

The mythology of threats to South Africa leading to the Anglo-Zulu war.

*At times of crisis myths have their historical importance.*

Winston Churchill

Myths can sustain morale in difficult times, in peacetime they explain the unexplainable and convince the undecided. They also provide a comfortable narrative about the past. Perhaps that is why they endure, and even makes aspects of history more acceptable as portrayed by the film *Zulu*.

The British love historical myths; from the delightful St. George and the Dragon to Loch Ness, Robin Hood and much about Lawrence of Arabia's experiences. And nobody really knows where the two-finger gesture comes from - there is no evidence that the French ever cut off or threatened to cut the fingers off captured archers. (1) Then there are the historical myths to explain the unexplainable; such as the location of the battle of Hastings in Sussex where thousands died across the battlefield strewn with discarded battle implements from two armies – but nothing has ever been found on the site or even nearby, not one arrowhead or bone of any French or English participant. We all accept there was a major battle in 1066 but no one knows where, and so the myth was born and today is promulgated by English Heritage that it occurred on a Sussex hillside overlooked by their visitor centre and tea rooms. And a few miles from the modern village of Battle is the alleged location of Henry VIII's prime shipbuilding dockyard where his mighty wooden warships were built – yet archaeologists, assisted by lasers and satellite imaging, have found no trace of any shipbuilding – their search continues with further excavations this year. The recorded location relies on the myth that the shipyard and many hundreds of workers' wooden houses were all destroyed by a great fire, yet not one trace of any fire has ever been found. Such comfortable myths help explain the unexplainable.

So what has myth to do with the origin of the Anglo-Zulu war?

Zulu war history books tend to explain the conflict by highlighting the British fear of invasion of British Natal by the neighbouring Zulus; if true, it would certainly have been a situation that required firm military action. This explanation features in the highly regarded *Narrative of the Field Operations*, the official history of the Anglo-Zulu Wars, and continues to be the rationale for the war in the many books written on the subject and highlighted in the still popular films *Zulu* and *Zulu Dawn*. Author Donald Morris wrote of the war,

*the war was a minor, encapsulated incident, and because it had relatively little effect on the course of European civilization, it only removed a threatening obstacle from its path.*

Author Ian Knight observed, *for the British today, of course, the invasion of Zululand is largely remembered for the heroism of the ordinary soldiers who took part* but that's not a just reason for the many myths; British soldiers always rise to every engagement and fight because they believe what they are doing is right. The Anglo-Zulu war was no different. Factually we all know what happened at Isandlwana but then history and myth begin to merge, especially as a result of influential survivors' accounts that arose following Rorke's Drift, accounts which seriously annoyed many British army officers then serving in Zululand, including the Commander-in-Chief, General Wolseley. Myths of unusual gallantry surrounding the engagement soon developed, curious incident reports (allegedly from Chard and Bromhead) emerged confusing what happened, who was where, or even present. One

myth, generated by the film *Zulu* has even resulted in a modern famous British Army regiment annually celebrating Rorke's Drift Day, in reality an English event – fought by sixty-five Englishmen of the 24<sup>th</sup> (2<sup>nd</sup> Warwickshire) Regiment although, no doubt, ably assisted by five Welshmen.

There was enough confusion and uncertainty surrounding the Anglo-Zulu War to generate explanatory myths, assisted by favourable lurid articles in the press, even to trying to explain away the reason(s) for Britain's curious war against the Zulus. Later historians echoed King Cetshwayo's poignant comment, *I have done you no wrong, therefore you must have some other object in invading my land*, echoed by Professors Leband and Thompson in their respected *Field Guide to the War in Zululand* stating, *there is still no general agreement on the causes of the Anglo-Zulu War* - but there are myths.

So what really happened? In 1878 Lord Carnarvon, Colonial Secretary, had obtained permission from Prime Minister Disraeli to send the respected politician, Sir Bartle-Frere, to South Africa with the task, with Russia in mind, to ensure the defence of the country and its two main ports, Cape Town and Durban. He was also to promote the unification (Confederation) under British rule of the territories consisting of the Cape Colony, Natal and Griqualand together with the Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Free State and so bring into line the militantly chaotic and bankrupt Boer republics to the north of the Cape. At the time of Frere's arrival in South Africa his dominating belief was that war with Russia was inevitably looming and that South African ports were vulnerable to attack by Russian warships and privateers. He was seriously perturbed; the Cape was defenceless and highly vulnerable to foreign naval vessels and to add to his woe, the internal threat of rebellion by the disgruntled neighbouring Boer Republic was festering – another headache, even for an accomplished Colonial expert like Frere.

So, why did the British in Natal invade their previously friendly neighbour, Zululand, whilst promoting its new world-wide defensive policy of Confederation? The perceived Russian danger to the Cape was certainly not baseless. The Russians were already agitating along the vast Asian border with British India. In November 1878 Britain considered it necessary to invade Afghanistan and embarked upon the Second Afghan War to ensure Afghanistan remained free from growing Russian encroachment into India. Three British columns, consisting of 40,000 men, invaded. One column marched through the Bolan Pass and seized Kandahar, a second occupied Ali Masjid fortress to secure the Khyber Pass before advancing to Jelalabad, while the third advanced along the Kurram Valley towards Kabul. At the same time, Russian diplomats were busy fermenting unrest in the Balkans. Frere's perception of these apparent dangers to the Cape were not baseless.

While en route to Cape Town, and with militant Russia uppermost in his mind, Frere received news from Theophilus Shepstone, the Natal Secretary for Native Affairs, that due to the recent crash of the Boer economy and the threat of an attack against the Boers by either or both of the adjacent Pedi and Zulu nations, the Boer government had reluctantly agreed to British annexation for protection. Not all Boers were prepared to accept annexation and within days, a deputation of Boers, led by Paul Kruger, set sail for London to argue against the British move. International politics then took a turn for the worse, Russia declared war on Turkey which strengthened Frere's fear of growing Russian naval influence in the Mediterranean.

When Frere arrived at the Cape accompanied by his wife and four daughters, he found his family accommodation, and Government House offices, 'run down'. Nevertheless, Frere set to work and instigated a survey as to how Cape Town could be defended. Nearby Simon's Town was more easily defended but was a week away for marching soldiers or a day's sailing, even if a British ship was in harbour. Frere promptly gave orders for four gun

batteries to be constructed with an additional floating battery to be positioned at the mouth of the harbour.

Frere was fully aware that South Africa had no telegraphic communication to the outside world and, anyway, there were usually no Royal Navy ships even within weeks of reaching the Cape.

In 1878 a review of British defence by a Colonial Defence Committee concerning the defence of the Cape commented that the Cape's coaling station was vital to the Empire and agreed with Frere that its defences were entirely obsolete and in ruins. The committee cited the breakdown in relations between Britain and Russia which coincided with the sailing of a Russian squadron of warships that had slipped unseen into the North Atlantic and whose whereabouts were unknown to the Royal Navy - until the Russian vessels arrived in the USA. The committee surmised that, had the Russians instead sailed directly to the Cape, their arrival there would have been unopposed – and the Royal Navy would have been unable to intervene or refuel. Indeed, since April 1878, Russian naval crews had been in the USA to collect three cruisers, believed to be intended for mischief in the Mediterranean where they could interfere with passage through the Suez Canal.

For Britain, matters then slowly went from bad to worse. The situation in South Africa was worsening with the threat of armed rebellion by the disgruntled neighbouring Boer Republic openly taking steps to gain independent access to the Indian Ocean with the intention of becoming independent of any British control or interference. The Boers were also openly encroaching onto fertile Zulu territory; the Zulus objected and, because of annexation, the Boers were now, legally, British subjects, Britain should order the expulsion of these unwanted Boer settlers. Matters were progressively becoming more serious for Frere. His temporary master stroke to calm the Boers was to turn a blind eye to their expansion into Zululand, this bought a short period of peace with the Boers - who then watched while Frere gave the Zulus an impossible ultimatum to disarm - which swiftly led to war between Britain and Zululand. Frere reasoned it was better to have a war against the primitive Zulus than against the well armed Boers and their European friends, and so the myth began that Britain invaded Zululand because the Zulus were threatening Natal. The Boers watched on, biding their time to seize independence, while British troops died on the battlefields of Zululand, bleeding away their life blood along with Britain's reputation of military invincibility.

### **So, how serious was the Russian threat to South Africa?**

The new Russian shipbuilding program, adopted in the late 1870s, coincided with the Russian naval strategy of open ocean sea denial, in which the Russian Navy was developing the capacity to engage enemy forces on the high seas.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Russian warships began making exploratory long-range deployments to the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. This was part of their strategy of expanding Russian naval capabilities in the Pacific. At the end of 1878, the clipper *Vsadnik*, under the command of Lieutenant Captain Novosil'skiy, became involved in an unusual diplomatic venture; while at the Penang Island in the Strait of Malacca, Captain Novosil'skiy had a secret meeting with official representatives of the sultans of Sumatra, who wished their country to become part of the Russian Empire. The main motive behind this decision was the attempt by indigenous Malays to stop further European colonisation of their land.

Because Vladivostok was icebound during winter, in 1877–78 the Russians had maintained a small squadron in Japanese waters. The Royal Navy conducted a watch on Japanese ports, waiting for the anticipated advice that hostilities had commenced via the only

telegraph to Japan. The cable ran overland through Russian territory to Vladivostok and from there to Japan by a line maintained by the Russians. It was therefore possible for Russian ships to receive news of an outbreak of war at least five days before the British did. With this foreknowledge their ships could slip away singly from Yokohama and Tokyo, before assembling in Okinawa where stocks of coal had been ordered from an American company. Politically, the Russian naval presence in the Pacific and Indian oceans greatly increased Russia's international prestige and helped to strengthen the country's authority in those regions.

Although coastal defences at British controlled overseas ports were either negligible or entirely lacking, Russia selected Australia as the prime target because there was less chance of encountering a British fleet during the return voyage to a neutral or friendly port on the west coast of the United States. The object of the Russian plan was to destroy as much unprotected coastal shipping as possible, and to raid the ports of Sydney and Melbourne where it was expected that gold bullion worth at least £6 million could be obtained under threat of bombardment. Remarkably similar plans of attack had been discovered earlier in 1864 but were officially denied by the Russians. On Admiralty advice, coastal defences in Australia had been planned to resist a force of four cruisers, one of which might be an armoured type. In developing his scenario for a hypothetical attack, the local senior naval officer, Admiral Egerton, decided to employ a squadron of seven ships, four of which would be armoured cruisers of a class similar to his own ship (HMS *Orlando*); another two cruisers would be equivalent to the Royal Navy's Marathon class, and he included a transport vessel for stores.

Fortunately for Britain the Russian world-wide naval threat became too costly and subsided - while Britain went on to suffer, firstly the Second Afghan War, the Anglo-Zulu War and then two Boer Wars in quick succession. With Britain's army visibly weakened, her European enemies began moving inexorably towards the First World War.

1. Factually, the gesture was first recorded in 1901. (Google)