Conclusion and Aftermath of the Zulu War

By Adrian Greaves

'Zululand, having been conquered by us, according to Zulu law, really belongs to Her Majesty the Queen.' (1)

With the defeat of the Zulu army at Ulundi the British invasion of Zululand was, theoretically, successfully achieved. From the British perspective, King Cetshwayo's army had needed to be defeated and neutralised in order to protect the European population of Natal against the threat of an imminent Zulu invasion. Natal's European population had certainly believed that the Zulus had been preparing for war. The invasion of Zululand also served to redress the grievances of the flow into Natal of Zulu refugees, fleeing from what Rev. Hepburn branded 'a godless despot'. From Britain's standpoint the invasion of Zululand could, therefore, be considered morally righteous.(2) A Dutch merchant, by the name of Vijn Cornelius, who happened to be parley to Cetshwayo's military preparations prior to the formal declaration of war, wrote of a general expectation of war. He tells of how 'the men and young men of Zululand have all been called up to the king for some reason or other – although in Natal it was widely believed they were coming to attack the whites'.(3)

At this point it is worth remembering that, pre-war, King Cetshwayo had a fearful reputation among Natalians, black and white. During the year leading up to the war the Natal population had been regularly reminded by Chelmsford and Frere that Natal faced the distinct possibility of a Zulu invasion – with all that that involved. Historically, Cetshwayo was never the benevolent king. If aroused to anger his ruthlessness knew no bounds. The most demonstrable example of Cetshwayo's untempered aggression is shown in his alleged slaughter of any female members of the inGuge tribe found living with a man less than forty years of age. His supplementary order demanded that the family of any such woman who fled to either Natal or the Transvaal would also forfeit their cattle.(4) In 1876 Cetshwayo had ordered the indiscriminate slaughter of dissidents in the Tonga tribe as well as the sacking of numerous Christian ministries in Zululand which had been 'befriended during his father's lifetime'. (5)

With the aforesaid in mind, it remains difficult to identify any legitimate reason for Britain going to war with the Zulus. It is therefore not surprising that by March 1881, nearly two years after the war, the defeated Zulu king continued to struggle to find any justification for the war. While held prisoner at the Cape he dictated a letter to the Governor, Sir Hercules Robinson, in an attempt to understand recent events. In his inimitable way King Cetshwayo poignantly wrote, 'Mpande did you no wrong, I have done you no wrong, therefore you must have some other object in view in invading my land'.(6) That 'other object' continues to mystify the majority of historians who study the Zulu War and who still rely heavily or exclusively on the Zulu refusal to comply with the British ultimatum of December 1878 as the justification for war. Many historians' sources are based on contemporary accounts that were highly subjective purely because it was inevitable that they were written by surviving senior British officers with important reputations to preserve. Regarding the unexpected defeats, sufficient scapegoats abounded, some obligingly now dead from loyally following their commanders' orders. Apart from private letters and reports from those involved, official military accounts of the day tended to rely on the official *Narrative of Field Operation* but that narrative refrained from any allusion to controversy. Perhaps the most honest explanation

can be credited to Laband and Thompson in their *Field Guide to the War in Zululand* in which they state, 'there is still no general agreement on the causes of the Anglo-Zulu War' although the sustained Boer migration into Zululand was clearly the precipitating cause of the war. In reality, Frere's reasons for the Zulu War were widely accepted by the white population of Natal. The overriding and terrifying assumption that a bloodthirsty Zulu invasion of Natal was imminent can today be seen as little more than an official excuse for war.

Understandably, Natal's European settlers took their pre-war cue from the British who directly influenced the Natal newspapers to regard the war as inevitable, there is evidence that few actually considered it desirable. However, once the war began, support for the official Frere line strengthened immeasurably. Frere's propaganda had been successful. The white population believed they had been spared an appalling fate at the hands of invading Zulu impis. More importantly, they had seriously profited with small fortunes made from supplying Chelmsford's army at exorbitant prices.

There were many who resolutely believed that the war had been an unnecessary evil. The Bishop of Natal, John William Colenso, known to the Zulus as '*Sobantu'* - 'Father of the People', preached that the Zulu nation under Cetshwayo had presented no real threat to Natal. Nevertheless, the High Commissioner, Sir Bartle Frere, and the Secretary of State for Native Affairs in Natal, Sir Theophilus Shepstone, had deliberately provoked the conflict to further their wider ambitions for South African confederation. There can be little doubt that Colenso was right in his damning assessment and that Isandlwana and all the other defiant battles were nothing more sinister than brave acts of self-defence by the Zulu king and his army.

Tragedies abound in any war. Perhaps the most obvious in this war was the absence of any intention by the British to pursue their policy of confederation once the war was won; instead, they withdrew then abandoned Zululand. Not satisfied with victory, their invasion force deliberately wasted the land along their lines of withdrawal. They then exiled the Zulu monarch to remove any form of national leadership and departed from Zululand leaving the impoverished Zulus to their fate.

Worse still, the setbacks experienced by Britain in the Zulu War sent a clear message to her brooding adversaries, especially to the Boers in the Transvaal and Orange Free State; if the British lion could be seriously mauled by a force of inexperienced part-time warriors, they reasoned that a well-prepared European force would undoubtedly fare even better.

References

1. *Colonial Office Papers* Wolseley 879/16, 204. No. 151.
2. Preston, A. *The South African Journal of Sir Garnet Wolseley* (Cape Town 1973).
3. Ibid. However, the *Illustrated London News* of October18 1879 wrote; 'In the entire history of Natal as a British province, no Zulu invasion has ever been attempted or threatened; no colonist or settler has ever yet been molested or annoyed by any of the Zulus. And the Lieutenant-General of Natal, who should know best, has invariably denied that there was any danger of a Zulu attack on that side.
4. *Zulu Kings and their Armies* – Jonathan Sutherland and Diane Carwell
5. Paper by a Mr Brownlee - Secretary for Native Affairs in the Cape Colony
6. Preston, A. *The South African Journal of Sir Garnet Wolseley* (Cape Town 1973).