# CHAPTER VIII

GANDHI GOES TO WAR

I n the Boer War, which was waged in South Africa from 1899

to 1902 between Dutch settlers and the British, Gandhi’s

personal sympathies ‘were all with the Boers’. Yet he volun¬

teered to serve with the British. ‘Every single subject of a state,’

he explained, ‘must not hope to enforce his opinion in all cases.

The authorities may not always be right, but as long as the sub¬

jects owe allegiance to a state, it is their clear duty generally to

accommodate themselves, and to accord their support, to the acts

of the state.’

This is not the language or sentiment of a pacifist. Although

the Indians, Gandhi knew, were ‘helots in the Empire’, they were

still hoping to improve their condition within that empire and

here was ‘a golden opportunity’ to do so by supporting the

British in the Boer War.

The Indians’ claim for equal rights and fair treatment in South

Africa, lawyer Gandhi submitted, was based on their status as

British subjects, and since they sought the advantages of British

citizenship they should also accept its obligations.

Then Gandhi made a fine point: it could be said that this war

and any war was immoral or anti-religious. Unless, however, a

person had taken that position and actively defended it before the

war he could not use it as a justification for abstention after

hostilities had commenced.

Gandhi would have been more popular with his countrymen

had he advocated a do-nothing neutral policy. But it was unlike

Gandhi to be evasive. He accordingly offered to organize

Indians as stretcher bearers and medical orderlies at the front

or for menial work in hospitals. The Natal government rejected

the offer. Nevertheless, Gandhi and other Indians began, at their

own expense, to train as nurses. They conveyed this information

to the authorities together with certificates of physical fitness.

Anpther rejection came. But the Boers were advancing, the dead

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were piling up on the battlefield, and the wounded were receiving

inadequate care.

After much procrastination from prejudice, Natal sanctioned

the formation of an Indian Ambulance Corps. Three hundred

free Indians volunteered together with eight hundred indentured

labourers furloughed by their masters. England and South Africa

were impressed.

Gandhi led the corps. A photograph taken at the time shows

him in khaki uniform and broad-brimmed, jaunty, felt cowboy

hat seated in the centre of twenty-one men similarly dressed.

Gandhi has a drooping moustache and, like the others, wears a

Red Cross armband. He looks stern and small. Next to him is

Dr. Booth, a bulky English doctor with goatee who trained the

volunteers. The man standing above Gandhi has both his hands

on Gandhi’s shoulders.

The corps members were African-born and Indian-born

Hindus, Moslems and Christians who lived together in natural

amity. Their relations with the Tommies were very friendly. The

public and the army admired the endurance and courage of

Gandhi’s corps. In one sanguinary engagement at Spion Kop in

January 1900, the British were being forced to retire and General

Buller, the commanding officer, sent through a message saying

that although, by the terms of enlistment, the Indians were not to

enter the firing line he would be thankful if they came up to remove

the wounded. Gandhi led his men on to the battlefield. For days

they worked under the fire of enemy guns and carried wounded

soldiers back to base hospital. The Indians sometimes walked as

much as twenty-five miles a day.

Mr. Vere Stent, British editor of the Pretoria News , wrote an

article in the July 1911 issue of the Johannesburg Illustrated Star

about a visit to the front during the Spion Kop battle. ‘After a

night’s work, which had shattered men with much bigger frames,’

he reported, ‘I came across Gandhi in the early morning sitting

by the roadside eating a regulation army biscuit. Every man in

Buller’s force was dull and depressed, and damnation was invoked

on everything. But Gandhi was stoical in his bearing, cheerful

and confident in his conversations, and had a kindly eye. He did

one good. It was an informal introduction and it led to a friend¬

ship. I saw the man and his small undisciplined corps on many a

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battlefield during the Natal campaign. When succour was to be

rendered they were there. Their unassuming dauntlessness cost

them many lives and eventually an order was published forbidding

them to go into the firing line.’

Later in 1900 seasoned units arrived from England, fortune

smiled on British arms and the Indian Ambulance Corps was

disbanded. Gandhi and several comrades received the War

Medal, and the corps was mentioned in dispatches.

Gandhi hoped that the fortitude of the Indians in war would

appeal to South Africa’s sense of fair play and help to moderate white

hostility towards coloured Asiatics. Perhaps the two communities

would slowly grow closer together. He himself had no unspent

belligerence and no further plans or ambitions in South Africa;

nothing foreshadowed the epic opportunity for leadership and

realization that awaited him there. He yearned to go home to

India, and did — at the end of 1901. He took his family. He

settled down in Bombay to practise law and enter politics.

Gandhi was forging ahead in both fields. In fact, he was

beginning to tread a path which led to the routine success of a

mediocre lawyer who made money, joined committees and grew

a paunch, when a telegraphic summons from South Africa asked

him to return. He had promised to return if called. It pained him

to break up his new life but it pleased him to be needed. Kasturbai

and the boys remained in Bombay. Gandhi estimated that he

might be away four months to a year.

Joseph Chamberlain, the Colonial Secretary, was making a

trip to South Africa which the Indian community regarded as

fateful, and they wanted their grievances presented to him by

Gandhi. Hence the summons.

Gandhi arrived in Durban near the end of 1902.

Chamberlain, Gandhi assumed, had come to get a gift of thirty-

five million pounds from South Africa and to cement the post¬

war bonds between Boers and British. The Colonial Secretary

certainly did not propose to antagonize the Boers. On the

contrary, every possible concession would be made to them. Very

soon, in fact, General Louis Botha, the Boer leader, became Prime

Minister of the British-dominated Union of South Africa and Jan

Christian Smuts, another Boer general and lawyer, its Minister of

Finance and Defence. Britain was tending Boer wounds and did

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not intend, therefore, to wound Boer susceptibilities by redressing

Indian grievances. In British Natal, accordingly, Chamberlain

received an Indian delegation, listened to Gandhi’s plea and

answered with chilling evasiveness; in the former Boer republic of

Transvaal Gandhi was not even admitted into Chamberlain’s

presence, and those Indian representatives who were admitted got

no greater satisfaction than seeing him.

From repeated rumblings in the Transvaal it seemed that a

political volcano might any day erupt and wipe out the entire

Indian settlement. Gandhi therefore pitched his tent close to

the crater; he became a resident of Johannesburg, the largest

city of the Transvaal, opened a law office there and, without

objection from the bar association, won the right to practise

before the Supreme Court.

The Transvaal government established an Asiatic Department

to deal with Indians. This in itself was ominous; it suggested a

racial approach. The Department, which Gandhi charged with

corruption, was manned, in the main, by British army officers who

had come from India during the Boer War and elected to stay. Their

mentality was that of the white sahib in a colony of coloured inferiors.

One of the top Asiatic Department ideologues was Lionel

Curtis, Assistant Colonial Secretary of the Transvaal, who later

attained wider fame as a liberal apologist of imperialism. Gandhi

went to see him in 1903 and Mr. Curtis wrote subsequently:

‘Mr. Gandhi was, I believe, the first Oriental I ever met’; but

ignorance has ever facilitated policy-making. Gandhi, Curtis

says, ‘started by trying to convince me of the good points in the

character of his countrymen, their industry, frugality, their

patience’. Still the same Gandhian hope of winning friends by

disproving calumnies! But Curtis replied, ‘Mr. Gandhi, you are

preaching to the converted. It is not the vices of Indians that

Europeans in this country fear but their virtues.’

If the Indians in South Africa had consented to be ‘hewers of

wood and drawers of water’ they would have had no trouble.

But the whites, unprepared to accept the Indians as equals, used

their monopoly of political power to handicap the brown men

from another part of the Empire. The purpose was unmistakable

because frankly avowed. General Botha put it bluntly in an elec¬

tion speech at Standerton in January 1907, when he declared,

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‘If my party is returned to office we will undertake to drive the

coolies out of the country within four years. 5 And Smuts asserted

in October 1906, ‘The Asiatic cancer, which has already eaten so

deeply into the vitals of South Africa, ought to be resolutely

eradicated.’ These were the Asiatic Department’s marching orders.

Gandhi stopped the whites far short of this goal.

Throughout 1904, 1905 and the first part of 1906, the Transvaal

Asiatic Department diligently carried out all anti-Indian regula¬

tions and showed special aptitude in inventing new ones. It

looked as though the existence of the ten thousand Indians of the

Transvaal and of the more than one hundred thousand in South

Africa was in jeopardy; the threats of Botha and Smuts appeared

on the eve of being translated into actuality.

Gandhi was now the recognized leader of South Africa’s

Indian community. Tension between whites and Indians was

growing. Nevertheless Gandhi forsook the political arena when

the Zulu ‘rebellion’ occurred in the first half of 1906 and joined

the British army with a small group of twenty-four Indian

volunteers to serve as stretcher bearers and sanitary aids. Gandhi

said he joined because he believed that ‘the British Empire existed for

the welfare of the world’; he had a ‘genuine sense of loyalty’ to it.

The ‘rebellion’ was really a punitive expedition or ‘police

action’ which opened with the exemplary hanging of twelve

Zulus and continued to the last as a ghastly procession of shoot¬

ings and floggings. Since white physicians and nurses would not

tend sick and dying Zulus, the task was left to the Indians who

witnessed all the horrors of black men whipped till their skin

came off in strips. Gandhi’s party sometimes came on the scene

five or six days after the whites had passed by and found the

victims suffering agony from open, suppurating wounds. The

Indians marched as many as forty miles a day.

After a month’s service, the Indian unit was demobilized and

each man honoured with a special medal. Gandhi had held the

rank of sergeant-major. All members wore khaki uniform, this

time with puttees.

When Gandhi returned from this expedition he was obliged to

plunge into a cold war with the British which ended in an

historic victory for moral force and brought him honour in India

and fame throughout the world.

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