

On Burgers, Sekhukhune and Shepstone - Paul Kruger

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In Chapter VI of his memoirs the exiled ZAR president describes the perfidious British annexation of the Republic

THE MEMOIRS OF PAUL KRUGER
FOUR TIMES PRESIDENT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN REPUBLIC
TOLD BY HIMSELF
TORONTO
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CHAPTER VI

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PRESIDENT BURGERS

IN 1870 diamond fields were discovered in West Griqualand, at Kimberley and in the west of the South African Republic, near Barkly West. I myself went to regulate matters in those which lay within Transvaal territory, but was very uncivilly received by the English miners who had gathered there. These people had arbitrarily established a kind of republic, with a certain Parker as president and threatened Pretorius with war unless he left them alone.

Pretorius complained to the British Government about the behavior of its subjects. He was told that the districts in which the diamonds were found did not belong to the Republic but to the Kaffir chiefs Montsioa and Gasibone. This was one of those false statements with which the British Government is always prepared when it suits its purpose; for Gasibone had now for some time been deposed by the Government of the South African Republic and Mahura put in his place. His district was within the borders of the South African Republic. About this there had never been the slightest doubt or dispute. Waterboer himself only laid claim to the territories at the instigation of the English. He had no right to them whatever.

In order to avoid the difficulties, President Pretorius agreed to arbitrate with Mahura, Montsioa and Waterboer. This was a mistake and very much against my wish, as I maintained that the Republic did not need and should never accept arbitration regarding her own possessions or between herself and her subjects. President Pretorius asked Keate, the Governor of Natal, to arbitrate, and the latter decided in favor of the Kaffir chiefs, declaring them to be the independent proprietors of the disputed districts.

One of the witnesses in this business was the Kaffir chief Mobile. He was asked if he intended to make any claims, as he had assisted in clearing the district and making it habitable. He answered:

"Yes, I did help, but I only followed the white man like the jackal which follows a herd, to watch if it can't pick up a lamb here and there."

He was told that he too might have a part of the district. The Kaffir was lost in thought for a few moments, and then answered:

"No, baas, I dread Malimo's (God's) anger. When Moselikatse's Kaffirs were murdering us, Malimo sent the white men to save us. Shall I now place my foot upon the neck of my deliverer?"

He spoke some time and reminded them how Moselikatse used to put the old people to death, when he saw the aasvogels hovering over his kraal, and how he threw them to the aasvogels. He refused to injure the rights of the white men who had delivered the Kaffirs from these horrors.

The Government of the South African Republic had appointed a commission to attend the discussions of the arbitration court. I was a member of this commission, which protested against Governor Keate's judgment and lodged its objections with the Volksraad against the proceedings of President Pretorius. The Volksraad joined in the protest and Pretorius resigned. The protest at least effected this result, that the Republic retained a small piece of the territory that part, namely, which contains the village of Christiania.

The resignation of President Pretorius necessitated a new election. A number of burghers asked me to become a candidate. But I refused and with my party supported Robinson as our candidate for the Presidency. The Opposition candidate was Thomas Francois Burgers. The latter had just returned from a tour through the country and was chosen State President by a large majority, although we made every effort to secure Robinson's election.

The inauguration of the new President took place in the old Government Buildings at Pretoria.

I was present. After the President had taken the oath of office, I rose and addressed him in the following words:

"Your Honor, I have done my best to prevent your election, principally, because of your religious views, which appear to me to be mistaken. But as you have now been elected by the majority, I submit as a good republican to this vote of the people, trusting that you are a more earnest believer than I thought, in which case I will congratulate you with all my heart."

To this the President answered:

"Burgher, who voted against me for conscience sake, you are as dear to me as those who voted for me."

Many burghers now came up to me to express their delight at my outspokenness; many had thought I would keep my own counsel.

President Burgers was without doubt a man of keen intelligence and of very great gifts. He endeavoured without delay to improve the government of the country and to enter into commercial relations with foreign countries. Another favourite project of his was the construction of a railway from Lorenzo Marques to Pretoria, and he personally undertook a journey to Europe to borrow money for this purpose.

This loan was only partially successful, but he had the good fortune to discover in Europe a few prominent men whom he brought back with him. One of them was Dr. Jorissen who afterwards rendered so many useful services to the country.

The only thing to be said against Burgers' government was, that his views differed too much from those of the burghers. And this was the case not only in religious questions, but also in other matters which he considered necessary for the development of the Republic, whereas his burghers were of a different opinion.

It must be admitted that the Republic of that day was not ripe for T. F. Burgers' advanced ideas. Even if, for instance, he had succeeded in collecting the money for the railway from Delagoa Bay to the Republic, the scheme could not have been termed a success, for the resources of the Republic were not yet sufficiently developed to make such a line a paying concern.

His plans, which were in advance of the times, and his liberal views regarding religion soon won him a host of adversaries. But what cost him nearly all his influence and made him almost impossible to the majority of the burghers was the unfortunate Secucuni War of 1876.

This war was brought about in the following way.

The Government had leased a farm in the neighborhood of Secucuni's town to a certain burgher, whose cattle were seized by one of Secucuni's subordinates.

When the Government sent to make inquiries, Secucuni returned an insolent answer, summoned his troops and threatened the Lydenburg district. The Republic was therefore obliged to bring back Secucuni to a sense of his duty.

President Burgers wished personally to accompany the burgher commando. I was very much opposed to this, as I considered it my duty as Commandant General to lead the expedition. When Burgers insisted on accompanying the commando I refused to go. Burgers asked the reason of my refusal, and I replied:

"I cannot lead the commando if you come; for with your merry evenings in laager and your Sunday dances the enemy will shoot me even behind a wall; for God's blessing will not rest on our expedition."

Burgers answered that it was in my power as Commandant General to forbid anything that I did not approve of. But I said:

"Do you think that the burghers would listen to anything I might say, once you, as President, have set them the example?"

Then he asked me whom I advised him to take with him as fighting General. I recommended Nicholas Smit, afterwards Vice-President of the South African Republic, and Ex-President Pretorius. Burgers accepted my recommendations and marched with a fairly strong force against Secucuni. Before coming to close quarters with him they attacked one of his subordinates called Magali, who lived in a very ugly rocky fastness. But the commando succeeded in driving the Kaffirs out of their caves and gorges, whereupon Burgers flew into such an ecstasy that he exclaimed:

"Now, Gibraltar is mine!"

After this attack they advanced against Secucuni.

But in consequence of discords and the absence of combined efforts, the attack on his entrenchments failed. A certain number of burghers, under Commandant Joubert, of Pretoria, had already captured the position, but were obliged to retire for want of reinforcements. They were attacked from all sides by between four and five thousand Kaffirs.

This incident, joined to other causes of discontent, exasperated the burghers to such a degree that, in the end, they refused to fight or to remain where they were. And, although the President employed all his eloquence to persuade them to stay with him, he did not succeed and was at last obliged to let the commando return home. He left three strong outposts of volunteers behind, however, under a Boer commandant and a German officer in order to hold Secucuni in check. Later on, the latter sued for peace and paid a war indemnity of 1,000 oxen.

Meanwhile the President and the burghers had returned home without bringing the war to a conclusion. The outposts cost money, and the President, for this purpose, levied a special tax of 5 on every burgher. This measure brought him into violent conflict with myself, for I considered the tax unlawful as it was imposed without the consent of the Volksraad. A considerable number of the burghers refused to pay.

During the session of the Volksraad, after the war, in 1877, the President made a violent attack on the burghers who refused to pay the extra tax, and this in the presence of Sir Theophilus Shepstone, the British Special Commissioner who was already in Pretoria waiting to see how he could put the English plans for the annexation of the Republic into execution.

I defended the burghers who resisted the illegal impost. During the adjournment, I was chatting with other members of the Volksraad on the veranda, when President Burgers joined us, slapped me on the shoulder and said :

"Mr. Kruger, you can't deny that the burghers who refuse to pay the taxes are in a state of rebellion against their Government?"

I answered:

"I deny it absolutely, on the grounds which I have already stated. They don't refuse to pay their taxes; but they do refuse to pay a tax which you have added, without authority, to the already existing taxes. But even if the fact were as you say, I should like to ask you a question. Would you consider it a proof of affection to accuse your wife no matter what her faults openly before her bitterest enemy? That is what you have done to the Republic in the presence of her enemy, and this is to me a proof that you do not love but hate the Republic."

The President was silent and left us.

All the difficulties which President Burgers encountered, through his own fault, were employed by the English to bring about and justify annexation.

A large majority of the burghers who lived in the plains were, as has already been stated, dissatisfied with the President's government, while the inhabitants of the villages,[1]who consisted almost entirely of foreigners, and of whom a large number were not even burghers, were contented with Burgers rule, above all because they expected great things from the proposed railway. When they now realized how strong the opposition was they gradually came to the conclusion that annexation by the British Crown would not be at all a bad thing for them. It was from these men that Shepstone received petitions in favor of annexation. These petitions were signed almost entirely by the village populations.

[1 The Boer always speaks of villages, or dorpen, where we should say towns. He knows the term "Kaffir town," or stad, but to him even the capital is only a "village," or dorp. - **Translator's Note.**]

Shepstone, the Governor of Natal, was authorized by the British Government to discover the best means for annexing the country. He left Natal for Pretoria with an escort of twenty-five men, for the purpose, as he pretended, of discussing the Kaffir difficulties and other questions. He added openly, which was the case, that the Republic had not defeated Secucuni, and that this fact would be a dangerous incitement to rebellion on British territory. I clearly foresaw Shepstone's intentions, and asked President Burgers not to permit him to enter the town with his armed body-guard, except under the escort of an armed burgher force. President Burgers paid no attention to my request.

The President's term of office had at this time expired, and a new election had become necessary. I was asked by a great number of burghers to present myself as a candidate, and, although I at first refused, I at last consented in order to put a stop to the dissatisfaction which the burghers had shown at my refusal to stand. But I made this condition with the election committee, that, if Burgers obtained a majority, they must rest content and obey him, so as not, through open discords, to give England an excuse for carrying out her plans of annexation.

Already in the first week in which the votes of the several parties (not the official election) were recorded, it became evident that I should have a large majority. I went to President Burgers and said to him:

"President, I promise to bring over the majority of the burghers to your side, if you will promise me to take strong measures against the annexation and to defend our independence. If this is your intention, you must make it plain, so that I can emphatically assure the burghers that the independence of our country will be powerfully guarded. Otherwise my arguments will, of course, make no impression. There is my hand on it, that I shall do what I have offered to do."

Before the election took place, however, the British flag waved over the once free Republic.

Shortly after the above conversation, on the 21st of January 1877, Shepstone arrived at Pretoria with his armed body-guard and a few wagons. A number of "loyal" and excited inhabitants were foolish enough to take the horses out of his carriage and draw him to the house where he was to stay.

The population as a whole, on the other hand, took the matter very quietly. People who were present and, therefore, in a position to know, say that there were not ten burghers at his reception. The first conference between the President and his Executive Raad and Shepstone took place on the 26th of January 1877, when Shepstone at once made a great point of the "inherent" weakness of the Republic and of the fact that it had been unable to subjugate Secucuni.

The weakness displayed towards the Kaffir chiefs on the part of the white men gave him grave cause to fear, he said, that difficulties with the Kaffirs might also arise in Her Majesty's territories. The Executive Raad appointed a commission to discuss matters more fully, and chose State Attorney Jorissen and myself as members. I absolutely refused, however, to discuss any questions at this conference which affected the independence of the Republic; and nothing, therefore, came of it. Shepstone had several interviews besides with President Burgers, who finally decided to call an extraordinary meeting of the Volksraad, which took place in February.

The first subject discussed was Secucuni's petition for peace. As already mentioned, President Burgers had left several strong volunteer corps behind when the burgher commandos retired, and these had harassed Secucuni so closely that he was now suing for peace. But this did not suit Shepstone's plans; for, if peace were concluded, the principal argument in favor of the annexation of the Republic to the British Crown fell through.

There would then be an end to his talk about the general incapacity of the Republic to master the Kaffirs, or, as he phrased it, its "inherent" weakness. It was against my will that Burgers now agreed to his proposal to send two envoys to Secucuni in order to investigate matters on the spot. This "duumvirate" commission, which consisted of Englishmen, of course brought back the desired answer, namely, that Secucuni had no idea of making peace. This dishonesty cost the English dear, as will shortly be seen.

The second matter for discussion was that of a confederation with the British dominions in South Africa. An overwhelming majority of the burghers sent in memorials declaring against the measure. I myself made a violent speech against any such plan, in which I said that this confederation would mean the absolute loss of our independence.

Burgers now resorted to a strong measure. He pointed out that several of the most violent of the opposition in the Raad had refused to pay the aforesaid tax of 5 per head, and were consequently debarred from taking part in the present discussion, and requested these members to withdraw from the Raad as unqualified. Although the State Attorney, Dr. Jorissen, was on the President's side, the Raad refused to accede to his request, which was certainly a great blow to Burgers.

It seems that this incident confirmed him finally in his opinion that the existing constitution of the South African Republic did not give him sufficient power, and that it was therefore incumbent upon him to draw up another which would fetter him less. At any rate, he did draw up a new constitution and submitted it to the Raad. It provided for the institution of responsible ministers, a supreme court, and extension of the powers of the State President. At the same time, an alteration was made in the arms of the Republic by the addition of a gnu. Although this measure met with the strongest opposition in the Volksraad, the proposed constitution was at last accepted, and before the Raad broke up I was elected Vice-President. The people, however, as the highest authority, rejected the new constitution.

The Volksraad did not break up in a very happy mood. Most of the members feared that the thread by which the sword of Damocles was suspended over the head of the Republic would break and end its independence. Although many hoped that the various new measures which the Volksraad had passed in its extraordinary session might avert the danger, it soon became evident that the

pessimists were right.

Shepstone seemed to be only waiting for the arrival of the High Commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, before proceeding to the annexation of the South African Republic. Frere arrived in Cape Town at the beginning of April 1877; and as early as April the 7th, Shepstone had an interview with the Executive Raad, in which he openly declared that he had been authorized and was prepared to annex the country on behalf of the British Government.

I at once told him that I would never give my consent to any such step, as I was bound by my oath to uphold the independence of the Republic. I must submit if the Volksraad agreed to the annexation and thus absolved me from my oath, but not otherwise. Shepstone thereupon asked me how long it would take to call the Volksraad together. I told him that I thought it would not take long if the President issued the summons at once. But here President Burgers intervened, saying that it would not do to try Shepstone's patience too far ; and so the plan fell through.

Burgers proposed instead, that we should at once draw up a protest against the annexation whilst the Government of the Republic still existed, and appoint a commission to take the protest to England. This was done; but Burgers had never expected it to succeed, nor was he a member of the commission. In the meanwhile, on the 12th of April 1877, Shepstone executed his plan and annexed the Republic.

This annexation cannot be too strongly branded as an entirely iniquitous act on England's part. It was in flagrant contradiction with the Sand River Convention of 1852, by which England solemnly undertook to acknowledge the unrestricted independence of the South African Republic, and never to encroach upon the districts north of the Vaal.

But as soon as it suited her convenience, perfidious Albion broke her solemn peaceful promise, as she always has done, and as she will always continue to do when it serves her purpose! What misery has come upon South Africa through this breach of treaty! The late war, which has reduced the whole country to ruins, quite apart from costing hundreds of men and thousands of innocent women and children their lives, this war, in which England has behaved in so uncivilized and base a fashion as to draw down upon herself the contempt of all civilized nations, had its origin partly in Shepstone's annexation.

I say partly, for the war had two causes. The first and principal cause was the wealth of the goldfields of the Republic; the second, "revenge for Majuba Hill." But if it had not been for Shepstone's annexation there would have been no Majuba Hill, and no "revenge for Majuba Hill" would have been called for.

The exasperating influence which the annexation was likely to have upon the relations between the two nations was foreseen by the Executive Raad of the South African Republic, which for that reason published the following protest against the annexation:

Whereas Her Britannic Majesty's Government, by the Sand River Convention of 1852, has solemnly pledged the independence of the people to the north of the Vaal River, and whereas the Government of the South African Republic is not aware of ever having given any reason for hostile action on the part of Her Majesty's Government, nor any grounds for such an act of violence;

Whereas this Government has ever shown its readiness and is still prepared to do all which in justice and equity may be demanded, and also to remove all causes of dissatisfaction that may exist; Whereas, also, the Government has repeatedly expressed its entire willingness to enter into such treaties or agreements with Her Majesty's Government as may be considered necessary for the general protection of the white population of South Africa, and is prepared punctually to execute such agreements;

And whereas, according to public statements of Her Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Carnarvon, there exists no desire on the part of the British Government to force the people of the South African Republic against their wish under the authority of the British Government;

And whereas, the people, by memorials or otherwise, have, by a large majority, plainly stated that they are averse to it; And whereas, this Government is aware that it is not in a condition to maintain the rights and independence of the people by the sword against the superior power of Great Britain, and moreover has no desire in any way to take any steps by which the white inhabitants of South Africa would be divided in the face of the common enemy against each other, or might come in hostile contact with each other, to the great danger of the entire Christian population of South Africa, without having first employed all means to secure in a peaceful way and by friendly mediation the rights of the people;

Therefore the Government protests most strongly against this act of Her Majesty's Special Commissioner.

It is also further resolved to send, without delay, a Commission of Delegates to Europe and America, with full power and instruction to add to their number a third person, if required, in order to endeavor in the first place to lay before Her Majesty's Government the desires and wishes of the people, and in case this might not have the desired effect, which this Government would deeply regret and cannot as yet believe, then to appeal to the friendly assistance and intercession of other Powers particularly of those who have acknowledged the independence of this State.

As members of this Commission are appointed, the Hon.

the Attorney General, Dr. E. J. P. Jorissen, and S. J. P.

Kruger, Vice-president of the South African Republic.

Dr. Jorissen was appointed by my wish, as he was a lawyer, and I was anxious to have some one with me who could speak foreign languages.

After appointing this deputation, the Executive Raad ceased to exist. President Burgers returned to his home in Cape Colony, and the Republic was left without a president. I had to act in his place; for, as Vice-President, it would have been my duty, even in other circumstances, to conduct the business of the state in the absence of the President from the country.

Source: http://www.politicsweb.co.za/politicsweb/view/politicsweb/en/page72308?oid=645691&sn=Marketingweb+detail&pid=90389&utm_source=Po