

A Lion Dishevelled:

The response of the British press to the battle of Isandlwana.

Capt. Erich Wagner US Marine Corps.

Never has such a disaster happened to the English Army. Trooper Richard Stevens, Natal Mounted Police

On 22nd January 1879, at the base of a plateau with a strange-sounding name, an event happened, unique in the long and glorious annals of British military history. The rocky crag was known as Isandlwana, and the incident that occurred there was a battle between Zulu warriors and British soldiers; the result was the worst defeat in the colonial history of the British Army. Under the command of a famous general, 1,329 officers and men were killed. Only fifty-five whites survived. Six companies of a seasoned British regiment were destroyed to the last man. The British Army lost more officers here, fifty-two, than it did during the three battles of the Waterloo campaign, forty-eight. No battalion had ever lost so many officers in one engagement.

There was, as the title of one modern book indicates, “an awful row at home about this” on the morning of February 11th, when the news reached the press. There had been reverses and setbacks from time to time, admittedly, as British troops were on active service in the many recesses of the Empire. Not since the sanguine events of the Indian Mutiny in 1857, had such total and humiliating losses been reported to the incredulous public. The shock was all the sharper because of its unexpectedness: for many, it was the first news that Queen Victoria’s regiments were even engaged in South Africa. The press in the opening weeks of 1879 was still preoccupied with the fighting in Afghanistan. The newspapers were galvanised; they now raced to capitalise on the disaster and compensate for their unpreparedness. They did so, in the words of Carl Becker, without fear and without research. Because of the enormous setback of January 22nd, as well as continued bad luck that plagued the British throughout the war, the campaign attracted considerable attention from contemporary scribes, pundits, and artists, whose representations in the reading material of the day transformed the Zulus into a myth that still endures, and endures very strongly.

In the late nineteenth century, the British public received varied images of their Empire, and probably the most vivid and emotive were those of war, provided by reporters and sketch-artists. The small imperialistic campaigns provided consistently available adventures for the press during this period. For more than a quarter of a century, these wars supplied the journals with enthralling true stories along with descriptions of intriguing lands and their inhabitants, and kept the British Army in the public eye. “The news” in its modern sense was a nineteenth-century creation, and the British press expanded greatly during this period, continuously in competition for readership and thereby for advertising revenue. Newspapers soon found themselves deeply involved in partisan politics: liberal and anti-imperialistic publications bashing their conservative and imperialist rivals.

The Zulu War is an excellent vehicle to explore the workings of the British press with regards to colonial war and public sentiments about empire. I will, in this paper, analyse how the press reacted to the disaster through the use of major newspapers and periodicals of the period. How were the Zulus, after their victory at Isandlwana, portrayed in the papers? Did Liberal papers have a defining view; did the Conservatives? Which newspapers blamed whom for the disaster; which protected whom, and how did they go about doing this? Finally, what common themes emerge in the reporting and what do they reveal about the educated public’s attitudes toward the Empire in the late-Victorian period?

“This calamitous ‘little war’ ”

I consider that there never was a position where a small force could have made a better defensive stand.
Lord Chelmsford, on the site of Isandlwana.

From 1837-1901, Queen Victoria ruled Britain, the most powerful dominion in the world. During these sixty-four years, Britain became a great colonial power. The British Empire, a realm upon which “the sun never set”, encompassed one fourth of the earth’s land surface - it was the richest and most powerful empire in the history of the world. The “red soldier”, or the British serviceman who built this empire, was

engaged in about sixty-four (an average of one per year) different campaigns fighting for Queen and country during this age. One of these conflicts has seized the popular imagination like none other of the period. During the first seven months of 1879, regiments of Queen Victoria found themselves ferociously entangled in a struggle with the most powerful and most feared of all African nations - the Zulus.

The year was 1878. The newly appointed High Commissioner for the Cape, Sir Henry Bartle Frere, was a veteran administrator from India, whence he brought his uncompromising views on the treatment of tribes which seemed to menace imperial frontiers. Frere's native commissioner, Sir Theophilus Shepstone, shared his superior's opinions that safe frontiers could only be gained by aggressive, forward thrusts of British military power followed by annexation. Shepstone was eager to solve the "native problem", and was worried about a black coalition, both within and outside the British domains. The most formidable of these native tribes was the Zulu Kingdom, ruled by King Cetshwayo. As long as his menacing army of between 50,000 and 70,000 warriors went unchecked, the Commissioners believed peace and prosperity in South Africa were impossible. Frere and Shepstone were lucky that their views about local security were shared by the Honourable Frederick Thesiger (after 1878 the second Lord Chelmsford) who commanded all British land forces in South Africa in March 1878.

In its origins, the Zulu War was of special interest in the history of South Africa because the crushing of King Cetshwayo and his fighting men was seen, accurately or inaccurately, as the solution to the problem of knitting together the European colonies into a workable confederation. At its onset, a quick campaign that would crush the savage and untutored foe - like the nine Border Wars before - was all that anyone expected. King Cetshwayo would learn his lesson that "Queen Victoria rules all of Africa" and would submit to her regal authority. The intricate web between Briton and Boer could be resolved now that the native Zulu nation which had threatened (hypothetically or not) both communities was eradicated.

The reality was quite different. Within the first two weeks following the invasion of Zululand on January 11th, 1879, the Zulus had dealt the British Army its greatest defeat in history at the hands of "savages". Chelmsford had advanced with dilatoriness and lack of caution - Isandlwana was the result. Here, on January 22nd, 25,000 Zulu warriors killed 1,329 officers and men of Lord Chelmsford's central column of his three-pronged invasion force.

Within the next six months, England sent a great number of reinforcements to Lord Chelmsford in South Africa, and Zululand was invaded for a second time. There were many more engagements, and several pyrrhic Zulu victories including Hlobane Mountain, Intombe River, and the death of the Prince Imperial of France, the "Last of the Napoleonic Dynasty", but the Zulu host was crushed in short time after such slaughters as Kambula, Gingindhlovu, and Ulundi. The war had cost the Treasury more than five million pounds of the taxpayers' money, and the army seventy-six officers and 1,007 Imperial soldiers. About 10,000 Zulus had been killed on the various fields of battle. The Zulu Empire had lasted about sixty years. It was now dead.

Zulu - the New Household Word. The Reaction to Isandlwana

I regret to have to report a very disastrous engagement... Lord Chelmsford's despatch

There being no direct telegraphic communication between the British Isles and the Cape or Natal, news of the catastrophe reached the papers after midnight on February 10, about three weeks after the battle. "Never has such a disaster happened to the British Army", wrote one British officer who escaped the slaughter of January 22nd. The reaction in England was incredulity and shock. Prime Minister Disraeli correctly saw that it was a mortal blow to his government. It would change everything, he told the Queen, humiliating Britain in the eyes of other Powers, sapping the nation's influence, bleeding the revenue white. The Zulus would be conquered. That, now, was beyond a doubt. But the price was to be paid by Disraeli's government. Disraeli anticipated the political fallout. Not long after the news reached him he wrote: "I am greatly stricken. Everybody was congratulating me on being the most fortunate of Ministers, when there comes this terrible disaster!" "The terrible disaster has shaken me to the centre", he wrote on February 13th, "and what increases the grief is that I have not only to endure it, but to sustain others and keep a bold front before an unscrupulous enemy [i.e. the liberal press]". The Prime Minister's health suffered a relapse, probably psychosomatic, and he was sunk in a mood of depression and irritation for several weeks. Colonel (later General Sir) Richard Harrison was one of thousands of British soldiers and officers who received their marching orders that day. He wrote: "Many a time have the people of England been startled by accounts received from some seat of war; but never, I think, has such a shock been felt at home as when the morning papers proclaimed that an organised British force had been almost annihilated by the badly armed though brave warriors of the Kaffir king, Cetshwayo, on the borders of Zululand".

News of the commencement of war in South Africa was published on the 8th and 9th of February, but it

did not attract any major attention. There was war in Afghanistan, where the Amir had refused to accept a British mission, and the distant fighting in Zululand, a native nation few Britons had ever heard of, was of little concern. The Afghan War might entangle Britain in hostilities with Russia. The defeat at Isandlwana, however, was like a bucket of cold water in the face of the press. There was a mad dash to gather all possible information on the disaster, the war, and the enemy. Special correspondents were quickly dispatched to South Africa. Each newspaper wanted to outdo the other - facts and correct information were sometimes sacrificed in the process: "*accurate information was at a premium, little was known about Zululand and proper names were largely guesswork*". The examples are plentiful, yet we must be discerning and cautious in judging the press, as the information that was received from the seat of war was often itself inaccurate. At its outset, the scene of the disaster was not known to be Isandlwana, as the original "Reuters Telegram" did not label it as such, nor did Chelmsford's despatch. Newspapers, therefore, did not refer to the calamity as "The Battle of Isandlwana", but rather something along the lines of "the terrible disaster which has occurred at the Cape". Some even called it the Battle at Rorke's Drift. When the site of the debacle became known, "Isandlwana" was spelled anywhere from "Isandula" and "Isandlana" to "Isandusana". Material about the campaign and the origin of the war was also often sadly wrong. The date given for the massacre in "Reuters" was "21st inst.", therefore throwing off several papers. The losses sustained by the British also fluctuated up and down. Originally reported by most as "600" killed, the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Illustrated London News* cited "500". The *Graphic* reported on March 1st "that the total loss of our men is less than had at first been reported, the number being...from 250 to 300 men", only to report "900" dead on March 8th. The war artist for the *Graphic*, lacking even a map of the battlefield, depicted a fanciful scene of the battle at its height. Many publications assured their readers that the Zulus must have had detailed plans for their victory, when in all actuality, the whole engagement was unintended and unwanted by the Zulus. Finally, the causes of the war were enthusiastically manipulated by editors to support whatever angle they wished to present, and it is here that we find the greatest mutilation of the truth. An example is a minor border incident in which two Zulu adulteresses were captured from inside the Natal border, taken back to Zululand and killed according to long-established Zulu law. Yet Frere cited this incident in his justification of the war, and pro-policy papers expounded on it, as when the *Saturday Review* invented, without foundation, that the women had been raped before their execution.

Immediately the press tried to offer assertions as to "How?" such a calamity could occur. Two common explanations emerged: lack of preparedness of the British invasion force, and some kind of special advantage enjoyed by the Zulus. This "terrible disaster to the British arms has been the result of a want of preparedness rarely known in our...annals", stated the *Telegraph* on the 11th, and the fact that the home government repeatedly denied Chelmsford's requested reinforcements was continually cited as a major reason for the tragedy. The *Morning Post* held that the fatal flaw that allowed Isandlwana to happen was undertaking the war without a proper cavalry detachment. *The Times* attributed the loss to "some imprudence on the part of the detachment left behind". An underrating of the enemy was a common rationalisation for the disaster. "The strength and generalship of the enemy were greatly undervalued", wrote the *Graphic*, "and...the Zulus knew a great deal more about us than we did about them". "Evidently the Zulus have excellent information as to our movements..." the *Pall Mall Gazette* had written two days before. "The Zulu success looks very much like the fruit of a well-considered plan". The British were "outnumbered and outgeneralled". The possibility that the Zulu was a warrior of equal calibre to the British fighting man was too incomprehensible even to contemplate. The *Pall Mall Gazette* published a letter written to the *Cologne Gazette* that exemplifies how far some went to find an explanation for the catastrophe. The letter denied the contention that the Zulus wore old German uniforms and that the success of their fighting machine was a result of training in Prussian tactics that they had received at the hands of ex-German French Foreign Legionnaires! The general consensus was that the British had been "duped" and drawn into the "ambuscade" by the "crafty" savage, not fairly beaten on a proving ground. The *Graphic* went so far as to somehow suggest that "our troops were enticed...into a thick forest in all probability by a feigned retreat...and... utterly annihilated".

The press responded to the lamentable tidings in a variety of ways. For *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, the revulsion of the disaster was intensified because of a specific piece of information. "Scarcely less than our national sorrow for the loss of our brave soldiers is the feeling of regret that the Colours of one of her Majesty's regiments should have fallen into the hands of the enemy", wrote the publication in the third sentence of its opening article regarding the war. Similarly, the *Telegraph* noted the "deep humiliation... that the Colours of the 24th Regiment fell into the hands of our barbarian foes, and after this it is a matter of comparatively minor importance that an enormous quantity of stores, ammunition, and provisions were likewise captured". All publications, regardless of political affiliation, noted the wound to national pride - "this disgrace to the British name". "Our prestige", wrote *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, "was felt to have suffered an indignity". The *Times*, in a small column, even thankfully noted that the Paris papers were being respectfully quiet about the whole debacle.

Despite the hand wringing, the press was quick to report what reinforcements were being sent to the seat of war. Every major publication provided a list of the regiments being sent to South Africa, and often, regimental histories accompanied them. "This morning", wrote the *Times* on the 12th, "brought the news to London: by noon the Admiralty and War office were in communication, and by 3 p.m. 6,000 troops had been placed under orders for immediate embarkation". The British public of the nineteenth century was very aware of its regiments and their battle histories. Whenever a regiment sailed for the Cape, it was duly noted. The *Graphic* devoted pages in several issues to sketch artists' portrayals of debarking regiments boarding troopships, bidding farewell to Old England. It stated,

If King Cetewayo could be transported on the magician's carpet...in the Arabian Nights, from his native country to this island for an hour or two, he would speedily sue for peace. He would be astonished by the bustle of preparation...caused by his success at Insandusana, and he would begin to comprehend what savages very seldom do comprehend, that the forces opposed to him in South Africa are a mere advance-guard of what the Home Government can send out if they choose to put forth the strength.

The press mobilised to provide reassurance of certainty of the impending British victory. We always win the last battle, they comforted the public. The ignorant savage had sealed his own destiny.

"Celibate Man-Slaying Gladiators"

A Zulu impi dished us up in style... Rudyard Kipling, *Barrack Room Ballads*

The press ushered the victors of Isandlwana into popular culture by glamorising and dehumanising them. It is important to note that not all newspapers and periodicals were guilty of this (the *Graphic*, for example, was moderate and accurate in its representation of the Zulus). Nevertheless, popular attention was attracted by the wild and outlandish descriptions given by many publications. The British public recalled Dickens' description of the Zulu as a "cruel, false, thievish, murderous" savage "addicted more or less to grease, entrails, and beastly customs; a wild animal with the questionable gift of boasting; a conceited, tiresome, bloodthirsty, monotonous humbug". Yet this wild animal, this humbug, had just humbled the mightiest nation on the face of the earth. These people were the ones the populace, enthralled and fascinated, pictured when they read of the disaster at Isandlwana in their morning papers.

The Zulus were characterised not as men, but as "inhuman, death-dealing monsters". Robert Buchanan's poem "The Battle of Isandúla", which the *Contemporary Review* published in April 1879, depicted the Zulus as "savage swarms", "screaming devils out of Hell", "wolves", "tigers", "not human-hearted things". Those newspapers that supported the war generally were quick to emphasise the "supposed" Zulu threat to Natal and the Cape, the tribe's warlike history under King Shaka and Dingane, and Cetshwayo's bloody rise to power. Many Conservative papers found themselves guilty of such portrayals, as in an attempt to declare the urgency and morality of the war, they turned Cetshwayo into a despot and maniac. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* pictured "the Zulus...[as] slaves of a despot who has shown himself both tyrannical and cruel, and as reckless of the lives as of the rights of his subjects" -- an ahistorical creation not unlike others of the period. In a similar style, the *Saturday Review* converted Cetshwayo into a "bloodthirsty barbarian", whose actions had placed him outside the confines of international legal boundaries.

A few commentators gave credit to the Zulus. *The Times* reported that the previous doubts the British had about Zulu pluck and skill had been resolved: "We now have ample proof not only of their valour but also of their skill in strategy". The *Telegraph*, likewise, reported their "skilful and fatal tactics". It described the Zulus as "savage but not untrained warriors", although "barbarous" and "crafty". The *Pall Mall Gazette* felt that the Zulu had been studying British warfare for years, and had now profited from "what he has learned from us". On the other hand, the *Daily News* wrote "It is extremely doubtful if either [the words 'strategy' and 'tactics'] exist in the Zulu language; and if the words do not exist we may feel certain that the ideas which they represent do not exist". This daily did, surprisingly, call the Zulus 'soldiers' - a time-honoured profession connotating respectability - a rare term among the papers in February.

In contrast, the *Graphic*, in one of the very first articles which appeared concerning the war, wrote: "The Zulus may be savages, but they are not as savages usually are --- a loose congregation of isolated bands provided with miserable weapons; these men possess enough of the civilised instinct to submit to a stern military despotism, they are, after a primitive fashion, well drilled, and (as our loss has proved) well led, and, thanks to the unpatriotic enterprise of white traders, they are excellently armed". While this is definitely a superior attitude represented by the *Graphic*, it is a more moderate and sensible one than that delivered by many fellow newspapers.

Press and Party Politics

Newspapers are founded for a variety of reasons, not always with the simple object of providing the public with the news.

Party politics were the chief catalyst in the expansion of the press in England during the nineteenth century. As the electorate doubled and tripled in size, parties organised new publications to reach out to a certain segment of the voting populace. Newspaper proprietorship was a speculative business, and might not have attracted so much investment without the additional lure of political influence, whether local or national. Among politicians, the putting of money into political newspapers could easily be assimilated into an old tradition. The nobility and gentry had always spent money on elections, and industrial leaders adopted the same habits. Throughout the nineteenth century, newspapers changed party orientations as frequently as European nations changed sides during the Napoleonic Wars. When a new editor took the helm, a newspaper's political persuasion would often change with him. Or, as recurrently happened, a paper might bash a politician one day, then shower him with plaudits the next.

Disraeli was no amateur to Fleet Street and was very adept at manipulating it and playing its games. Nor was the Queen naive about the whole matter, and she lectured Disraeli on "the importance of securing some newspaper as an organ for the Government". In fact, the Prime Minister and his associates revelled in an overabundance of metropolitan press support in the 1870's. Predominately Liberal when "Dizzy" took the office of his second premiership in 1874, Fleet Street was almost completely in the hands of the Conservatives when he left in 1880. Defence-minded and imperialistic papers became the greatest sellers. The intensification of party rivalry in the 1870s, Stephen Koss maintains, made "journalists more assertive and politicians more attentive...[and acutely sensitive] to them". A statesman who held himself indifferent to the media was increasingly in danger of becoming an anachronism.

In 1876, for instance, Disraeli knew that the *Daily News* was "the real Opposition journal", and presumed that its accounts were, "to a great extent, inventions", printed "to create a cry against the Government. The *Pall Mall Gazette* was a strong Conservative bastion, and one of Gladstone's fiercest Fleet Street opponents. So popular was it that by January 1st 1870, four copies were acquired "for the use of the Upper Library" during the parliamentary session. In 1878, the Queen felt that "the *Daily Telegraph*, *Pall Mall* and the *Post* are very strong in the right sense". The *Daily News*, the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Spectator*, however, and "other organs of advanced Liberalism looked to [Gladstone]" as their leader. Each of London's top quality newspapers had a distinguishing character of its own.

Isandlwana, and the whole Zulu War in general, quickly became mired in partisan politics. Both sides of the political spectrum struggled to explain the catastrophe to the public. Scapegoating became a priority, as Chelmsford and Frere were initially apportioned much of the blame for the disaster and the war respectively. A survey of major press organs on each side reveals the assumptions and confusions that attended a spectacular foreign policy adventure in the era of emerging mass party politics.

The *Daily News*, from its inception in 1846, was radical, appealing to the liberal side of England's readership. It became the official organ of the Liberal Party in 1868. Its editor from 1869 to 1886 was Frank Harrison Hill, who received guidance throughout the period from Lord Granville, alternatively Colonial Secretary and Foreign Secretary under Gladstone. The journal deplored the war, spread blame between policy-makers and the military, and displayed a surprising sympathy for the Zulus, even while urging their destruction.

Opposed to the imperialist policies of the Disraeli Ministry, the *Daily News* was ready and eager to criticise the new, unsanctioned campaign. Citing "grave negligence and overconfidence" the paper was already of the opinion on the 12th that "nothing can be clearer than that it ought not to have happened". Hill labelled the ultimatum sent to King Cetshwayo as "monstrous", and wrote "that if the Ministry has consented to [Frere's] ultimatum it will not retain office a day after the next meeting of Parliament". While the paper was not in favour of the war, Hill did pledge that "...the Ministry would have the cordial sympathy and support of the Opposition in any needful effort to remove and obliterate the misfortune to which their policy has exposed the British arms. But that policy itself must be submitted to the most searching criticism".

Supportive (by necessity), the *Daily News* was nevertheless quick to probe for a scapegoat. The *Daily News* urged a strict scrutiny of the policies of Chelmsford and the High Commissioner, and an investigation into their actions. Hill believed that Frere was guilty of deceiving the nation about why he went to war, and that "there is no sign that any emergency existed except that which Sir BARTLE FRERE himself had created". He had directly disobeyed orders, the editor felt.

“The mere fact of [the war’s] existence, the mere fact that a war in which we have assumed the aggressive should ever have placed the country in the position of trembling for the safety of one of its possessions, is sufficient reason for subjecting the conduct of those who planned the war, as well as of those who were charged with its execution of it, to the strictest investigation”.

“To attempt invasion”, wrote Hill, with the troops Chelmsford had, was “a wilful throwing away of lives”. The editor, however, did not stop here. “To what extent the Home Government...shares...this responsibility” must also be explored. The *Daily News* immediately sent Archibald Forbes, its renowned war correspondent who fraternised “with half the general staffs of Europe”, to the Cape. He would prove to be a most excruciating thorn in the side of Lord Chelmsford. Forbes attributed the loss at Isandlwana to Chelmsford’s “miserable blundering and helpless incapacity”; “Lord Chelmsford has failed as our Commander-in-Chief in South Africa and ought to be instantly recalled”. Forbes was so unrelenting with his calumnies that it spurned a bitter post-campaign controversy.

The Zulus, asserted the *Daily News*, were, by all accounts, in the right. The war was “entirely of our own seeking” and “deliberately prepared for and forced on a reluctant enemy”. Nevertheless, the Zulus’ “supposed” hostility “must be redressed”, contended the *News*, as Britain’s prestige demanded it. It would be “mere madness” to fight the “barbarians” in the bush, so they must be “enticed by whatever means...[including] the capture of his women” to fight a “fair fight” where “his defeat is inevitable”. Perhaps the paragraph the *Daily* closed with on the 12th displays most clearly the paper’s confusing stance toward the need to pursue a war it deemed unjust:

“The Zulus will be the greatest sufferers in the long run; their first success is the pledge of ultimate ruin. But British treasure and blood will be expended on a scale which the authors of the war, to do them that justice, did not contemplate; death will prematurely visit hundreds of peaceful and happy homes in England; and burdens, heavy in all cases, and ruinous in many, will be inflicted on struggling industries. And all for what? How prophetic those words would become”.

The *Fortnightly Review*, far more liberal than the *News*, was edited by T.H. Escott, a Gladstonian Liberal, journalist, and social commentator. We see in this paper the Liberals’ antagonism toward the war carried to a far greater extent. Feeling “that there is no reason why all criticism of contemporary transactions should be reserved for a historian a hundred years after”, Escott proceeded to lambaste the war. He felt the disaster did for the British what nothing else could do - it forced them to analyse “this detestable story” from the beginning, a story “not more grossly immoral than...[it is] grossly impolitic”. Britain’s sinful past made present sinning effortless; the “high-handed lawlessness” in her previous affairs in South Africa had directly led to “the high-handed lawlessness that has produced the war with the Zulus”. If the deaths of the British regulars lead the nation to realise the error of such a policy, then they did not die in vain. “If you want to civilise Cetywayo, or to civilise so many of his people as your Gatlings spare...you are not to rebarbarise England”, admonished the editor. In the next twenty-three pages of the *Fortnightly*’s first article covering the conflict, Escott proceeded to discredit Frere and his war, and concluded that “this war is one of the worst crimes that has been perpetrated in our history”. The “brick-bat fashion” in which the *Review* responded to the war was felt by the *Graphic* to be harmful to the Liberal cause.

The official mouthpiece for the majority party was the *Standard*. An “old-established Conservative” newspaper, in 1870 it was under the direct political supervision of the Conservative Whips. The *Standard* set the tone for the Conservative response and established the “official” themes regarding the war and the emergency: defending the Ministry, calling for a policy of “first things first”, mitigating the disaster, supporting Frere and Chelmsford, and calling for subjugation of Zulus at all costs. W. H. Mudford, the paper’s editor, wrote on February 12, that the *Standard* could not suppress “...a feeling of bitter disappointment, mingled with shame and indignation, at the news of the disaster; but the immediate duty of the country is to support the Government, without shrinking or questioning, in those measures which may be necessary to retrieve our losses, moral as well as material”. Tending to place a heavier responsibility upon the military than the government, the paper claimed that... “The military credit of the British army is at stake. If there has been, as there is only too much reason to believe, either gross blundering or a contemptible contempt [sic] for a formidable enemy, judgement must be passed upon those responsible, whoever they may be, in the sternest and plainest manner”.

However, as Mudford wrote on the 15th, “There must be no mistake about one thing: it is not the Home Government which has made this Zulu War, whether right or wrong, just or unjust”. “The policy of the Government was emphatically not a policy which even by any stretch of the imagination, or by the ingenuity of the most malignant criticism, can be denounced as aggressive or provocative”. Responding to the increased criticism of Frere in the Liberal dailies, the Tory *Standard* strove to protect him (as hard as that was): “If Sir Bartle Frere, in spite of the warnings he received, took steps leading directly to war, we may assume that he was impelled by grave and cogent reasons, which will hereafter be shown to the satisfaction of Parliament”. No informed person could contend, the daily asserted, that Frere had forced “a rupture with the Zulu King”.

The *Standard* was most emphatic, however, in its castigation of the Liberal press and their exploitation of the calamity. Mudford wrote... "It has become too plain that the first thought with those who represent the active and belligerent section of the Opposition, when they learned that Lord Chelmsford's army had been beaten and forced to retreat, was simply and solely what use could be made of the untoward event to inflict injury upon the Government"

Astounded at such perfidy, the paper continued: "It is a fact that while in foreign countries expressions of sympathy are warm and frequent, there are those at home who think it opportune to hold up Cetewayo to the contemplation of the world as an injured innocent against whom we have waged a "war of aggression", and to declare, in effect, that we are justly punished by the slaughter of our soldiery and the stain upon our military fame".

The *Standard* initially had an "ace in hand" on all other papers in the reporting of the disaster. Charles Norris-Newman, special correspondent of the *Standard*, affectionately nicknamed "Noggs" by the troops, was the *only* "special" in Zululand at the time of the invasion. A careful and competent former imperial officer, he accompanied Chelmsford's Central Column and was fortunate enough to escape Isandlwana. He would go on to publish a narrative of his adventures entitled *In Zululand with the British throughout the War of 1879*.

The London *Times*, often considered the "newspaper of record" for the establishment, was the paper to read for the influential opinion-makers of government, nobility, ruling class and business and financial circles. Despite its "Independent" tag, however, *The Times* had pronounced Conservative leanings. The *History of the Times* describes how the paper came to the general support of Disraeli in about 1865. Disraeli even gave advance copies of his speeches to Thomas Chenery, editor of the paper.

Announcing the "Defeat of the British", *The Times* devoted many a column to the disaster on the 12th of February. Chenery wrote... "We must have patience, and the colonists must have patience, in presence of a disaster which, though grave, is evidently not beyond repair. The country will warmly approve whatever measures the Ministry may consider needful to recover the credit of the British as a military Power in South Africa.... The power of CETYWAYO must be broken; and as we have undoubtedly the means of effecting this, we are bound to use them with the utmost energy and rapidity, lest the responsibility for some new disaster be laid at our doors".

The Times was "careful to give...[an]...exact explanation of the origin of the Zulu War to counteract the wilful misrepresentation as to its cause made by the Opposition speakers and journals for the purpose...of casting the onus of blame for the outbreak of hostilities upon the Conservative Government". The paramount necessity for quick reprisal was related: "While the *Times* understands the fiscal problems facing England, it feels that no tenderness for individual susceptibilities, no reluctance to appear unnecessarily harsh, should be permitted to impede the discharge of this plain and imperative duty.... It would be cowardly...to hesitate.... It must be accomplished at any cost".

The Times defended the general-in-chief against those who already sought to place blame by contending that "it would be useless as well as ungenerous to fasten upon any individual as a scapegoat". With regard to the Governor of the Cape and his decision to go to war, the editor asserted that "It is now obvious that CETYWAYO'S military tyranny was in truth as formidable to his English neighbours...as SIR BARTLE FRERE represented it to be". Not only did the editor defend Chelmsford and Sir Henry Bartle Frere, but urged that "it would be unmanly to vent our irritation upon individuals, or to pick out errors in judgement for close scrutiny and angry censure". Anticipating the backlash from Gladstone, *The Times* wrote "It is perfectly clear that the Liberals have nothing to gain either by hastily censuring the war against CETYWAYO as unjust and unnecessary or by prematurely accusing any Minister or former Minister of being the author of the disaster to Lord CHELMSFORD'S army".

The *Daily Telegraph*, having switched political affiliations only about four years previously, was another "Conservative organ" and it was unambiguous in its stance regarding the war. This "necessary enterprise...must now be more than ever thoroughly prosecuted, until our savage foes in South Africa remember only to rue this momentary success". The "Home Government is also warmly supported..." in its prosecution of the war with the utmost promptness. "At any cost, with whatever necessary strength, the reverse must be effaced, the savage victors chastised, conquered and disarmed, and those daring Zulus made as harmless as the Hottentots". Taking the high moral ground, the *Telegraph* felt that "It would be, indeed, a scandal and an offence if this disquieting period were employed to coin political capital out of the calamity. It is a military not an administrative failure". It portrayed Isandlwana as only a setback, "far from being irreparable", and to be met "in a resolute spirit". Like the *Standard*, however, the daily was more intent on supporting the Disraeli Ministry than it was in defending Frere or Chelmsford.

The *Pall Mall Gazette* remedied this deficiency. In a column entitled "A Plea for Fair Play", the *Gazette's* editor Frederick Greenwood defended the Commissioner and the Commander-in-Chief. He maintained "It is only fair and reasonable to suppose...that what was done was forced upon [Frere] and upon [Chelmsford].... Pray let us be fair to these men". The *Pall Mall Gazette* seemed to believe that some

Conservative papers, in an attempt to protect the home government, were too harsh on the “men-on-the-spot”.

Perhaps no paper captured the mix of frustration, annoyance, and chagrin felt by the political classes as well as London’s best-known elite paper, *Punch, or The London Charivari*. With its combination of cartoon and caricature, it flourished amid the disordered conditions of politics. Not officially giving its allegiance to a specific party, “Mr. Punch” tended to attack everyone and view itself as the voice of the interested public. The oldest of the present-day humorous magazines, *Punch*, edited by F.C. Burnand, took an aversion to the war from the very beginning.

Its numerous cartoons, while done with characteristic merriment, nevertheless carried a pronounced view. As its main cartoon on March 1, *Punch* published the most famous caricature of the entire war, known simply as ‘A Lesson’. This satire pictured John Bull being instructed by a Zulu warrior in full war regalia to “Despise Not Your Enemy”. On April 5th, a mock letter from Sir Bartle Frere to the Queen reported the extent of the disaster and asked for reinforcements:

“As a result of the foregoing indirect communication, our troops advanced into the territory of King CETEWAYO, and on the 22nd of January, at a position named Isandlana, eight hundred British and Colonial soldiers (married and unmarried) after killing three thousand Zulu soldiers (unmarried), were themselves slaughtered, leaving some hundreds of widows and children, the burden of whose maintenance will, no doubt, be readily borne by a grateful country...I regret that my views should be...in direct opposition to those of Her Majesty’s Government....”

In the postscript, *Punch* lampooned Sir Bartle Frere’s already famous description of the Zulu warriors as “celibate man-slaying gladiators”. It read: “P.S. - It would be better, if possible, to send out only unmarried men. I find there is something to be said for a force of celibate man-slaying gladiators, after all”.

Although *Punch* bashed everything related to the war, from the Prince Imperial’s presence to the proposal of a memorial church on the Isandlwana battlefield, most of its artillery was aimed at decision-makers in London and the Cape. The publication was quick to note how Disraeli’s diplomatic coup at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 was contrasted with the Isandlwana debacle. In a poem entitled “Another Star Gone Out, I Think”, *Punch* quipped:

At Berlin, DIZZY’S Star, in the ascendant,
On tinsel “Peace with Honour” shone resplendent;
Now with Zulus and BARTLE FRERE to master,
His star is dimmed, and must be spelt *Diz-aster!*

During the weeks that followed, Mr. Punch launched a satirical attack on Chelmsford, inspired not only by the widespread criticisms of his generalship, but also by the curiously naive style in which his dispatches were written. Burnand offered Chelmsford a *Phrase Book for the Use of General Officers*, full of barbs. On learning that a regiment is missing: “Fellows should take more care - they should, really!” On discovering that the troops under his command have been out-generalled and cut in pieces: “Now, who is responsible for this?” *Punch* invited him to write an additional chapter for the information pamphlet he distributed among his soldiers before the invasion of Zululand. The chapter should be on “How to insure a Defeat, and how to behave under it”. An opening paragraph was suggested along these lines:

“Knowing that a strongly-fortified camp is the key and nucleus of defence against this vigilant and active enemy, the Commanding Officer should quietly move off with the bulk of his force, leave the tents unentrenched, and the wagons unparked.... There will be no harm if, in order to show his sense of the responsibility of his position, he, later in the day, orders one of his Staff to go to the top of a hill with a telescope, and look towards the camp. He will, of course, be satisfied by the assurances of the Staff Officer that he thinks it’s all right”.

If *Punch* did express the “Independent” view of policy, it is clear that the public was not happy to accept that occasional reverses were a normal cost of the operation of running an empire.

Images of Empire

All the world is in the paper. William M. Thackeray, British author, 1811-1863

The study of the press’ reaction to Isandlwana provides the historian worthwhile insight into an empire’s digestion of a disaster. The themes that reoccur in the reporting of the battle reveal specific concerns and conceptions of Victorian society.

The Zulu War was widely unpopular, and the loss of face Britain suffered as a result of Isandlwana intensified the aversion. Nevertheless, the enormity and dire consequences of the Zulu victory led many to

develop an “our country, right or wrong” mentality. The question of patriotism in supporting or not supporting the war played itself out on Fleet Street as it did in Whitehall. The *Fortnightly Review* preempted the question of patriotism in its opening attack of the war. “It has been absurdly contended that the hour of war is no fitting time for judging policy”, wrote the editor, “and that to engage in such debates is unpatriotic”. On the contrary, he asserted, “we are as good patriots as they are.... [and] have as much pride as they in the greatness of England”. In a similar fashion, the *Daily News* defended itself. “It is unfortunately a matter of course that those of us who call in question the general policy of the Government in foreign affairs...and the management of the invasion of Zululand, should be pursued with the stupid taunt that we are wanting in ‘patriotism’, and insensible to the honour and interests of the Kingdom”. *The Times*, on the other hand, while supportive of the Ministry, felt that “The Opposition may do valuable service to the State if they are willing to co-operate in such an inquiry without the design of party advantage”. The *Standard* felt that “it is vain to submit reasons for or against [the current] policy” to those who are “weighed by an anti-patriotic bias” and labelled those that raised a “cry” against the Government as “unscrupulous and ill-informed”. Greenwood, of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, felt a duty forced upon him to counter lies. “It grieves us to write these things; but the alternative, if we may judge by much that we read, is a wretched sort of truculent make-believe, which we do not choose to countenance”. “Each [publication] uses journalism to his own patriotic ends”, wrote one historian, “feeling that patriotism consists in his having his way”. Such was the case among editors during the Zulu War.

Every newspaper showed great concern for what would become of Natal and the neighbouring colonies as a result of the Zulu army being unchecked. The thought of fellow white colonists subjected to “savages” fostered a sense of urgency “lest the responsibility for some new disaster should be placed at our doors”. This foreboding heightened the drama of the whole disaster. “The condition...may be so grave, even at this moment”, penned the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, “that it would be unwise to dwell upon what might occur....[for] our fellow countrymen may be holding on ‘by their eyelids’ against a horde of savages flushed with victory”. *The Times* feared “the graver dangers of insurrection among the natives” after witnessing the success of the Zulus. The ever-too-ghastly memory of Cawnpore and Lucknow in the Indian Mutiny crept back into the minds of Englishmen.

Perhaps not surprisingly, capitalists seized the opportunity. Many advertisements in the newspapers were a direct exploitation of the battle. For several days beginning on February 14th, the *Pall Mall Gazette* published the following advertisement:

“THE ZULU DISASTER. - SAD, BUT TRUE. The history of mankind convinces us that present wars and disasters are in reality stepping stones for higher progress. To prevent disastrous diseases from poisoned blood, use ENO’S FRUIT SALT”.

The tycoons of show business were not slow to respond either. Zulus, billed as having fought at Isandlwana, would be brought to England and exhibited throughout Europe. On March 8th, the *Graphic* reported:

“HAMILTON’S AMPHITHEATRE, HOLBORN. --THE ZULU WAR. -- Will be produced during the Week of the Battle of Isandwala, illustrating the thrilling episode of the heroic stand against 20,000 Zulus by the gallant 24th, from the most authentic sources.... A Quadruple War Dance by Zulu Warriors.... [Inc.] the Niggers Nick Pick.... Nightly at 8”.

The Disraeli government, still highly sensitive because of their loss of face at the hands of the Zulus, tried to interfere with such shows. Maps of Zululand were advertised; pictures of the Zulus were sold; Lt. General Sir Arthur Cunynghame, former Commander-in-Chief in South Africa, even published his book about his experiences in the Cape in the weeks following Isandlwana. In his preface he conveyed that with empires come “Isandlwanas”. “The Victorians”, wrote Frank Emery, “with a mingling of fear and respect, wanted to know more about [the Zulu], and their need was met in dozens of newspaper articles, books and lectures by anyone who had the slightest first-hand knowledge of Zululand”.

The war seemed to provide a platform for complaining about “the amount of money Englishmen spent on colonies” and the need for a remedy. “The colonists of South Africa must make up their minds to accept their reasonable share of responsibilities, which at present they seemed determined to cast altogether upon the weary and heavy-laden mother country”. They must learn, declared the *Graphic*, “that it is they and not the British tax-payer who should bear the brunt of these wars”. In a column entitled “The Cost of Not Recognising an Empire”, the *Pall Mall Gazette* expected the campaign in Zululand to be “one of the most costly on record” because of the shameful way Imperial finances were handled before the war. The Imperial Chest had a million pounds to cover minor disturbances, and it was realised that the Zulu War would far exceed this limit. The current South African policy “is not likely to earn commendation from the British taxpayer”. Britons were, for the most part, in favour of colonies and high Imperialism, as long as they did not hit them too hard in the pocket books. By 1879, however, the “nation was grumbling over unnecessary military expenditure”, as England was experiencing hard economic times, and expenses were already large

with the Afghanistan excursion.

The reality that this disgrace of British arms had occurred at the hands of blacks was perhaps the most distressing aspect of the tragedy. Had Europeans or at least whites dealt the reverse, it would have been much more acceptable. But now, if such a thing could happen at the Cape, what prevented it from happening in Asia -- or India again? The *Westminster Review* wrote:

“The news of the massacre of eight hundred of our gallant troops...by a horde of naked savages, took everyone by surprise, and created more alarm than the slaughter of thousands would have caused in open battle against a civilised foe”. Similarly, in the *Pall Mall Gazette*:

“If the Kaffirs, or, as they are called in the finest example of the race, the Zulus, had worn white skins, it would be seen at once that an Englishman had no more right to despise them than had a subject of the Roman Empire to despise the ancestors of the Germans.... the very chief...has just killed as many Englishmen in a single engagement as the Russians slew outright at the Alma...”

The *Daily Telegraph* felt that “the military insignificance of the foe, as compared with civilised enemies, render the thought of this great loss...unspeakably distressing”. Four months later, the death of the Bonapartist heir, Prince Louis Napoleon, would again leave Europe similarly “unspeakably depressed”.

Like the eclipse of the midday sun at Isandlwana, the defeat was seen by many as an eclipse of the abilities of the Empire to defend itself. Something inherently had to be wrong with a system that could allow such an improbable humiliation to occur. Frederick Greenwood felt that a lesson had been taught to the nation. “Once more the fact is brought home to us by the stern teaching of calamity that our whole military system, our entire apparatus of defence for world-wide possessions and interests, is in this day a complete anachronism”. The class of recruit that the British Army was enlisting was “altogether overmatched in point of age and physique by the savage soldiery he has to face. A raw, weedy boy, as are too many of our recruits...is...no match for one of CETEWAYO’S Zulus”. The *Statist* considered that Isandlwana demonstrated that the current military system was quite inadequate to meet the demands of the Empire – “a military force which a second-rate Continental State would consider below its requirements”.

The Zulu War was not met with uniform condemnation or support by the press: *i.e.* not all Liberal papers censured the war with the same diction, nor did the Conservative press “rally round the flag” unequivocally. Represented in these publications were the variances of opinion and concerns within the educated populace. A reverse such as Isandlwana is an aptly chosen vantage point from which to interrogate public interest in the Empire. Violence was at the heart of the colonial venture, and military interventions were without equal in inciting expressions of latent imperialist sentiment. With the study of newspapers and journals - abnormal and confused as they often may seem, with blaring headlines, political cartoons, inaccuracies, advertisements, editorials, and biased partisan stances - the historian has at his possession an invaluable tool with which to reconstruct past life and sentiments of a society.

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