

“What Caused the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879?”

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The Society regularly receives requests for advice, queries and essays from children interested in the Anglo Zulu war. The following is a short example to show members that interest in the campaign spans the ages.

The reason why the Zulu war started was because of Sir Bartle Frere, but there were a lot of things that made him want to start the war.

It all started with the Balkan Crisis. This was where the Turkish started massacring the Bulgarians because the Bulgarians wanted independence from Turkish rule. The Prime Minister at the time, Mr Disraeli, wanted to support the Turkish because they controlled an important trade route through the Suez Canal, running through to India. Mr. Disraeli's rival was Mr. Gladstone. He was a charitable man who wanted to help the Bulgarians by swaying public opinion. Mr Disraeli realised the Russians were going to attack Constantinople, the Turkish capital, which put the trade route under threat. Mr. Disraeli decided to back no country and use the old trade route around the Cape in Africa. This is when Sir Bartle Frere and English troops went to Africa to protect the trade route.

When Sir Bartle Frere got to Africa he realised the trade route was completely unprotected: “Cape Town is in an utterly defenceless position”. Any ship could pass through and the English couldn't do anything to stop them because there wasn't even a gun mounted. Frere's main aim was to protect the trade route. Whilst Bartle Frere was in Africa newspapers had already suggested a war with the Zulus was going to happen but Frere didn't want this.

In August 1877, the Xhosa tribe revolted over problems with the English. The revolt had been brought to an end by November that year and the Xhosa tribe was completely defeated by 1878. Sir Bartle Frere was getting very annoyed at this time because there were so many tribal wars going on. He had complained of “the gigantic evil to which all this chronic insecurity and warfare is due.” He thought British rule should replace their chiefdoms. He also commented “the constant imminence of African wars or combinations of outbreaks among them and other native tribes.”

In 1878 two Zulu women, who were wives of a man called Sihayo, slipped out of their quarters at night and headed for the safety of British territory. Sihayo knew how powerful the British were and didn't do anything to get them back. Sihayo's son, Mehlokazulu, however did take action and gathered up Zulus and headed to British territory to get his father's wives. He ended up killing both of them, and one wife was even his own mother.

This was what pushed Frere over the edge. He already had problems with tribal wars and the amabutho system and Mehlokazulu's actions made Frere do something. Frere gave the Zulu king, Cetshwayo, an ultimatum to hand over Mehlokazulu and disband his impis. Cetshwayo obviously didn't accept this and so the Zulu war started. Bartle Frere disobeyed orders to start this war and when Mr. Gladstone was elected to be Prime Minister he publicly humiliated Bartle Frere for starting the war and he was disgraced for the rest of his life.

Bartle Frere obviously did wrong, but how was he going to protect and sort out the trade route in Cape Town if he had constant battles around him? I think he meant to do right for England and the Empire and Gladstone made him out to be worse than he really was because he absolutely hated Frere.