

Przemysław Benken

Wojna Zuluska 1879

Zabrze: Inforteditions, 2012
280 pp. ISBN 9788389943880

Piotr Fiszka-Borzyszkowski

Wojna Zuluska 1879

Warszawa: Bellona, 2009
298 pp. ISBN 9788311118744

Piotr Fiszka-Borzyszkowski

Wojna Burska 1880-1881

Warszawa: Bellona, 2012
235 pp. ISBN 9788311122055

Krzysztof Kubiak

Wojna Zuluska 1879

Zakrzewo: Replika, 2009
95 pp. ISBN 9788376740058

Popularizing South African Wars in Poland: Joint review of recent publications concerning South African History

During the last three years we have witnessed an unusual flow of Polish publications concerning South African history, especially wars in South Africa. Polish historiography of South Africa is rather limited. There are some specialists interested in South African culture, literature, history and politics, but it is not the most fashionable field of study presently, and in fact has never been. Therefore it is all the more surprising that over the last three years four books by Polish authors concerning South African history in the 1870s and 1880s were published: three concerning the Zulu War of 1879 and one on the Transvaal War of 1880-1881 (Kubiak 2009; Fiszka-Borzyszkowski 2009 and 2012; and Benken 2012).

Why so many books on the Zulu War of 1879 in such a short time? There are no clear reasons for this phenomenon, and any answer would be speculative. However, almost any book on South African history published in Polish is something to be happy about, as it increases knowledge of the South African past in Poland. At the same time this is exactly the reason why it is difficult for me to evaluate them properly and objectively.

The reviewed books are not academic in any sense; quite the opposite: their main goal is popularization. Therefore they do not utilize any elaborate critical apparatus, or a very broad base of primary sources. In fact, they are mostly based on secondary sources. Still, to their credit, the authors try to base their narratives on the most modern literature, and they are well acquainted with the works of Ian Beckett (Beckett 2003), Jeff Guy (Guy 1994), Ian Knight (Knight 1990, 1991, 1995, 2001, 2003), John Laband (Laband 1992, 1997, 2005), and other authors. Although the bibliographies are not too extensive, they give readers and potential students access to further literature on the relevant topics.

Krzysztof Kubiak's book is in fact a ninety-six-page booklet of a very general nature. It could be called a summary of the Zulu War of 1879, giving very basic information concerning the history of South Africa up until the war, a little more on the history of the Zulus and Natal. In the case of the Zulus, the content is very old-fashioned and little more than sketchy. The same applies to the description of the Zulu military, its history and traditions. The origins of the war are treated similarly, with short, sketchy descriptions and superficial presentation of the motives of the British. The latter even contains factual mistakes, for example the Transvaal annexation is presented as the private enterprise of Sir Theophilus Shepstone (Kubiak 2009: 16). The immediate causes of the war are also presented shortly, but correctly.

Most of this booklet (seventy three pages) is devoted to describing the events of the war itself. Here, one may recognize that the author has a military past. His presentation of strategy, tactics, weaponry, battles and maneuvers clearly shows where his heart is. Although the description of the war is concise, it is also precise and in most cases correct. He repeats some myths concerning the reasons for the Isandhlwana disaster, such as the story of a logistics officer who did not want to issue ammunition to regiments other than his own (Kubiak 2009: 41). The booklet ends with a short survey of the pacification of Zululand by sir Garnet J. Wolseley after the battle of Ulundi (Kubiak 2009: 92-93). The author does not mention, not even in summary, the later history of Zululand up to its annexation by the British in 1887.

Piotr Fiszka-Borzyszkowski's books are a different case. Over the last three years he has published two books: *Wojna Zuluska 1879* [The Zulu War 1879] in 2009, and *Wojna Burska 1880-1881* [The Boer War 1880-1881] in 2012. The books are similar enough to present them together here. Specifically, they share the same virtues and defects: both can be divided into two parts of uneven value, and both titles are popular, but much longer than the book by K. Kubiak, and much more complete. Both these books are then of greater but uneven value.

In both *Wojna Zuluska 1879* and *Wojna Burska 1880-1881*, the parts which describe the wars themselves are valuable, interesting, and well written. The author, who lives in South Africa, has travelled the battlefields of both wars and therefore relies not only on

historical accounts or academic literature, but also on personal observations of the areas where both campaigns took place. There are some elements that could be contested. For example, he does not appreciate the role of Commandant Nicolaas Smit during the Natal campaign of the Transvaal insurrection. However, most of these doubtful elements are a matter of interpretation, and thus the author perhaps avoids controversy by omission.

In both books, too little is made of the technological revolution of breech-loading and its effects on historical developments. In the 1870s the British army was rearmed with breech-loading weapons (the Martini-Henry rifle), bringing great increases in accuracy, rate of fire and range. Despite this technological superiority, the Zulus were still able to win battles. On the other hand, the new weapons also gave the Boers an additional advantage over the British troops. In fact, in this technological respect K. Kubiak's booklet is a better text. However, such deficiencies can be considered minor and not determinant factors in the military aspects of those wars.

While the wars themselves are presented extensively and correctly, the origins of both conflicts are presented more sketchily. The author evidently feels a little less competent in the fields of political, social, and economic history. His analysis of the British actions and decisions leading up to the war are generally correct. But he limits himself to immediate causes. He does not go into details of the South African politics of the time, only mentioning, with no elaboration, the confederation scheme. Nor does he show how the British played the Zulus against the Transvaal Boers and vice versa. In this respect the picture is far from complete.

Much better are the chapters describing the British, Boer and Zulu military traditions. In the first case the author concentrates on the British experience in South Africa. He aptly summarizes the so-called Cardwell reforms. One could wish for more information on the conflicts within the British army of that time, concerning the length of military service, and the whole program of reform, but this is a minor defect. Both the Zulu and Boer military systems are described quite extensively and quite correctly. The author presents the structure, organization and tactics of the Zulu forces in detail (Fiszka-Borzyszkowski 2009: 53-70), and evidently bases his narrative on good secondary material. However, the history of this system, as presented, is a mixture of facts and stereotypes. He acknowledges that the Zulu tactics developed fully only after Shaka's death (Fiszka-Borzyszkowski 2009: 61). He also acknowledges that Shaka was not responsible for initiating changes in armament and tactics, as these were earlier innovations, which he only modified (Fiszka-Borzyszkowski 2009: 68). The author does however repeat myths about the supposed character of earlier warfare and the creation of the *amabutho* system. The whole discussion concerning the emergence of the Nguni states, their character, the causes of migration, its extent and effect has passed him by. However, taking into account the character of this book, one should not be too critical about it.

His presentation of the commando system, its history, characteristics and tactics is correct in most cases. He appreciates the virtues of this system and its adaptation to the South African environment with specific enemies, especially African peoples and chiefdoms. He realises that the new breech-loading rifles gave additional advantages to the Boer commandos over the more rigid and unimaginative British tactics of the time (Fiszka-Borzyszkowski 2012: 79-84).

Alas, in both books the presentation of the earlier history of the region and the relations between the Africans, Boers and British is outdated, to say the least. Understandably, it is brief – the author cannot go into details and there is not enough space for presenting all the accompanying controversies. Still, taking into account that knowledge of South African history is more than limited in Poland,¹ there is a need for some presentation of the earlier history of the region, just to sketch the historical background of the events described. Exactly because of its required brevity, it is all the more important to present it according to the newest historical interpretations, and not to repeat long outdated concepts and stereotypes. In the case of the second book, *Wojna Burska 1880-1881*, this aspect is slightly better, but still repeats too many outdated stereotypes to be appreciated as a valid source of information on South African history.

The last of the titles under discussion is Przemysław Benken's recently published *Wojna Zuluska 1879* [The Zulu War 1879]. This book also features many of the positive and negative aspects of Fiszka-Borzyszkowski's books – perhaps the authors were in contact with each other, one can't be sure. Benken's book can be divided into two parts of uneven size and value. His book is generally well-written and its narrative is dynamic, and includes a set of maps and plans in color, which also adds to the value of the publication. The bibliography is much more complete than in the case of Fiszka-Borzyszkowski, and includes some primary sources. Although it is far from complete, it will certainly give potential students valuable guidance concerning important literature and primary sources.

As in Fiszka-Borzyszkowski's book, the war itself is described diligently. The author uses primary sources and literature carefully and tries to present a balanced picture of the war. He clearly has more sympathy for the Zulus, but he is able to acknowledge both their virtues and mistakes. On the other hand, in the face of all the faults of the British, he sees determination. The author is of course aware that the Zulus had no chance of winning this war, but he has no clear vision of what, if anything, they should have done otherwise. He blames them for a lack of offensive strategy, but he does not consider whether the BaSotho king Moshoeshoe's strategy, to propose capitulation after some minor victory,² would have been a better strategy for the Zulus. Of course the situation in 1879 was not the same as in 1852, but knowing that after little over a year the British authorities were willing to accept treaties with the Boers and BaSotho which gave them broad autonomy,³ one wonders if the same was not possible in the case of the Zulu. The problem here is that the author knows the Zulu campaign very well, but his knowledge of the general history of South Africa is rather limited. Therefore, he is simply unable to make such comparisons.

¹ Currently there are two general textbooks of South African history in Poland. The older one is Jan Balicki's *Historia Burów. Geneza państwa apartheidu* [History of the Boers. The Genesis of the Apartheid State], published in 1980. This book is outdated and presents concepts which were already outdated in the 1980s. The second textbook, published in 2006, is Andrzej Gąsowski, *RPA* [RSA – Republic of South Africa], published as a part of the series *History of States during the 20th Century*. Despite the title of the series, the author also includes the earlier history of the region in his book. Generally speaking, this book is historiographically up-to-date.

² As Moshoeshoe did after the battle of Berea in 1852. See Thompson 1975: 160-165.

³ See the Pretoria Convention of 1881 and The Cape Colony treaty with BaSotho in 1881.

His presentation of the military forces on both sides is very good. In the case of the British army, it is much better than Fiszka-Borzyszkowski's or Kubiak's. In fact, this is one of the best presentations of the British army of the time in all of Polish historical literature. His presentation of the Zulu military is also valid. He is aware that *amabutho* was not just a military institution, but also a social one, although his explanation oversimplifies its role and character. However, he does repeat the anachronistic presentation of Shaka as the inventor of the *amabutho* system and the initiator of the revolution in weaponry.

The generally positive effect is marred by two elements. The first is the lack of a description of what happened later, as if the history of the Zulus ended here. Obviously, there is no space for a detailed history, but a few pages on Zululand history up to 1897 would be welcome, just to show that the system created by Lord Wolseley was fragile and disintegrated after a very short period.

The second element is the presentation of South African history up to the war itself. The presentation of the origins of the war is oversimplified and far too short. Again, one does not need a detailed study, but especially because it is written for a reader whose knowledge is limited and who does not have access to the current literature, the origins of the war should be presented in a more detailed and nuanced way. As in Fiszka-Borzyszkowski's book, the view of the earlier history of the region is outdated, to say the least. In fact, the first 32 pages of this book should be ripped out and thrown away. It is terrible and outrageous to propose such a thing, but the truth is that this part is just a collection of mistakes, suppositions and made-up stories, and should be written anew. Clearly, the general history of South Africa is unknown to the author. Therefore, omission would be better than speculation. It is, in my humble opinion, better not to give any information than to mislead.

All four books are instances of a similar type. Their goal is popularization of certain episodes in the South African history (the Zulu War of 1879 and the Transvaal Rebellion of 1880-1881). In this respect they do their job rather well. Despite the mistakes mentioned above, which are in some cases quite grave, they are a valuable addition to the limited Polish literature concerning South African History.

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