

## I “*The chief relaxation of the force*”

The war correspondent Archibald Forbes commented that “letter writing seemed to be the chief relaxation of the force [in Zululand]”.<sup>1</sup> This may explain to some extent the existence of so many of these letters, of which only a fraction could have reached the pages of the newspapers. Unlike in subsequent conflicts, the letters have not undergone the rigorous attentions of the official censors; the newspapers made changes only to standardise spelling and punctuation and there appears to have been no censorship by regimental officers.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the best proof that letters escaped censorship is that on at least one occasion, a scandal erupted when a letter from Private John Snook caused a storm of protest and prompted official denials of the events described therein.<sup>3</sup> The letters are an invaluable research tool, reflecting the thinking of a substantial proportion of mid-Victorian society, in their expressions on imperialism in particular.

The Anglo-Zulu War was significant in that it came at a time when imperialist ideology was becoming more popular, both in the Britain and in its colonies. While the Zululand campaign itself was motivated more by hopes of creating a Canadian-style confederation in southern Africa, rather than by imperial expansion for its own sake, the war and its major events became part of the imperialist mythology, as did the contemporaneous actions in Afghanistan. Study of primary sources related to the war raises the inevitable question of whether the prevailing ideology was evident either in British public life or among the soldiers engaged in colonial campaigns.

## II “*A language which cannot be mistaken*”

To develop an understanding of the prevailing ideology in late-Victorian Britain, one must first look to the world of science. In the wake of Darwin’s discoveries, and the manifold technological marvels of the industrial age, it was science that the Victorians worshipped, even as religious adherence itself declined.<sup>4</sup> Beatrice Webb wrote that

it is hard to understand the naïve belief of the most original and vigorous minds of the ‘seventies and ‘eighties that it was by science, and by science alone, that all human misery would ultimately be swept away...the men of science were the leading British intellectuals of the period ... it was they who were routing the theologians, confounding the mystics, imposing their theories on philosophers ... and even casting doubts on the capacity of the politicians.<sup>5</sup>

There is no doubt that the pronouncements of the scientific community on many subjects had a great impact on the general public in Britain and the subject of race was no exception. The popular study of craniometry was held to prove the inferiority of Africans to Europeans, despite the

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Emery, *The Red Soldier* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), pp.19-20

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.22-24

<sup>4</sup> A. N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (London: Random House, 2003), pp.168-169

<sup>5</sup> Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926), p.130

protestations of some leading figures in the field.<sup>6</sup> The ethnologist Richard Dunn claimed in 1866 that the facial features of the African “speak a language which cannot be mistaken ... For whenever and wherever ignorance and brutality, destitution and squalor, have for a long time existed, this prognathous type invariably prevails”.<sup>7</sup>

The effect of such attitudes among the scientific and anthropological communities was to reinforce the late Victorian mythos of racial and cultural difference in which “ethnocentrism allowed them to think in terms of a cultural hierarchy, in which Western civilisations occupied first place ... with the stagnant, technologically backward cultures of Africa and the Pacific at the bottom”.<sup>8</sup> The scientific orthodoxy of the late Victorian era both fuelled and served as justification for wars against native enemies, particularly those of the African continent.

The scientific community’s attitude towards Africans undoubtedly influenced society as a whole. Marika Sherwood outlines a clear progression of British attitudes to race from early ambivalence or ignorance regarding the issue of race, to the late Victorian period’s near-obsession with the subject, and lays the blame both on the ‘intellectual’ class and on the imperatives created first by the slave trade, and subsequently by imperial expansion and economic exploitation,<sup>9</sup> writing that

writers, philosophers, economists, scientists and politicians, the churches and their missionaries, empire societies ... the purveyors of popular culture, including magazines and the formal education system, all played their role in producing the national ideology of beneficent imperialism, of English superiority and of national unity.<sup>10</sup>

Increasing standardisation of educational curricula in Britain may have served either as a useful tool to disseminate such racist ideas, or as an indicator of the popularity these ideas already held within society. The textbooks of the mid- to late-nineteenth century contained negative stereotypes of the Empire’s “subject peoples” and enemies and moved “from the idea of the ‘struggle for freedom’ as the core of national identity to the idea of the English having a special place in the world by virtue of their superior moral and physical qualities”.<sup>11</sup> Examples of such textbooks include the *History of England* (1857)<sup>12</sup>, *A School History of England* (1911), which described West Indians as “lazy, vicious, incapable of serious improvement, or of work except under compulsion”<sup>13</sup>, and the *Class History of England* (1884), in which it was claimed that the British were “face to face with barbarous peoples, whom it is profitless to conquer, yet amongst whom it is difficult otherwise to enforce peace and order”.<sup>14</sup> These views were also widely held by public school headmasters, such as Frederic Farrar, head of Marlborough College<sup>15</sup>, and by influential university professors such as Sir John Seeley of Cambridge who claimed that “a most deplorable anarchy reigned” in India before British rule<sup>16</sup>, and James Froude of Oxford, who

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<sup>6</sup> Christine Bolt, *Victorian Attitudes to Race* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p.15

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27

<sup>9</sup> Marika Sherwood, ‘Race, Empire and Education: Teaching Racism’, *Race & Class* 42, 3 (2001), pp.1-28

<sup>10</sup> Sherwood, ‘Teaching Racism’, p.10

<sup>11</sup> Andrew Thomson, *The Empire Strikes Back?: the Impact of Imperialism on Britain from the mid-Nineteenth Century* (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2005), p.117

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.117

<sup>13</sup> Sherwood, ‘Teaching Racism’, p.13

<sup>14</sup> Peter Fryer, *Black people in the British Empire: an introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 1988), p.78

<sup>15</sup> Michael D. Biddiss, *Images of Race* (Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1979), pp. 143, 147-8

<sup>16</sup> J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (London, Macmillan, 1894), pp. 138,185 -Check source

compared Africans to domestic animals.<sup>17</sup>

Disseminated through “schools, cheap newspapers, juvenile literature, and the music hall”, such attitudes spread not just among the influential classes of Imperial society, but throughout society as a whole.<sup>18</sup> Open assumptions of racial superiority colour much of the dialogue on African affairs in newspaper editorials of the decade. One remarkable example of this dialogue came in *The Times* of 5 June 1873, with the publication of a letter from the renowned traveller and eugenicist Francis Galton, proposing the establishment of Chinese settlements on the shores of Africa, which would “supplant the inferior negro race ... the gain would be immense to the whole civilised world if we were to outbreed and finally displace the negro”.<sup>19</sup> A commentary in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of the same day responded

There would be an advantage, it cannot be denied, in getting a continent full of industrious ... inhabitants, instead of a territory thinly stocked with fierce barbarians, inveterate man-stealers, or ‘lazy palavering savages’. But ... perhaps the Negro would not retire from the face of the earth without a struggle. He has certainly given his friends a great deal of trouble, and the account, we fear, is not quite closed ... we are not sure that the world is prepared for the substitution of one race for another after the fashion proposed.<sup>20</sup>

These attitudes were to be of particular relevance within just five years, as Frere and Chelmsford prepared to make war against just such a nation of “fierce barbarians”. The portrayal of the Zulu as a ‘savage’ destabilising influence was central to Frere’s *causis belli* and is echoed in both soldiers’ letters and in newspaper editorials of 1878-9. An *Aberdeen Weekly Journal* editorial of 3 July 1878 reported that “at any moment the flood may rise, and the savage hordes of Zulus sweep over fair Natal ... Zululand must be annexed and garrisoned by British troops”.<sup>21</sup> Five days later, the same newspaper claimed “the Zulu King is endeavouring to persuade the Swazies to join him in an attack on the Europeans...the peace of the colony will not be secured until Cetshwayo has received a severe lesson”.<sup>22</sup>

This portrayal of the Zulu, and the tacit acceptance of Frere’s reason for going to war that it indicated, is also reflected in some of the letters sent from soldiers in southern Africa prior to the outbreak of hostilities. Nevill Coghill, later to win a posthumous Victoria Cross for his actions at Isandlwana, wrote home on 3 November 1878 describing the situation:

Not satisfied by a mere assertion, [Cetshwayo] has caused by threats etc several farmers to leave their homes and trek ... we shall have to go in at them and treat them as we did the Kaffirs in Cape Colony ... until the dusky potentate is disposed of there will be no peace for South Africa”.<sup>23</sup>

The “Kaffirs in Cape Colony” were the Xhosa who had been defeated that summer, in the final Cape Frontier War. Writing again on 13 December, Coghill was equally sceptical of the likelihood of the ultimatum’s terms being accepted:

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<sup>17</sup> Sherwood, ‘Teaching Racism’, p.13

<sup>18</sup> Fryer, *Black people in the British Empire*, p.67

<sup>19</sup> Francis Galton, ‘Africa for the Chinese’, *The Times*, 5 June 1873, p.8

<sup>20</sup> ‘Epitome of Opinion in the Morning Journals’, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 5 June 1873

<sup>21</sup> “Blackwood” on the South African Question’, *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 3 July 1878

<sup>22</sup> ‘The Kaffir War’, *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 8 July 1878

<sup>23</sup> Emery, *The Red Soldier*, p.37

Steps will be taken to enforce our dictum, which will settle the matter as far as peace or war goes for a time, but still will not let us out of the country until we see exactly what likelihood of this savage performing his promises, which when we take his previous career and character I should say was doubtful in the extreme.<sup>24</sup>

### III “How hopelessly inferior they are to us”

The overriding sentiment expressed by the British soldiers in the prelude to war and the opening stages of the invasion was one of over-confidence. Even old Africa veterans like Garnet Wolseley, later to command in the closing stages against the Zulu, held a sense of racial superiority in dealings with African enemies:

It must never be forgotten by our soldiers that providence has implanted in the heart of every native of Africa a superstitious awe and dread of the white man that prevents the negro from daring to face us in combat. A steady advance or charge, no matter how partial, if made with determination, always means the retreat of the enemy ... they will not stand against the advance of white men.<sup>25</sup>

This general attitude was common from the highest ranks to the very lowest – Private Owen Ellis recounted that “the farmers who live in the surrounding country say that the Zulus will only be tempted to fight the Europeans once and that they will afterwards fly away for their lives, because they have not the weapons which we have”.<sup>26</sup> Private George Pettit wrote to his mother on 20 January, just two days before Isandlwana, and his letter shares the over-confidence and sense of superiority displayed by his commanders: “The General (Chelmsford) says it will not last long, for all the petty chiefs are giving in; they are coming in daily, which will soon make old Cetshwayo squeak ... we shall have no difficulty in finding out Cetshwayo and breaking up all his tribes.”<sup>27</sup> Lord Chelmsford himself wrote to Theophilus Shepstone in July 1878, detailing his view on the prospect of war with the Zulu:

Half measures do not answer with natives – They must be thoroughly crushed to make them believe in our superiority; and if I am called upon to conduct operations against them, I shall strive to be in a position to show them how hopelessly inferior they are to us in fighting power, altho’ numerically stronger.<sup>28</sup>

Still, a note of caution was struck by some of the correspondents. Before the campaign had even begun, Corporal H. Brown wrote to his wife on 29 December to tell her that “I don’t think that we shall finish this war so soon and easy as the other [referring to the 8th Xhosa War], for they are a better lot of men and more of them and they have got rifles the same as we have”.<sup>29</sup> On seeing some of his fellow soldiers being flogged on charges of drunkenness, Private John Thomas

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp.37-38

<sup>25</sup> Knight, *Go to Your God Like a Soldier: The British Soldier Fighting for Empire, 1837-1902* (London: Stackpole, 1996), p.214

<sup>26</sup> Emery, *The Red Soldier*, p.65

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p.154

<sup>28</sup> John P. C. Laband (ed.), *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand campaign, 1878-1879* (Stroud: Published by Alan Sutton for the Army Records Society, 1994), p5

<sup>29</sup> Emery, *The Red Soldier*, p.63

remarked that “they will have to remember that the Zulus have got Martini-Henry rifles as well as we”.<sup>30</sup> Some of the British press shared in the sentiment, *The Freeman’s Journal* prophesying: “The discipline and weapons of the Europeans will probably in the end tell against the numbers and the valour of the black men, but in former Kaffir and Zulu wars the Empire has learned too well what the cost in blood and money is of a campaign against the South African tribes”.<sup>31</sup>

However many more newspapers adopted the same confident approach as Wolseley and Chelmsford in their editorials on the impending Zulu conflict. The *Pall Mall Gazette* struck just such a tone: “The Zulus ... are probably disciplined just sufficiently to embolden them to come out into the open. Once there we can have no doubt as to the result of an encounter. It is worthy of remark that our position, though dangerous if opposed to a civilised enemy, is just such as would alarm savages”.<sup>32</sup> And *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post* hit the perfect note of patronising superiority with some vague words of caution: “It is reported that no less than 40,000 men can thus be drawn to the Zulu standard, and although the military skill which guides the force is probably contemptible, the mere fact that training has been attempted and discipline apparently assured cannot be left wholly out of account”.<sup>33</sup>

#### IV “A stronger and more powerful race of people”

The presumed superiority of the British over the Zulu was seriously called into question by the defeat at Isandlwana on 22 January 1879. Private Edward Evans described the events of the day in a few short words: “Murderous savages ... kept coming in by thousands, and killed our men like dogs!”<sup>34</sup> The sudden change in perspective caused by the disaster is neatly summed up in a letter sent by a veteran of the 2/24<sup>th</sup>, Sergeant W. Morley, to a fellow-soldier stationed in Britain: “they were like lions and not afraid of death. As soon as one man fell, another took his place, and those that think the niggers in Zululand will not fight, are sadly deceived”.<sup>35</sup> Private Joseph Morgan, another soldier of the 24<sup>th</sup>, wrote in a letter to his parents on 1 February:

It was a fearful sight to see 600 British soldiers lying dead on the plain, killed by savages ... Before the war the General sent home for more troops, but was told he had enough, and now they find out their mistake, that the Zulus are a stronger and more powerful race of people than they thought.<sup>36</sup>

The press reaction to the defeat took different forms. *Punch* magazine responded, in its main cartoon on 1 March, with the image of a Zulu warrior standing before John Bull and chalking on a blackboard the words “despise not your enemy”.<sup>37</sup> The *Pall Mall Gazette* commented that “if the worst that is possible happens to us in Natal, we shall in the end succeed in beating a savage chief whom we never ought to have allowed to beat us”.<sup>38</sup> The *Aberdeen Weekly Journal* claimed that “the Zulus in South Africa have read our generals in South Africa a salutary lesson in bush

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<sup>30</sup> Edward M. Spiers, *The Victorian Soldier in Africa* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p.38

<sup>31</sup> *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 9 January 1879

<sup>32</sup> ‘Occasional Notes’, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 January 1879

<sup>33</sup> ‘News of the Day’, *The Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 28 January 1879

<sup>34</sup> Spiers, *Victorian Soldier in Africa*, p.41

<sup>35</sup> Emery, *The Red Soldier*, p.101

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.189

<sup>37</sup> ‘A Lesson’, *Punch*, 1 March 1879.

<sup>38</sup> ‘The news from Cape Town’, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 February 1879

warfare ... we must compel respect and submission by a military effort commensurate with the gravity of the emergency”.<sup>39</sup> And the *Liverpool Mercury* significantly commented:

The greatest danger we have to fear, perhaps, is that these natives who have settled among us may ... rise and join the invading tribes ... As the Duke of Wellington said [in the first Afghan War] ... England cannot afford to be defeated by native forces anywhere, or the lives of the greater portion of the British army in India or the colonies would not be worth a day’s purchase”.<sup>40</sup>

Common among the editorials and commentary on the aftermath of the battle was this fear that a native uprising was imminent, the very same uprising that previous editorials had urged war in order to pre-empt. Ian Knight’s portrayal of “a patronising superiority which could be benevolent, paternalistic, and, when thwarted, bitterly savage”, becomes particularly relevant in such a reading of the situation.<sup>41</sup> The thwarting [at Isandlwana] prompted fear and a determination to fight for survival. As *The Times* editorial on 13 February summarised, “the subjugation of the Zulu power and the destruction of the military organisation must be accomplished at any cost ... No tenderness for individual susceptibilities, no reluctance to appear unnecessarily harsh, should be permitted to impede the discharge of this plain and imperative duty”.<sup>42</sup>

It was not only the press that reacted to the news of Isandlwana. The British public was affected by the battle as they had been by no other colonial campaign since the Indian Mutiny. Frank Emery addressed this fascination in his commentary on the soldiers’ letters in *The Red Soldier*: “A by-product of the bad news of disaster was that the public imagination seized on the Zulus as on few other savage enemies. The Victorians, with a mingling of fear and respect, wanted to know more about them”.<sup>43</sup> And know more about them they would. In the wake of Isandlwana, press reporting of the Zulu campaign and the Zulu people in general reached fever pitch, subsiding only once the war was over and both the ongoing campaign in Afghanistan and the upcoming general election diverted attention. The fascination at one extreme was marked by lecture tours by Otto Witt, the missionary whose station was the scene of a bloody postscript to the disaster at Isandlwana, and by the display in municipal theatres that summer of a troupe of Zulu warriors claimed to have been present at the battle.<sup>44</sup> At the other extreme, the public were scandalised by the reports of Zulu ‘atrocities’ committed at Isandlwana, which were considered symptomatic of the Zulu’s savagery, bloodthirstiness, and animal brutality; this was all viewed as dreadful confirmation of the African’s position at the bottom of the hierarchy of races.

The correspondent of the *Daily News*, Archibald Forbes, described the scene as it was when British troops finally returned to the field of Isandlwana, on 21 May 1879: “Some were almost wholly dismembered, heaps of yellow clammy bones ... Every man had been disembowelled. Some were scalped, and others subjected to yet ghastlier mutilations”.<sup>45</sup> Melton Prior, of the *Illustrated London News*, filed a similar report: “The sight at Isandlwana is one I shall never forget. In all the seven campaigns I have been in ... I have not witnessed a scene more horrible”.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> ‘The South African Disaster’, *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 12 February 1879

<sup>40</sup> ‘The Disaster at the Cape’, *Liverpool Mercury etc.*, 12 February 1879

<sup>41</sup> Knight, *Go to Your God*, p.214

<sup>42</sup> *The Times*, 13 February 1879, p.9

<sup>43</sup> Emery, *The Red Soldier*, p.144

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.144

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.113

Perhaps understandably, the reports of disembowelment and mutilation revived fears of torture and cannibalism among the settlers of Natal and the British soldiers serving in Zululand. Laurence Kitson describes how Africa was popularly seen as “cruel and bloodstained, the Dark Continent not because so little was known about the interior, but because so many of its practices could not bear the light of day”.<sup>47</sup> Isandlwana was seen by many of the British as confirmation of “the natural cruelty to which the African was believed to be prey, and for which they were to be justly punished”, and calls for revenge grew among the troops and the public at home.<sup>48</sup> And while the aftermath of Inyezane, which took place before Isandlwana, saw relatively gentle treatment of Zulu wounded and surrendering prisoners, the subsequent aftermath of Khambula betrayed a markedly different attitude.

#### V “*Fighting with them is terribly earnest work*”

However, the effects of Isandlwana on the public and military perception of the Zulu were not wholly negative. While indeed many attributed the disaster to African cruelty and savagery, others were inclined to attribute to the Zulu a much greater respect in the aftermath of the battle, although the two perceptions were not mutually exclusive. Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Harness described this reappraisal: “None of us valued, to its proper extent, the many military qualities possessed by this savage nation”.<sup>49</sup> There was certainly a desire for revenge among the British soldiers, but this was now tinged with wariness and, as Knight describes it, “the subsequent respect given in British establishment circles to the Zulu stereotype (“Savage, brutal, if you will/ He fought for home, a hero still”).<sup>50</sup>

The shock and humiliation of the defeat at Isandlwana was tempered somewhat by the news of the defence of Rorke’s Drift over the same night. Lieutenant Q. Logan recorded his description of the battle, in a letter to his old school on 1 February: “B Company fought for dear life and honour; and the Zulus, drunk with victory and plunder, could not believe that it was impossible for their savage yells and numbers to strike fear into the hearts of the few white men”.<sup>51</sup> The image of the savage Zulu beaten back by the last-ditch bravery of the plucky defenders was a lasting one, and was commemorated in the illustrated press and in verse. One of the poems, by Bertram Mitford, neatly displays the dual portrayal of the Zulu as both noble savage (“One hundred strong we stand, Against the very pick and flower, Of warrior Zululand”) and cruel animal (“And held the post ‘gainst a maddened host, Drunken with British blood”).<sup>52</sup>

The other columns had fared better, although Pearson’s column remained trapped in Eshowe. The only early action taken against either force was on 20 January, when Wood’s column was attacked by 1000 Zulus, whom they defeated. Emery comments on the reaction to this skirmish by Captain Woodgate:

[He] thought fit to note that the Zulus seemed to be regularly organised and led, ‘each man after firing dropped as if dead, probably to avoid the return shot’. Here we may

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<sup>47</sup> Laurence Kitson, *Victorian Writers and the Image of Empire: The Rose-Colored Vision* (London: Greenwood, 2001), p.23

<sup>48</sup> Knight, *Go to Your God*, p.234

<sup>49</sup> F. W. D. Jackson, ‘The 1st Battalion, 24th Regt marches to Isandlwana’ in *There will be an Awful Row at Home about this*, ed. by Ian Knight & Donald Morris (London: Victorian Military Society, 1987)

<sup>50</sup> Knight, *Go to Your God*, p.114

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.122

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p.146

detect the first hint of realisation that the Zulu warrior was not just another wild fighting man, but disciplined, drilled, and no novice with firearms.<sup>53</sup>

The same realisation dawned on British forces at Isandlwana, Rorke's Drift, and Eshowe, as they were forced to reappraise the preconceptions of the Zulu that they had carried into the campaign. At the besieged mission station of Eshowe, Colour Sergeant J. W. Burnett confided his own moment of realisation in a letter to a friend on 24 January (the last post to make it out of Eshowe before Pearson's column was cut off):

The Zulus stood for about four hours, our people firing shells, rockets, Martinis, and the Gatling guns. I never thought niggers would make such a stand. They came on with an utter disregard of danger...I tell you what it is: our 'school' at Chatham, over one hot whisky, used to laugh about these niggers, but I assure you that fighting with them is terribly earnest work, and not child's play.<sup>54</sup>

## VI "No quarter was given"

The changed circumstances had a great effect on the forces being gathered to launch a second invasion of Zululand from 7 March, when the first reinforcements arrived at Durban, Emery writing that "the nerves of young soldiers on their first campaign had to contend with the spectral memory of Isandlwana ... and the constant need for careful precautions against a jack-in-the-box enemy".<sup>55</sup> Even Frances Colenso, wife of the Bishop of Natal and a champion of the cause of Zulu independence, sympathised with the experience of the young reinforcements in a letter of 22 June: "I fear that the spirits and courage of our army are flagging, they seem to be beginning to *fear the Zulu*".<sup>56</sup> The memory of the defeat at Isandlwana was a cause of some concern, but the tactics of the Zulu army were also a factor in the nervousness of the reinforcements. Captain Edward Hutton recorded how the speed of the Zulu troops forced a rethink of British tactics during the advance of the relief column to Eshowe:

Lord Chelmsford told us to forget the drill ... the enemy was to be treated as cavalry. The impression left upon our minds was that the Zulus were very formidable foes ... Our men, especially the young soldiers, were not slow to share the general feeling of uneasiness which the disasters at Isandlwana and elsewhere had caused.<sup>57</sup>

The British forces badly needed a victory to restore morale, and it finally came at Khambula on 29 March 1879. Private Joseph Banks wrote to his parents describing the pursuit of the routed Zulus which followed: "When the enemy were in full retreat the mounted men followed them, and accounted for all followers that lagged behind, and did some execution".<sup>58</sup> The pursuit after Khambula was particularly ferocious and merits some closer attention. As previously referenced, the correspondence of Private John Snook, in particular a letter to his pub landlord written on 3 April, caused great controversy when it was reprinted in the newspapers:

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.153

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.185

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.195

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.196

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.199

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.172

Then we let our mounted men out of the laager waggons, and I can tell you some murdering went on ... On March 30th, about eight miles from camp, we found about 500 wounded, most of them mortally, and begging us for mercy's sake not to kill them; but they got no chance after what they had done to our comrades at Isandlwana.<sup>59</sup>

The Aborigines' Protection Society protested to the War Office concerning the practices described in the letter and Evelyn Wood published an official rebuttal. His case was not helped by the existence of a number of other letters detailing the aftermath of Khambula. An anonymous infantryman recounted his view of the battle: "The cavalry ... followed them up for about eight miles, killing every one they could lay hands upon".<sup>60</sup> Captain Cecil D'Arcy of the Frontier Light Horse described in a letter printed in the *Eastern Star* how he took part in the pursuit himself:

We killed a little over 2,300, and when once they retired all the horsemen in camp followed them for eight miles, butchering the brutes all over the place. I told the men, 'No quarter, boys, and remember yesterday', and we did knock them about, killing them all over the place.<sup>61</sup>

And Commandant Schermbrücker, the leader of a group of German colonial volunteers, described in *The Friend of the Free State and Bloemfontein Gazette* his part in the pursuit:

They fairly ran like bucks, but I was after them like a whirlwind and shooting incessantly into the thick column ... They became exhausted ... so we took the assegais from the dead men, and rushed among the living ones, stabbing them right and left with fearful revenge ... No quarter was given.<sup>62</sup>

## VII "We were cutting them down like cutting grass"

Pearson's column was finally relieved from the mission station at Eshowe, but not before Chelmsford's relief column was brought to battle by the Zulu at Gingindhlovu. Again the result was a British victory, and again the pursuit after the battle was prosecuted with vengeance in mind. A piper of the 91<sup>st</sup> Highlanders described the aftermath: "When the Zulus commenced to retire, our natives and mounted volunteers went out after them; the natives assegaid all the wounded they could find. It was brutal work; still, it was nothing more than they would have done to us, if it were possible".<sup>63</sup> And another first hand account of the pursuit, written by Sergeant Edwin Powis of the mounted infantry to a lady friend, backs up this account:

We were attacked by about 8,000 black devils ... [we] saddled our horses and made heavy chase out into the open field with sword in hand. We were cutting them down like cutting grass, they were that thick ... we caught [Zulus], who had been wounded, trying to make for the bush. We cut off their heads, the three of them, and let them lay.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.173

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.171

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.169

<sup>62</sup> Knight, *Go to Your God*, p.234

<sup>63</sup> Emery, *The Red Soldier*, p.202

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.205

The common experience of both battles seems to have been a vengeful pursuit of the beaten Zulu warriors, yet the letters are also replete with admiration expressed for Zulu bravery and fighting ability. The final battle of the war, at Ulundi, where Cetshwayo's army was finally destroyed, saw a similar conclusion, and similar sentiments expressed. An anonymous correspondent of the 17<sup>th</sup> Lancers, in a letter to his brother, described how

the infantry ... kept up a fire like one continual blaze, but notwithstanding this the Zulus got to within fifty or sixty yards of us, and I could see them on one side breaking their assegais short for a final rush, so you can form some sort of idea as to the sort of metal they are ... They tried lying down to escape, but it was no use, we had them anyhow, no mercy or quarter from the 'Old Tots'.<sup>65</sup>

An account of the battle reproduced in the *Cape Journal* described another such example of 'no quarter':

It was a singular time, and a dangerous spot, in which to interview a man, especially a wounded man, but the questioner went to work seriously, and got all the news of the week ... on being assured that there was no more information to be had, he quietly shot the man, mounted his horse, and joined again in the chase.<sup>66</sup>

While the aftermath of the three great British victories at Ulundi, Gingindlovu, and Khambula was particularly bloody, it is worth remembering that no mercy was given after Isandlwana either. In the midst of battle, the Zulus too "killed everything they came across, soldiers, non-combatants, and animals alike".<sup>67</sup>

### VIII "Our men can't hold a candle to them"

While much has been written on the Anglo-Zulu War in recent years, most of this work has focused on the strict military tactics of the forces involved and on blow-by-blow accounts of the major battles. Less attention has been given to the attitudes of either side, or the worldview of the societies from which the soldiers originated. A number of questions may be raised concerning these attitudes and how they may be reflected through wartime correspondence.

Despite their obvious limitations, the soldiers' letters are the best sources available to give some indication as to the thoughts and motivations of "Tommy Atkins" as he fought his way through Zululand. Regarding the ideological background from which the soldiers came, one can draw several conclusions. The first, that there *was* such a thing as an imperial ideology, which created a rationale for the acquisition and the retention of overseas possessions in the name of Empire. Another conclusion possible from a reading of the sources is that the Anglo-Zulu War played a major role in the transformation of imperial ideology from reluctant beginnings in the 1860s, when it seemed possible that a move might be made *away* from the imperial ethos, to its triumphal peak in the 1890s.

However it is equally apparent from the Anglo-Zulu War sources that the imperialist movement was one born of fear. Seen by many at the time and since as a war of imperialist

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.233

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p.237

<sup>67</sup> Knight, *Go to Your God*, p.238

aggression, the war was at least partially motivated by fears of destabilisation and native insurrection. After Isandlwana in particular, the war was seen as one in which a defeat might mean the end of the Empire, and parallels with the Indian Mutiny two decades before are clear. Then also, the reaction of the British forces was “bitterly savage”, and marked an important tactic in maintaining imperial cohesion - that native opponents showing any success in resisting must be thoroughly crushed, lest their resistance encourage others.

Yet the act of crushing such resistance required a certain attitude among the soldiers - a willingness to use brutality as a tool of suppression. As Knight commented, on the difference in attitudes to warfare against European and African enemies, “whilst troops seldom had any qualms in destroying Zulu or Maori homes...many soldiers felt deeply uncomfortable about the policy of forcibly removing Boer civilians to concentration camps and burning their farms”.<sup>68</sup> Arguably, such a willingness required certain preconceptions of the enemy, preconceptions fed by the existence from some time before the Anglo-Zulu conflict of a negative perception of the African that pervaded British life and letters. Earlier notions of equality, or at least of basic ethnocentrism, were mostly discarded in favour of a depiction of the African as a lesser being, “both savage and bestial figures who needed to be controlled at all costs and as passive and helpless beings in need of missionary care and protection”.<sup>69</sup> This dual perception of the African, as “half devil and half child”, as Kipling later put it, can be seen in the letters, and is key to interpreting British perceptions of the Zulu.

Natives under British control, like the Xhosa of the Cape and the peoples of India, could be easily portrayed as passive and weak. The Zulu, and other notable enemies like the Afghans and the Sudanese, attained significant, though limited, respect in Victorian society, principally because of the vigour with which they resisted British power. The defeat at Isandlwana created both fear and respect among the British soldiers, and the ferocity with which revenge was taken at Khambula, Gingindlovu, and Ulundi can to some extent be seen as a measure of that respect. Captain William Crauford spoke for many when he admired “very much the way they advanced to the attack. Our men can’t hold a candle to them”.<sup>70</sup> It was a view of the Zulu that his commander would have recognised – Evelyn Wood described the attack on Khambula in a letter to General Horsford: “The attack on this camp was a wonderful sight...What astonished me most was their tactical skill”.<sup>71</sup> In the end, the Zulu organisation, bravery and fighting skill could not win the day against the disciplined fire of the Martini-Henry rifle, but the British response to the Zulu threat, both in the adoption of revolutionary battlefield tactics and in impressions expressed in the letters sent home from the campaign, singled out the Zulu as the most feared enemy faced by the Victorian British Army.

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<sup>68</sup> Knight, *Go to Your God*, p.238

<sup>69</sup> Paul B. Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.12

<sup>70</sup> Spiers, *Victorian Soldier in Africa*, p.50

<sup>71</sup> Emery, *The Red Soldier*, p.176