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EAETLL OF ISAHDDdLJANA - JAIRLLLIY 22, 1879

It is indicative of imperialist and racist history books that the names Tshingwayo and Mavumengwana are totally ignored. Yet these are the two Zulu generals - the former a spirited veteran of 70 years, the latter thirty years his junior - credited with inflicting a crushing defeat on the British army at Isandhlwana on January 22, 1879.

The battle - the centenary of which we are marking this year - is considered one of the most humiliating defeats suffered by Britain in the annals of her colonial history. 'The Oxford History of South Africa' refers to it as Britain's Xgreatest disaster since the Crimean War. The Durban Daily News carried an item at the time which was partly an attack on the British general Chelmsford and stated: "You will have seen of our great disaster at Isandhlwana, only a short distance from the border where every man was butchered...it is evident that our general was out-generalled by the Zulus". No less an authority than Frederick Engels was later to write: U...the Zulus- did what no European-army can do. Armed only with lances and spears, without any firearms, they advanced under a hail of bullets from breechloaders up to the bayonets of the English infantry - the best in the world for fighting in closed ranks - and threw them into confusion more than once, yea, even forced them to retreat in spite of the immense disparity of weapons".

The British lost 1,800 men at Isandhlwana. Half of these were British troops and officers; and half of them African troops of the so-called Natal Native Contingent. (Not for the first time in our history are the Pretoria Boers today attempting to use Africans to fight Africans!) The British soldier at the time of Isandhlwana was armed with the most up-to-date rifle. This was the famous Martini-Henry which was accurate up to 400 yards individual fire. Battalion volley fire against massed opponents was accurate at 800 yards. The artillery units were equipped with cannons and rocket tubes which fired lethal fragmentation projectiles.

In addition the army used the Getlihem machine gun which caused the most fearful carnage. The cavalry, armed with pistol, rifle and sword could be a decisive opponent of simple foot-soldiers such as the Lulu. This was the army which in the words of the historian H. Lawson i'brought calamities compared to which the cattle raids of the Boers had been mere flea bites. He has written: "The British war machine was not composed of cowardly cattle thieves but of ruthless and dehumanised mercenaries whose profession was destruction. Moreover, they appeared in their thousands where the Boers had mustered only a few hundred. When they attacked the Afrikaner people, the damage they were able to inflict was tremendous. The Zulu army at Isandhlwana was composed of 20,000 warriors, organised in 12 regiments.

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Frederick anels was marvelling at the victory of the Zulu impis
of Cetshwayo over the British Imoerial hrmy at Isendhlwena Jill
on Janhury 22, 1879; the centenary of which all oatriots of our'
country comemmmorate this year.

At that historic battle the entire central column of a British
invasion army - the most modern and well-equipped-that the world's
leading power could put into the field - was skilfully, out-
manoehvred and wiped-out by nfrian warriours. Nine hundred
British troops were speured to death as well as a similar number
of African Native levies under British officers. The battle -
at the hey-day of British meire and Colonial might - is regarded
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Leonard Thompson in 'Ehe Uxford distorl of South africa'.

News of Cetshvayo's unexpected and overwhelming-victory -
tantamount to the senior bully in the school having his neck't
soundly wrung by a first-year junio;- stunned Victorian Lngland
and sent shock-wuves throughout Colonial South nfria. The
arrogant British commander, Lord Chelmsford retreated to DurLan
in consternation and disgrace. There he waited for thousands,
of troop re;nforcements which were soon to pour in from all
corners of the Empire. Dhe pred tory colonial War ground, for
the time being, to a deai halt;
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4 although there could be no esghtmebou; its u;;iggte__t;_ggc outcome. The Zulus had won a signal battle, but for them, as for all the brave indigenous people of our country, there could be no queetion of winning the war. The British imperialists liked to boast that their's was an hmpire lion which the sun never sett; it was in fact an Empire "on which the blood never ran dry".

SEIRIT OF ALSIDTARCE

With remarkable heroism the indigenous peeple of South Africa, organised into various.political units, resisted the robbery, rape and plunder of our land by European invaders. The superiority of arms and technology oVer Slmple, isolated agrarian societies spelt out the inevitable nature of defeat. But such was the fierceness of resistance that conquest and subjugation was a long time coming and the intruder paid dearly in life and blood. In the end it was the iron and fire e-power of British arms, the resources of industrial Britain end her vast Empire, not the motley Boer commandos (who had every reason to fear the courage of our-pe0ple from the Cape to the lepopo and beyond), that defeated sma"nfrlka'and imposed the cruel reign of white authority.

Nhilst there will inevitably be those who wish to hake of the Isandhlwana Centenary "a Lulu affair" we mus t be to stress that the fighting spirit which so impressed Lngels was displayed throughOLt South Africa by our Khosa-speaking forbeurs in the Hundred Years war which bore-the-hrunt-of-British and Boer expansion; by the southrrn-Sotho who fought with great skill from the near-impregn.ble mountain-fortress of hoshoeshoe's kingdom using fire-arms and horses; by Sekhukhuni's Pedi and the Vehda Chieftains who valiantly defied the Boers and British for many years; by the Griqua, .swana and Kh oikhoi resistance etc., etc. Indeed, well before the landing of the Dutch thief Van Riebeeck at the Cape, the Khoikhoi wиеed out 75 Portuguese plunderers with poisoned arrows on the banks of the Salt River in 1510.

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UNFOLDING OF THE MAP

The subjugation of the indigenous people of our country to colonial and imperialist control was part of the global process that began with the 15th Century 'Voyages of Discovery' (so-called) and climaxed in the conquest and partition of Africa over the last third of the 19th Century.

Britain's colonial policy of domination and expansion in Southern Africa became increasingly belligerent in the 1870's. Rivalry between the European capitalist Powers for world markets, expressed in that vivid term the scramble for Africa was frenetic and intense. In 1879

With the discovery of diamonds in 1870, and later gold, and the consequent mining revolution and labour requirements, colonial rapaciousness intensified in response to the laws and demands of Capital. One after the other, within the space of a decade, the African chiefdoms were subjugated in a welter of blood and fire by the force of British arms; after more than 200 years of armed resistance by our people.

It was this blood that fuelled our industrial era. The Statisticians have compressed this process as follows:

"Responsible government, imperial expansion and industrialism followed hard on the diamond discoveries of 1867-71. British and colonial troops made war on the Xhosa in 1873, the Gcaleka and Pedi in 1877, the Nguni of Fingo, Pondoland, Griqua and Hottentots in 1878, the Zulu in 1879, the Sotho in 1880, the Matabele in 1893, and the Afrikaner republics in 1899. The Cape absorbed the Transkei and its people in 1879-94. Britain annexed Basutoland in 1868, Griqualand West in 1871, the South African Republic in 1877, Zululand in 1887, Matabeleland in 1894, and the Afrikaner republics in 1900...South Africa's industrial era was baptised in blood and the subjugation of small nations.

(Class and Colour in South Africa)

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The most dramatic and violent confrontation was perhaps the Zulu Repression of 1879 (so-called LZulu Har'); for the Zulu chieftaincy had evolved from Shaka's time a spartan society-H and martial system which made it the most feared and formidable warrior kingdom south of the Sahara. Armed with high morale, superior tactics and excellent weapons - the necessities of any successful army - as part of the grand design of bringing the whole of Southern Africa under her political and economic control British imperialism had conclusively to break both the military power and the agrarian self-sufficiency of the Zulu people.. This voracious aim was pithily expressed by that master of treachery and deceit Theophilus Shepstone, who as secretary for native affairs in Natal, renorted regretfully after attending Cetshwayo's coronation in 1872 that the Zulus "were so attached to their regimental system" that the "recruitment of labour from that people" was impossible. Shepstone, who had sided with the Zulu in their bitter territorial dispute with the Transvaal Boers over the Buffalo and Pongola River lands, treacherously switched sides when he became administrator of the Transvaal (anticipating Britain's pact with the Boers in 1910) and began to provoke the atmosphere for a "civilising war" against Cetshwayo. The Zulu were depicted as a barbaric and unruly race, unfit to govern their country and a constant menace to the 'white civilisation' of Natal. Thus the die was soon cast and the bloody process launched which would transform Cetshwayo's warriors into landless labourers working for wages,.if not corpses; but not before the warriors would "wash their spears in the blood of hundreds of Englishmen.

INVASION

To the Zulu nation the British decision to make war came as a bolt from the blue. Zulu disputes and conflict had mainly been with the Boers. Their relationship with the British had been tactful and diplomatic. Now it suited British policy to launch a violent and sudden war on the Zulu kingdom.

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Shcpstone had totally betrayed Cetshwayo's trust. An arrogant ultimatum was served on Cetshwayo from Sir Bartle Erere, British High Commissioner in South Africa, ordering the king to disband the Zulu army and abandon the military system. wCetshwayo was given 30 days to comply with this order failing which British troops would invade his country and force the issue. Even if he' had wanted to; Cetshwayo could not have bowed to this ultimatum. If he had he would have been immediately denosed by a more determined successor.

As it was, Cetshwayo stood for the preservation of the traditional order and hid always defended his territory a:ainst all comers. The British invasion force, which had been assembled on the southern bank of the fugela river, consequentlr crosred the border into Zululand on January 11th, 1879 under the command of J40rd Chelmsford. Cetshwayo had already learnt from his scouts that the British were invading his country in great force, and the superb regiments were assembled at Ulundi, his capital; a mere 75 Liles from Pugela. Chelmsfdrd's plan qu to advance on Ulundi in three main columns.i His force consisted of 16,000 men including 2,000 cav.lry, artillery and engineers. He had 700 wegons and carts, rockets and shells for his cannons and Gatling guns, and 2,000,000 rounds of ammunition. His trooys were armed with the excellent L&ztnii' dehry rifle, Battalion volley fire against massed opponents could commence at upwards of 800 yards. Average accuracy was 400 yards. The .45 caliber bullet left gaping wounds and smashed bone. An elaborate system of garrisons and communication lines were developed and fresh troops held in reserve. So confident was Chelmsford that his adversary would soon be crushed that he contemptuously dismissed cll talk of their military skill, efficient intelligence system and excellent use of the ' terrain. The Boers, who.had learnt from their own bitter experi-w ence, Werned that a Zulu army moved with terrific speed and claimed that the actual charge of an impi was as swift as cavalry. /6.....

Vdow enduring and able they are " Engels wrote in Qhe Origin of the Family , ?is proved by the complaints of the Englishh according to which a Zulu" can cover a longer distance in 24 hours than a horset. Chelsmford haughtily dismissaed the sugge- stion that he should take precautions to adequately defend his camps from surprise sulu attacks. EO the British Lord the war was all but won. Within a iow days he was sorely mode to regret his Optimism.

It is estimated that almost 50,000 men in Lululand were under arms organised in 35 regiments of various age groups. This in a population of about 300,000. Ehe active corps consisted of 26 regiments comprising 40,000 men of which about 20,000 were under the age of thirty. The nmasoka regiment contained the 'princes of Zululand and was regarded as 'Cetshwayo's own'.

It was the finest dressed regiment and all its warriorshcarried pure white shields. Regimental uniforms were generally speaking all alike except for miner features, usually in the head-dress and colour of the ox-hide shields, which distinguished one regiment from another. tThe most outstanding warriors were awarded the long Isitwalandwe feather and they led the men into battle. All warriors were barefoot; no sandals had been allowed since the days of Shaka which accounted for the fleetness of .foot.

On January 17, the king adressed the regiments at Ulundi:

"I am sending you against the Uhitemen who have invaded Zululand and driven away our cattle. You are to go against the column at Rorke's Drift and grive it back into Natal. You will attack by daylight and march slowly so as not to tire yourselfes".

The column Cetshwayo referred to was the British central column.

It consisted of 300 mounted men, 1,300 British infantry, 2,500 African hetive Contingent and was supported by six guns of the Royal Artillery and a half company of the Royal anengineers.

Chelsmford himself accompanied this column.

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SAKDHLWhhA CARP

On January 20th, Chelmsford advanced from Rorke's Drift, accompanied by 100 wagons, and pitched camp at Isandhlwana. The mountain forms a conspicuous landmark, echinX-like in shape, dominating the trail from Aorke's Drift to Ulundi. In front an open plain extends, with little cover. Either side of the mountain is flanked by low foothills. The British camp faced the plain with its back to the mountain. At this stage the Zulu army was moving forward so skilfully that British scouting parties had still not made contact with any warriors.

On the afternoon of January 20 the British sampled their first taste of the awesome Lulu army. A scouting party, searching for the elusive enemy, was sent to investigate a report that aulus had been seen on a distant hill. As they rode forward to test the position "There appeared as if by magic" in the words of the commander making his report a long line of hulu'warriors in skirmishing order, from one end of the ridge to the other, advancing at a run; it was a grand sight and they never uttered a sound. I defy the men of any British regiment to keep their intervals so well at the double'. Eaten aback the commander swiftly withdrew his men.

Meanwhile Chelmsford had himself set out from the camp with a reconnaissance party on a wildgoose chase in search of the enemy; The Zulu generals' supreme Command, the old General Ishingwayo and his younger partner Havumengwena, were playing a cat and mouse game with the British, showing an elusive presence now here now there and creating the general impression that the main force was miles away from the adversary. Thus dawned January 22, 1879.

THE BATTLE

At about 8 a.m. a report reached Isandhlwana that a large Lulu impi was advancing from the rear, using the foothills flanking the mountain as cover. At 9 a.m. the first of the warriors were seen on the crests of some distant hills, but these immediately withdrew.

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At noon a scouting trooo from the camp reached the top of a hili only 4 miles away and to their utter amazement sighted a large Lulu force not more than a mile away. This was the crack Umcityu impi (the Redheads) who carried black shields and numbered 4,000. The troop promptly retreated but at once the whole impi roaring out the national battlecry HUsutu: sprang forward. The entire Zulu army - it is eetiheted that 30,000 warriors were committed to the battle - was concealed nearby and the advance of the Umcityu inflamed the other regiments and they too sprang to the attack. The British tr00p galloped for the safety of the camp and the Battle of Isandhlwana had commenced.

The Zulu army was prepared in the traditional crescent formation. With a stamping of feet which shook the earth, the beating oft essegais on shields, and amid the roaring of the wer-cried, the regiments advanced to the attack with frightening speed; the. _ right and left 'horns' of the cresecent spreading out to encircle the foe. At the some time the 'chest' - the central body of the formation - swept fiercely onto the camp, endeavouring to get to close quarters where they would make full use of their short stabbing assegais. Ehis was the awe-inspiring system of battle devised by Shaka.

An artillery battery, hastening to Isandhlwana from Rorke' s Drift but not realising the battle had begun, saw the advancing warriors _and attempted to position its guns on a small ridge from where it could Open fire. Suddenly the tip of the left 'horn' bore down on the gunners. They were wiped out in the first onrush; only four escaping out of 180. Another company of reinforcements from Rorke's Drift, who also had the misfortune to arrive on the scene at the wrong moment, were tranned in a ditch from where they poured volley after volley into the massed ranks. But as quickly- as warriors fell others took their place. Pressing forward they overran the; enemy position, scarcely pausing to finish him off and the way to Isandhlwana lay onen.

By impi the 'chest! was approaching the camp. The right and left 'horns' were pouring through' the valleys at either end of the mountain,

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and were speeding towards each other to link up. Thus the encirclement of the camp was complete. If the British lines wavered, if the warriors could keep up the momentum and come to close quarters, then the annihilation of the defending force was on the cards. i

The lack of fortifications and entrenchment, the surprise of the attack which disorganised the defenders, was aiding the determination and contempt for death of the warriors and the conditions for a rare Victory were materialising.

Silently now the warriors came on in their thousands, the 'chest' advancing to within 200 yards of the British lines, which kept up a furious fire. Warriors fell in droves, but the pressure was maintained and after a particularly powerful charge an entire British contingent broke and the warriors poured through the gap. Then fierce slaughter began because at in-fighting no army in the world could excel the Zulus. The British soldiers literally had the bayonets yanked from their rifles and the short stabbing assegai was put to work. The commander of the camp; Colonel Bullen, was killed in his tent. His death has been described by the warrior who slew him: "I sprang into the opening of the little white tent. At a table there was seated an officer who plucked out a little gun and shot me through the cheek. I staggered and found myself still alive. So I sprang upon him and finished him with my spear. That is why I am called meqindaba (he who finishes the matter) because I killed the chief of the army".

By 2 o.m. all was over. Over 1,800 British troops lay dead together with over 2,000 Zulu warriors; for the bullets had taken a fearful toll. Several British horsemen and other fugitives who managed to break out of the camp in a desperate bid to escape, stood no chance, for the triumphant warriors soon overtook them. The warriors were able to run as swiftly as the fleeing riders, who found the going slow over the rough countryside. Those who were not dragged from their mounts found themselves trapped at the Buffalo River which was in flood. Here many fugitives drowned while attempting to swim the swollen torrent or were slain on the river bank. Only a few managed to reach safety.

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REVENGE

Isandhlwana could be no more than a pyrrhic victory. There was no gloating among the Zulu. When reports of the battle reached him Cetshwayo remarked: "An assegai has been thrust into the belly of the nation. There are not enough tears to mourn for the dead".

Panic swept through the colony of Natal and cold shivers up and down the spine of white South Africa. Chelmsford licked his wounds from his retreat in Durban praying that Cetshwayo would not go onto the offensive; for the colony was at the mercy of the Zulus. The British attempted to divert attention from their disgrace and humiliation by exaggerating their defence of the Rorke's Drift garrison. Withdrawing from Isandhlwana Dabulamanzi's impi had a crack at this well-defended position and lost several hundred warriors in the process. Eleven Victoria Crosses were handed out to the defenders in a jingoistic exercise designed to save the imperial face after the Isandhlwana disaster. In fact to this day the majority of books dealing with the war, including a mediocre film, generally concentrate on the trifling and strategically insignificant Rorke's Drift episode. A clear sign that "Western Christian Civilisation" is haunted by the spectre of Isandhlwana to this day.

Cetshwayo refrained from carrying the war into Natal. The so-called "blood thirsty and barbaric monarch", who commanded, in the words of Sir Bartle Frere "celibate murdering gladiators", desired to show that the Zulu nation sought nothing but friendship and peace with Britain. Cetshwayo's hand of conciliation was contemptuously ignored. After all, the British and the white colonists desired land and a docile labour force; the peace of the graveyard not peace with an independent people!

Cetshwayo understood all along that there was no other prospect but defeat. He continually attempted to come to terms with the British through diplomacy. But the British demanded nothing but abject surrender and on this there could be no yielding. In July 1879, with 23,000 troops to draw from, Chelmsford marched a huge force of infantry, artillery and cavalry on to the plains at Ulundi.

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To get them there he had moved little more than fifteen miles a day drawing into defensive laager every two or three miles. At Ulundi the pride of Zululand was KOWD down by an overwhelming barrage of cannonshells and bullets. It was better to fight and die, the generals urged at Ulundi, than to stand and watch the destruction of their kratls and the dwelling of their king. On hearing news of the burning of Uluhdi, Mkebi, the doyen of Zulu royalty, who had-Witneseed the rise of the -ulu nation.\$ and survived to see its fall, called her people together, announced that there was nothing for which to live and silently cut her throat. uy this time much of the country had been laid waste. Wherever. the British-went they burned Villages, massacred the DeOpIe, seized cattle and plundered kraels. Cetshwayo fled and for a time evaded capture. fhe British tortured, flogged bribed and threhtened to shoot those suspected of knowing his whereabouts. "We tried everything" wrote an English officer, VI knew the people and their habits, and Although I believed they would be true to their king, I never expected such devotion". Cetehwayo was inevitably tracked down and imprisoned in Cape Town. Pre-dating the methods of the present-day Pretoria hutocracy by nearly a century, the British divided Sheka's kingdom into thirteen artificial tribal units under the rule of arbitrarily appointed chiefs. After liberal agitstlon in England, Cetshwayo was allowed to plead in person before gue;n Victoria and was permitted to return to Uluhdi. Bloodshed and civil war was inevitable. Cetshwaye's rivals, aided by white mercenaries and adventurers again destroyed Ulundi and the king died in 1884 a virtual orisoner of the British at Eshowe. H.J: Simons has written on the consequences of the war: It destroyed the Zulu power and dethroned Cetshwayo, the last of the great Zulu monarchs. The Boers got their territory, the settlers got their farms and Zululand, dismembered, shattered and subgued, became a part of Natal zin 1897. ('African Women - fheir Legal status in South Africa')

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The question could be asked; could Cetshwayo have fought in a different way perhaps resorting to guerrilla forms of struggle? The brief answer to this question is that the military organisation and tactics of the time of Shaka was a pillar of the society, which not unlike other tribal units or nations was traditional and conservative. To have expected a flexible change in tactics along guerrilla lines, which would have broken up the regimental system (in fact a demand of the British) would have required the revolutionising of the social system from top to bottom. With regards to firearms many Africans did manage to obtain these from traders but they were generally cheap flintlocks of dubious operation. It was only the East Griquas and southern Sotho who were able to make effective use of firearms. In passing we should note that Moshesh sent some of his military experts to Cetshwayo in order to train the Lulus in shooting and horsemanship.

QLSILIENQE

A once cohesive and homogeneous political unit is today fragmented into no less than nine pieces, Kwa Zulu as it is now known became the second 'semi-independent' Bantustan after the Transkei in 1972. At the time, its prime minister, Chief Gatsheni Buthelezi, stated: "I am a prime minister without a country and we are citizens of nowhere".

'Citizens of nowhere'; the remark applies to all black South Africans and particularly to the descendants of the indigenous people who were once proud owners of the land.

What are the lessons to be learned from the Battle of Isandhlwana which we have described so that our people should know about the fighting spirit of our ancestors? There are two essential points which must be grasped not simply from the victory at Isandhlwana (which cannot be viewed in isolation) but from the whole glorious era of military resistance. They are both of essential importance to the liberation of our country, South Africa.

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