

General Louis Botha's Role in the South African War, 1899–1902

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Abstract

This study investigates the role played by General Louis Botha in the South African War of 1899 to 1902 and assesses his military skills in his encounters with the British forces in both the set-piece battle phase in the first months of the war and the guerrilla phase in the last two years of the war. It also analyses his attitude to peace and his participation in the peace process since the successive British commanders-in-chief Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener had in this respect both direct and indirect contact with him as commandant-general of the South African Republic (the Transvaal) in the last two years of the war.

Keywords: General Louis Botha; South African War; Peace of Vereeniging; Lord Roberts; Lord Kitchener; South African Republic; Transvaal

General Louis Botha played a significant role in the South African War of 1899 to 1902. Not only did he display his military skills in both the set-piece battle phase (October 1899 to August 1900) and in the guerrilla phase (September 1900 to May 1902), but as commandant-general of the South African Republic (the Transvaal) he was also involved in various efforts to establish peace in the last two years of the war.

There is a limited number of academic studies that cover the role played by Botha in the South African War. C.J. Barnard's work, *Generaal Louis Botha op die Natalse front 1899–1900* (Cape Town: A.A. Balkema, 1970), focuses on Botha's contribution in Natal in the first five months of the war, while D.M. Moore's publication deals with *General Louis Botha's Second Expedition to Natal: September—October 1901* (Cape Town: Historical Publication Society, 1979). Both authors have done extensive archival research and both books are extremely useful for an understanding of Botha's role in the specific periods they cover. Leopold Scholtz's work on the relationship between the Transvaal and Free State governments during the war, *Bondgenote en Dwarstreckers: Die Transvaalse en Vrystaatse Regerings in die Anglo-Boereoorlog, 1899–1902* (Pretoria: Kraal Publishers, 2019), is useful in illuminating Botha's involvement with peace initiatives in the last two years of the war. The first full-length academic study on the life and times of Botha is the recent doctoral thesis by Antonio Garcia, 'General Louis Botha: Farmer, Soldier, Statesman, 1862–1919'

(Military Academy, Stellenbosch University, 2019). Garcia's archival research is solid and he has made some succinct analyses of Botha's military skill.

Five biographies of note have been written on Botha. They are not based on archival research, although some primary sources were consulted by their authors. They are Harold Spender's *General Botha: The Career and the Man* (London: Constable, 1916), Earl Buxton's *General Botha* (London: John Murray, 1924), F.V. Engelenburg's *Genl. Louis Botha* (London: George G. Harrap, 1929), Johannes Meintjes's *General Louis Botha* (London: Cassell, 1970), and more recently, Richard Steyn's, *Louis Botha: A Man Apart* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2018). These works do not make claim to being academic studies and they cater for the general reader.

Spender was influenced by the British liberal and imperialist historiographical tradition. He focused primarily on Botha's role in politics, while his analysis of Botha's leadership in the South African War was limited. Buxton, too, wrote from a liberal and imperialist perspective. He was governor-general of the Union of South Africa for the most part of Botha's premiership of the Union of South Africa (1910–1919). His high regard for Botha is very evident. Engelenburg was originally from the Netherlands and then became impassioned by the Afrikaner cause. He was editor of the pro-Kruger newspaper, *De Volksstem*, prior to the South African War and was again its editor for twenty years after the war. His friendship with Botha stemmed from the 1890s and he was as loyal to Botha as he had been to Kruger. Meintjes wrote from an Afrikaner nationalist perspective. Although he made more use of archival sources than the previous biographies, he depended largely on Engelenburg. Like Meintjes's work, Steyn's well-written *Louis Botha* is geared specifically for the general reader and is also based on the earlier biographies of Botha.

The young Louis Botha

Louis Botha was born on 27 September 1862 in the district of Greytown in Natal. His parents soon moved to the district of Vrede in the Orange Free State Republic (Free State). His father, a farmer, and his mother were faithful Calvinists who as children had participated in the Great Trek—the migration of Dutch/Afrikaans-speaking people who left the British governed Cape Colony and set up two Boer republics in the interior of southern Africa. Like many of his contemporaries in this pioneering period, Botha enjoyed only about two years of formal education. He and his brothers, of whom Philip and Chris were to become Boer generals as well, assisted their father on the farm. He came to know the land (the veld) from an early age and developed that infallible eye for terrain, which was to become one of his principal military characteristics.¹

In 1886 he married Annie Emmett from the Free State, an English-speaking girl of Irish descent, whose family identified themselves with the republican cause,² and

whose brothers were to be with him on commando. With this marriage, Botha moved beyond his cultural boundaries, proving his ease to operate within a broader view on matters than most of his Boer contemporaries.

Remarkably, Botha's only military experience before the South African War was in 1884 when he was a member of a Boer commando under Lucas Meyer, which successfully assisted Dinizulu in his claim to the Zulu throne against Usibepu. This led to a close friendship with the much older Meyer, which was to be of great significance in Botha's military career.

Dinizulu granted land to his white military allies against Usibepu, whereupon they established a small state called the New Republic in 1884. Botha was awarded a tract of land he named Waterval, which he turned into a prosperous working farm. In the small community his strong personality and charisma were soon recognised and he was voted onto the executive council and elected as field-cornet, with Lucas Meyer as president of the young republic. Although this was a small beginning to public office, Botha's field-cornetcy was carried over to the new Vryheid district after the New Republic was incorporated into the Transvaal in 1888.³

As Stanley Trapido notes,⁴ the field-cornet in the Boer republics was almost inevitably elected from a family of local notables. Such was the case with Botha. Socially and genetically, he was part of an Afrikaner elite. He was distantly related to President M.T. Steyn (of the Free State) and General Koos de la Rey (of the Transvaal), both of South African War fame, through the Nel family line.⁵ Antonio Garcia maintains that it is questionable whether this distant family connection (second and third cousins respectively), was meaningful at all.⁶ But in the small community of republican Afrikaners it was not insignificant. Moreover, his father and both his grandfathers had fought at Blood River against the Zulu in 1838, one of the landmarks of Afrikaner history.⁷ All this gave Botha significant socio-economic and potentially, political power.

In turn, holding the office of field-cornet gave Botha the opportunity to increase his socio-economic status. As Van der Waag remarks, the field-cornet was entrusted not only with the maintenance of combat-ready burghers in his ward and their mobilisation in case of emergency, but also with the registration of farms.⁸ This placed him in a favourable position to accumulate landed property.⁹ Within a decade Botha acquired or purchased six farms, in all as much as 16,000 acres. He owned about 4,000 sheep, 600 head of cattle, a hundred mares, a number of riding-horses, and more. He and Meyer also managed a land syndicate, which annually yielded large amounts of money.¹⁰

Botha was thus financially independent. Because of his socio-economic position and status his election to the Transvaal Volksraad as a member for Vryheid in January 1897 at the age of 34 came as no surprise.¹¹ But his personality also played a major

role in his election. As field-cornet (an office he had to vacate once he was elected to the Volksraad) he kept in touch with his burghers and endeared himself to many friends.¹² Both E.J. Weeber, who fought under Botha in the South African War, and the well-known Irish politician Michael Davitt mentioned his irresistible magnetic personality, and they both regarded him as a born leader of his people.¹³

After the failure of the Bloemfontein conference between President Kruger and the British High Commissioner, Sir Alfred Milner, in June 1899, Botha began to support the president's cause—contrary to what is often maintained. This was particularly the case with the dynamite monopoly that the Kruger government had granted to Eduard Lippert to be the sole provider of dynamite for the gold mines. Originally Botha was against the monopoly, because the mining companies had to pay a higher price for dynamite. As a member of a commission of enquiry, however, Botha now was in favour of the dynamite monopoly, clearly in reaction to British pressure and intervention in the domestic affairs of the republic.¹⁴ But it is unclear whether Botha voted for or against the Boer ultimatum of 28 September 1899. No minutes were made on what was discussed at this secret meeting. The imperial view, introduced by Spender in 1916¹⁵ and taken over by Buxton in 1924,¹⁶ is that Botha voted against the ultimatum. They argue that thereby Botha declared himself to be against war. In 1944, P.C. Joubert, a member of the second Volksraad in 1899, also claimed that Botha voted against the ultimatum.¹⁷ Spender, who gives the day of voting as 9 October 1899 (which is incorrect) supplied seven names of Volksraad members whom he claims voted against the ultimatum, and so did Joubert, but only three of the names they mentioned, concur. Of these Botha's name was one. By contrast, in 1919, F.W. Reitz, who as state secretary was directly involved with the drafting of the ultimatum, denied emphatically that Botha opposed the sending of the ultimatum.¹⁸ Engelenburg (1929) and historian C.J. Barnard (1970) were also of the opinion that despite his anti-war sentiments, Botha voted in favour of the ultimatum. As Engelenburg put it, 'It is to be supposed that he did his very best in order to preserve peace; the available documents, however, supply but little evidence on the point'. Both Engelenburg and Barnard quote from the report on the Volksraad debate of 7 September 1899:

What he wanted was a defensive position—not war. Emphatically he would oppose any steps that might affect the integrity of the country. They should avoid a defiant attitude; at the same time, they should say: thus far, and no further ... The Transvaal had done all it could in order to preserve peace, but he thought they had now gone far enough.¹⁹

Whichever way he cast his vote, on 3 October Botha departed for the Natal front with Lucas Meyer—Meyer as the general of the south-eastern Transvaal commandos and Botha as his second-in-command, but as a private burgher, literally without rank.²⁰

Botha's appointment as general in command of the Tugela front

Botha went into the first major battle of the war at Talana (Dundee) on 20 October 1899 as a private burgher. His opportunity to prove his military ability came when Lieutenant-General Sir George White, with numbers in men and artillery on his side, attempted on 30 October to disperse the Boer force lying around Ladysmith.²¹ Early in the battle Meyer became ill, whereupon Botha took command of the sector along the Modderspruit,²² east of Ladysmith. For the first time in the conflict he was in a position to showcase his tactical skills. He placed his best commando, the men from Krugersdorp, on the strategic Swartkop hill and continued to extend his front southwards, maintaining a heavy gun fire. Thus, he held the initiative and prevented the British cavalry from outflanking the Boers and breaking through. He inspired his officers and men with his presence and determination. Wilhelm Mangold of the Heidelberg commando noted at the time that when Botha appeared on the scene, replacing Meyer, 'his arrival was greeted with loud cheers of "hurrah"'.²³ When the enemy began to retreat in disorder, his men pursued them across the Modderspruit. He requested Commandant-General Joubert to attack the retreating troops in his sector, but Joubert did not possess the insight to grab the moment.²⁴ This enabled White to retreat into Ladysmith and prepare for a siege. The most flattering praise for Botha's military expertise came from White himself. Melton Prior, a well-known war correspondent, overheard White saying: 'I tried to outflank the Boers, but as fast as I did so they outflanked me; in fact, they outwitted me'.²⁵ It then became the task of General Sir Redvers Buller, who had arrived in South Africa with a huge force, to relieve the town from south of the Tugela River.

Meyer, suffering from exhaustion of the nerves, returned to Pretoria. Botha was left in command. At the age of 37 he became a permanent general,²⁶ and a man who had gained fame overnight.

Realising the strategic value of probing deeper into enemy territory, Botha then led a force in the direction of the coastal port of Durban. On 15 November he captured an armoured train at Chieveley.²⁷ A week later he clashed with Colonel Walter Kitchener near Willow Grange, where he had a narrow escape when his horse was shot beneath him. Joubert, accompanying the expedition, sustained an internal injury when he fell from his horse, and they were forced to return to the Boer laagers. Joubert's injury was to lead to his death four months later. On 30 November he retired to Volksrust to recover, and Botha was placed in command of the commandos along the Tugela River facing Buller.²⁸

Clearly, the circumstances—the indisposition of both Meyer and Joubert—and merit—as proven in his tactics at Modderspruit—ensured Botha's appointment as general in command of the Tugela front. As burgher J.F. Naudé commented: 'He was

the right man at the right spot. Trusted and esteemed by officers and men, they obeyed him willingly'.²⁹

Botha's victories along the Tugela front, December 1899 to February 1900

In a remarkable display of insight, military strategy and tactics, Botha gained three brilliant victories along the Tugela front: at Colenso on 15 December 1899, Spioenkop on 24 January 1900 and Vaalkrans between 5 and 7 February 1900.

To hold the Tugela line Botha's overall strategy was defensive, but he made provision for offensive tactics whenever possible. His choice for the positions of his trenches was outstanding and it provided the opportunity for maximum tactical surprise. It was later described as a work of military genius.³⁰ Accepting correctly that Buller would expect the Boers on the hills and that he would direct his artillery fire on the hills, he ordered the men to dig their trenches as close as possible to the river and to camouflage them. When completed, his positions comprised gun emplacements, trenches for riflemen and dummy trenches, extending over 24 kilometres. Recognising that his weak point was the Hlangwane hill, east of Colenso across the Tugela, he extended his left flank to this hill.³¹

In preparing for the imminent battle, from 2 December onwards Botha was untiring in his efforts. He visited the positions on horseback, gave direction and inspired the burghers. He sent out regular daily reconnaissance patrols.³² A French volunteer officer with the Boers, Colonel Georges de Villebois-Mareuil, who was critical of the older Boer officers, gave Botha great credit for his sustained visits to the Boer positions: 'I saw General Botha—young, intelligent, and doing his utmost. He thoroughly understood the position'.³³ At 8 p.m. on 14 December (on the eve of the Battle of Colenso) Botha informed Kruger: 'It gives me great pleasure to let you know that I have succeeded in turning the wavering amongst our men into courage'.³⁴ Garcia concurs, remarking that Botha managed to add some stability to the faltering discipline of the commandos with a combination of inspirational leadership, and unifying the command, reinforced by messages from the president.³⁵ At last there was a tactician of note with the Boers in Natal.

On the other hand, Buller's planning left much to be desired. His lack of proper reconnaissance meant that at no stage did he know where the Boer positions were. Neither he nor his officers saw a Boer during the battle. During his heavy bombardment in the days prior to the battle there was—at the order of Botha—an unfathomable silence across the river. But the bombardments warned Botha that an attack was at hand.³⁶ Buller's decision at the last moment to attempt a breakthrough at the railway at Colenso, played into Botha's hands—he anticipated that the attack would be made at Colenso.³⁷

Against Buller's force of 19,000 men with 44 guns, only 3,000 Boers with four guns and a Maxim-Nordenfeldt machine gun participated in the Battle of Colenso.³⁸ The British attack was immediately bogged down. Ten of their guns were captured. Everywhere the troops were mowed down by an invisible enemy of whom more than half were fighting with smokeless cartridges in their Mauser rifles. Botha carried out the necessary logistical operations during the battle with a cool head. When two of Colonel Long's batteries got into a mess and the artillerymen were shot down, despite the raging battle, Botha sent men with horses through the river to collect the guns—ten guns in total.³⁹

Eventually his victory was well-nigh perfectly orchestrated. To his regret, however, the offensive part of his plan, that his right flank under Combat-General Christiaan Fourie had to counterattack and envelop the British forces, did not materialise because Fourie failed to act and let the opportunity slip through his fingers.⁴⁰ The official British account of 1,139 casualties is undoubtedly an underestimation of the real figures. Botha had thirty-eight casualties.⁴¹

By January 1900 Botha's reputation as commander was well-established. Commandant Ludwig Krause recorded in his memoirs, written in March 1901:

The influence that Louis Botha had amongst the Burgers at that time [after mid-January 1900] was simply marvellous. The mere mention of the fact that Louis Botha was in command and on the spot, was sufficient to inspire the Burgers with courage and confidence—no matter how despondent they may have been before. When we learnt that Louis Botha had gone to take over the command at Spionkop [sic], it was a relief ... *Now we could confidently await results—the English would never succeed in breaking through there—for was not Louis Botha in command?*⁴²

Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Warren, who on the spur of the moment indicated to Buller that he would occupy the dominant hill along the Upper Tugela River, Spioenkop, ordered Major-General E.R.P. Woodgate to take the hill. Woodgate reached the summit by 3 a.m. on 24 January and ordered his men to dig trenches for defence against any possible Boer attack. Before dawn the Boers took up the challenge.⁴³

As Garcia mentions, Botha's strength as a commander on the operational and tactical levels came to the fore in the Battle of Spioenkop. His practical approach to command, 'enabled him to reinforce the positions that required reinforcing and the correct positioning of his artillery and maxim machine guns to ensure maxim direct and indirect fire support to the advancing commandos'.⁴⁴ Botha was stationed beside Major J.F. Wolmarans's 75 mm Krupp gun, directly north of Spioenkop. With the assistance of Commandant Hendrik Prinsloo of the Carolina commando and his heliographer who was based on Aloe Knoll, Botha found the perfect range to shell the British in their shallow trenches on Spioenkop. In no other battle during the war

did the Boer artillery create such havoc among the enemy as Botha's five guns and two machine-guns. In this, the greatest battle of the war, the British suffered their heaviest casualties.⁴⁵ Historian Breytenbach believes British casualties between 16 and 24 January numbered as many as 1,800 to 2,000 men. The Boers lost less than 200 men.⁴⁶

While enjoying a much-needed few days of leave in Pretoria, Botha was rushed to the Tugela front on 4 February, because Buller was launching a third attempt at breaking through to relieve Ladysmith, this time at Vaalkrans. Once at the scene, Botha immediately strengthened the Boer defences and intensified the artillery and rifle fire on the British forces that had occupied Vaalkrans. Buller lost his nerve and withdrew his forces from their favourable positions across the Tugela River, ensuring victory for Botha. Again, British losses were huge.⁴⁷

The retreat of the Transvalers, February to June 1900

In February 1900 the war tide turned against the Boers. This began with the relief of Kimberley by General French on the orders of the new British commander-in-chief, Lord Roberts, on 15 February, followed by General Piet Cronjé's surrender twelve days later with 4,000 burghers at Paardeberg, Buller's relief of Ladysmith the next day, and the occupation of the Free State capital, Bloemfontein, by Roberts on 13 March.

With these events both the western and southern fronts of the Boers collapsed. At the same time the Boers in Natal were forced to retreat. For the next six months the Boer forces were obliged to fall back constantly before the superior numbers of the British army, until the commencement of the guerrilla war phase over the entire operational area by September 1900.

Before Ladysmith Buller at last realised that the way to the town might be possible on his right flank, where Boer resistance was at its most vulnerable due to the almost indefensible terrain east of the Tugela River. After heavy losses Buller succeeded in breaking through the Boer lines on the Lower Tugela and relieving Ladysmith on 28 February.⁴⁸

Would Botha have been able to ward off the British onslaught successfully had he come down from his position at the Upper Tugela at an earlier opportunity to take over the command from the ailing Lucas Meyer at the Lower Tugela? The irony was that Meyer was officially in command on the Tugela front, having been appointed again by Joubert after returning to the front. As one of the English-speaking burghers, McKechnie, remarked to Ludwig Krause: 'It looks as if General Meyer and [Christiaan] Fourie are throwing away the whole thing. What a pity Louis Botha is not here!'⁴⁹ It is clear though that Buller's numerical superiority in men would have guaranteed success, provided he could exploit the Boer vulnerability along the Lower

Tugela. And this he did. Against his huge force of 28,000 men and eighty-five guns the Boers at the Lower Tugela could muster less than 3,000 men with eleven or twelve guns.

With the death of Joubert on 27 March 1900 President Kruger announced that it had been the wish of the commandant-general that he be succeeded by Louis Botha. According to the constitution, however, the commandant-general was to be elected by the burghers. Since it was not practically possible during the war, Botha was thus appointed acting commandant-general for the rest of the war. At this stage, at the age of 37 he was still by far the youngest Boer general.

In May 1900 Botha made unsuccessful attempts at Sand River and again at Rhenoster River in the Free State, to offer resistance to Roberts's advance towards Pretoria. It was Roberts's tried and tested tactics to use his cavalry to outflank the enemy with his superior numbers, together with the fact that the empty Free State plains did not offer good defensive positions for the Boers. These circumstances proved decisive.⁵⁰

The condition of the Boer horses played a part too. By this time many of the burghers were on foot and since mobility was an essential part of their way of war, they were therefore unwilling combatants. They left their positions as soon as they were threatened by encirclement. To apply the decision of a war council at Kroonstad of 17 March that the Boers should act offensively behind the British lines, required mobility, and this was now not possible. Moreover, daily their numbers dwindled. Between March and June 1900 between 12,000 and 14,000 discouraged burghers laid down their arms.⁵¹ General Jan Smuts later explained: 'It was everlasting retreat, retreat—wearying, dispirited retreat. At every stage of the retreat the Boer cause became more hopeless, the Boer army smaller in numbers, and the Boer resources more exhausted'.⁵² Without much resistance Roberts crossed the Vaal River into the Transvaal on 27 May, annexed the Free State as the Orange River Colony, brushed aside Botha's Transvalers, who nevertheless had given a good account of themselves at Klipriviersberg, Natalspruit and Doornkop, occupied Johannesburg on 31 May, and triumphantly rode into Pretoria—the Transvaal capital—on 5 June.⁵³

In assessing Botha's inability to check Roberts's advance and prevent the British occupation of Pretoria it can be stated that with the small number of men at his disposal, Botha could probably not have prevented these setbacks. Had he retreated to the Vaal River immediately after Kroonstad was occupied on 12 May, however, he might have delayed Roberts's advance by using the good positions the river offered. The late arrival of General Koos de la Rey with the western Transvaal commandos did not help Botha's cause.⁵⁴

Kruger had already left Pretoria for Machadodorp on 29 May.⁵⁵ For the last two years of the war the Transvaal and Free State governments (their presidents and executive councils) were destined to roam the veld.

Botha's attitude towards peace, May to June 1900

In the last week of May and the first two weeks of June 1900 Louis Botha for the first time became involved directly with discussions by the Boer leadership about peace. It seems as if Botha, like the other leaders, wavered for the moment, and that their moods changed rapidly from continuing the war, to making peace, and back again. On 25 May Kruger rejected Botha's plea to convene the Volksraad to discuss the desperate military situation. Six days later the chairman of the Volksraad, Lucas Meyer, made the same request. These developments alarmed Kruger and on 31 May he informed President M.T. Steyn of the Free State by telegram that most of the Transvaal officers and men were unwilling to continue fighting.⁵⁶

Steyn reacted sharply. Ending the war would mean a death-blow to the Afrikaner cause, he said. He pointed out that the Free State burghers had sunk into the same discouragement after the fall of Bloemfontein, but that they had overcome that. If Kruger and the Transvaal officers were determined to continue, the Transvaal burghers would take courage again. General Christiaan de Wet confronted Botha with similar arguments.⁵⁷

Shortly after the war, Jan Smuts commented eloquently on Steyn's reaction:

His answer meant two years more of war, the utter destruction of both Republics, losses in life and treasure compared with which the appalling losses of the preceding eight months were to dwindle into utter significance. Aye, but it meant also that every Boer that was to survive the death struggle, every child to be born in South Africa, was to have a prouder self-respect and a more erect carriage before the nations of the world.⁵⁸

It seems that the reaction by Steyn and De Wet inspired Botha and gave him renewed courage, because on the same day he confirmed his resolve to fight as long as he could assemble a commando.⁵⁹ That morning a war council of Transvaal officers passed a motion by twenty-nine votes to fourteen that the method of warfare be left to Botha.⁶⁰ If he had not been in complete military control before, he certainly was now.

Directly after the fall of Pretoria, Botha was approached a number of times on the matter of seeking peace. Although the initiative did not come from Roberts himself, he eagerly made use of these civilian mediators. It seems that they wanted both parties to believe that the other party desired contact. These mediators included L.F. de Souza, secretary of the Transvaal's department of the commandant-general, J.S. Smit, commissioner of railways, J.F. de Beer, chief inspector of offices in the Transvaal, and Mrs Annie Botha herself.⁶¹

It is not difficult to explain why these officials approached the commandant-general rather than President Kruger in the first week of June. The president was at Machadodorp, 220 kilometres away, while Botha was more accessible, being only 30 kilometres east of Pretoria, where he was preparing for battle in the Magaliesberg range. It is clear that by this time, Botha was increasingly seen as the political leader, the decision maker, rather than the 74-year-old Kruger or Vice President Schalk Burger.

Mrs Botha had meanwhile reported back on the content of their discussions to Roberts. Ten years later Louis Botha declared that what his wife had said to Roberts was exactly what he himself had said in public shortly before the British occupation of Pretoria—that he was prepared to talk about peace, 'but that I would under no circumstances surrender unconditionally'.⁶²

Why did Mrs Botha visit Roberts for any other reason than hoping for peace? The answer we find with Harold Spender, who commented on a later peace effort of hers: 'If General Botha did not despair of war, Mrs. Botha did not despair of peace. The perseverance of this noble woman as a peacemaker is one of the most romantic and thrilling episodes in the last phases of this war'.⁶³ She was to be a mediator again.

On 12 June, the second day of the Battle of Diamond Hill, Roberts formally made a peace offer to Botha. His answer was that he would seriously consider it and requested an armistice to consult his officers and his government. Roberts and Botha could not agree on the conditions, whereupon Botha broke down negotiations.⁶⁴

What was Botha's attitude to peace between the end of May and the middle of June 1900? Scholtz is of the opinion that Botha was not a steadfast person and that he lacked moral courage.⁶⁵ It is more probable that in this case and all other cases where Botha was to be involved in peace discussions, he was in favour of peace, but not at all costs, and definitely did not support surrendering unconditionally. Up to this point peace or no peace was the issue at stake, not conditions for peace.

In the next few months, the Transvalers were compelled to retreat twice—after the Battles of Diamond Hill (11–12 June 1900) and Dalmanutha (21–27 August 1900). Botha could not really have prevented this in any way. In both battles the British with their superior numbers found vulnerable spots in the thin Boer lines, and retreat was inevitable in order not to be cut off by the British cavalry. Botha was of the opinion that the heavy British shelling and their superior number of guns was also a major factor in smashing Boer resistance.⁶⁶

Botha's military activities and his attitude to peace, August 1900 to March 1901

Convinced that the enemy had been defeated, Roberts annexed the Transvaal on behalf of Britain on 1 September 1900.⁶⁷ Hereby any chance that Britain would in the

future acknowledge the independence of the republics in peace discussions vanished. Three weeks later British columns reached the Portuguese East African border. Seemingly, the entire Transvaal south of the Delagoa Bay railway was in British hands. And yet, in reality it was not the case.

At the end of August 1900 Steyn with his Free State government joined Kruger at Waterval-Onder. Botha, who had just been driven off at Dalmanutha, proposed to Kruger that, although he had stood firm up to that point, they should make use of Steyn's presence 'to bring this matter to an end'. He added that it was not out of cowardice, but because of the circumstances, and that General Ben Viljoen was of the same opinion.⁶⁸ Botha explained to Steyn that he did not want to end the war during his retreat—he wanted to dig in his heels and only then negotiate.⁶⁹ As the responsible commandant-general he was ready for peace, but not at all costs. A more powerful position could ensure better terms. This view he would hold consistently.

At a joint meeting of the two republican governments on 28 August it was decided unanimously after some 'unpleasant discussions', that negotiations about peace were out of the question.⁷⁰ This was not the first and would not be the last time that the republics decided to continue the war—evidently because of Steyn's unyielding stance. The meeting decided to send Kruger to Europe to further the Boer cause there. His age prevented him from remaining with the burghers in the field. Schalk Burger was appointed acting president.⁷¹

In a telephone conversation with Kruger on the evening of 27 August Botha announced that the only way the Boer resistance could continue was to adopt a fully-fledged guerrilla war.⁷² This method of warfare was applied for the remainder of the war. In the course of September and October 1900, after careful planning, Botha divided the Transvaal into four sections in preparation for the proposed guerrilla war.⁷³ He personally would command the area on the eastern Transvaal highveld south of the Delagoa Bay railway. The commandos were sent back to their respective home districts and split into small groups for easier concealment. The burghers were familiar with their own areas and preferred it that way.⁷⁴ As General Ben Viljoen noted: 'It was better ... to keep our men somewhere near their [own] districts, for even from a strategical point of view they were better there, knowing every nook and cranny, which enabled them to find exactly where to hide in case of danger'.⁷⁵ When an isolated British column was sighted, the commando would be re-assembled immediately for a surprise attack, but if the advancing British column was deemed too strong, the commando was simply to step aside.⁷⁶ This was certainly not a strategy invented by Botha himself—it had been followed by General De Wet in the Free State as early as 31 March 1900 at Sannaspost and at Roodewal on 7 June. In fact, these tactics had been considered as a possible strategy earlier in the war. In the time of crisis with the British occupation of Pretoria, Kruger advised Botha that when

the British sent out their columns, the Transvaal commandos should attack them as De Wet had been doing in the Free State.⁷⁷

With Kruger on his way to Europe and a vacillating Acting President in Schalk Burger at the head of the government, from September 1900 Botha, who as commandant-general was a member of the executive council, almost seamlessly was in political control of the Transvaal war effort as well—a development that in effect had begun after the fall of Pretoria in June 1900. He soon showed his keen understanding of military matters with the new emphasis on discipline, something sorely lacking in the commandos previously.

As part of the general attempt to improve discipline, on 4 September 1900 the Transvaal government implemented Act No. 5 of 1900, by which the size of commandos, field-cornetcies and corporalships was determined. All assistant-generals, combat-generals and commandants were to be appointed by the commandant-general, all field-cornets by the commandant with the approval of the commandant-general, and all corporals by the field-cornet with the approval of the commandant and commandant-general.⁷⁸ Hence the practice of electing commandants and lower ranking officers was abolished. In future, capable officers would lead the commandos and there was no room for popular but incompetent officers. President Steyn and his Free State government were present at the discussions, and they agreed to adopt the same measures.⁷⁹

These measures had a positive effect on military discipline.⁸⁰ Oskar Hintrager, a German volunteer who accompanied President Steyn to Waterval-Onder, noted in his diary at this time: 'It seems as if there is at least some fighting under Botha and that discipline is being gradually implemented'.⁸¹ The improved discipline and the role Botha played in this did not escape the notice of the burghers either. In the northern Transvaal Ludwig Krause spoke of a new spirit which caught on among them by October 1900. He found that discipline and strict obedience in reaction to orders were becoming the rule and that the burghers were resolved to fight to the last man. Louis Botha, he said, was determined to have competent officers.⁸² Krause was more or less correct in his assessment and Botha dismissed no fewer than seven generals who had taken part in the Battle of Diamond Hill in June 1900. In their place he appointed several able generals and combat-generals, notably Christiaan Beyers, Ben Viljoen, Coen Brits, Chris Muller and Gert Gravett.⁸³ However, some of the officers who were dismissed were later reappointed to a lower rank,⁸⁴ showing that Botha was not entirely successful in this respect.

Botha entrusted the logistics of food supply in the guerrilla phase to the individual commandos. With the commandos, field-cornetcies and corporalships assigned to their own districts it was merely practical that they find their own way of obtaining provisions. Because of the British scorched earth policy, whereby thousands of homesteads and crops were destroyed, livestock killed or removed, and civilians

carted off to concentration camps, it proved to be far easier to find sufficient food for fifteen men of a corporalship than for an entire commando.⁸⁵

As Garcia maintains, Botha attempted 'to balance political, strategic and tactical matters with the broader organisational requirements of the Boer force and went to great lengths to maintain an organised and united chain between his subordinate commanders'. This, he adds, extended from the tactical sphere to the strategic level: 'Before embarking on operations, Botha wrote specific orders; and in terms of negotiations with the British, Botha required a formal and fixed channel of command so that one united voice and message could be delivered'.⁸⁶

Botha also displayed his skill in carrying out a number of raids on British columns, making use of the renowned mobility of the commandos. In December 1900 he personally led the attacks on British detachments at Utrecht, Wakkerstroom and Vryheid, followed on 7 January 1901 by attacks on various posts on the Delagoa Bay railway. The attacks were too isolated to have good effect.⁸⁷ Botha's attack on Major-General H.L. Smith-Dorrien's 19th Brigade at Lake Chrissie on 6 February was warded off with heavy casualties on both sides.⁸⁸

Applying Boer guerrilla strategy, Botha offered little resistance against Kitchener's great drives in early 1901 in his sector on the eastern Transvaal highveld between the Delagoa Bay and Natal railway lines. The scorched earth policy meant, however, that a prosperous part of the Transvaal had been laid waste.⁸⁹ This was beginning to overshadow the success the Boers, including Botha, were able to pocket.

Between September 1900 and February 1901 Botha was again placed under enormous pressure to end the war. Roberts personally sent at least five letters to him, pointing out the hopelessness of the Boer cause and advising him to end the struggle.⁹⁰ Botha declined these invitations. He also rejected with contempt the attempts by individuals, among others by businessman Sammy Marks whereby Roberts and then Kitchener were involved. It was also painful to Botha when in January 1901 Kitchener sent the aged former president M.W. Pretorius to influence Botha for peace. Humiliating, too, was a letter in January 1901 from the 'Burgher Peace Committee', which had been raised by Kitchener from prominent burghers who had laid down their arms and had started to collaborate with the British authorities. For them Botha's message was: 'It is impossible for me to negotiate with traitors and I can even say murderers of their people'.⁹¹

Clearly gleaning from his intelligence sources that Botha was more disposed to peace negotiations than his fellow generals, Kitchener invited him—again with Annie Botha as mediator—for peace talks in Middelburg.⁹² Botha accepted, stating that nobody desired peace more than he did.⁹³

From the outset there had been an agreement between Kruger and Steyn that neither of the two governments would accept peace or open negotiations with the

British without permission of the other.⁹⁴ Botha informed Steyn and De Wet of his intended meeting with Kitchener. Acting President Burger also gave notice to Steyn, adding that it could do no harm to find out the British attitude without the Boers committing themselves.⁹⁵

It did do harm. Botha had accepted Kitchener's invitation before the Transvaal leaders informed their Free State allies. For Kitchener it clearly had become evident that the way to peace was to lead via the Transvaal leaders, of which Botha was an important component.

On 28 February 1901 Kitchener and Botha met at Middelburg. Kitchener made it clear that in case of peace the republics would not retain their independence. Botha indicated that the Boers could still hold out for a lengthy period. 'He tried very hard for some kind of independence', Kitchener afterwards reported to the Secretary of State for War, St. John Brodrick.⁹⁶ On 7 March the British government responded with their conditions for peace. The most important point was that the republics were to lose their independence and become British colonies.⁹⁷

Botha had heard what he wanted to know. In case of peace the republics would lose their independence. They would be granted representative government and later responsible government. For the first time he had the opportunity to learn the British viewpoint on peace and could decide accordingly whether peace was an option or not.

Although Botha dominated the Transvaal government by this time, he did not want to decide on peace on his own. He preferred to consult with other leaders. He therefore corresponded with General De la Rey in the western Transvaal but met with no encouragement.⁹⁸ For the Transvaal government too, the conditions were totally unacceptable.⁹⁹ Thereupon Botha informed Kitchener on 16 March that he and his chief officers and government were completely in agreement that the conditions were unacceptable.¹⁰⁰ He was probably influenced by the notion that the Free State government was dead against peace without independence.

Mistrusting their Transvaal allies, the Free State government demanded a meeting with the Transvaal government and De Wet and Botha. On 15 April the issue of peace was discussed at Klip River in the Vrede district. It was decided unanimously to continue the struggle.¹⁰¹ As before and in the cases hereafter 'unanimously' clearly meant that a minority gave way for the sake of a united front. Botha's viewpoint is not known.

Botha's attitude to peace initiatives in May and June 1901

In May and June 1901 Transvaal leaders again discussed peace. At De Emigratie in the Ermelo district on 10 May 1901 the Transvaal government and Generals Louis

Botha, Ben Viljoen, Jan Smuts and Chris Botha decided to request Kitchener to allow that two delegates be sent to Kruger in the Netherlands to discuss the war situation and inquire about diplomatic intervention from Europe. At the same time, they sent a letter in a very pessimistic tone to the Free State government, in which they mentioned their contact with Kitchener, and informed them that a continuation of the struggle had become impossible.¹⁰²

In his reply Steyn was highly indignant. It was barely a month after they had decided solemnly to continue the struggle. Nothing had happened in the meantime that could justify the tone of the letter. He also disapproved of the request to Kitchener, because thereby they had exposed their hand to the enemy.¹⁰³

Nonetheless, the Transvaal government went ahead. Kitchener was not prepared to allow the delegates through to Kruger, but instead granted Smuts permission on 3 June to send a message in code via the Dutch consul in the Transvaal. In his message Smuts indicated that their cause was 'in a truly fearful position'. He supplied grim detail, remarking that the republics had become a wasteland. In conclusion he requested some advice from Kruger as to what they should do.¹⁰⁴

The Transvaal government received Kruger's reaction on 13 June. He indicated that (diplomatic) intervention was out of the question. Nevertheless, he expressed the hope that the republics would persevere, except if it was absolutely impossible to continue.¹⁰⁵

In his memoirs Steyn expressed his disappointment about the negative content of the message to Kruger.¹⁰⁶ He realised he had to intervene again. At the new meeting of the republican governments and main officers at Waterval in the Standerton district on 19 and 20 June 1901, though, he was surprised to find that the general sentiment was that the war be continued with force. It was particularly the victories of General Jan Kemp at Vlakfontein on 29 May and General Chris Muller at Wilmansrust on 12 June near Bethal and Kruger's plea for perseverance that lifted spirits.¹⁰⁷

Minutes of the meeting at Waterval do not exist, but it appears that the decision to continue the war was a majority decision. This is what we learn from a letter by Viljoen to Botha in February 1902 where he mentioned that the two of them were of the opinion at Waterval that they should try and get 'an honourable peace'.¹⁰⁸

Then Kitchener had a stroke of luck. On 11 July 1901 a British column surprised the Free State government in the town of Reitz. Steyn managed to escape, but his entire government was taken prisoner. The government papers fell into British hands, including the damning correspondence with the Transvaal government of May 1901. Kitchener had this printed and distributed among the Boers in the field.¹⁰⁹

Botha's activities in the field, July 1901 to May 1902

Strategic considerations were always important to Botha. Between July and September 1901, he was active in visiting and encouraging his commandos.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, to coincide with Smuts' invasion of the Cape Colony in September 1901 it was decided at Waterval that Botha would perform a second invasion of Natal. This would lure British troops out of the Transvaal and relieve the pressure on the commandos on the highveld. It would also illustrate to Kitchener the determination of the Boer leaders to continue the war as decided at Waterval. Moreover, it would give encouragement to the burghers after a proclamation by Kitchener on 7 August 1901 whereby all Boer officers and members of government who did not surrender before 15 September would be banished permanently from South Africa.¹¹¹

But a full Buffalo River, and the presence of 20,000 British troops that had been rushed to the scene, barring their entrance, made Botha's invasion of Natal with his 1,700 burghers from the south-eastern Transvaal impossible. He did succeed in applying the new Boer method of attack on 17 September at Bloedrivierspoort by having the men charge on horseback, firing from the saddle, and then proceed on foot to take the enemy camp. The booty of British Lee Metford rifles and ammunition and horses was extremely valuable. Botha's charge on horseback, firing from the saddle, was not the first time in the war that the Boers had implemented such tactics—at least as early as 29 May 1901, General Jan Kemp under General Koos de la Rey had done so in the western Transvaal¹¹²—but under Botha such tactics also proved highly successful.

With his simultaneous attacks on the British posts at Itala and Fort Prospect nine days later, Botha was unable to break through to Natal, despite inflicting heavy British casualties. After skilfully having given the pursuing British columns the slip during his retreat, he and his commandos were back in the Ermelo district by middle October.¹¹³

Still, Botha's expedition was not without success. He reached his goal by creating a major diversion, which drew many British troops from other parts of the country and relieved the pressure on the Boers on the highveld. And, as D.M. Moore indicates: 'The total effect of these actions was to boost the morale of the Boer fighters still in the field and to give them confidence in their ability further to resist the British'.¹¹⁴ Important too is the assessment of the *Times History*: 'After two years of war, Botha was able to assert and, in spite of damaging checks, to maintain to the end of the operations a moral ascendancy'.¹¹⁵

Botha made up for the disappointment of the failed invasion of Natal by achieving a brilliant victory over Lieutenant-Colonel George Benson—one of the most competent

British officers in the war—in the Battle of Bakenlaagte on 30 October 1901. With tactical skill he encircled the British column, attacking it at the very moment that two wagons got stuck in the mud. He then used the proven method of charging on horseback and following it up on foot while keeping up a deadly rifle fire. Bakenlaagte was one of the greatest Boer successes in the final year of the war.¹¹⁶

Botha's role at the Peace of Vereeniging

Eventually the peace of Vereeniging was signed on 31 May 1902. The first move was a note from the Dutch Prime Minister, Dr. Abraham Kuyper, to the British government on 25 January 1902, offering his government's service as mediator for an interchange of thoughts on peace. Kitchener sent copies of the correspondence to the Transvaal government.¹¹⁷

It is noteworthy that Kitchener sent the correspondence only to Burger and not to Steyn as well. In his memoirs Steyn was of the opinion that Kitchener purposefully had overlooked him and had rather made contact with the leaders who in the past had been inclined to negotiate about peace.¹¹⁸

This led to a meeting of sixty delegates—thirty from each republic—at Vereeniging between 15 and 31 May where the conditions in the two republics were put under scrutiny. Most delegates declared that conditions were pitiful in their districts, but that there was still hope of continuing the war.

Botha's role was to prove crucial. He painted a gloomy picture of the situation in the south-eastern Transvaal in regard to the availability of wheat, slaughter-stock and horses, the limitations of movement placed on the commandos by the blockhouse lines, and the threat posed by hostile black groups for both the commandos and the Boer women and children roaming the highveld and the Natal border area. Of special concern was the murder of 56 burghers of the Vryheid commando (Botha's district) at Holkrans (Mthashana) by a Qulusi impi just more than a week before.¹¹⁹

At the evening session of 16 May Botha was resolute:

It has been said that we must fight 'to the bitter end', but no one tells us where that bitter end is ... In my opinion we must not consider the time when everyone lies in his grave as the 'bitter end'. If we do so, and act upon that view, we become the cause of the death of our people. Is the bitter end not there, where the people have struggled till they can struggle no more?¹²⁰

In support of Botha the immediate reaction of De la Rey—who throughout the war had been seen as the unshakeable champion of continuing the struggle—can be considered a turning point in the discussions. Taking the argument further about the bitter end, he stated:

It is argued that we must fight to the bitter end. The Commandant General has asked whether that bitter end has arrived ... It must be borne in mind that everything—cattle, goods, money, man, woman and child—has been sacrificed ... Is this not the bitter end? ... Therefore I think that the time for negotiating has now arrived.¹²¹

On 17 May a delegation of five Boer leaders, which included Botha, held discussions with Milner and Kitchener in Pretoria. Milner, Smuts and Hertzog formed a committee to draw up a draft with peace proposals. These were sent to the British government. On 28 May the final British proposals were received to which the sixty Boer delegates at Vereeniging simply had to vote 'yes' or 'no'. The most important points were:¹²²

1. The burgher forces will lay down their arms and recognise King Edward VII as their lawful sovereign.
2. Representative government and, as soon as circumstances permit, responsible government, will be introduced.
3. The question of granting the franchise to black people will not be decided until after the introduction of responsible government.
4. £3 million will be made available for the repatriation of civilians to their homes and supplying those who, owing to war losses, are unable to provide for themselves, with food, shelter, and the necessary seed, stock, implements, &c.

Three more days of discussion at Vereeniging followed. Botha's final plea for peace was forceful: 'If we are convinced that our cause is hopeless, it is a question whether we have the right to allow one more burgher to be shot. Our object must be to act in the interest of our people'.¹²³

The die was cast. On 31 May it was decided by fifty-four votes against six to accept the British peace proposals, whereby the republics lost their independence.¹²⁴ That evening Botha was one of ten Boer representatives who signed the Peace of Vereeniging with Kitchener and Milner in Pretoria. His enormous role in the South African War had come to an end.

Conclusion

In this study General Louis Botha's role in the South African War was assessed in three main areas: how he fared as commander in the set-piece battle phase in the first eleven months of the war; how he performed as commander in the guerrilla phase in the last two years of the war; and his involvement with the peace discussions in the final two years of the war.

His success in the set-piece battle phase can in the first place be attributed to his eye for terrain. He showed his keen tactical ability by placing the trenches on the banks of the Tugela River at Colenso. It surprised the British and prevented them from ascertaining where the Boers were positioned. His choice of where to dig the Boer trenches deserves the same praise as that accorded to General De la Rey, who was the mastermind behind the Boer trenches for the Battle of Magersfontein on 11 December 1899 on the western front. There is no evidence that Botha had any contact with De la Rey in their simultaneous preparation for conflict at Colenso and Magersfontein respectively. Botha's magnetic personality, his will-power and untiring visits on horseback to their positions truly inspired the burghers. His greatest victory was at Spioenkop, where his thorough planning and capable guidance to both the burghers and the artillery ensured success.

His success in the guerrilla phase did not have the same impact as his celebrated victories on the Tugela front. His commandos were relatively too inactive, although avoiding military contact with the numerically stronger British columns had become the Boer strategy throughout the operational area, only attacking a British column with a surprise swoop when the enemy was in a vulnerable position.

Between May 1900 and May 1902 Botha was involved in several peace initiatives. These were discussions among the Transvalers themselves, initiatives involving the Free State government, initiatives that had their origin with the British commanders-in-chief Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener, initiatives by private individuals, mostly initiated by Roberts or Kitchener, and eventually discussions with the British high command, ending in the Peace of Vereeniging. The internal discussions and consultation with the Free State government were about the desirability for peace, whereas the discussions with Kitchener at Middelburg and Kitchener and Milner in Pretoria were about the peace conditions.

Since the Middelburg discussions with Kitchener in February 1901 Botha increasingly realised that his preference for peace and with it probably a loss of independence, was—for the sake of unanimity—secondary to the majority sentiment. The negative reports at Vereeniging on the conditions in the republics eventually gave him the opportunity to state decisively that the bitter end had come. By raising the issue that the bitter end had come he gave the cue to De la Rey. And when that die-hard champion of keeping-up the struggle backed him, the mood of the meeting changed towards acceptance of the British peace proposals.

Of his comrade in arms and in politics, Jan Smuts later remarked:

I saw him under the most severe tests that can be applied to a human being—tests which would have revealed and brought out any flaws in his inner composition. And it is the way he stood all these tests and showed real greatness of soul that has made

him quite outstanding in my memories of the great men whom I have known and worked with.¹²⁵

Louis Botha's prominent role in the South African War was the beginning of a remarkable career of service for South Africa. In 1907 he became prime minister of the Transvaal Colony when it was granted responsible government, and in 1910 he was appointed as the first prime minister of the Union of South Africa when the Cape Colony, Natal and the two former Boer republics were united in a single state. He retained this prominent position until his death on 27 August 1919.

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Notes

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