

## THE ZULU PROBLEM OF 1878-9.<sup>1</sup>

IN a recent number of HISTORY<sup>2</sup> Sir Charles Lucas has considered it necessary to emphasise once more the importance in our national history of the fact of insularity. The special problems which confront an island Power are not less acute and formidable than those which concern a continental State. Bismarck, thinking of the geographical situation of modern Germany, said that it is quite true that the idea of coalitions gave him nightmares. The problem which has worried English statesmen, on the other hand, has been that of intervention or non-intervention. Can the balance of power ever be safely left to take care of itself?—the great question for all island Powers.

The characteristic indecision of English diplomatists when faced by this ever-recurring problem has not been confined to European politics. The intense interest of the Zulu War of 1879 lies in the fact that here the old maxims and habit of mind of our statesmen came into contact with old problems presented in a new form. The existence of an intensely military and autocratic State alongside of a community which imperfectly understood its neighbours and was governed by men the mainstring of whose policy was a benevolent *laissez faire*; in this there is nothing very unfamiliar. But the whole question of the attitude of the Colonial Governments towards the native subject races complicated matters and brought to the forefront new decisions and new habits of mind. Not merely was it a matter of intervention or of *laissez faire*, but of what kind of intervention, and how it was to be applied. To the average Natal and South African politician a firm handling of

<sup>1</sup> The dispatches of Sir Bartle Frere and Sir T. Shepstone, from which quotations have been made, are to be found in the Blue Books relating to Transvaal and Natal Affairs, 1878-9. Notes of the Legislative Council of Natal debates are published for the year 1880 and contain illuminating references. Lord Blachford's article on the causes of the Zulu War appeared in the *Nineteenth Century* of March, 1879. See also Martineau's *Life of Frere*, Vol. II, and a paper read by J. Noble at the Royal Colonial Institute on February 18th, 1879 (*Proceedings*, Vol. X., 103).

<sup>2</sup> See above, New Series, Vol. I., pp. 7-9.

the Zulu question meant intervention in the form of repression. A prominent member of the Legislative Council of Natal stated with approval in the House on February 3rd, 1880, that: "It all came of the same kind of policy—playing with the Zulus as if we were dealing with rights as between two civilised nations. . . . Rights between barbarians must be dealt with with full justice, but with a paternal care which is necessary in dealing with such people. If we had acted firmly, the war would never have taken place." In accordance with this view, the road to the Zulu War was paved with good intentions, along which the Government drifted through unwillingness to use strong measures. Now for the other kind of intervention: "By neglecting to invest money in the profitable occupation of improving, we have been forced to lavish it in the unproductive, miserable, melancholy work of repression; and the necessity for this last kind of expenditure will increase in the exact proportion in which we continue to neglect the first" (Sir T. Shepstone).

That there should be inevitable differences of opinion was not merely the result of this divergence of view as to method; the difficulty of the Zulu situation of 1879 lay in the diagnosis of the problem itself. How far had the internal process of militarisation gone? To what extent could the situation be left to right itself by internal dissolutions? These are the questions which an alliance of autocracy and militarism always brings to the forefront, and the answer differed in 1879 just as it did to a similar problem in 1914. And it was in relation to the condition and menace of Zululand that new and illuminating ideas of imperialism were thought out by a handful of British statesmen, who originally brought to their task little more than the typically insular attitude of their countrymen.

According to Lord Blachford, the situation should have been left to right itself. "The Zulu Kingdom," he wrote in March, 1879, "though capable of being cemented under the stimulus of a popular war, was decomposing, and if let alone would have torn itself to pieces perhaps soon, almost certainly on the death of the present King." Whether it was consistent with the duty of the Imperial Government to allow the continuance of the existing state of bloodshed within Zululand during Cetewayo's lifetime he does not stop to argue. Sir T. Shepstone was quite clear that "We are not fighting with the Zulus, but with the Zulu King." The fact of the matter was that no one knew in 1878 how deep down militarism had penetrated or to what extent the King stood for the nation, any more than it was known in 1914 how far the

same kind of influences had really altered the people of Germany. Mr. Fynney, a well-informed border agent of the Government, said that the King was convinced of the loyalty of his army, but he was of opinion himself that it would greatly depend upon whom they were called on to fight. This, however, was in 1877, and Cetewayo seems to have been less certain of his warriors as it became clearer that the enemy to be fought was going to be the British, and not merely the Boers.

Probably no one—not even Cetewayo—could be certain in 1878 of the internal cohesion of the Zulu nation. At any rate, as late as December 30th, 1878, the Magistrate at Umsinga wrote to Shepstone that “Sirayo’s people (who had already incurred the hostility of the Government, and were Cetewayo’s vanguard) are in fear of being attacked in the rear by the Zulu nation so soon as the English move against them, and appear to dread the nation more than the English.”

Must we say, then, that it was a mistake on the part of Sir Bartle Frere and his colleagues to bring affairs to a crisis at this time, rather than to allow the domestic dissensions of an imperfectly militarised State to remove the menace of a united and aggressive Zulu power? Lord Blachford openly accused Frere and Shepstone of having forced on an unnecessary war against a people who sincerely desired to live in peace with its English neighbours. The majority of history text-books, whilst applauding the award of the Commissioners as to the territory in dispute between Zulus and Boers, state baldly that an ultimatum was sent along, which led to war. Lord Blachford likens the ultimatum to a request from Germany to the British Government that, on pain of war, we should within six weeks destroy our Navy. No adequate account of the conditions which produced the ultimatum or of the interesting development of ideas in the attitude of Frere and Shepstone has appeared.

The state of Zululand in 1878 is sufficiently well known to make detailed mention unnecessary. The nation seems to have approached very near to the state known to philosophers as “balked disposition.” Warlike customs and aspirations had continued to multiply after the occasions and motives for their exercise had departed. Nothing had been done to accustom the people to agricultural pursuits on a scale justified by the altered circumstances. The young warriors were anxious to live up to their traditions, and foreign war in general meant a relaxation from the internal cruelties. “The diversion and even comparative personal safety that in bygone days resulted from Zulu invasion

of foreign tribes, far away from their own home, have ceased with the circumstances which permitted them; and these energies have to be expended at home and among themselves" (Sir T. Shepstone, January 5th, 1878). It is not difficult to see that Shepstone believed at this time that, far from cementing the old state, a vigorous blow from without would be the signal for a revolution which would sweep away this unpopular state of affairs. Clearly the peaceful life which native races and Zulu refugees were able to enjoy in Natal must have been an incentive to those who suffered at home to accomplish some vital change. The present system made aggressive war sooner or later an essential for every male Zulu, who was not allowed to marry until he had been successful in killing an adversary.

Frere and Shepstone were, however, hampered at every turn by the hopeless blindness and optimism of Natal public opinion on native questions, and particularly by the sentimental pro-Zulu feeling. The reason why collisions had hitherto been avoided between the Government in Natal and the Zulus was this: in the chronic state of hostility that existed between Boers and Zulus the sympathy of the colony of Natal was strongly in favour of the latter. Frere wrote on January 12th, 1879, that this feeling still continued and that he had been shocked to find "how very close to the wind the predecessors of the present Government here have sailed in supporting the Zulus against Boer aggression."

Another difficulty was the indecision of a home Government, which distrusted the European situation and was inclined to repudiate all Colonial decisions that might necessitate the employment of Imperial troops. The despatch of October 17th, 1878, from Sir M. Hicks-Beach spoke of the possibility of war with Cetewayo as "a very serious evil," and definitely refused to send any reinforcements. Shortly afterwards, however, the Cabinet changed its mind and promised troops "for defensive purposes only." And yet all along, Sir M. Hicks-Beach had been fully informed of the state of affairs, and had himself used expressions in approval of the Commissioner's (Frere's) policy.

The most interesting factor in the situation was the attitude of Sir T. Shepstone. His early opinion of Cetewayo had undoubtedly been favourable. King Edward VII. repeatedly said of the present German Emperor that he was convinced he would never go to war. Shepstone's report of Cetewayo was that "he was proud of the military traditions of his family," but frank and straightforward in character and not particularly warlike. Influenced perhaps to some extent by the prevalent pro-Zulu feeling in

Natal, Shepstone admits that he believed at first in the justice of the Zulu claims to the land in dispute with the Transvaal Boers. On January 5th, 1878, he wrote: "I should, in my ignorance of the merits of the case at my first meeting, have surrendered to them much more than I afterwards found they were entitled to." The state of Zululand and the character of Cetewayo's rule begin to assume more sombre colours in the despatches which Shepstone, as Administrator, now sent home to the Earl of Carnarvon. Lord Blachford assumes that the change was entirely due to the exigencies of Shepstone's position in having carried through the annexation of the Transvaal against the wishes of Volksraad and population. "It is most certain," he says, "that Shepstone will not be able to prove his point (*i.e.*, that the Boers were not ill-pleased at the annexation) if his first step is to surrender, instead of upholding, the Dutch land claims." Lord Blachford sees something suspicious in the Administrator's discovery, at this point, of documents among the Transvaal records which substantiate the Dutch claims, though it was well known at the time that they were reserving the proofs of their rights until the actual sitting of the Commission of Inquiry. His explanation of the war is thus found in the necessity under which Shepstone lay of ingratiating the Boers, and in the prejudices of Sir Bartle Frere. That the new position of Shepstone as Administrator of the Transvaal made it necessary for him to walk warily and to consider very carefully every side of the Zulu problem, is at once obvious. Frere himself admitted that, as the embodiment of Natal policy and protector of Cetewayo in his opposition to Boer extension, Shepstone "had much leeway to make up" in the Transvaal. His early sympathies would naturally be expected to be in conformity with those of the majority of Natal officials, the more so as the general Boer attitude towards native problems was selfish and repressive; but there is every indication that his decision and that of Frere was reached solely on the consideration of the merits of the case between the two parties, and on what they were convinced was now necessary in order to remove the Zulu menace.

As a matter of fact, the ultimate judgment of the Commission as to the disputed territory seems to have been one-sided and over-favourable to the Zulus. Frere discovered that no fewer than seventy-four farms of Boer settlers existed within the tract of land adjudged to Cetewayo. Shepstone protested against the finding of the Commission as being couched in terms which were cynical and insulting towards the Transvaal. Nevertheless, so far were Frere and Shepstone from favouring the Boers that the

judgment was adhered to in its entirety, with a few safeguards relating to the security and treatment of the farmers on the land in dispute.

But the immediate cause of the war was not the decision of the Commission, but the ultimatum on the Zulu military organisation which was presented at the same time. When Cetewayo complained that the Boers had become English, he went to the root of the matter. It was not so much the new duties of Shepstone, as Administrator of the Transvaal, which produced the changed outlook on native affairs as the new note of a wider Imperialism appreciating all sides of the question. No broad, well-informed views on such matters existed either in Natal or in the Transvaal. Frere says that "there is less sound opinion and sound public interest than there ought to be in Natal; what the Transvaal desires is sure to be wrong." Natal public opinion, in fact, oscillated between the extremes of a complacent disregard of the Zulu menace as something which concerned the Transvaal rather than Natal, and a demand for stern repressive measures. To sum up the causes of the Zulu war, as Lord Blachford does in the statement that Frere wanted war, while Shepstone must needs push the claims of the Transvaal Boers to make his position as Administrator in that country a tolerable one, is to neglect altogether the main problem: how to deal with an uncivilised, but vigorous, nation, organised for war on an aggressive scale and totally uninstructed in habits of peaceful intercourse and domestic improvement. Shepstone and Frere are both quite clear that the earlier adoption, perhaps under Panda, of a policy of peaceful intervention would have solved the problem without any need for the employment of force. "Had Cetewayo's thirty thousand warriors been in time changed to labourers working for wages, Zululand would have been a prosperous, peaceful country, instead of what it now is, a source of perpetual danger to itself and its neighbours" (Sir T. Shepstone, January 5th, 1878). Regarding the problem from an Imperial standpoint, he could see that the fault had been largely in the lack of co-ordination of methods. The Colony of Natal had smiled upon the enterprises of the Zulu King whilst rapidly confining the area in which these enterprises might find fruition. The Transvaal Government had temporised and conciliated to avoid an open dispute, thus encouraging the aggressive tendencies of their neighbours. And neither had done anything to alter the character of the Zulu organisation or to employ their energies in constructive work. The policy of expansion along the easiest lines, leaving the equili-

brium between the various races to take care of itself, had inevitably led to a condition of affairs which demanded intervention in the form of repression. The die for peace or war had been cast two years before the British forces crossed over into Zululand. The folly of *laissez faire* and the necessity for the ultimatum are explained by Frere to the Colonial Secretary in his despatch of February 12th, 1879: "It was a simple question whether we should steadily bring our differences to an issue on a clear and unmistakable demand for our right to live at peace with our neighbours, or whether we should await the convenience of the Zulu King and be taken at disadvantage when he saw his opportunity."

That Zulu militarism may be explained in terms of favourable opportunity and could have been corrected by wise measures at the opportune moment seems fairly clear from a consideration of the uneasy state of Zululand in the month preceding the final outbreak. That the military party would never agree to the demands in the ultimatum—especially the abrogation of the rule as to celibacy and the disbandment of the army—was, of course, to be expected. But the existence of a Zulu peace-at-any-price party, from the moment when the British and not the Boers were seen to be the opponents of Cetewayo, shows what might have been done earlier in the direction of intervention of the kind Shepstone had advocated. Fannin, the special border agent, wrote confidentially that there was considerable feeling in Zululand that the promises of reform exacted by the British Government at Cetewayo's coronation should be enforced. Several Zulus informed Fannin that "if the English Government proclaimed its intention of enforcing observance of this law it would probably alienate many from the King." Clearly, the more pacific elements in the Zulu nation regretted the *laissez faire* attitude of the Colonial Ministers, and had almost ceased to look to them for any decisive intervention in Zulu affairs. Frere reported on September 30th, 1878, that the Zulus were quite out of hand; but most of the chiefs would have followed a clear lead from the Government had the former good relations been based on wise direction rather than on a weak encouragement of anti-Boer enterprises. Such a policy could have only one result—a fatal loss of prestige in the eyes of the native races generally. Frere reported home a fortnight after delivery of the ultimatum that "the almost universal impression I find among natives out of Zululand is that the natives are the stronger power, and will beat the English." Cetewayo at this time was personally confident, and determined to

fight. His temporising policy was the result of the general uneasy feeling which increased among the minor chiefs as Shepstone and Frere showed their determination to stand by their ultimatum. Compliance with the military demands could not now have been expected of Cetewayo and the warlike party; but to assume that Zululand was on the verge of civil war, which would have reduced Cetewayo to impotence without an "unnecessary war," is utterly fallacious. The indecision among the more pacific chiefs was the result of an intervention which had for the first time been firmly and justly proclaimed. It is a measure of what might have been achieved years before by elaborating the terms of the coronation oath of Cetewayo into a practical programme of administration. Everything would be lost by withdrawal and the continuance of the old policy of *laissez faire*. Frere judged correctly that the internal process of militarisation had gone too far to avoid altogether the prospect of repression. That a decision to intervene in the sense desired by Shepstone ("investing money in the profitable work of improving") must be taken early and in relation to the needs of all the various communities living side by side; and that, in native matters the balance of power can never be safely left to take care of itself; these were the main lessons which the Zulu problem of 1878-9 brought to the forefront. In the working out of Imperial problems it has been this kind of local experience, modifying and enlightening the somewhat insular equipment of British statesmen, which has triumphed over the difficulties of colonisation.

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