



**UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)**

**A war of words : Dutch pro-Boer propaganda and the South African war (1899-1902)**

Kuitenbrouwer, J.J.V.

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Kuitenbrouwer, J. J. V. (2010). A war of words : Dutch pro-Boer propaganda and the South African war (1899-1902). z.p.: Eigen Beheer.

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## **Conclusion**

In this thesis, different perspectives have been discussed in order to assess the meaning of the Dutch pro-Boer movement. As is asserted in existing historiography, this historical phenomenon was undoubtedly a form of nationalism. To a certain extent, the Boers were idealised in order to serve as an example to the population of the Netherlands. These sentiments left their mark on popular culture and some heroes even became brand names during the South African War. In addition, such imagery had relevance for domestic politics. Different parties tried to assert their special relationship with the Boer republics in order to enlarge their popularity amongst the electorate. This was particularly the case with the orthodox Protestants, whose leader Abraham Kuyper had a problematic relationship with the pro-Boer organisations as a result.

Although these effects cannot be denied, it would be wrong not to consider the wider context. Feelings of kinship with the Boers, called *stamverwantschap*, were clearly connected with ideas about the global position of the Dutch race. Moreover, there was a structural attempt to enlarge Dutch economic and cultural influence in the region and it can be seen as a kind of informal imperialism. It has been argued in this thesis that these international components had a profound influence on the pro-Boer movement in the Netherlands from the 1880s onwards. It therefore was not merely an isolated and unique phenomenon in Dutch history or a temporary fit of mass hysteria, as is suggested by some historians. It also was connected with the shaping of modern South Africa and as a result there was a clear interaction with both Afrikaner nationalism and British imperialism.

### **The pro-Boer network and public opinion in the Netherlands**

The Dutch public's interest in South Africa was aroused after the Transvaal War of 1881 and the newly founded NZAV received support from a wide range of social groups in its efforts to strengthen ties with the Boer republics. Although there was no intention to establish a territorial presence in the region, the Transvaal and (to a lesser extent) the OFS were seen as potential spheres of cultural and economic influence. One of the main priorities was to promote emigration in order to help the Boers strengthen their state institutions and withstand British expansion in the region. The number of emigrants remained relatively low, but a group of well-educated Dutch people did go to the Transvaal and contributed significantly to the modernisation of the republic that took place under Paul Kruger. Another priority of the pro-Boer movement was propaganda, in order to inform the public in Europe about the South

African question. In this sense too, the Dutch emigrants played an important role, because many of these men and women had the capacity to write about the complex situation in South Africa and to communicate these views to the Netherlands. A transnational network came into being, transferring information that supported Boer independence. As a result of the mounting tensions in South Africa in the 1890s, the Transvaal government dispatched the prominent *Hollander* Willem Leyds to Europe to act as a diplomatic representative and to co-ordinate the distribution of such propagandistic material.

There was a measure of continuity in the activities of Dutch pro-Boers during the South African War and the period prior to that, although the situation changed considerably. Leyds and his allies started a propaganda campaign on an unprecedented scale to refute the British coverage of the war and to disseminate the accounts coming from the Boer side. At the beginning of the war, the transnational network of the Boers and their supporters in Europe proved to be of great value, and Dutchmen played an important role as mediators. Because of the British monopoly on telegraph lines, news coming from the British perspective always reached Europe first. Nevertheless, reports about events that had sometimes taken place weeks before were eagerly published by the Dutch media. During later phases of the war, these lines of communication became increasingly constrained. After the British had occupied the capitals of the Boer republics, they deported unwanted individuals, many of whom were Dutch, and imposed censorship. As a result, there was a huge drop in the amount of material that reached pro-Boer propagandists in Europe, although information continued to trickle through nonetheless. Many of the deportees and refugees spoke about their experiences in public, inmates of PoW and civilian camps sent letters about the situation there and at times even the isolated commandos managed to smuggle their accounts to Europe. This information was considered to be of great importance by the propagandists in their attempts to refute British coverage of the war.

Pro-Boer organisations in the Netherlands were closely connected to these lines of communication and co-operated with Leyds to distribute the information. The ANV press office was one of the most important institutions in this respect because it had strong ties with both the official representatives of the republics and the Dutch pro-Boer organisations. Moreover, these contacts were considered to be important with a view to the efforts to help the embattled republics with material aid. During the South African War there was an explosion in the number of spontaneous initiatives to rouse money to help Dutchmen settle in South Africa or to help the Boer victims of the war. The profuseness of such initiatives made it hard to separate useful ones from those that were fraudulent. The NZAV, in co-operation with the Boer representatives

and the ANV, therefore tried to guide the public along what they considered to be the right lines. In order to do so, new organisations were created to streamline emigration plans and to collect and distribute humanitarian aid.

Despite the feverish activism during the South African War, the question remains as to what effect these efforts actually had. The main purpose of the propaganda campaign was to put pressure on the British government by mobilising public opinion. Although there was widespread enthusiasm for the Boers in continental Europe, it yielded few political results because none of the governments abandoned its policy of neutrality, a contrast that was probably most apparent in the Netherlands itself. In other ways too, the pro-Boers were confronted with the volatility of public opinion. Although at first sight the huge wave of enthusiasm might have been positive for the propagandists, they also had great problems coping with the huge amount of work this entailed. Leyds's legation office could barely handle the increase in paperwork and he often complained about the lack of efficiency. The executive committee of the NZAV was severely criticised by some of the members, who wanted to reform the society in order to mobilise public support more effectively. Years later, while looking back, the founder of the ANV press office was of the view that the press office had not been professional enough to fulfil its job properly. Such source material shows that the pro-Boer movement in the Netherlands was quite haphazard and relied on improvisation. This points to a more fundamental flaw in the Dutch press system at the time; its international connections were quite underdeveloped. It seems that the government's policy of neutrality and the reluctance of businessmen to invest money in global lines of communication were the main explanations for this limitation.

On the other hand, contemporary pro-Boers did actively reflect on these deficiencies, which indicates that to them the propaganda campaign fitted in with broader issues associated with the rise of mass media taking place at that time. The press office of the ANV fulfilled a pioneering role in the Netherlands because it was the first organisation that tried to propagate Dutch interests in the international media. There was much appreciation for these activities, both from journalists and people within the government, but they did not receive any structural support and the press office depended on funds from pro-Boer organisations. It is also hard to assess how much of the ANV material was actually published in newspapers inside and outside the Netherlands. Still, it can be said that despite these limitations, several gripping images were distilled from the material that was transferred from South Africa, which was used to propagate a vision of the past and future of the region that legitimised the existence of some sort of independent Dutch entity there. This corpus was the most important result of the pro-Boer propaganda network.

### **The Dutch and the Boers**

In general, Dutch literature about South Africa in the 1880s and 1890s emphasised the good relationship between Dutchmen and Boers, but there remained tensions. Some groups within the Transvaal openly showed their dislike of the Dutch immigrants, who they considered to be foreign meddlers. Such tensions can be clearly detected in publications in which the Boers were described as people who were akin, but different at the same time. Similarly, the development of Afrikaans as an independent language was received with mixed feelings. Despite these tensions, Dutch opinion-makers generally supported Kruger's ideas about the Transvaal's independence. This undoubtedly had to do with their own attempts to enlarge their influence in the region, which shows that imperial dreams of *stamverwantschap* at times overlapped with the ideals of certain groups of Afrikaner nationalists. Their common goal was to prevent the British from ending the independence of the Boer republics in a bid to gain complete dominance over the region. Contemporaries did not reflect on this issue in terms of high politics and economics only, but also believed that cultural differences were of importance. In their words, the two 'white races' were mainly separated by their heritage and language. Many of the efforts by Dutch pro-Boers were therefore aimed at strengthening national identity in the Boer republics. As a result, a view on the nineteenth century history of South Africa came into being that bolstered the claims to independence by the Boers.

The contents of pro-Boer propaganda during the South African War showed great continuity with publications from the 1880s and 1890s. From the start, the conflict was considered to be the outcome of a 'century of wrong' that had been inflicted upon the Boers by the British. Such views were reinforced in Dutch coverage of events taking place on the battlefield. The wrongs of the Boers were occasionally mentioned, but in general they were quickly glossed over or refuted as jingo slander. By contrast, British cruelties were enumerated extensively. Although there was some sympathy for the 'Tommies' who were forced by their superiors to fight a war they did not ask for, reports also mentioned their atrocities, which were seen as being emblematic of the injustice of the war. Another issue that caused an outcry amongst propagandists was the armament of black people, which they believed greatly imperiled the colonial order in South Africa. The tone of publications about the atrocities became more radical after the occupation of the Boer republics. The measures taken by the British to counter the Boers' guerrilla tactics – such as farm-burning, the deportation of prisoners of war and the concentration camps – were seen as barbaric. Some commentators even described the concentration camps as an orchestrated attempt to exterminate the white Dutch-speaking population in South Africa. Although these indictments were quite far-fetched at times, it should be

remembered that they were mainly aimed at British statesmen and empire-builders who Dutch opinion-makers considered to be responsible for the war and not against the British nation as a whole.

During the South African War, the image of the Boers was also less univocal than might appear at first sight, drawing heavily on the way they were depicted in Dutch sources from the 1880s and 1890s. In the early phase of the war, during which commandos performed quite well on the battlefield, there was almost an euphoric mood in the Netherlands. Leyds and other propagandists even tried to temper that enthusiasm, because they feared that it would lead to disillusion later on. This did happen to a certain extent when the British started their advance in 1900 and the shortcomings of the Boer militia system, such as the lack of discipline and the hesitant strategy of the old commanders, were discussed in the media. After the occupation of the Boer republics and the start of the guerrilla war, the atmosphere of hope and fear polarised. Those who surrendered, the '*Handsoppers*', were seen as the embodiment of the negative traits in the Boer character, such as selfishness and stubbornness. By contrast, those who continued to fight, the '*Bittereinders*', were seen as true patriots. Prisoners of war and women in the camps who opposed British tyranny and did not give up hope, shared in the same kind of heroism and were depicted as martyrs. Letters and reports about such defiance bolstered the hope that the independence of the republics could somehow be restored. The Peace of Vereeniging and the acceptance of the British annexations therefore came as complete surprise to the pro-Boers in Europe.

The ambivalences in the Dutch perception of the 'cousins' in South Africa show that there were clearly limits to the ideal of *stamverwantschap*. Contemporaries were aware that there were differences between modern Dutchmen and the conservative Boers. This, however, should not obscure the fact that there were different groups in South Africa and the Netherlands who perceived their interests to be mutual. As a result, they both propagated a view on the recent colonial past that condemned attempts to incorporate the Transvaal and the OFS into the British Empire and that legitimised the independence of the two republics. This view continued to shape the pro-Boer propaganda campaign during the South African War. Contemporaries considered the struggle between the Boers and the British to not only be military, but also cultural and as a result, such publications did not lose all their relevance after the war ended. As before, it was believed that British attempts to Anglicise South Africa could be withstood if Afrikaner identity was bolstered.

**The aftermath of the pro-Boer movement**

Many historians argue that the enthusiasm for the Boers in the Netherlands quickly evaporated after June 1902 and that the pro-Boer organisations led a marginal existence afterwards. Although there was a clear drop in their activities, it has been argued in this thesis that there was a greater measure of continuity than is often thought. Propaganda and public opinion remained key issues for the old pro-Boer activists and they continued to try to mobilise support for their efforts to keep Dutch influences in South Africa as large as possible (and English influences as limited as possible). The institutions that were used to do this originated in the previous periods and were mainly financed from the remnants of the money that was generated then. Attempts to set up new institutions that could operate independently failed, however, which casts doubts upon the actual effects of these efforts. Even more than before, there were tensions and controversies, which highlights the complex relationship between the pro-Boer movement and public opinion in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, certain views on South Africa that originated in the 1880s remained in vogue at least until after the Second World War. Although there was criticism of both the accommodation policy of Botha and the linguistic reforms of more radical Afrikaners, the lasting heroic vision of the Boers' past and the popularity of songs in Afrikaans demonstrate the long shelf life of the propaganda from before and during the South African War.

Besides the complex relationship that the propagandists had with public opinion in the Netherlands, there was also a continual interaction with Afrikaner nationalism, which entered into a new phase after 1902. One of the main priorities of the pro-Boer organisations was to help rebuild Afrikaner cultural infrastructure in order to withstand Milner's policy of promoting English, which resulted in financial support for Dutch schooling and newspapers in the 1900s. These efforts too could not be sustained after the pro-Boers' funds ran out, but they did contribute to the survival of these institutions during the difficult years immediately after the South African War. In addition, there were ongoing attempts to provide Afrikaner nationalists with intellectual ammunition, particularly with material that could help develop a heroic vision of the past that would mobilise the Dutch-speaking white population and bolster their sense of identity against English influences. With this goal in mind, Willem Leyds tried to make the huge amount of propagandistic material that he gathered during the South African War available to the Afrikaners. His attempts to publish an integrated history of the conflict failed because of differences of opinion between him and the authors of several manuscripts. In the end, however, he did succeed in moving several important collections to South Africa, which were used by Afrikaner nationalists. Despite the mixed results, such activities show that, to a certain

extent, the old lines of communication were reversed and used to transfer pro-Boer propaganda back to South Africa.

### **Britishness and *stamverwantschap***

The Dutch primary sources that have been presented in this thesis match the views about imperial culture that have been developed in recent British historiography quite well. One fundamental premise is that concepts of nationalism and imperialism were not necessarily opposed to each other and, although there were often contradictions and tensions, sometimes even overlapped. In this way, the concept of Britishness resembled its Dutch counterpart *stamverwantschap*, even though the political context was obviously very different, as the former concept was embedded in a formal empire. Still, there are parallels regarding identity formation. In the dominions, imperialistic and nationalistic sentiments held by English-speaking groups existed side by side. Although at first sight it seems that Afrikaner nationalists were more weary of outside meddling, even if it came from people who claimed to be closely related, *Hollanders* contributed significantly to the development of their cultural institutions and helped to strengthen them against English influences. There was a reciprocal effect too, as propaganda in favour of Boer independence and against British expansion was quite popular in the Netherlands because it fed into Dutch nationalism again. In this sense, the propaganda campaign during the South African War can be considered to be a confrontation between ideas of Britishness and *stamverwantschap*.

Significantly, contemporaries were aware of this interaction and often used military metaphors to refer to this war of words. Pro-Boer propagandists in the Netherlands actively tried to refute the views that were put forward by British advocates of expansion, who wrote negatively about the Boers. Already in the 1880s and 1890s, they tried to provide an account of the nineteenth century of South Africa in which the existence of the Boer republics was legitimised. Attention shifted to current events during the South African War, but the goal was the same: to promote the concept of an independent Dutch-speaking entity in the region. Although the propaganda was quite negative about the British at times, this dichotomy was not as absolute as it might seem. In general, it was argued that jingoists had corrupted public opinion and politics and had thus provoked the war. In addition, there were people in Britain that opposed the conflict, who were seen as allies and pro-Boers in the Netherlands exchanged information with them. This had its limits, however, because even though both groups were appalled by some of the events taking place in the war zone, they had fundamentally different views on the colonial future of South Africa.

When looking at the institutional aspects, more differences become apparent. At



the start of the war, the British media were represented by hundreds of journalists and because of the monopoly on telegraph lines, their news reached Europe first. By contrast, Dutch newspapers depended on informal correspondents who initially sent their letters via Delagoa Bay. When the British authorities tightened censorship after they had occupied the republics, these lines were increasingly disrupted. This points to fundamental differences between British and Dutch imperialism. As a small country, the Netherlands clearly lagged behind in global communication lines. This can partly be explained by the international power relations, which forced the government to adhere to a strict policy of neutrality. In addition, there seems to have been a great unwillingness amongst the business community to invest in institutions that could help to improve the situation. These problems were clearly apparent to the Dutch pro-Boers, and they tried to improve the situation by setting up organisations such as the ANV press office. These efforts were successful in the sense that a large amount of information that supported the Boer perspective was gathered and distributed throughout Europe. Analogous to the situation in South Africa, one could say that the pro-Boers developed a guerrilla style of propaganda that created powerful images that the British found hard to refute.

A final comparison can be made concerning the chronology. Despite the fact that the public in Britain became increasingly demoralised, the South African War was not the beginning of the end of the British Empire. Many supporters of expansion were shocked by the inefficiency of the army and made plans to reform imperial institutions. Although the actual effects of these initiatives were probably rather limited, it shows that contemporaries reflected on such matters, which means that historians need to take them seriously. In 1902, the loss of independence by the Boer republics caused a far greater shock in the Netherlands and, compared to their British counterparts, the Dutch organisations that propagated *stamverwantschap* were much weaker. Attempts to professionalise them after the South African War clearly failed, in contrast with the ever-developing British press system. Nevertheless, the ongoing popularity of the heroic past of the Afrikaners, which lasted until after the Second World War shows a parallel with the endurance of popular imperialism in Britain.

To properly assess the long-term effects of the pro-Boer propaganda campaign in comparison to British imperial culture, one should also take into consideration the situation in South Africa. After they had secured territorial dominance, British administrators failed to Anglicise the white population, the majority of which took pride in their Dutch heritage and language. Although their attitude towards the cultural motherland, the Netherlands, was ambivalent and sometimes even openly hostile, to a large extent Afrikaner nationalists appropriated the views on South African history that had been written by Dutchmen. People like Leyds actively tried to

reverse the existing lines of communication and stimulate this process. It would be going too far to assert that this was the only factor that shaped Afrikaner nationalism, but it does dispel the views of those who argue that transnational feelings of Dutchness were simply a myth. From the 1880s, *stamverwantschap* had different meanings to different groups of people in the Netherlands and South Africa and as such became a mixture of nationalism and ideals of transnational brotherhood, laced with racism and colonialism. This ideology undoubtedly reached its climax during the propaganda campaign from 1899 to 1902, but the cannon-fire of this war of words clearly resounded well into the twentieth century.