

The role of King Sekukuni in precipitating the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879.

By Dr Adrian Greaves

In 1878 Sir Bartle Frere was encouraged to invade Zululand because he saw a campaign against the Zulus as a straightforward and easy means to sweep away any manifestation of festering native dissent in South Africa, whether real or imagined. In the case of the Zulus, the amount of dissent was minimal; they were a peaceful nation and their ruler, King Cetshwayo, was well disposed to the British. What caused some offence to Frere was King Cetshwayo's reluctance to submit to British demands for Zulu labour to work in Natal and the Transvaal, and to have his country administered by the British.

To the north of Zululand British forces had recently been attempting to control the militant rebel leader, Prince Mbilini, who had a long history of raiding Boer farms around Luneburg and stealing Boer cattle; worse was Mbilini's enthusiasm for murdering their native workers. Further to the north of Mbilini's sphere of influence was Sekukuniland, where the Pedi people under King Sekukuni had likewise been in a state of rebellion against anyone white and who regularly interfered with British lines of communication between Natal and Pretoria, the capital town of the Transvaal Republic that had been annexed by Britain only the year before in 1877. By this annexation, the British inherited not only the Boers' long-standing border dispute with the Zulu kingdom but also the legacy of conflict and bitterness with the Pedi nation, which came to a head following a minor dispute between the Boers and Pedi raiders in 1876, which in turn then led to full-scale war when the Boers commenced operations by advancing on Sekukuniland. They chose to attack along the course of the Olifants River towards the first rebel stronghold but, after a chaotic two-day operation, their morale had begun to crumble even before they reached the first Pedi stronghold. The Boer commandos had been reinforced by 2,500 neighbouring Swazi allies and it was they who bore the brunt of any skirmishing. The Boers then attempted to advance further towards Sekukuni's main stronghold but when the Swazis abandoned the campaign in disgust, Boer morale collapsed and their motley invading force retreated leaving Sekukuni unscathed and free to continue his marauding.

The Boer campaign had been a military and political disaster for their floundering Republic and was one of the factors used by the British to justify their intervention and annexation of the Transvaal in April 1877. Meanwhile, British attempts to establish authority over the Pedi were likewise firmly rejected by Sekukuni - in the official history of the Zulu-War it is interesting to note that the British blamed Sekukuni's recalcitrant attitude largely on the fictitious influence of the Zulu king Cetshwayo. In any event, the beginning of April 1878 saw British troops moved towards the Sekukuniland border to defeat the Pedi and thereby, in theory, finally resolve matters. There was another reason for attacking the Pedi; with the invasion of Zululand in advanced preparation, Frere and Chelmsford did not want a rebellious Pedi army actively operating behind their northern supply lines into Zululand. Since the recent annexation of the Transvaal, the Boers living in and around Sekukuniland had become quasi-British subjects so Frere had some misplaced trust in the Boers that they would not rebel. But many were on the point of

abandoning their farms to the Pedi marauders, which Frere feared would give the Pedi greater control in the area. It was clear to Frere that British action had to be taken to pacify and protect the Boers, so Colonel Hugh Rowlands VC was instructed to march north to neutralise the Pedi. Rowland's numbers were absurdly small, especially given the recent Pedi successes over the Boers - no more than a few companies of British regulars were available along with a handful of locally-raised Irregular units. After several months of sporadic skirmishes around obscure British outposts, Rowlands was finally ordered to attack Sekukuni's capital, Tsate, in the Leolu Mountains in order to resolve matters, once and for all. Rowlands assembled his force at a point about twenty-five miles east of Tsate called Fort Burghers and on the 3rd October 1878 advanced with a force of just 130 men of the 1/13th Regiment, 338 men of the Frontier Light Horse, and two light 7 pounder Krupp guns. It was autumn and the country was dry and parched after several years of below-average rainfall. Rowlands advanced just a few miles each day, harassed by the Pedi warriors sniping from rocky hill-sides or attacking his bivouacs at night. By the evening of the 5th October he was still several miles short of his objective and his horses were suffering terribly from the lack of water and grass. That night the camp was again attacked from three sides and the Pedi managed to stampede the column's slaughter oxen. The attack was driven off after about half-an-hour but the cattle were lost. The following morning Rowlands adopted the earlier Boer tactic; he gave up the advance and ordered the retreat to Fort Burghers which he reached on the 7th October 1878.

The British expedition to quell the Pedi had proved only marginally less ignominious than the Boers' attempt but Chelmsford's accelerating plans for the conquest of Zululand made it impractical to resume any fresh operations against the Pedi. A series of British-controlled forts were strategically built around Sekukuniland with the intention of containing Pedi counter-attacks and, from these, sporadic skirmishing would continue up to the end of the year.

By January 1879, few outside Frere's immediate circle of officials knew of the on-going Pedi campaign and its ignominious results to date. This was fortuitous as Britain stood at a high point in its history and enjoyed a second-to-none position in world affairs. Britain was, or so she thought, the greatest power in the world and competently commanded a fine Empire. Britain's army was not in the practice of shirking a battle and not since Waterloo had any power contested her right to rule as and where she chose. And yet, perhaps emboldened by King Sekukuni and the Pedi people, King Cetshwayo and his Zulu nation defiantly stood their ground when Britain was committed by Frere and Chelmsford to invade Zululand just a few weeks later in January 1879.

The above is an abridged extract from my forthcoming book, *Forgotten Battles of the Zulu War* published by Pen & Sword.