

Queen Victoria and her initial involvement in the Anglo-Zulu War.

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During the 1870s the Royal Family was deeply involved in the army in more ways than just the moral aspect as epitomised by the awarding of medals. Such honorific acts in many ways are an understandable facet of the monarchy's relationship with the army, even in modern terms. Less easy to comprehend from a modern perspective was the more direct intervention of the monarchy in the running of the army at the time of the Anglo-Zulu War.

In contemporary terms the involvement in the events of the war of the Duke of Cambridge, Queen Victoria's cousin, was understandable for he was the commander-in-chief of the British Army and therefore his interest and direct intervention was fully merited. His initial comments concerning Chelmsford after Isandlwana though are less easy to support, especially as they were given before a full and comprehensive understanding of the events had been obtained. He wrote to Chelmsford in the second week of February, when the news of the terrible defeat came in, that he had the "fullest confidence in the regiment, and am satisfied that you have done and will continue to do everything that is right". It was a view that many people did not share and that, over time, even the Duke reluctantly appeared to abandon.

If the sentiments may be suspect, the acceptance of the right to make a comment on the military situation cannot be doubted as it came from the head of the British army. The same cannot be said of the Queen's own intervention early on in the same process when she asked for a message post-Isandlwana to be sent via the Secretary of State for War to Chelmsford in the following vein;

The Queen wishes you to telegraph to Lord Chelmsford that she sympathises most sincerely with him in the dreadful loss which has deprived her of so many gallant officers and men and that Her Majesty places entire confidence in him and in her troops to maintain our honour and our good name. (1)

This was a potentially serious intervention. This public vote of confidence, as it was likely to be interpreted, immediately after the news of Isandlwana had arrived made it more difficult for opponents to criticise Chelmsford and his actions. It would not stop them from doing so but it would mean that it would be some time before Chelmsford found himself uncomfortably in the spotlight and then several months more before decisive action was taken.

'The establishment' – or at least that part of it represented by the royal family – had signalled early their support for Chelmsford in a way that threatened to take the Queen's role in particular into dangerous territory. The situation had arisen because in part the Queen was a supporter of Chelmsford from times past – she had made him an aide-de-camp in 1868. She had also made him a Knight Companion of the Bath in 1878. But her expressions of support were now to pose an interesting problem.

It put the monarch notably at odds with sentiment in some political quarters. Sir Robert Peel (not the Prime Minister of the same name who had died several decades

before) was one MP who was trenchant in his criticisms of Chelmsford, evidenced when he noted in the House of Commons that “the incompetence of Lord Chelmsford had led to the miserable disaster at Isandhlwana [sic]. Upon his head ... was the blood of 53 officers and 1,400 men, or a greater number of officers than had fallen at the Battle of Inkermann [sic]”. (2)

The tone of these comments was in stark contrast to those expressed about Chelmsford by the Queen as well as the Duke of Cambridge.

References.

1. RA VIC/MAIN/O/33/86
2. In Moodie, 44