

What factors shaped British press coverage of the reverses, and successes, encountered by British arms during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879?

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‘The news which reached England yesterday is of the gravest importance. A British force has been defeated in open field by the despised savages of South Africa, and not merely defeated, but annihilated’.¹ The defeat of a British column at the battle of Isandlwana, in January 1879, sent shockwaves through the British public. From this juncture, the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 received press coverage that was unprecedented for a colonial campaign that had little or no bearing on the majority of readers. Although the political alignment of newspapers influenced coverage of the conflict, the most important single factor in shaping press reporting of the war was the innate imperialism of contemporary culture. This essay will focus on the coverage of the Zululand campaign in four daily newspapers in order to show this. The *Daily News*, whose editor-in-chief, Frank Harrison Hill, was a strong proponent of Gladstonian liberalism, is used as an example of the Liberal press. The *Northern Echo*, also a Liberal publication, will provide perspective on the impact of the regional base of newspapers, as well as a contrast in price. The *Times* and *Pall Mall Gazette* will also be studied. Although founded by a Liberal, George Smith, in 1865, the *Pall Mall Gazette* was edited as a Conservative paper by Frederick Greenwood until 1880.² Equally, although the *Times* still carried an ‘independent tag’, it ‘counted for much’ within the Conservative press.³ This choice of source material will also allow for a comparison of papers based on their intended readership. The scope of this essay is further confined to the opening months of the campaign. The initial defeat at the battle of Isandlwana, and heroic defence of Rorke’s Drift, provide ample scope for an investigation into coverage of the reverses and successes of the Zululand campaign.

The most important factor shaping British press coverage of the reverses and successes of the Anglo-Zulu War was the imperialism evident in contemporary popular culture. Outpourings of imperial sentiment accompanied many events throughout the decade, exemplified by the Russo-Turkish War of 1878, which resulted in the creation of the term ‘jingoism’. Although this sentiment was most commonly expressed in relation to specific events, Mackenzie argues that these were merely the ‘surface ripples’ of a much deeper intellectual and social current that had developed by the middle of the nineteenth century.⁴ Propagating this imperial identity was an important role of the late Victorian press, a point discussed by Curran, who notes the role of print-based media in advancing a national identity focused on empire. He argues that the competing liberal and conservative understandings of empire, as either ‘an adventure story or a moral project’, were increasingly merged together by the press in the late nineteenth century, ‘into a seductive synthesis, constructed around an image of national superiority’.⁵ Supplementing this argument, the growth in empire-wide communication was to play an important role. From the 1850s, a global network of submarine telegraph cables was created. Potter contends that the

¹ ‘The Disasters in Zululand’, *Northern Echo* (Darlington), 12.Feb.1879.

² A.J. Lee *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855-1914* (London 1976) p165

³ Lee *The Origins of the Popular Press in England* p134.

⁴ J.M. Mackenzie ‘Introduction’ in J.M. Mackenzie (ed.) *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester University Press 1986) p3.

⁵ J. Curran ‘Media and the Making of British Society, c.1700-2000’, *Media History*, Vol.8, No.2 (2002) pp144-145.

growth of the telegraph helped sustain imperial identities and a sense of Britishness, arguing that people throughout the empire were able to feel increasingly connected to the most important events.⁶ Although this argument pertains primarily to the Dominions and later imperial history, it raises interesting questions for the reporting of the Anglo-Zulu War. Quicker access to news from around the empire allowed the British readership to become more closely associated with events in its far reaches. Although Southern Africa was not directly linked to the imperial centre, significant news of the campaign reached London comparatively quickly via the telegraph station at St. Vincent. Thus, although the Anglo-Zulu War was initially of little interest to the British press, it was able to become a focus for popular imperialism, and a source of great national importance. These points impacted heavily on the reporting of the Anglo-Zulu War, and in reaction to defeat or in celebration of victory, press coverage focused on providing reassurance that imperial values of bravery and heroism had been upheld.

Coverage of the campaign often emphasised the bravery of the imperial soldiers. For example, a piece which appeared in the *Times* described the battle as ‘the Thermopylae of Natal’, and the defenders ‘our devoted Spartans who checked the fierce raid of the Zulu hordes into Natal’.⁷ Similarly, the *Daily News* laid the blame for the disaster on a premature invasion, deliberately diverting responsibility for the early reverses of the campaign towards the High Commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, whilst simultaneously professing the bravery and courage of the British soldiers. The paper claimed that ‘one thing is abundantly clear from the news...that the invasion of Zululand was premature’, whilst declaring that ‘the admirable courage and discipline of ours troops could not compensate for the immense disparity of numbers’.⁸ More detailed reports of Isandlwana, which followed in the subsequent months, were equally as emphatic in highlighting the bravery of the British troops. In early March, the *Daily News* reported that ‘of the details of the fight we...know but little...But we have heard enough to show that British Valour has once again proved itself as true as of yore’.⁹ In a comparable fashion, press coverage of the defence of Rorke’s Drift was emphatic in its praise of the victorious garrison, and the engagement was used to reaffirm British military prowess. For example, The *Pall Mall Gazette* said of the defenders that

Their resolve to defend the post against overwhelming odds was taken without a moment delay...and even the unflinching courage with which the long and desperate defence was maintained is not more impressive than the collected forethought which presided over it.¹⁰

In this respect, reporting of both the successes and reverses of the campaign is shown to be nationalistic in character, emphasising the bravery of the British soldiers and heroic characteristics.

The imperialist nature of coverage is also shown in the regular calls for a renewed offensive against the Zulu nation. The *Times* argued that ‘the subjugation of the Zulu power and the destruction of the military organisation must be accomplished at any cost and with the most efficient means at our command’,¹¹ and that ‘the pre-occupation of the public mind will assert

⁶ S.J. Potter *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press, 1876-1922* (Oxford University Press 2003) pp27-28.

⁷ ‘The Zulu War’, *Times* (London), 7.Mar.1879 p10.

⁸ ‘London’, *Daily News* (London), 21.Feb.1879.

⁹ ‘The War at the Cape’, *Daily News* (London), 6.Mar.1879.

¹⁰ ‘The Defence of Rorke’s Drift’, *Pall Mall Gazette* (London), 11.Mar.1879.

¹¹ *Times* (London), 13. Feb.1879 p9.

the right of the military question to take precedence over the political'.¹² On a related note, the previous issue argued that the reinforcements *en route* to the Cape embarked 'with a full determination to retrieve what we must look upon as a serious blow to our military prestige'.¹³ Similarly, Lieven brings attention to the influence of the public mood on the initially anti-war *Daily News*, arguing that the shock of the defeat 'unified public opinion behind the government'.¹⁴ An article recounting the departure of reinforcements declared 'that the troops will respond heroically to the demands made upon them no one can doubt; and even in the interests of the tribes against whom they carry war, it must be hoped that their success will be rapid and decisive'.¹⁵ The author invokes the higher cause of British imperialism in justification of these sentiments, declaring that 'a much higher motive than any mere sentiments of wounded pride counsels us to dispatch...a sufficient force to restore our military renown'.¹⁶ Such sentiments, and the emphasis placed on military virtues and the need to restore imperial pride, reveal the impact of popular imperialism in shaping coverage of the Anglo-Zulu War.

However, although press coverage of the war was heavily influenced by this factor, it is important not to present an account which is overly homogenised. Analysis of the *Northern Echo* provides some interesting contrasts to this general theme. The price of the *Northern Echo*, one halfpenny, is only a quarter that of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and a sixth of the three pennies paid for the *Times*. Brown identifies a contemporary newspaper reader as 'someone with a serious concern for the affairs of a world power'.¹⁷ The intended readership of the *Pall Mall Gazette* very much fits this description, yet in contrast, the halfpenny *Northern Echo* can be assumed to have a different readership. The price of one halfpenny made the paper accessible to most social classes, especially in times of popular excitement as in the aftermath of Isandlwana. One former editor, H.C. Ellis, wrote that 'in all times of...excitement...the price of a ½ d. paper would be no obstacle to the poorest person indulging in curiosity'.¹⁸ As such, although the paper still extols imperial virtues in the common soldiers, it is more willing to criticise the actions of those in command. For example, the paper asserted that 'beyond the display of heroism on the part of the individuals there is nothing in this dismal business that can be regarded with complacency', whilst simultaneously lambasting the army for allowing its officers to carry luxurious baggage on campaign, pleading that 'in future it is to be hoped that when British armies invade savage States they will not take as their model the luxurious effeminacy of the Oriental'.¹⁹ Sentiments like this would not appear in the conservative *Pall Mall Gazette* or the *Times*, and such castigating of the officer class suggests that the intended readership of a publication could have shaped, to a limited extent, press coverage of the war. This disparity could also be attributed to the place of publication. However, improvements in transport technology by the late nineteenth century meant that London based papers could become national. At the same time, a gradual shift from community-based to class-based politics in the country as a whole homogenised coverage of significant events across the press. Although this trend should not be exaggerated, Lee contends that it still resulted in the declining political significance of local pressures, in

¹² *Times* (London), 13. Feb.1879 p9.

¹³ 'The Zulu War', *Times* (London), 12.Feb.1879 p10.

¹⁴ M. Lieven 'The Honest Representative of True English Freedom': The Metropolitan Press and the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879', *Journal of the Anglo-Zulu War Historical Society*, 25 (June 2009).

¹⁵ 'London', *Daily News* (London), 20.Feb.1879.

¹⁶ 'London', *Daily News* (London), 20.Feb.1879.

¹⁷ L. Brown *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford 1985) p111.

¹⁸ H.C. Ellis quoted in Brown *Victorian News and Newspapers* p33.

¹⁹ 'Isandula and Sedan', *Northern Echo* (Darlington), 4.Mar.1879.

favour of national ones.²⁰ Consequently, there appears to be little disparity in either the attention afforded to the conflict, or the nature of reporting, and the *Northern Echo* covers the campaign in a comparable fashion to the correspondingly Liberal *Daily News*.

The political alignment of different publications did shape their coverage of the Anglo-Zulu War. Although the press was comparatively consistent in expounding general imperial values in its coverage, reporting was also influenced by the political views of the editors and proprietors. The rise of press barons at the end of the nineteenth century, such as Lord Northcliffe the founder of the *Daily Mail*, revolutionised the newspaper industry. As Williams attests, ‘the perceived motive of nineteenth century newspaper proprietors, editors and journalists – to guide public opinion – was pushed into the background as the opportunities to make money increased’.²¹ However, in 1879, areas of the British press still identified with different political agendas. This is borne out by Brown, who argues that editors and journalists of later nineteenth century publications ‘had their political sympathies...and aimed to work for publications of whose views they approved’.²² In addition to this, liberal narratives stress the nineteenth century role of the media as the ‘fourth estate’. This argument, highlighted by Curran,²³ argues that the press became increasingly independent from government throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in the wake of the repeal of the Stamp Duty on newspapers in 1855. In this way it was able to expose the government to public scrutiny, or support their position, in line with the views of individual editors. Therefore, political affiliation was still an important factor in 1879, and so was influential in shaping coverage of the Anglo-Zulu War.

An analysis of the different coverage of the campaign in Liberal and Conservative publications illustrates this point. Throughout the pre-ambule to the conflict, and in the wake of the early reverses suffered by the British Army, the *Daily News* condemned the war, and in particular the dubious pre-text provided for the invasion. The paper specifically condemns the ‘man on the spot’, Sir Bartle Frere, and his relationship with the imperial government, in one instance complaining that he addressed government ministers ‘more in the tone of a master than of a servant’.²⁴ When reports of initial success in the opening skirmishes of the war reached London, the *Daily News* still reacted by questioning Frere’s justification. The paper argued that, ‘we have already expressed the opinion, which is further borne out by the letter from our Special Correspondent...that no sufficient cause has ever arisen to justify a quarrel with Cetewayo’.²⁵ The *Northern Echo* takes a similar stance in its coverage of the campaign, in one instance reporting that ‘the responsibility for the slaughter of a British regiment in Zululand rests primarily upon the head of Sir Bartle Frere...But it lies also at the door of Her Majesty’s Ministers, whose half-hearted irresolute policy rendered it possible’.²⁶ Even if imperial fervour demanded the soldiers be portrayed in a certain light, it is evident that papers with Liberal sympathies reported the war in a more negative fashion, whilst opposing a justification which flew in the face of Gladstonian principles of retrenchment.

However, the *Times* and *Pall Mall Gazette* showed more support for government policy. In stark contrast to the arguments of the *Daily News*, the *Pall Mall Gazette* saw it that ‘nothing can be more unfair than to condemn the High Commissioner for the unfortunate results of the

²⁰ Lee *The Origins of the Popular Press in England* p183.

²¹ K. Williams *Read All About It! A History of the British Newspaper* (London 2010) p138.

²² Brown *Victorian News and Newspapers* p94.

²³ Curran ‘Media and the Making of British Society’ pp136-137.

²⁴ ‘London’, *Daily News* (London), 17.Feb.1879.

²⁵ ‘London’, *Daily News* (London), 7.Feb.1879.

²⁶ ‘The Government and the Zulu War’, *Northern Echo* (Darlington), 20.Feb.1879.

first operations in Zululand...and it is only by strained construction that Sir Bartle Frere can be made responsible for it'.²⁷ The author even goes so far as to comment that 'it is...possible to contend that the success of the Zulus in the ambushade in which the greatest part of the 24th perished is a vindication of the sagacity and foresight of the High Commissioner'.²⁸ Similarly the *Times* was quick to emphasise that the government was doing all it could to support Lord Chelmsford's invasion. The paper argued that 'at this moment, when every opportunity is taken to decry the efforts of the government', it should be pointed out that 'the government met... [Lord Chelmsford's] demand in a spirit which will commend itself to every Englishman'.²⁹ An earlier edition had already offered its support for the pre-text of the war, arguing 'it is not, perhaps, too much to take it as proved that the military organisation of the Zulu Kingdom threatened the British colonies with a blow that must have fallen sooner or later unless the weapon was broken in the hands of the despot'.³⁰ Such views are in stark contrast to those presented in the *Daily News*, and it is apparent that, beyond the abstract images of British military prowess, the coverage of the reverses and successes of British arms in Zululand was influenced heavily by the political leanings of each particular publication.

Popular imperialism, evident in late nineteenth century British society, profoundly shaped press coverage of the Anglo-Zulu War. As a result of this factor, newspapers, important instruments in creating the imperial identities of the late nineteenth century, covered the war in a nationalistic manner. The Victorian emphasis on imperial and military values ensured that the bravery of the British soldiers was rarely questioned, and that newspapers were quick to extol the need for a swift and decisive British victory. Publications intended for a higher readership, such as the *Times* or *Pall Mall Gazette*, emphasised these values the most, whilst the halfpenny *Northern Echo*, whilst still extolling the bravery of individuals, is more readily prepared to disregard this trend in relation to the officer class and conduct of the war. Although newspapers were separate from direct political control, their role as the 'fourth estate' in British society meant that the political affiliation of different newspapers also shaped coverage of the war; for this reason it is clear that the Liberal press was substantially more condemnatory of the Zululand campaign than those publications which supported Disraeli's government. The late nineteenth century press maintained a close relationship to the popular ideals of the British Empire, and this was the most important influence on press coverage of the Anglo-Zulu War. This factor was so significant, that the images of the war which the press inspired have lasted until the modern day. Scenes in the film *Zulu*,³¹ which portray red-coated soldiers heroically defending the final redoubt at Rorke's Drift, can trace their origins to the editorials of contemporary newspaper coverage.

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³⁰ *Times* (London), 13. Feb 1879 p9.

³¹ Cy Enfield and Stanley Baker *Zulu* (1964).

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