

In the 18th and 19th century, there was a rise of large and powerful African kingdoms on the inland of South Africa. One of these African kingdoms is the famous Zulu Empire. The Zulu Empire was a powerful military state.¹ This kingdom was radical in expanding its leadership. It used its extensive administrative power to organize their strong military. The young Zulu men were organized into “amabutho” which were well-trained soldiers. The source of the Zulu Empire power came tributes paid by every household.

The 19th century saw a period of British expansion in southern Africa. This was driven by a desire to confederate the various white states that had been established in South Africa. The British government believed that this would lead to increased economic growth for the emerging mining industry in the northeast.² Initially, the British only maintained control over the Cape region. After the Great Trek which began in 1836, which led to the establishment of several Boer states, the descendents of the original Dutch settlers, the white territory was spreading out further.³ These states included Transvaal, along with other states like Natal and the Orange Free State. With the establishment of Transvaal, a border dispute developed with the Zulu Empire. Rather than come to a peaceful solution that was mutually beneficial to the Afrikaners and the Zulu, the British government sought to start a war with the Zulu.⁴ The expansion of white domination saw the rise of brutal, scorched earth warfare that devastated the regions, especially in the Black African states, including the Zulu Kingdom.

¹ Ross, Robert. “A Concise History of South Africa” 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2008)

² Ross. “A Concise History of South Africa” 2nd ed.

³ Ross. “A Concise History of South Africa” 2nd ed.

⁴ Ross. “A Concise History of South Africa” 2nd ed.

In 1881, Cetshwayo Mpande, the King of the Zulu wrote a letter to the governor of Cape Town. Cetshwayo wrote the letter and lobbied on behalf of the Zulu people for their land to be returned to them after it had been seized by the Boers (Cetshwayo, page 141) The King also advocated for his own release from prison where he was being held in Cape Town. The King explained in the letter that the British government's attacks on the Zulus were seen as a surprising and devastating turn of events after he cited the cooperation between the Zulus and British in the years earlier (Cetshwayo, page 141-142). The King saw these acts of war as unwarranted acts of aggression against the Zulu people and Zulu sovereignty.

This letter, as a primary source, demonstrated the shift in African colonial politics from cooperative relationships between states to white dominance over Africans, a significant characteristic of South African history. The cooperation was shown through Cetshwayo's characterization of his relationship with the British compared to his father's. This primary source illustrated the rise of white domination in South Africa in the 19th century. In the letter, it is chronicled how the Boers surrounded the Zulu territory and attacked the Zulu people. It also showed the Zulu perspective of the British conquest and expansion across the southern tip of Africa.

What is compelling though is that Cetshwayo is clear that he wants to have friendly relationships with the British in the beginning of the letter. He highlights the relationship between the British official, Sir Theophilus Shepstone and Cetshewayo's father. There is a close, almost personal relationship depicted in the beginning of the letter with Shepstone and Cetshwayo- and by extension, the Zulu people. He writes "Mr. Shepstone to say, "I am now passing on, and am about to go and arrange matters with

the Boers. Tell my child (Cetwayo [Cetshwayo]) that I do not know how matters will turn out, as the Boers seem about to be troublesome. I will tell him (Cetwayo) about the result when I have talked with the Boers (Cetshwayo, page 143). On several occasions in this quote, Shepstone was seen as referring to the King with informal language. Shepstone referred to Cetshwayo as his child which was personal and affectionate. Furthermore, Shepstone seems to have suggested in this quote that he was working collaboratively with Cetshwayo by writing that Shepstone himself will talk to Cetshwayo.

In a similar fashion, the King wrote the letter in an informal way. It was clear from the tone and phrasing of the letter that he had a relationship with several of the British officials. He had asked for an explanation. He wanted to understand why the British had pushed into his territory. In a larger sense, he also wanted to understand why the British had begun disrespecting the peace between the British and Zulus in favor of the Boers. He wrote at the end of the letter ““I never for a moment thought that the English would invade my country”(Cetshwayo, page 145). This last line of the letter was a powerful way to end the letter. It was a perfect summation of the Zulu King’s disbelief at the clear betrayal of the British government to go to war with the Zulus over false land claims.

In Cetshwayo’s letter, he included details about his father, Mpande kaSenzangakhona, who had been a great king of the Zulu people, and his father’s relationship with the British people. He wrote “My father Mpande belonged to the English, and when anything happened to him he used to report it to the English, and he made a move when he had heard from the English” (Cetshwayo, page 145). This quote contributed to a narrative that demonstrated the formerly long-standing relationship

between the two nation-states. It is indicative of Zulu-English cooperation that benefited both parties.

When Cetshwayo Mpande wrote to the governor of the Cape Colony in 1881, it was a clear signal to the Zulu Kingdom and the British Empire that there was a clear break in the relationship between the two empires. This letter was written in response to the British military's actions against the Zulus. The letter was several pages long and detailed the relationship that the Zulus had with the British for many years. The King of the Zulus explains in the letter "it will be good for Mr. Shepstone to tell the English nation, in order that the English nation may know what he is doing, when he is destroying my country, taking it away from, throwing me out of it, and giving it to the Boers" (Cetshwayo, page 144-145) meaning that the British government was causing harm and destruction. The King wanted to make it known that there was war happening and his people were the ones to suffer from it.

However, there is a contrasting narrative to consider when studying the understood history of white control of South African politics. The British government and the Boers intruded on the territory and sovereignty of the Zulu people. With the subsequent collapse of the Zulu Kingdom, and the rise of white-commanded politics, there was a clear avenue to position the British government as the dominating power. However, during the Anglo-Zulu War, it was the powerful Zulu military that destroyed British forces in 1879.⁵ The Zulu army was not something to be under-estimated.

The contents of the letter were a simple way of showcasing the unfair treatment that the Zulus, along with other Africans, suffered from under the oppression of the

⁵ Michael Lieven. "Heroism, Heroics and the Making of Heroes: The Anglo-Zulu War of 1879." *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 30, no. 3 (1998): 419–38.

British government. As the letter continued, the King seemed to beg for his land and his dignity back. He wrote “All what is mine in Zululand has been overturned and spoiled. My children and wives have been put in misery by the chiefs now ruling, specially Dunn [a white Zulu chief]. The English were merciful, but not the chiefs now ruling. I wish the English to look to this” (Cetshwayo, page 145). This quote meant that the Zulu people were suffering because of the Anglo-Zulu War. It is explained in the article “New Light on the Anglo-Zulu War,” that imperialists, like Shepstone, in the 19th century used the Zulu Kingdom as a scapegoat for South Africa’s growing economy’s stagnation. Author Freda Harcourt wrote “in the 1870s... it was regarded that imperial expansion could extend in a north-easterly direction to the regions popularly thought to be teeming Black laborers... if only the obstacle of the formidable Zulu kingdom was removed.”⁶ This suggested that the British expansion actually had two intentions; the first being the accumulation of more Boer territory, the second being the push of Black laborers into the white economy from their home states.

In conclusion, the letter is a good primary source that demonstrated the deterioration of Zulu-British relations. This is shown by the King of the Zulus, Cetshwayo Mpande, as he clearly described the once strong bonds between the two nation-states. Through his account of his father’s relationship, and then his own, with the British government, he was direct in confronting the changed realities of South African politics. He continued in the letter and showcased white aggression against the Zulu people, and the harmful effects of the Anglo-Zulu War on the Zulu Kingdom. It demonstrated the clear shift in African politics that began in the 18th century and continued into the 19th

⁶ Freda Harcourt. Review of *New Light on the Anglo-Zulu War*, by Andrew Duminy and Charles Ballard. *The Journal of African History* 24, no. 1 (1983): 118–19.

century where Black oppression became more systematic and organized, and white domination became more and more of a societal norm. This letter worked as a primary source that provided insight to the Zulu perspective on the Anglo-Zulu War. This was important as oftentimes the loser of war does not get to share their perspective.

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