

Koos De la Rey

A Boer General Like Lee, Jackson, and Forrest

Part 2 of The Boer Republics under Siege

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South Africa 1899 to 1903

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The Boer Republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free State in South Africa were under siege by the British Empire during the First Boer War from 1880 to 1881 and again during the more famous Second Boer War from 1899 to 1902. The issues were Boer independence versus gold mining resources and empire. In 1879, just before the First Boer war, the British Army engaged migrating Zulu tribes during what was called the Anglo-Zulu War, which is more famous in the U.S. because of two famous battles: Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift. The heroism of a small detachment of 141 men, mostly from the 24th Welsh Foot (infantry) at Rorke's Drift, for which eleven Victoria Crosses were awarded, was the subject of the American movie, *Zulu*. But before we continue the story of Koos De la Rey and the Second Boer War, it is important to summarize the state of South Africa from 1994 until today.

In the 24 years since the end of Apartheid in South Africa in 1994, the country has been ruled by the increasingly radical-left African National Congress (ANC) Party. ANC government is actually a Tripartite Alliance of the ANC, the South African Communist Party (SACP), and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). Although rich in natural resources, South Africa has been on a steady economic and social decline as evidenced by extremely high unemployment (28 percent), among the highest crime rates in the world, and an astonishingly high adult HIV/AIDS rate (19 percent). The white population of South Africa has steadily declined from 22 percent in 1904 to 8.4 percent of 55 million people today. About 60 percent of these are descendents of the Boers, and the rest are mostly of British origin. The white population was probably well over 50 percent before the surge of Bantu migration from central and western Africa began in the 1830s. Today the Boers and other whites are under siege by the leftist and increasingly black nationalist ANC government. The name and fame of Koos De la Rey is sometimes raised as a rallying cry by presently besieged Boers. Part 1 of this series covered more historical background and detail on South Africa and the Boer Wars.

Two of the Boer generals, Louis Botha and Jan Smuts (a favorite military personality of Churchill) would later serve with the British against the Germans in World War I and later become Prime Ministers of the Union of South Africa. But one of the greatest of the Boer generals, Koos De la Rey, deserves especially to be remembered for both his remarkable skill and leadership as a cavalry commander and the sterling nobility of his character. He was Jacobus Herculaas ("Koos") De la Rey. He had no formal military training. He was a farmer and member of the Boer Parliament (Volksraad). He possessed a remarkable combination of military and leadership talents and character that bring two of the most revered military figures in American history to mind: Nathan Bedford Forrest and Robert E. Lee. He was remarkably reminiscent of Forrest in the fierce determination, startling success, and brilliant tactics of his cavalry raids. Like Lee, he demonstrated also to a remarkable degree the ability to command incredible and unwavering

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loyalty of the Boers by sheer inability of character. Also like Lee, he projected a soft-spoken air of fatherly authority and wisdom. His Boer troops received neither pay nor regular supplies, but they were dedicated to their cause and confident of their leader.
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De la Rey was a reluctant warrior. He opposed war with the British until it was seen as inevitable and necessary to protect his country. In combat he was also reminiscent of the intensely religious Stonewall Jackson. He was frequently heard encouraging his troops with "I fear God and nothing else" and "God is on our side." Despite the British war on the Boer civilians, their concentration camps, and the death of a beloved son in combat, De la Rey insisted on treating captured British soldiers with a near sacrificial degree of civility. The Boers did not have the material and additional food supplies to sustain prisoners, so after stripping them of weapons, ammunition, and valuable equipment, they simply released them following any medical treatment required. Though fierce in combat, Koos was not a man of vengeance and would not allow a spirit of vengeance to prevail among his troops. The Boers themselves knew that if they were captured, they would likely be sent to St. Helena or worse. The chivalrous Koos de la Rey severely punished any mistreatment of British prisoners.

In March of 1902, De la Rey, in a surprise cavalry attack on a British column, killed or wounded 189 British soldiers and captured another 600. Among the wounded prisoners was his arch foe and nemesis, Lt. General, Lord Methuen. Methuen had burned De la Rey's own farm, and his son, Adaan, had been mortally wounded by Methuen's troops. The British had shot some Boer officers in the past. Many of De la Rey's men called for Methuen to be shot. But the deeply religious De la Rey treated his enemy with the respect he believed all Christian men deserved. Methuen was sent under a flag of truce, accompanied by a doctor, to the nearest British medical station. De la Rey even sent Methuen's wife a message of sympathy, expressing concern for the seriousness of his wounds.

Despite their noble valor, the Boers were eventually forced to surrender. The British were able to inflict a significant military defeat on the Boers in the last month of the war, but the primary reason for surrender was to bring an end to civilian suffering. Lack of supplies and food had also brought the Boer commando forces near the limit of physical endurance. The British surrender terms offered to release all prisoners and granted amnesty to all belligerents. The Boers agreed to and signed these terms in Pretoria on May 31, 1902. While many in Britain cheered, many in the Transvaal and Orange Free State wept, including De la Rey, his wife, Nonnie, and their six surviving children. Nonnie de la Rey asked in tears, "Why was all this bloodshed and suffering? What was the purpose of it all?"

Although the British won the war they suffered greatly in world public opinion and in their own soul-searching. The Boers lost their independence only temporarily. In 1906 and 1907 the Transvaal and the Orange Free State were again granted a limited independence. A few years thereafter they became political divisions of the Union of South Africa. As previously noted, Boer Generals Botha and Smuts both later became Prime Ministers of the new Union of South Africa. In 1914, Koos De la Rey was mistakenly shot and killed by police chasing a band of criminals. Ironically, on

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On death, the British honored him more than his Boer countrymen. The British built a statue of him at the British cemetery on his farm and a hospital was built in his name. Lt. General, Lord Methuen and his famous commander, General, Lord Kitchener, were the first to contribute donations. The British also honor him by calling some of their elite troops, "commando," the Afrikaans term for the Boers militia organization of the valiant Boers. The fighting ability of Boer troops in the British Army during World War I and II was highly respected by both British and American commanders.

We should not forget the valiant struggle and determination of the Boers, nor Koos De la Rey, a man whose Christian character and convictions should be remembered and honored everywhere.

The great issue in South Africa today is whether the descendents of the Boers and their former British enemies of two Boer wars can remain safely and profitably in South Africa under the property confiscations, persecutions, and anti-white violence of the ANC majority government.