

SPEECH BY RONNIE KASRILS, MP

ANGLO-BOER WAR DEBATE

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For centuries, South Africans have taken up arms for freedom and justice and in defence of their rights. It is in this context that we must look back at the Anglo-Boer War.

The South African wars of resistance began as early as 1511 when Portuguese, attempting to raid for cattle in Table Bay, were driven off by Khoisan – with bows, arrows and spears.

In the centuries that followed, the indigenous African people struggled bravely against colonial invasion, but the spears were no match for guns. One by one they were defeated and absorbed in the white man's order.

Many of these struggles are legendary. There is the epic 100 years war by the Xhosa people under the generalship of Makanda and Maqoma; the ingenuity of the Sotho under Moshweshwe; the struggle of the Griqua under Adam Kok; the astonishing defeat of the British by Cetshwayo's Zulu impis at Isandlwana, and the brave resistance of Sekhukhune of the Pedi, Galishewe of the Tswana and of Venda kings such as Makhado.

Just as it had engineered wars against the African people, Great Britain engineered the 1899-1902 war against the Boer Republics. This was the first major war of the Twentieth Century and the first large-scale guerrilla war of the

modern era.

It was also the final step by Britain to subjugate and control the whole of Southern Africa and to seize its resources for the Empire.

The outcome was inevitable. Britain's half a million troops outnumbered the Republicans almost ten to one. The Republicans fought with great skill and courage and saw their homes and farmsteads burnt, their women and children herded into the notorious camps where 29 000 perished. And as we know today, so too did 20 000 Africans whose deaths, and indeed existence, were unrecorded and unsung.

Amongst those who opposed the British was my own grandfather, Nathan Kasrils. A man of socialist inclinations, he had come from Russia to Kimberley in the 1870s to prospect for diamonds. Nathan Kasrils was commended by General Koos de la Rey as a "goeie spioen en skerpskieter" and appears as one of 200 "Boerejode" (Jewish Boers) on a list recently compiled by the Jewish Board of Deputies to mark the centenary.

The old man died before I was born. But I grew up hearing of his loathing for Rhodes and can only hope that, as a good anti-imperialist, he was sympathetic to the cause of the black people. For, despite our sympathies for the underdog, we should be under no illusions about the real limitations of the Republic resistance. It was a struggle for the right of white Afrikaners to independence. In essence, it was about their right to be masters of the black man.

The Anglo-Boer War was a white man's war. And it was in this coincidence of interests that imperialist Britain was able to come to terms with its republican

foe and hand independence to white South Africa in 1910. Despite appeals to Britain to consider the consequences of ignoring black interests, the two former enemies made a deal that excluded the majority population entirely.

Thus, although the war stands, in the words of Jack and Ray Simons, "as a classic example of Imperialist aggression prompted by capitalist greed", it cannot be classified as a just war of national liberation because it denied freedom and justice for black people.

The compromise reached at Union lasted another 84 years. But no compromise that denies people their freedom can be sustained forever. Because freedom is indivisible.

At the turn of a new century, it is appropriate to look back and consider what we can learn from it.

There is no doubt that, had the Boer Republics united with the cause of the African, Coloured and Indian people, our history would have been very different. For one thing, Britain would never have dared to invade. The opposing forces would have been too strong.

The lesson here, of course, is that it is in unity that we find the strength to exist as a free nation – not in the false unity of the Union coat of arms, but the unity of a people living side by side as equals.

This is the kind of unity we must seek today. A South Africa of patriots and equals, working together for a strong, progressive and stable state. It is this unity that will serve as the bedrock of freedom, independence and prosperity for all; this unity that will, far more than tanks or bullets, keep us safe from external

aggression.

Many have died on the long journey towards freedom. Let us call on their strength and courage as we seek to reconcile our nation and heal our many battle wounds.