

THE ANGLO-ZULU WAR OF 1879 -

AN EVALUATIVE REVIEW

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Prologue

The January issue of *Reality* (Vol. 11 No. 1) was devoted to a series of articles on the origins, conduct and aftermath of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. The Editorial Board have in their wisdom requested me to write an evaluative review of that issue of *Reality*.

Reality must be congratulated on its apparently lonely efforts to re-examine the history of the Zulu people during the period of the war "in the light of facts kept hidden or glossed over in the past" (editorial). During the past 100 years most historians of the Anglo-Zulu War have indeed done a thorough and efficient job in either hiding, glossing over or blatantly distorting facts pertaining to this war. Consequently many myths pertaining to the war have found their way into history classrooms in the length and breadth of our country. A frank discussion about the war will therefore in the words of the editorial, "dispel some of the myths which history teachers have, no doubt unwittingly, helped to sustain these hundred years."

A cursory examination of the articles in the January issue of *Reality* reveals that the authors have touched on three main aspects, namely: (i) The white man's view of the War. (ii) Causes of the War and (iii) aftermath of the War.

1. The White Man's view of the War

John Wright's introductory article clearly portrays the white man's view of the war in terms of which British aggression against and invasion of the Zulu kingdom is seen as a triumph of British Civilization over Zulu savagery. This view is indeed prevalent especially amongst historians of the colonial era. The fact is that Zulu warriors who fell in 1879 were defending the territorial integrity and sovereignty of their kingdom against the aggression of the British Government — a government which they had for years regarded as a friendly neighbour and protector. Bishop Colenso's highly introspective sermon delivered two months after Isandlwana is precise on this point:

"I repeat the question, Wherein, in our invasion of Zululand, have we shown that we are men who love mercy? Did we not lay upon the people heavily, from the very moment we crossed their border, the terrible scourge of war? Have we not killed already, it is said 5,000 human beings, and plundered 10,000 head of cattle? . . . Have we not heard how the wail has gone up in all parts of the country for those who have bravely and nobly died in repelling the invader and fighting for their king and fatherland?" (p.7). Colenso's pointed question. "And shall we kill 10,000 more to avenge the losses of that dreadful day?" was decisively answered by British officials and their answer was the subsequent battles of Hlobane, Khambule and Ulundi. There is clearly a crying need for a critical study of the actions of certain British officials (notably Sir Bartle Frere) during the war who allowed, greed, hypocrisy and a lust for cheap and short-lived honour to dictate the pattern of their relations with the Zulu kingdom.

Jeff Guy (pp. 8-13) takes a broader and essentially original view of the war and shows how the distorted and sometimes blatantly false reports of British officials have misled generations of western writers. He sees the war for what it really was: "a calculated attack by the most powerful nation in the World, made to bring about certain changes in the social and political order in Southern Africa," and the machiavelian tactics used in this attack are also clearly high-lighted: ". . . solemn pledges were broken, and lies were propagated, by men who are still described as upright and true by historians".

One finds little fault with Guy's "holistic" view of the war, including his thesis that the war must be seen within the framework of the needs of developing capitalism in Southern Africa coupled with British imperialistic tendencies which were embodied in Lord Carnarvon's confederation scheme.

Of particular interest to all historians is Guy's questioning of the importance of the British military victory at Ulundi. It is interesting to note that Zulu oral tradition appears to support Guy's view in that it attributes the British victory at Ulundi only to the failure of the Zulu forces to heed King Cetshwayo's advice. It is such a pity that modern historical research methodology is still loathe to accept traditional oral narratives as reliable historical primary sources. As long as this state of affairs persists the complete story of the Anglo-Zulu War and indeed the whole history of the Zulu people shall never be told. According to oral tradition King Cetshwayo, a seasoned military strategist, had warned his generals the day before Ulundi that the British would send only a small force to test the Zulu strength and also to select a suitable site for the battle that was to come. He warned his forces against engaging British troops on the open plains and suggested that they should rather adopt guerilla tactics in the rugged terrain. The King was, however, overruled by his Generals and young Zulu national servicemen all of whom rightly thought that Ulundi was to be a serious British onslaught. Had the King's advice (wrong as it was) been heeded British troops would have found it very difficult to annihilate the Zulu army within a short time in rugged terrain. This narrative is supported by W. H. Longcast in an article published in the *Cape Times* of 11 September 1879 and also quoted by C. T. Binns (*The last Zulu King: The Life and Death of Cetshwayo* p.165).

The fact quoted by Guy that British riflemen only fired an average of 6,4 rounds each could best be explained by the assumption that other Zulu regiments might have heeded the King's warning that the British would send only a small force and therefore decided to remain in their barracks during the battle.

As another reason why he feels that Ulundi was not such a great military victory as it was made out to be, Guy quotes the fact that King Cetshwayo was only captured in August — about a month after the Battle of Ulundi.

While this may be so, we should not ignore the fact that

one important reason for the delay in the capture of King Cetshwayo was the remarkable loyalty of the Zulus to their King as exemplified in their total and uniform refusal to disclose his hiding place. Longcast who accompanied Lord Gifford in the search for the King remarks:

"We could get nothing from the Zulus. We were treated the same at every kraal. I had been a long time in Zululand. I knew the people and their habits, and although I believed they would be true to their King, I never expected such devotion. Nothing would move them. Neither the loss of their cattle, the fear of death, or the offering of large bribes would make them false to their King". (Binns p.169).

On the whole, Guy's approach is praiseworthy in that he attempts to open up new horizons in the search for a just and historically balanced estimate of the Anglo-Zulu War.

2. The Causes of the War:

There is little comment one could make on Peter Colenbrander's article since it is, in his own words, based mostly on A History of Natal by Brookes & Webb and Cope's unpublished M.A. dissertation entitled "Shepstone and Cetshwayo 1873-79." His narrative also coincides with Binn's account. In his concluding paragraph, Colenbrander intimates, without, however, substantiating his point, that the Zulus were also not blameless in this war. To my knowledge there has never been any historical evidence to prove that the Zulus had at any one time acted aggressively against Natal. On the contrary, King Cetshwayo had strictly avoided invading Natal even when he had the opportunity to do so. Further, after Isandlwana, King Cetshwayo sent messengers to Lord Chelmsford in an attempt to start negotiations for the ending of hostilities. These overtures were spurned by Lord Chelmsford who was bent on revenging the British defeat.

3. Aftermath of the War:

The capture of King Cetshwayo and his subsequent imprisonment in Cape Town led to the disintegration of the Zulu Kingdom and the advent of internal rivalries within the kingdom. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that this is exactly what the British officials were aiming at when they deliberately went out of their way to humiliate the king's senior advisers like Chief Mnyamana Buthelezi (the King's Prime Minister) who was placed under Chief Hamu's jurisdiction, and Prince Ndabuko (the King's brother) who was placed under Chief Zibhebhu and later under John Dunn. Further the British officials' blatant favouritism in respect of Chief Zibhebhu and Chief Hamu did not go unnoticed by Zulus who were still loyal to the King. This is further confirmed by King Cetshwayo's old headmen who once remarked as follows to the white officials: "We are not killed so much by Zibhebhu as by your White House. You have placed our section of the Zulu nation aside. You have taken into your special favour Zibhebhu and his people. With you Zibhebhu can do no wrong. Our King may not fight nor lift a hand. Zibhebhu may do as he likes, it is winked at, an official reprimand is made to him as a matter of routine but he suffers no real check". (Binns p. 210).

When the King returned from captivity it became clear that the terms for his return were designed to make it impossible for him to avoid a further conflict within his depleted kingdom. This British strategy also did not go unnoticed by Zulu leaders. During the King's second coronation at Emtonjaneni Prince Dabulamanzi delivered a remarkably prophetic speech which he addressed to Sir Theophilus Shepstone: "We thank you Sir, for bringing him (King Cetshwayo) back to us. But since it is we of the Reserve who came down to the Authorities in Maritzburg praying for him and saying This Chief and that Chief are troubling us, but we cannot fight them since they too are Cetshwayo's people, 'tell us now who are these 'dissatisfied

ones' for whom you are cutting off the land? Do you say that you are restoring him, this son of the Queen while all the time you are destroying him, just as you did formerly? Sir, you are killing him still as you did before when you made him king and then killed him. Show us these dissatisfied ones' for whom you are cutting off our land, who do not wish for the King.

Do you say that we are to move? Where will you put us since you are eating up all Cetshwayo's land? Tell us where you fix Zibhebhu's boundaries. Why do you give the land to the very people who have been killing us? Do you approve of their bloodshedding? You have come to kill him, not restore him." (Binns p.202). Campbell supports this view. "Fair play is a jewel which has been utterly lacking in the treatment Cetshwayo has received since his restoration". (Binns p.210).

Prince Dabulamanzi was proved right for in 1883 Chief Zibhebhu's Mandlakazi faction got engaged in battle with the King's Usuthu faction and in the process the King's Ulundi kraal was devastated and he himself was stabbed in the thigh by Chief Zibhebhu's men. The King fled to Nkandla where he found refuge with Chief Sigamanda Ncube in the Nkandla Forest. He was later persuaded to return to Eshowe where he died in February 1884.

Dick Cloete's assignment (pp. 20-23) has been the most difficult of all the others. To trace the fate of the Zulu people from 1879 to the present is no mean task. One glaring short coming in Cloete's article is that it conveys the false impression that political activity among the Zulus ended with the banning of the African National Congress in the 60's. The fact is that the struggle for liberation goes on unabated. Chief M. G. Buthelezi, grandson of Chief Mnyamana Buthelezi (King Cetshwayo's Prime Minister and Commander-in-chief) and great grand son of King Cetshwayo is now at the helm of the liberation struggle. Through Inkatha Yenkululeko Yesizwe of which he is President he has not only intensified the liberation struggle but he has also broadened it to include all oppressed black people in the country. The 200,000 strong Inkatha Movement has already spread its tentacles to the four provinces of the Republic and 40% of its membership is non-Zulu. One historical incident that many political commentators conveniently ignore is that Inkatha has already played a crucial role in thwarting the Pretoria Government's designs to deprive 5 million Zulus of their South African citizenship.

During the last KwaZulu elections Inkatha won 100% of the Legislative Assembly seats on the ticket of total rejection of independence for KwaZulu. Inkatha has also stood its ground against attempts by some officials of the now defunct Department of Information who have over the years tried unsuccessfully to form pseudo-opposition parties in KwaZulu with an aim of grooming puppet leaders who would sheepishly toe the Government line and plunge KwaZulu into so called independence and thus declare 5 million souls stateless in the land of their birth.

Last, but not least, Inkatha has participated in the formation of one of the most powerful black political alliances ever to be witnessed in South Africa – the South African Black Alliance. In this way Inkatha has joined forces with the Labour Party of South Africa (Coloured) the Reform Party (Indian) the Inyandza Party (Swazi) and the Dikoankwentla Party (Sotho) with an aim of forcing the Government to heed the united voice of the oppressed black masses. The enormous power wielded by the South African Black Alliance keeps on increasing each year as more political groupings join in large numbers.

So it is that Inkatha under the leadership of Chief Buthelezi has earned itself an undisputed role in the black liberation struggle in the 70's, and no perceptive political observer can deny the fact that any South African political dispensation that tries to ignore Inkatha and Chief Buthelezi shall never see the light of day.

Conclusion:

I am rather disappointed that not a single article amongst those evaluated conveys a spirit of reconciliation between Zulu and Briton and between black and white. The Zulus defeated the British at Isandlwana and the British in turn defeated the Zulus at Ulundi. However, wars are wars and history is studded with accounts of enemy nations which have emerged from opposing battlefronts to become mutual partners in the creation of a just society. Let it be with us after the Anglo-Zulu War, the Battle of Blood River, and

all the other holocausts we have had to witness in this part of the continent of Africa. □

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