

## WHY DID DINGANE KILL RETIET?

- Lionel Forman

Lionel Forman was an active member of the liberation movement until his early death in October 1959, 20 years ago. He was editor of the newspaper 'New Age', a member of the South African Communist Party, and of the Congress of Democrats. He was one of the accused in the 1956 Treason Trial. He wrote many articles in which he uncovered the real history of our country.

Every year, on December 16, there is a spate of claptrap from pulpits and platforms and press about how, at Blood River, on December 16, 1838, the forces of civilisation and of light, the messengers of God Himself, destroyed the power of barbarism and darkness in the shape of Dingane's Zulus.

It might be a good idea to arm ourselves in advance against being submerged in the wave of emotion by taking a look at the facts.

It is one of the facts of history up to now that in the relations between tribes or nations, when two neighbouring peoples have had an urgent economic need for something of which there was not sufficient for both, the stronger community has seized by force that thing from the weaker.

It is only when man obtains rational control of his society, and is able by his use of science to satisfy the economic wants of all, that wars and all the horrors that go with them will cease to be the stepping-stone of history.

South Africa's history is no different from that of other countries in this respect. In the quest for good land for men and cattle, the strong dispossess the weak. They did it by trickery if possible; by brute force if necessary. And those who were defending their land used the same weapons.

While the Europeans were establishing their rule in the Cape, the Free State and parts of the Transvaal, the Zulus were establishing theirs in Natal.

### ZULU AND ENGLISH MEET

When the first Europeans - Englishmen - came in 1824, the Zulus gave them permission to settle and establish Port Natal (now Durban).

In 1828, the Zulus, disturbed by the behaviour of the

Whites, sent some of their men, including a chief, Jacob, to the Cape to study the way the Europeans had behaved towards the Xhosas there.

Jacob reported:

"At first the white people came and took part of their land, then they encroached and drove them farther back... they built houses (missions) among them for the purpose of subduing them by witchcraft... the soldiers frequently asked what sort of country the Zulus had... and said 'We shall soon be after you'. They would then build a fort, when more would come and demand land, who would also build houses and subdue the Zulus and keep driving them farther back, as they had driven the frontier tribes".

In spite of this explicit (and prophetic) warning, Dingane, who succeeded Tshaka in 1828, took no hostile action against Port Natal, although the white settlers, numbering, until 1836, no more than thirty people, were completely at his mercy.

Three times his councillors recommended the destruction of the settlement, and three times Dingane vetoed the proposal.

He did not molest them even though he had cause for resentment because the Port Natal white settlement, happy to have black labour and black allies, was providing a haven for the Zulu tribe's outlaws and political refugees. The white settlers were treated as chiefs by no fewer than 3,000 of these people and in the words of Theal, "exercised power even of death over their followers."

"The European settlement", noted the White settler H.F. Fynn, "was objectionable not only because it was an imperium in imperio (i.e. a kingdom within a kingdom) but because it harboured many that could be assumed to have vowed everlasting vengeance... and were consequently plotting to bring about his downfall". In addition the settlers were actively fomenting tribal feuds and disunity.

Alarmed at the possibility that Dingane might attack them, the Europeans held a meeting and agreed to approach the Zulu ruler and give him an assurance that they would not be attacked.

### PREDICTION

Dingane willingly entered into a pact with the Europeans in April, 1835, saying at the time, "I will keep my word, but I know that the white people will be the first to break the treaty".

Fynn comments, "As the despot himself correctly surmised... it was indeed broken and surprisingly soon".

Two white traders, Halstead and Snelder, were, within two months, hard at work in the Zulu territory smuggling Zulu women through to Port Natal, where there was a great demand for them among the Europeans.

In spite of these infringements, the general effect of the treaty satisfied Dingane.

A year of close co-operation between the Africans and the Europeans followed. When in 1836, Dingane launched an attack on the Swazis, one of the colonists noted:

"The whole of the British inhabitants with three or four exceptions have volutarily joined the Zulu army and by means of their firearms killed and wounded a number of his enemies for which they have been handsomely rewarded with the cattle they have captured".

(Those who cite Dingane's wars against defenceless tribes as examples of African savagery should be reminded that Europeans with their guns formed the spearhead of the Zulus in at least one such attack. Savagery knows no colour bar).

#### BOERS ARRIVE

In 1837, the Voortrekkers arrived in Natal. Dingane saw them in a completely different light from the men at Port Natal. He saw the Boers as a threat to the Zulu people. He believed that they would seize the Zulu land as they had seized the land of other people before.

Nevertheless, his first dealings with the Voortrekkers were friendly. On October 31, 1837, he wrote to the Voortrekker leader, Piet Retief, telling him that he had discovered another chief in possession of a number of sheep belonging to the Boers. He returned the sheep together with the letter.

Retief followed this up with a letter asking Dingane for a grant of land. "Our country is small, and we, becoming numerous, can no longer subsist there," he wrote. Dingane replied on November 8, saying that he was considering the request, but charging the Boers with the theft of his cattle:

"A great number of cattle have been stolen from my country by a people having clothes, horses and guns. The Zulus assured me that these people were Boers... the Zulus now wish to know what they have to expect.

"My greatest wish, therefore, is that you should show that you are not guilty of the matters alleged against you, for at present I believe that you are. My request is that you recover my cattle and restore them to me, and if possible, hand over the thief to me. That proceeding will remove my suspicions, and will give you reason to know that I am your friend: then I shall accede to your request. I shall give you a sufficient number of people to drive the cattle that you may recapture for me: and they will remove all the suspicions that the stolen cattle are in the hands of the Dutch".

Piet Retief assured Dingane that it had not been the Boers, but a Basotho chief, Sikonyela, who had stolen the cattle.

Whether or not Sikonyela had stolen any cattle, no one knows. But Retief and his men, accompanied by some Zulus, without further ado, made for his kraal.

They were already acquainted with Sikonyela, for he and his tribe had helped to show the Voortrekkers the best way to get their wagons from the Highveld through the difficult Drakensberg mountains into Natal.

#### RETIEF'S TRICK

Retief received a hospitable welcome, and in return, offered to demonstrate to the chief a pair of handcuffs he had with him.

Sikonyela was kept bound for three days until his people had rounded up a sufficient number of cattle for Retief. The helpless tribesmen, according to an account by Dr. John Philip, asked Retief indignantly: "Is this the way you treat the chiefs of the people?"

"Being answered in the affirmative, with coarse and offensive expressions, he asked, 'Would you treat Dingane in this way were he in your power?'

"To this they made reply: 'We shall treat Dingane in the same manner should we find him to be a rogue'.

Unknown to Retief, there was one of Dingane's councillors among the Zulus with him.

"From that moment," said Philip's informant, "Dingane's councillor became restless and uneasy, and as soon as it became dark he disappeared, proceeded with speed to Dingane, related his story, along with his own impression; and the chief taking

fear from his councillor, made his preparations for the destruction of Retief and his party before their arrival with the cattle".

### REASONS FOR FEAR

Though this may have been the deciding factor, other facts have also been cited as confirming the view of Dingane's councillors that the Boers were a very real danger to Zulu security.

The Zulus had heard from Retief's own lips how the Boers had defeated the Matabele and massacred them - and the Matabele were the kinsmen of the Zulus.

And according to the short biography of Dingane in Mveli Skota's 'African Yearly Register', "on more than two occasions reports were brought to him by his spies that the Boers were seen by night on all sides of the village in which the Royal Kraal was situated".

It is also suggested that the Zulus who accompanied Retief on his raid on Sikonyela reported back that the cattle seized there were not those which had been stolen from the Zulus, thus confirming Dingane in the belief that the cattle had been stolen by the Boers.

Theal records too, that there were very strong rumours at the time that one of the British settlers had influenced Dingane in his decision to kill Retief by telling him that the Boer claim that they were short of land was patently untrue, for they had left good land in the Cape, that they were deserters from British rule, and that the British therefore, would not view their punishment with disfavour.

When Retief and his sixty followers came to Dingane's kraal with the cattle, the Chief, who now, in his own words, "had no doubt that they were enemies masquerading under the guise of friendship," tricked them with professions of friendship, just as they had tricked Sikonyela, and had them killed on the spot.

Then immediately the Zulus attacked all the Boer camps in Natal, killing on the Boers estimates, not fewer than 375 white men, women and children and two hundred of their African servants.

### COUNTER-ATTACK

The Boers and Britons immediately united to counter-attack. Thirty Durban settlers led an army of over 1,000 Africans against Dingane, while 350 Boers mounted and armed with muskets attacked from Pietermaritzburg.

The Zulus won a series of extremely costly victories and on April 26, the missionary Owen, recorded: "the whole country is at their disposal".

But Dingane did not follow up this victory. The writer, Mnguni, says:

"With Port Natal at his mercy and with the enemy taking to the boats Dingane returned to his capital. This major blunder was due to the fact that he thought still in terms of tribal war ethics. He had shown his superiority and he thought the enemy would now live in peace with him; so he did not extend his sway over the Boer-British force he had routed. The Boer-British front exploited Dingane's politeness, regrouped, and under Pretorius, killed 3,000 Zulu soldiers at Blood River".

#### DECEMBER 16

That was on December 16, which the Afrikaners now celebrate as a public holiday to mark what they have been taught by Nationalist historians to believe was the "decisive" battle between white and black.

In fact however, Blood River was by no means a decisive battle. The Afrikaners lacked the military power of the British, to whom must go the dubious honour of having won the engagement which smashed the main tribes, including the Zulus.

It was only in January 1840, when Dingane's treacherous brother, Mpande, placed himself at the head of a number of dissident Zulu tribes, united with the Boers, and led an army of nearly 6,000 Zulus, spearheaded by 400 mounted Boers, against Dingane, that the latter was defeated and forced to flee.

The Zulu military machine remained relatively intact, but Mpande became a puppet chief in the service of the Boers.

But just as there was nowhere a black man could go and be left in peace by the white man, so there was nowhere a Boer could go and be left in peace by the British.

Within a few months of the establishment of the Boer Republic in Natal, reports reached London that there was valuable surface coal in the territory. At the same time awareness was growing of the value of Port Natal as a naval base.

In 1842, after a short battle with the Boers, the British took over.

For the Zulus it changed nothing.