

The Zulu

Viscount James Bryce, British jurist, historian, and politician, from his memoirs on his visit to South Africa prior to the Boer War, 1897 CE

When, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Dutch at the Cape began to learn something of the Kafirs who dwelt to the eastward, they found that there was no large dominion, but a great number of petty tribes, mostly engaged in war with one another. Some were half nomad, none was firmly rooted in the soil; and the fact that tribes who spoke similar dialects were often far away from one another, with a tribe of a different dialect living between, indicated that there had been many displacements of population of which no historical record existed. Early in the present century events occurred which showed how such displacements might have been brought about. In the last years of the eighteenth century Dingiswayo, the exiled son of the chief of the Abatetwa tribe, which lived in what is now Zululand, found his way to the Cape, and learned to admire the military organization of the British troops who were then holding the Colony. Returning home and regaining his throne, he began to organise and drill his warriors, who before that time had fought without order or discipline, like other savages. His favourite officer was Shaka, a young chief, also exiled, who belonged to the then small tribe of Zulus. On the death of Dingiswayo, Shaka was chosen its chief by the army, and the tribes that had obeyed Dingiswayo were thenceforward known under the name of Zulus. Shaka, who united to his intellectual gifts a boundless ambition and a ruthless will, further improved the military system of his master, and armed his soldiers with a new weapon, a short, broad-bladed spear, fit for stabbing at close quarters, instead of the old light javelin which had been theretofore used. He formed them into regiments, and drilled them to such a perfection of courage that no enemy could withstand their rush, and the defeated force, except such as could escape by fleetness of foot, was slaughtered on the spot. Quarter had never been given in native wars, but the trained valour of the Zulus, and their habit of immediately engaging the enemy hand to hand, not only gave them an advantage like that which suddenly made the Spartan infantry superior to all their neighbours, but rendered their victories far more sanguinary than native battles had previously been. Shaka rapidly subjected or blotted out the clans that lived near, except the Swazis, a kindred tribe whose difficult country gave them some protection. He devastated all the region round that of his own subjects, while the flight before his warriors of the weaker tribes, each of which fell upon its neighbours with the assagai, caused widespread slaughter and ruin all over South-east Africa.

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