<sup>12</sup> But, even though it might not be wrong for British writers to use *Boer War* the name still is, from a Afrikaner point of view, unacceptable because of the implication that the Boers then caused the war.

It should also not be forgotten that in Europe the most common usage of the name *Boereoorlog* is in reference to the peasant revolt of 1524 in Germany.<sup>13</sup>

### 5.2 *The English War (Die Engelse Oorlog)*

The same argument used for the name *Boer War* is of course applicable in the case of the name *English War*. This implies that for Afrikaners the name *Engelse Oorlog* will not be wrong, especially seen in its traditional and historical perspective. The

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10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*; E. DE BRUYNE, G.B.J. HILTERMAN and H.R. HOETINK, *Winkler Prins Encyclopaedie*, vol.8, (Elsevier, Amsterdam, 1950), pp.196-198.

12. J.G. PRETORIUS, Unpublished paper, p.1.

13. P.J. ESTEIE, *Geillustreerde Encyclopaedie*, (Amsterdam, n.d.), p.99.  
*Historia*, 44(1), May 1999, pp. 101-09.

name also implies that the Afrikaners see British imperialism as having caused the war and the principle of referring to the enemy in the name is also adhered to.

The only shortcoming of this name is that it does not specify exactly which English war is referred to, unless the dates 1899-1902 are added to the name whenever it is used. There have also been too many wars between the English and other nations. It can be misleading. The Transvaal (ZAR) itself fought two wars against England. It can thus, also in the South African context, be confusing.

### 5.3 *The Anglo-Boer War (Die Anglo-Boereoorlog)*

If Afrikaners (Boers) are inclined to use *Engelse Oorlog* and the English prefer *Boer War*, the *Anglo-Boer War* seems to be a good compromise. In fact no argument against the use of *Anglo-Boer War* holds water. It is factually the most correct name, absolutely impartial and neutral and without any emotional undertones.<sup>14</sup> It says exactly what it was and translated into Afrikaans (*Anglo-Boereoorlog*) leaves no scope for misunderstanding or confusion.

By far the greatest number of academic publications, in Afrikaans as well as in English, have used the name *Anglo-Boer War* or, *Second Anglo-Boer War*. It also became the official name used by institutions such as The South African Archival Services, The South African Academy for Science and Art and the War Museum of the Boer Republics in Bloemfontein.<sup>15</sup>

It is also worth noticing that the seventeenth century wars between England and the Netherlands previously referred to, which are called the Dutch wars by the British and the 'Engelse Oorlogen' by the Dutch are officially known as the *Anglo-Dutch Wars*, according to the authoritative *Grote Winkler Prins Encyclopaedia*.<sup>16</sup> It therefore seems that the same compromise for a name has been reached in this case as the one suggested for the 1899-1902 war.

Prof. M.C.E. van Schoor, the Free State historian, once said:

'n Mens sou wel soos 'n Shakespeare kon vra: 'What's in a name?' Maar 'n naam moet hierdie epogmakende oorlog dra wat die begin van die einde van die Britse roem en ryk ingelui het.<sup>17</sup>

He then concludes that of all the possible names *Anglo-Boer War* remains the most suitable after all.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

With the coming commemoration of the *Anglo-Boer War* it seems rather important that consensus and uniformity be reached about the official name for the war. Many

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14. J.G. PRETORIUS, Unpublished paper, p.1.

15. M.C.E. VAN SCHOOR, "Boereoorlog, Engelseoorlog of Anglo-Boereoorlog", p.10.

16. A.J. WIGGERS, R.F. LISSENS *et al*, *Grote Winkler Prins*, vol.7, (Amsterdam, 1977), pp.154-157.

17. M.C.E. VAN SCHOOR, "Boereoorlog, Engelseoorlog of Anglo-Boereoorlog", p.10.

18. *Ibid.*, p.10.



books, brochures, programmes and memorabilia will, in the next two to three years, be printed. It will create a rather bad impression if each and every organisation uses a different name.

It seems that at least the government realises the importance of keeping *Anglo-Boer War* as the official name: In February 1998 the minister of Arts, Culture and Science, Mr. Lionel Ntshali, at a press conference said that he saw no reason why a different name should be used:

Ek glo dit is deel van die geskiedenis en dit is wat dit genoem is - die *Anglo-Boereoorlog*.<sup>19</sup>

One can therefore conclude that the name *Boer War* is too partial and the same applies to the opposite *Engelse Oorlog*. *Tweede Vryheidsoorlog* is again too exclusive and only applicable to the Transvaal. *Driejarige Oorlog (Three Years War)*, although a good substitute, also has certain shortcomings and *South African War* is unacceptable at least for South Africa. The only name that one cannot find fault with is *Anglo-Boer War*. The name *Anglo-Boer War* is already well established and has become stereotyped to the degree that no other name will probably ever overrule it.<sup>20</sup>

### Opsomming

#### Naam vir 'n oorlog: Die oorlog van 1899-1902

Name vir oorloë ontstaan dikwels spontaan in die volksmond wanneer 'n land in 'n oorlog betrokke raak. Die amptelike naam wat aan die spesifieke oorlog gegee is, het dikwels verskil van hierdie populêre naam. Nogtans kan mens deurgans sekere 'ongeskrewe' reëls waarneem oor hoe oorloë vernoem is. So by voorbeeld sou 'n land nooit homself in die naamgewing van 'n oorlog waarin hy betrokke was vernoem nie, want dit sou impliseer dat hy verantwoordelik was vir die oorlog. Derhalwe sou hulle altyd na die vyand in die naam verwys.

Met die naderende herdenking van die oorlog 'n honderd jaar gelede tussen die twee Boere-republieke en Groot Brittanje het daar nou meningsverskil ontstaan oor wat die korrekte benaming vir die oorlog is. Moet dit Anglo-Boereoorlog, Boereoorlog, Engelse Oorlog, Tweede Vryheidsoorlog, Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog of wat wees?

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19. A. KOTZE, "Nuwe Kommissie gaan 'aanstootlike' plekname verander", in *Beeld*, 2 February 1998.
  20. Also see: W. BELONJE, *Onder de vlag van Christiaan de Wet, een verhaal uit den Engelsch-Zuid-Afrikaansche oorlog*, (Amsterdam, 1903); J.H. BREYTENBACH, *Die Geskiedenis van die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog in Suid-Afrika, 1899-1902*, 6 vols., (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1969-1996); J. HAYDN, *Dictionary of Dates and Universal Reference*, (London, 1841); G.D. SCHOLTZ, *Europa en die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*, (Voortrekkerpers, Johannesburg, 1941); C.J.S. STRYDOM, *Kaapland en die Tweede Vryheidsoorlog*, (Nasionale Pers, Cape Town, 1937); M.C.E. VAN SCHOOR, "Die Stryd tussen Boer en Brit het baie name" in *Die Burger*, 26 April, 1997; A. WESSELS, *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899-1902: 'n Oorsig van die militêre verloop van die stryd* (War Museum, Bloemfontein, 1991) p. 1.

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