

A Masterly Display of Fence-sitting

The Role of the Swazi in the Anglo-Zulu War

By Ian Knight

When, in the aftermath of the British ultimatum of 11 December 1878, King Cetshwayo sent his messenger, Sintwangu, to ask for clarification of their terms, Sintwangu returned with a surprisingly precise appreciation of the British threat. The British, he said, were massing on the borders of the Zulu kingdom, and were poised to invade from several points. One column, he feared, would arrive by sea; another would advance across the Thukela at the Lower Drift, another from kwaNtunjambili at Middle Drift, and another from Rorke's Drift. The Boers were said to be ready to advance from the Ncaka Mountain, near the village of Luneburg, while 'the Amaswazi would enter by the Pongolo'. (1)

This strategic assessment was in all essentials correct. Although the British did not attempt a landing on the Zululand coast, this was largely due to the absence of a viable port; British warships had certainly patrolled the coast in the immediate run-up to the invasion, and once the war was under-way they did indeed establish a landing stage for provisions at Port Durnford. Certainly, Lt. Gen. Lord Chelmsford's plans called for British troops to be concentrated at the Lower, Middle and Rorke's Drifts, while his No. 5 Column, under Col. Hugh Rowlands, was placed at the hamlet of Derby, on the Transvaal/Swazi border. The presence of a strong British garrison at Luneburg can have only helped to encourage the belief that a further invasion might be expected from that point.

Yet in one respect King Cetshwayo's fears would prove unfounded. Despite long-standing rivalry with the Zulu kingdom, and indeed despite the best endeavours of British agents to make them do so, the Swazi did not commit themselves to support the British invasion. As the guardians to the northern gateway to Zululand, their role was of the greatest strategic importance, yet their part in the war would prove deeply ambiguous. Although the principle objective of the Swazi king, Mbandzeni, was to preserve, as one distinguished historian has described it, 'a truly masterly display of fence-sitting', (2) large numbers of Swazis would in fact fight on both sides. Indeed, one of the most dynamic and ruthless commanders on the Zulu side was in fact a Swazi prince.

These divisions within the Swazi community owed much to the tangled history of the two states, and to over-lapping territorial claims on the turbulent north-western borders of Zululand. The Swazi kingdom had emerged under the leadership of the Dlamini chiefdom early in the nineteenth-century, at much the same time as the Zulu. For much of its history it lived under the threat of two powerful neighbours, the Zulu to the south, and, from the 1830s, the Boers of the Transvaal republic (Z.A.R.) to the west. Both groups periodically tried to claim sovereignty over the Swazi, but by a skilful mixture of diplomacy and occasional military force, the Swazi had avoided being dominated by either. In the early part of the kingdom's history, the Swazi were vulnerable to attacks from the Zulu kings Shaka and Dingane, but under the dynamic leadership of King Mswati waSobhuza in the 1840s and 50s the Swazi were able to pursue a successful expansionist policy that earned them a formidable reputation as warriors. This consolidation of the Swazi state had taken place at a time when the Zulu threat had been weakened by Dingane's destructive wars with the Boer Voortrekkers (1838-40), and by his successor Mpande's preoccupation with repairing the internal damage that had been the result of that conflict.

Nevertheless, the Zulu kings had reserved to themselves the right to intervene in Swazi affairs, and three times in his reign – in 1847, 1848 and 1852 – Mpande had launched his army north across the Swazi borders. The reasons for these campaigns were varied, but several common threads dominated Zulu policy in Swaziland – the need to weaken the influence of the Swazi kings, often by exploiting internal divisions, the maintenance of territorial claims in what was effectively southern Swaziland, and the tendency to regard Swazi herds as a treasure house to be plundered whenever the Zulu kings needed to placate their own supporters.

These factors remained largely unchanged when Cetshwayo succeeded his father as king in 1873. If anything, Cetshwayo was inclined to intervene in Swaziland even more than his father. As a young man, his regiment, the uThulwana, had been bloodied in the 1852 campaign (it was remembered among the Zulu as the *ukufunda kuku 'Thulwana* – 'the teaching of the uThulwana'), and the experience had widened his eyes to the possibilities Swaziland afforded. These were all the more appealing because, by the 1870s, Zululand was under demographic pressure. Despite the slaughter that had accompanied the war of succession in 1856, the population had grown steadily (Shaka was estimated to control an army of 14,000 men; British intelligence reports on the eve of the invasion estimated Cetshwayo's theoretical strength in excess of 40,000 men). Moreover, the country was hemmed in on two sides by increasingly truculent colonial neighbours, and Swaziland offered not only the prospect of fresh grazing lands, but also a way out of white encirclement. Several times during his brief reign King Cetshwayo had raised the prospect of a Zulu raid into Swaziland, which would both increase his political prestige, and replace the losses in the national herds, which had been devastated since his accession by the spread of European-introduced lung-

sickness. In the event, he was dissuaded from doing so by the objections of his own northern chiefs – who had complex trading links through Swaziland and beyond – and, significantly, by the objections of the Natal authorities.

Nevertheless, Cetshwayo encouraged Zulu expansion into Swaziland by rather less dramatic means, and throughout the 1860s and '70s Zulu groups infiltrated and settled areas to the north of Zululand which had traditionally been considered Swazi territory.

This process was most obvious on Zululand's north-west borders. Here the Phongolo River was widely regarded as the boundary between the two kingdoms, but Zulu settlements had been slowly spreading north across the Phongolo, as far as the Mkhonto (Assegai) river beyond. This area was, in any case, particularly sensitive, as it lay at the northern edge of the triangle of land over which the Zulu contested ownership with the Transvaal republic, and which was known as the 'disputed territory'.

What made the area so volatile was that the area was thinly settled by both white and African groups, who were a long way from their respective centres of authority, and who were accustomed to acting with a good deal of independence. In 1819 or 1820, the area had been heavily raided by King Shaka. One group who had survived were the Khubeka people, who lived on the upper Ntombe River, north of the Phongolo. This was a rugged area rich in natural refuges, and the Khubeka had apparently fled to nearby caves and offered Shaka their allegiance. In the 1870s they were ruled by Chief Manyanyoba, who continued to acknowledge Zulu authority but who seems at various times – probably wisely – to have also paid taxes to the Transvaal government and tribute to the Swazis. Shaka had remained concerned about this area, and had established a military homestead, ebaQulusini, in the area.⁽³⁾ By 1879 the descendants of the men attached to this homestead, known as the abaQulusi, had settled a wide area south of the Phongolo River, around the mountains of Zungwini and Hlobane. Cetshwayo himself once described them as Swazis, ⁽⁴⁾ and indeed it is likely that many were originally Swazi speakers. Nevertheless, by 1879, a generation or two later, they were fiercely Zulu in their loyalties, and considered themselves a section of the Zulu Royal House. They were ruled not by hereditary chiefs, but by *izinduna* appointed directly by the king, and they mustered and fought as a local army, rather than as an *ibutho*.

From the 1840s, Transvaal Boers began to settle the area from the opposite direction. King Mpande had given resolutely republican Boers – who had refused to live in Natal following the British annexation of 1843 – permission to graze their cattle in the area, and over the next thirty years Boer farms had slowly encroached deeper and deeper into Zulu territory. King Mpande had been reluctant to risk an outright confrontation with the Z.A.R., but Cetshwayo on his accession was a more vigorous man, and had vehemently denied the Boer claims. This tension was the direct cause of the boundary dispute in which the British intervened so dramatically in 1878, and to press his point Cetshwayo had repeatedly staked his claim to the area north of the Phongolo. In 1877 he had ordered the abaQulusi to build a small royal homestead near the German mission settlement of Luneburg, while the following year his representative, the *induna* Faku, had several times challenged the right of both the Luneburg farmers and Boers living on the Bivane River to remain there without the king's permission.

While Cetshwayo's attitude was a direct response to the extravagant claims of the Transvaal Boers, it was also consistent with his long-term aims to expand into southern Swaziland by the Phongolo route. In this respect, he was aided by yet another powerful element in this volatile mix, the exiled Swazi prince, Mbilini waMswati.

Prince Mbilini was born about 1843, the eldest son of King Mswati by his first wife laMakhasiso. From an early age he was said to have inherited his father's military flair, and one rather colourful missionary account suggested that at the age of 12 he had been wrapped in the fresh pelt of a savage dog, in the belief that he would assume some of its ferocity. Certainly, he grew up with a subtle mind and a ruthless attitude to politics; although his manner was outwardly pleasant, he was really, in the words of one who knew him, 'a hyena'. ⁽⁵⁾ When Mswati died in 1865, Mbilini attempted to secure the succession on the grounds that he was not only the most able candidate, but also his father's favourite. His mother's position as first wife, however, made him ineligible as a legitimate heir, ⁽⁶⁾ and his rivals, suspicious of his capabilities, combined against him. In April 1866 he fled Swaziland and placed himself under the protection of the Lydenburg Boers. At first, the Boers were keen to shelter him, since it allowed them an opportunity to interfere in Swazi politics, and they also hoped that he would bring large numbers of followers with him, who could provide service as both labourers and military allies. In fact, however, Mbilini arrived with just a handful of men, and although a few supporters did join him over the following months, there was no great exodus. Indeed, his following was so small that the Boers became nervous that his presence would merely attract Swazi reprisals, and in 1867 Mbilini left Lydenburg to *khonza* – to give allegiance to – the Zulu king.

At that time, Mpande's power within Zululand was being steadily over-shadowed by that of his son, Cetshwayo. Since Cetshwayo had effectively destroyed internal opposition to his succession at the battle of 'Nondakusuka in 1856, he had gradually assumed control of more and more of the apparatus of royal power. Cetshwayo invited Mbilini to stay with him at his oNdini homestead, which was then located near the coast. At that time, Mbilini was described as a refugee with few followers, although Cetshwayo saw

in him the potential to advance his own ambitions in Swaziland. After Mpande's death, Cetshwayo gave Mbilini permission to settle in the Ntombe valley, and he built a home on the slopes of the Tafelberg, downstream from Manyanyoba's Khubeka, and near the village of Luneburg.

As Cetshwayo must have anticipated, both Mbilini's predicament and his character made it inevitable that his presence would further de-stabilise the border region, to the king's advantage. A lean, spare man, Mbilini wore the headring despite the fact that he was not married, and his restless ambition drove him to accumulate cattle and followers at the expense of his neighbours. Between 1874 and 1878 he mounted a number of raids into the Transvaal and southern Swaziland. Although he may not have secured Cetshwayo's approval in each case, he was careful not to antagonise the king's supporters in the border region, and indeed soon formed an alliance with Manyanyoba, whose followers joined his forays. Mbilini also forged close ties with the *izinduna* of the abaQulusi, and in due course built a second home of the southern slopes of Hlobane. On at least occasion the Boers complained to Cetshwayo of his actions, prompting the king to disown him, and to invite Boer reprisals. Although the Boers attacked Mbilini, they failed to arrest him, and it is probably significant, however, that he took refuge among the Zulu. While his ambivalent relationship with Cetshwayo allowed the latter to disclaim any responsibility for his actions in public, he was useful to the Zulu king as a means of testing the strengths and weaknesses of his rivals on the border. Nevertheless, at this time Mbilini's following remained small, variously estimated at between 20 and 200 men. Most of these were either Swazis or disaffected Zulus from the Transvaal side of the border.

All of these complex factors made the reaction of the Swazi kingdom to the imminence of war crucial. Certainly, the British hoped to exploit their traditional fear of the Zulu, and irritation with Mbilini, to persuade them to take an active part in joining the war, and it was proposed that a Swazi *impi* should be attached to Col. Rowland's column at Derby. In October 1878 Captain Norman MacLeod, a retired officer in the 74th Highlanders, was appointed civil and political officer to Wood's column, based at Utrecht, with the specific intention of persuading the Swazi to join the war. In November MacLeod travelled to the Swazi royal homestead at Nkanini for an audience with King Mbandzeni. He found the king full of professions of support, but clearly reluctant to commit the Swazi army to a war that the Zulu might win. As two of the king's *izinduna* explained,

... they had never seen the English fight. They were always saying that they would, but never did. They thought they never would. If we did we should be beaten. They had seen the Zulu fight. Until they saw the English fight the Zulus and beat them they could not believe it possible. They would not fight the Zulus until they saw them running away to their caves, then they would come and help the English burn them out. When the English were ready to go into Zululand they might tell the Swazis so that the Swazis might be ready. In case the English proved stronger, which would make them very glad. (7)

This was as explicit a description of the Swazi dilemma as anyone could have expected. While they were, indeed, happy to see Zulu power broken, they were not prepared to commit themselves to join the fight until it was clear that the British would win. The consequences, if they lost, could be disastrous. Although MacLeod worked tirelessly over the following months to persuade Mbandzeni to come off the fence, he resolutely refused to do.

In the meantime, once the fighting began, many Swazi living north of the Phongolo found themselves drawn in on one side or the other. Since both Wood's and Rowland's columns were operating from Transvaal territory, and therefore not supported by the auxiliary forces raised in Natal, the British made strenuous efforts to raise African forces from the groups living on white farms on their side of the border. These included Wood's Irregulars, who boasted a strength of over 400 men and were under arms from December 1878 to April 1879 and attached to Wood's column, and the Swazi Police, 200 strong, under arms from January 1879 to April, commanded by W.F. Fairlie, and based at Derby. The composition of these units probably reflected the mixed population along the border, but the bulk was undoubtedly Swazi. Unlike either the Natal Native Contingent or the Zulu royal regiments, many of these men wore full ceremonial regalia into the field.

On the other hand, many Swazis supported King Cetshwayo. Where Zulu settlement had penetrated among the Swazi north of the Phongolo, many Swazi had come to accept Cetshwayo's authority, and there are suggestions that some men from this area joined the main Zulu army in its attack on the British camp at Isandlwana. (8) Others rallied to Mbilini and Manyanyoba, who, together with the abaQulusi further south, quickly came to dominate the resistance to British encroachments in the region. They provided an arc of Zulu loyalists who effectively surrounded Wood's bases on the upper White Mfolozi, and threatened his line of communication with Rowlands at Derby, further north. Mbilini himself moved freely between his homesteads on the Tafelberg, near Luneburg, and on Hlobane to the south. Throughout January and February Mbilini, Manyanyoba and the abaQulusi, acting together, harassed British movements and raided white farms along the upper Phongolo. On 11 March they were responsible for the first great Zulu success in the region, when about 800 men, led by Mbilini in person, over-ran a stranded

convoy of the 80th Regiment at Myer's Drift on the Ntombe, killed most of the escort, and carried away wagonloads of ammunition and supplies. On this occasion Mbilini's force was probably augmented by a number of Zulus living along the upper Blood (Ncome) and Buffalo (Mzinyathi) rivers. Mbilini himself had close links with the sons of Sihayo kaXongo – who lived further south, opposite Rorke's Drift – while men belonging to the king's army were in their family homesteads, having dispersed after Isandlwana, and there are suggestions that some of them joined the attack. (9)

After the action at Ntombe the Zulu concentration in the north scattered, Manyanyoba's followers retiring to their caves to avoid British reprisals, and Mbilini himself returning to Hlobane. Their success was a factor in Wood's decision to attack Hlobane at the end of the month. The British were, in any case, about to renew their offensive for the first time since Isandlwana – Chelmsford was about to march to relieve Eshowe, and had asked Wood to stage a diversion – and Wood was in any case tempted by the large abaQulusi herds corralled on Hlobane.

The battle of Hlobane on 28 March was arguably Mbilini's greatest success of the war, since he seems to have been largely responsible for the defence of the mountain itself. Some sources suggest that it was Mbilini himself who was involved in the firefight among the boulders with Wood's staff, which left Captain Ronald Campbell dead and Mbilini himself wounded. The British foray was, of course, badly conceived and poorly executed, but it was Mbilini who ensured that once up on the hill, the British were trapped, and could not get down. The timely arrival of the main Zulu army had merely turned British discomfort into a rout.

King Cetshwayo's decision to deploy the army on the northern front reflected not only the continuing pressure exerted upon his followers by Wood – Mbilini and the abaQulusi had begged the king to send them more support – but also the traditional Zulu view that the Phongolo River was the gateway into Swaziland. All too aware of the imminent British offensive, Cetshwayo was keen to destroy the one British force that blocked any potential Zulu retreat to the north.

In the event, the success at Hlobane was followed immediately by disaster. The following morning the Zulu army advanced to attack Wood's base at Khambula, and was heavily defeated. The army disintegrated, and Zulu supporters living across northern Zululand went into hiding. At a stroke, the ascendancy, which Mbilini and his allies had struggled so hard to build up, was destroyed.

A fresh blow followed this setback a week later. On 4 April Mbilini had recovered sufficiently to make a raid against African farm workers living on white farms near Luneburg. The following day, Captain Prior of the 80th Regiment set out with a handful of mounted men and auxiliaries from Luneburg to try to intercept the raiders. They came across a few stragglers near the Ntombe River, and gave chase to two Zulu on horseback. Shots were fired; one fell from his horse, and was promptly speared by the levies. He was later identified as Tshekwane, a son of Chief Sihayo. The other was shot by an auxiliary named 'Sinnaquie' as he rode his horse down a riverbank. The Zulu managed to get away, but he was badly wounded – the bullet had struck his right shoulder and passed down his body, emerging below his waist. It was Mbilini himself; a few days later he was dead. (10)

The death of Mbilini deprived the Zulu of the greatest guerrilla leader to emerge during the war. Resistance continued in the north – the Khubeka and abaQulusi continued to raid the area north of the Phongolo. In truth, however, the British success at Hlobane, and again at kwaGingindlovu on the coast a few days later, had turned the tide irrevocably in their favour.

In Swaziland King Mbandzeni reacted to the obvious turn of the tide with some relief, but he remained reluctant to offer overt support to the British cause. Pressed by MacLeod, he offered to muster his army if the British would send white troops to join him. Since Chelmsford had no spare troops at hand, this was hardly possible. When Sir Garnet Wolseley arrived to take over from Chelmsford, he urged MacLeod to press Mbandzeni harder; but by that time Cetshwayo had already been defeated at Ulundi on 4 July. MacLeod urged the Swazi to cross into Zululand to try to capture Cetshwayo – who had fled into the Ngome forest – but even at this stage Mbandzeni was clearly unwilling to risk his men at anything more than raiding the homes of Zulu loyalists along the Phongolo. The capture of Cetshwayo by British Dragoons at the end of August finally let the Swazi off the hook.

Ironically, it was left to the Khubeka and to the remnants of Mbilini's followers to fire the final shots of the war. While the majority of chiefs and *izinduna* across Zululand had accepted that the king's capture spelt the end of hostilities, a large number of warriors remained under arms along the Ntombe. In early September a force under the command of Lt. Col. the Hon George Villiers marched into the Ntombe to disperse them. Skirmishing continued for several days, and cost the lives of two men of the 2/4th Regiment, and a number of Zulus. In the end, Villiers' Engineers dynamited the entrances to some of the Khubeka caves, with the occupants still inside. Manyanyoba eventually surrendered on 22 September.

The end of the hostilities left the Swazi kingdom in a vulnerable position, but if they were worried about being called to account for their vacillation, Wolseley immediately offered them a way out. With Zululand suppressed, Wolseley turned his attention to the Pedi of King Sekhukhune, who had been overtly resisting the authority of the Transvaal for several years. Wolseley marched troops north from Zululand to suppress them, and called on the Swazi to assist. Having been reassured of British power, and

having his own grievances against the Pedi, Mbandzeni was only too pleased to comply. In October 1879 he assembled an army of over 8000 men from the royal regiments, and sent it north. When Wolseley over-ran the Pedi capital at Tsate the following month, the Swazi played a crucial part in his success.

Ironically, the Pedi campaign allowed the Swazi to retrieve the political advantages in their dealings with the British which their reluctance to help in Zululand had so nearly squandered. They created a positive impression among the British, which they were able to exploit for years to come. As MacLeod himself put it, 'To the British mind in general, Russians and Zulus are fiends, Turks and Swazis are angels.'(11)

References.

1. Cetshwayo's letter to Sir Hercules Robinson, Governor of the Cape, 29 March 1881. British Parliamentary Papers, C-2950.
2. Philip Bonner, *Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires*, Cambridge, 1983.
3. Rightly, for it was by this route that the Ndwandwe under Sikhunyana kaZwide – whom Shaka had driven out of Zululand in 1818 – returned in 1826. Shaka assembled his army at inqaba kaHawana – near the 1879 battlefield of Khambula – then defeated the Ndwandwe at izinDolowane, on the Ntome.
4. *Cetshwayo's Story*, Macmillan's magazine, February 1880.
- 5 Paulina Dlamini, *Servant of Two Kings*, compiled by H. Filter and translated by S. Bourquin, Pietermaritzburg, 1986.
6. The usual line of succession was to the eldest son of a nominated 'Great Wife'; a first wife was generally considered ineligible as a Great Wife.
7. MacLeod Papers, quoted in Bonner, *Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires*.
8. Interview with Mr Isaac Dlamini, whose great-grandfather lived north of the Phongolo and considered himself a Swazi, but who fought at Isandlwana. Malambule, the grandfather of a recent Prime Minister of Swaziland, Obed Dlamini, also fought at Isandlwana; information from Mr John Doble, British High commissioner to Swaziland, 1996-1999.
9. Mgelija Ngema of the uVe ibutho 'was also in the fight at [Ntombe] before [Khambula]. At the end of the night we crept on a camp near wagons near a river [Ntombe] and from all sides attacked ...' Bowden Notes, Reproduced in Ian Knight, *Kill Me In The Shadows*, 'Soldiers of the Queen' 74, September 1993.
10. For a full biography of Mbilini, see Huw Jones, *A Biographical Register of Swaziland*, Pietermaritzburg 1993, and Ian Knight, *Great Zulu Commanders*, 1998.
11. MacLeod papers, quoted in Bonner, *Kings, Commoners and Concessionaires*.