

NUOVA **ANTOLOGIA** 
MILITARE
RIVISTA INTERDISCIPLINARE DELLA SOCIETÀ ITALIANA DI STORIA MILITARE

N. 5
2024

Fascicolo 20. Ottobre 2024
Storia Militare Contemporanea



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Nuova Antologia Militare

Rivista interdisciplinare della Società Italiana di Storia Militare
Periodico telematico open-access annuale (www.nam-sism.org)
Registrazione del Tribunale Ordinario di Roma n. 06 del 30 Gennaio 2020
Scopus List of Accepted Titles October 2022 (No. 597)
Rivista scientifica ANVUR (5/9/2023) Area 11



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For the Journal: © Società Italiana di Storia Militare
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Grafica: Nadir Media Srl - Via Giuseppe Veronese, 22 - 00146 Roma
info@nadirmedia.it

Gruppo Editoriale Tab Srl -Viale Manzoni 24/c - 00185 Roma
www.tabedizioni.it

ISSN: 2704-9795

ISBN Fascicolo 978-88-9295-989-7

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The banner, shown courtesy of the Schwind Collection to Pēteris Cedrinš, is the personal banner of prince Avalov, commander of the West Volunteer Army (Западная добровольческая армия), a White Russian anti-Bolshevik and pro-German force created by Germany Gen. von der Goltz in August 1919 merging the rest of German Freikorps in the Baltic States and some Russian POWs with the Special Russian Corps raised in November 1918 by Gen. Graf Fëdor Arturovič Keller and by Cossack Gen. Pavel Bermond, later Prince Avalov, both Knights of the Russian Branch of the Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem (SOSJJ). The Corps lent allegiance to Kolchak's white government and later to a Latvian puppet government supported by Berlin, and fought against both the Bolshevik and the Latvian democratic government supported by the Entente, being disbanded in December 1919. The Banner front shows the imperial coat of arms. On the reverse, the Black Maltese Cross with Crown of Thorns memorializes General Graf Keller, murdered by the Bolsheviks

<http://www.theknightsofsaintjohn.com/History-After-Malta.htm>;

<http://www.vexilloграфия.ru/russia/beloe.htm>;

<http://lettonica.blogspot.com/2007/11/bear-slayers-day.html> (Pēteris Cedrinš, *Bear Slayer's Day*, 11 November 2007). Cedrinš posted the image of the Flag's recto on wikipedia commons.

Before *Small Wars*

Early Thoughts on the Strategy of Colonial Warfare

By MARCO MOSTARDA

ABSTRACT – The essay aims at identifying the British sources of C. E. Callwell’s *Small Wars* and addressing the prevailing opinion of an earlier generation of theorists dealing with the strategic level of colonial warfare. Due consideration is given to the interplay between the theory of regular warfare and the practice of irregular operations in shaping the nascent theory of small wars.

KEYWORDS – CALLWELL – LOGISTICS – WOLSELEY – SMALL WARS – STRATEGIC THEORY – ZULU WAR

A summary of past experiences

Charles Edward Callwell’s *Small Wars* has been frequently credited to represent the starting point of the British approach to counterinsurgency;¹ it can be contended, though, that it has more the value of a recapitulation of the season of imperial wars of conquest, rather than representing the main intellectual background of further theorizations on COIN warfare. Actually, of the three classes of conflicts encompassed by the term “small wars” as intended by Callwell, only that of «campaigns for the subjugation of insurrections, for the repression of lawlessness, or for the pacification of territories conquered or annexed» stands as the likely antecedent of counterinsurgency operations as these are currently understood.² It is true that Callwell took care to point out that campaigns of conquest and annexation not infrequently passed through two distinct stages, the second represented by the operations to uproot a spread-out resistance made «of ambushes and surprises, of murdered stragglers and of stern

1 Daniel WHITTINGHAM, “‘Savage Warfare’: C. E. Callwell, the roots of counter-insurgency, and the nineteenth century context”, in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 23:4-5, 2012, p. 592.

2 C.E. CALLWELL, *Small Wars. Their Principles and Practice. Third Edition*, London, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1906, p. 26.

reprisals».³ While such an observation blurs the boundaries between the aforementioned classes of campaigns, this second stage made of counter-guerrilla operations still differs significantly – with regard to the prevailing political circumstances – from the subsequent British experience on counterinsurgency warfare during the second half of the XX century. Callwell's operations of pacification brought about the stabilisation of the imperial edifices involved in the colonial expansion, while the majority of the internal conflicts between «insurgent groups and counter-insurgent security forces», on the rise after the end of the Second World War, are understood to have originated «in decolonization, in the global process of empire disintegration».⁴ Therefore, the fundamental outlines of counterinsurgency operations in these two distinct periods might be perceived as analogous because, as stressed by Carl von Clausewitz, war has a grammar of its own; whereas, as for its logic, political aims dictating the nature and course of the conflicts widely differ between the historical phase of imperial conquest and that one of decolonisation.⁵

In countering the notion of «an apparent absence of any formal doctrine» shining through the British colonial operations of the period, Simon Anglim stressed how Callwell, in his effort to provide a strategic and tactical summary of colonial warfare, actually «reflected prevailing opinion as much as influenced it».⁶ The array of experiences shaping the composition of *Small Wars* is notoriously wide although, together with the practical knowledge gained by the British Army on the various colonial battlefields, two major focal points could be singled out: the seminal importance of the French experience, chiefly represented by Hoche in Vendée and Bugeaud in Algeria; and Callwell's enduring interest in the Russian operations in Central Asia.⁷ The British experience in small wars, however, was

3 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

4 Martin THOMAS, Gareth CURLESS (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Late Colonial Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies*, Oxford, Oxford UP, 2023, p. 1.

5 Carl von CLAUSEWITZ, *On War. Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton UP, 1976, p. 605.

6 Simon ANGLIM, "Callwell versus Graziani: How the British Army applied 'small wars' techniques in major operations in Africa and the Middle East, 1940-41", in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 19:4, 2008, p. 592.

7 Daniel WHITTINGHAM, *Charles E. Callwell and the British Way in Warfare*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2020, p. 49. Douglas PORCH, *Counterinsurgency. Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 4-8, 18-23. In view of Porch's

not purely empirical: even though in campaigning in Africa and India «the experience of one war often was reversed by the next»,⁸ thus posing a significant hindrance to the formulation of a comprehensive theory of colonial warfare, there was already a general consensus on a series of principles conveyed by a body of literature Callwell made extensive use of.

Small wars as an art by itself

Even though he resorted to a term such as *small wars* which, by his own admission, he was not entirely satisfied with – a loose label denoting «in default of a better, operations of regular armies against irregular, or comparatively speaking irregular, forces»⁹ – Callwell is credited to be the first to have recognized small wars as a branch of the military art separate from conventional war, thus striving to «demonstrate that small wars should be accorded a professional status equal, if not superior to, continental soldiering».¹⁰ According to his famous dictum, «the conduct of small wars is in fact in certain respects an art by itself, diverging widely from what is adapted to the conditions of regular warfare, but not so widely that there are not in all its branches points which permit comparisons to be established».¹¹ Such a stance was hardly original: Garnet Wolseley had already spoken of «savage warfare» as «an art in itself», going as far as to declare that «almost all our colonial misfortunes during the reign of Queen Victoria, are to be accounted

avowed polemical target, i.e. the American approach to COIN doctrine enshrined in the FM 3-24 and its allegedly distorting effect on the ability of waging conventional operations, *Counterinsurgency* must be approached with caution; nevertheless, the author's remarks on Callwell's facile simplification of the operations in Vendée, as well as on Bugeaud's *razzia* as the immediate forerunner – only slightly reworked by Hubert Lyautey – of the population-centric approach typical of modern COIN doctrine, are sound. For a critical reappraisal of Callwell's views on Russian operations, see Alexander MORRISON, "The Extraordinary Successes which the Russians have achieved – The Conquest of Central Asia in Callwell's *Small Wars*" in *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 30:4-5, 2019, pp. 913-936. As for Callwell readily gauging the importance of seizing fixed positions in the ultimate success of the Russian strategy, see Alex MARSHALL, *The Russian General Staff and Asia 1800-1917*, New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 60-61.

8 Jay LUVAS, *The Education of an Army. British Military Thought, 1815-1940*, London, Cassell, 1965, p. 200.

9 CALLWELL, *Small Wars*, cit., p. 21.

10 PORCH, *Counterinsurgency*, cit., p. 50.

11 CALLWELL, *Small Wars*, cit., p. 23.

for by the fact that we have attempted to fight great warlike native races with the same formal tactics as those which succeeded at Waterloo». ¹² Therefore, it can be concluded that the kind of regular warfare small wars had to depart from, while retaining some of its principles of enduring validity, was the sort of post-Napoleonic warfare expounded by the Archduke Charles, William F. P. Napier and especially Antoine de Jomini: and summarised, in Great Britain, by textbooks such as MacDougall's *The Theory of War* and, chiefly, Hamley's hugely influential *The Operations of War*. ¹³

Albeit without being dogmatic, Patrick L. MacDougall and Edward B. Hamley were rather conservative interpreters of the Jominian thought. In *The Theory of War* the principles of war pinpointed by the author amounted to three fundamental rules, reflecting a strict focus on the operational level of strategy: «to places masses of your army in contact with fractions of your enemy»; «to operate as much as possible on the communications of your enemy without exposing your own»; «to operate always on interior lines». ¹⁴ Of these principles Hamley would offer a more articulate and detailed discussion, for example illustrating, by means of an analysis of the 1849 campaign of Novara, the advantage for an army to operate «on a front perpendicular to the line communicating with its base», instead of parallel to it: ¹⁵ that the very same analysis, *verbatim* quoted by Luvaas because paradigmatic of Hamley's approach, was already cited by Reginald da Costa Porter in 1881, shows its being illustrative of the kind of strategic thinking dominating in Great Britain in the 1870s and 1880s. ¹⁶

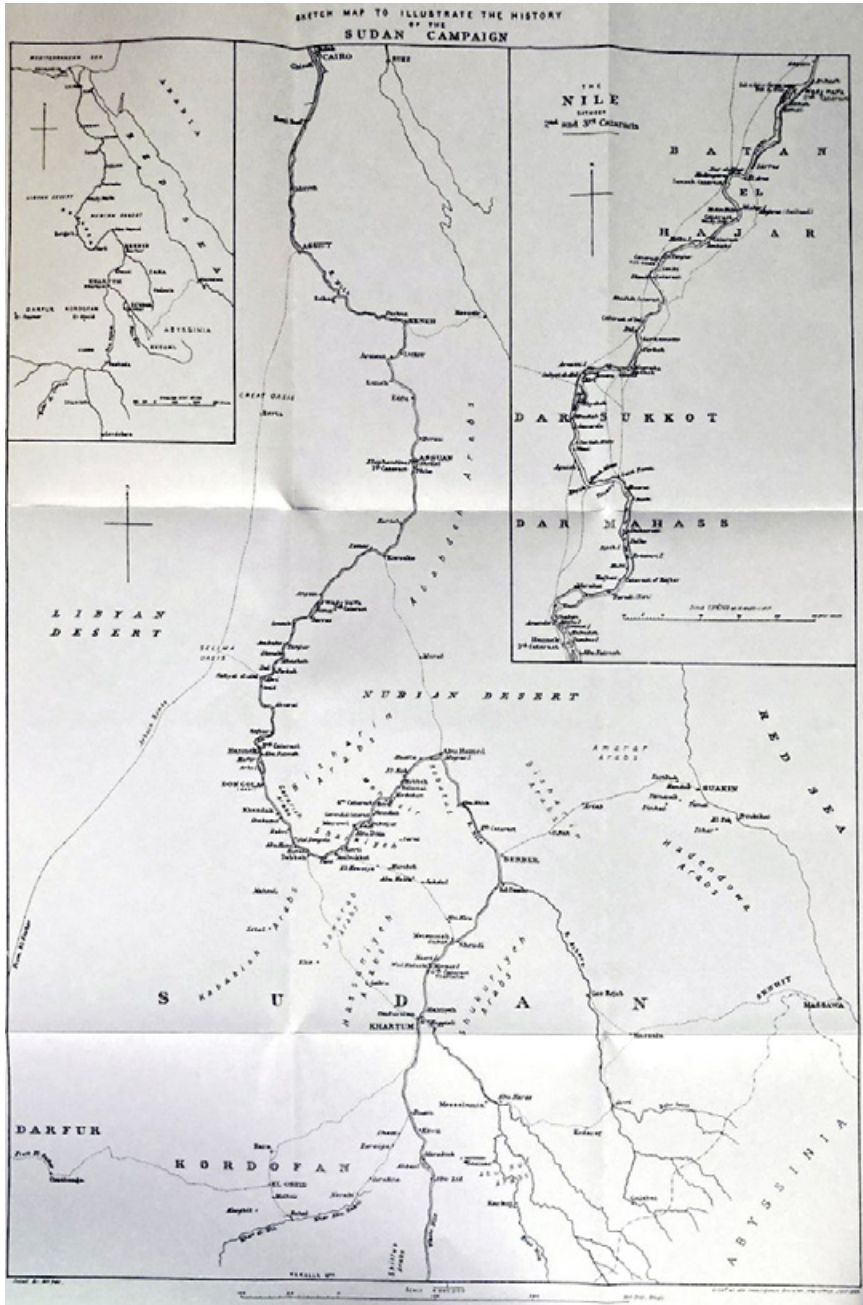
12 Garnet WOLSELEY, "The Negro as a Soldier," in *The Fortnightly Review*, No. CCLXIV. New Series. – December 1, 1888, pp. 702-703.

13 LUYAAS, *Education of an Army*, cit., pp. 102-103, 139-141.

14 P. L. MCDUGALL, *The Theory of War. Illustrated by Numerous Examples from Military History. Third Edition*, London, Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862, p. 51. As for the purely Jominian lineage of the emphasis on interior lines, see the «Maxims on Lines of Operations» in Antoine Henri de JOMINI, *The Art of War by Baron the Jomini. Translated from the French by Capt. G. H. Mendell and Lieut. W. P. Craighill*, Philadelphia, J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1862, pp. 114-123.

15 Edward Bruce HAMLEY, *Operations of War. Explained and Illustrated, Fourth Edition*, Edinburgh and London, William Blackwood and Sons, 1878, p. 76.

16 LUYAAS, *The Education of an Army*, cit., p. 142. Reginald DA COSTA PORTER, R.E., "Prize Essay 1881. Warfare against Uncivilised Races: or, How to Fight Greatly Superior Forces of an Uncivilised and Badly-Armed Enemy", in *Professional Papers of the Corps of Royal Engineers*, edited by Mayor R. H. Vetch, R.E., Royal Engineer Institute, Occasional Papers, Vol. VI, 1881, London, Published for the Royal Engineer Institute by Edward Stan-



Sketch Map to Illustrate the History of the Sudan Campaign - From Col. H. E. Colville, *Official History of the Soudan Campaign*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1889 (from the Author's private copy of the book).

Da Costa Porter's "Warfare against Uncivilised Races" can lay claim to the distinction of being the first comprehensive British essay dedicated to the realities and specific exigencies of colonial warfare. Although it is overwhelmingly rooted in the experience of the Zulu War of 1879 – the only campaign the author took part in before his untimely demise in 1882¹⁷ – it stands apart from the histories of single campaigns, such as Brackenbury's semi-official history of the Ashanti War and Rothwell's official narrative of the Zulu War, insofar it strives to single out «certain main principles» common to all the campaigns «which may serve as guides in future cases».¹⁸ It is also safe to assume that Da Costa Porter's approach, albeit carefully eschewing any criticism of the strategic orthodoxy of the day, exemplifies the process of building a theory of small wars by deducing from regular warfare principles which could be still applied to the irregular one, and linking them up with the lessons learned on the battlefield: this process would be crowned by the publication of Callwell's *Small Wars*.

In such a fashion, the author first made mention of the disadvantage of operating on a front parallel to one's own line of communication, stressing that, to a certain extent, this was the case with the 3rd Column stationed at Helpmekaar and depending upon the Helpmekaar-Durban line, whose Greytown-Helpmekaar section ran parallel to the Zulu boundary.¹⁹ Then, he took care in highlighting that in savage warfare the enemy had «usually [...] no fixed whereabouts» and he was «almost entirely independent of lines of communication», which made «his movements freed from the restraint of civilised armies».²⁰

This peculiar trait had profound implications not only on the offensive, making a futile exercise out of any attempt of manoeuvring in order to threaten the enemy

ford, 1882, p. 306.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 306; despite Da Costa Porter's assertion of having frequently mentioned «the wars in New Zealand, Abyssinia, Ashanti and Afghanistan», the examples taken from these campaigns are sparse and most of the concepts are illustrated through episodes taken from the Zulu War.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 305-306. As for the mentioned histories of campaigns, see Henry BRACKENBURY, *The Ashanti War. A Narrative Prepared from the Official Documents by Permission of Major-General Sir Garnet Wolseley*, Edinburgh and London, William Blackwood and Sons, 1874; *Narrative of the Field Operations Connected with the Zulu War of 1879. Prepared in the Intelligence Branch of the Quartermaster-General's Department*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1881.

19 DA COSTA PORTER, "Warfare", cit., pp. 306-307.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 311.

communications;²¹ «protect[ing] our line of communications from attack» carried out by an enemy endowed with such a latitude of movement was «frequently impossible» as well.²² Therefore, the analysis proposed by these first theorists of colonial warfare tentatively moved back and forth between two poles: the reassurance that even in «the peculiar conditions of campaigns in savage countries, many of the ordinary rules of warfare do still apply in the majority of cases»; and, as Wolseley put it, the fact that «the theory of war as we learn it from books is an excellent servant, but to him who obeys its orders literally it is often the falsest and most fatal of masters».²³

The capture of whatever they prize most

Hamley had observed that «whenever the *causa belli* is something less definite and tangible than disputed territory [...] the acquisition of some material guarantee can alone be expected to bring the adversary to term. That guarantee is generally sought in an enemy's capital» because «the occupation of its chief city paralyses a civilised country». True to the Napoleonic lesson, though, Hamley stressed that the mere possession of the enemy capital was not enough, and that a collapse of the enemy resistance was to be expected only when «the seizure of the capital is coupled with such ascendancy over the defensive armies [...] that further resistance is felt to be hopeless».²⁴ But what to do, wondered Da Costa Porter by obliquely glossing Hamley, when dealing in a colonial setting with «the absence of a capital of prime importance to the country» and «the peculiar nature of the enemy's army, which generally makes it quite impossible to ensure driving it before us»?²⁵

On an operational level, the absence of organised bodies of regular soldiers occupying key positions in the theatre of war meant that there were no flanks, strictly speaking, which could be overturned; and as for a supposed outflanking

21 *Ibid.* p. 316. Da Costa Porter remarks that «the absence, or comparative unimportance, of the enemy's line of communication destroy the chance of using strategic combinations (in the higher sense of the word)».

22 *Ibid.*, p. 312.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 306; WOLSELEY, «The Negro as a Soldier», cit., p. 703.

24 HAMLEY, *Operations of War*, cit., pp. 50-51.

25 DA COSTA PORTER, «Warfare», cit., p. 309.

movement, the already stressed absence of any significant enemy line of communication made it devoid of much of its strategic significance even if successfully carried out. If «strategy fails to ensure a successful conclusion to any series of operations» articulates Da Costa Porter, the solution ought to be identified on the level of moral forces: namely, by relying on the «combating and aggressive spirit on the part of the natives» which «will lead them, sooner or later to attack any force that advances into the country».²⁶ Therefore, striking deep in the country, “prepared to give or accept battle wherever we may find the enemy” had to be assumed as the primary aim of colonial warfare,²⁷ to which Da Costa Porter added two strictly related objectives: directing the march upon «the king’s residence» or «the chief stronghold of the nation»; and doing «as much material mischief as possible to the enemy [...] by destroying his huts and crops, and seizing his cattle».²⁸

Exasperating the enemy by systematically destroying the means of living of warriors and civilians alike went hand in hand with advancing «well into the interior of the enemy’s country», and it might turn out to be the best way for compelling him to accept a set-piece battle. It is apparent that one of the chief features common to this early generation of theorists of colonial warfare was the concern to bring the conflict back to the conventional battlefield as much as possible, where the European superior firepower could be most efficaciously brought to bear. As aptly stressed by Whittingham, Callwell himself «was not a theorist of counterinsurgency as we would understand the term today». In order to attain decisive results «he believed that irregular warfare should be kept as ‘regular’ as possible».²⁹

Such a remark is true for Da Costa Porter as well. In other words, what makes these practitioners of imperial small wars standing apart from the COIN theorists of a later age is the unwillingness to embrace the asymmetry intrinsic to this class of conflicts and the “longue durée” typical of counterinsurgency operations,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

²⁷ This recommendation will be reworked in a more articulated fashion by Callwell: “in a small war the only possible attitude to assume is, speaking strategically, the offensive. The regular army must force its way into the enemy’s country and seek him out. It must be ready to fight him wherever he may be found.” See *ID.*, *Small Wars*, cit., p. 75.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

²⁹ WHITTINGHAM, *Callwell and the British Way*, cit., p. 40.

rather aiming at a swift collapse of the enemy morale to be obtained by forcing a series of symmetric engagements on the opponent, or resorting to widespread destruction, deprivation, and collective punishments. Whenever these efforts failed to bring about a decisive result, the spectre of protracted war was looked at in horror; and the elusive enemy of Da Costa Porter, described as a «one of those brainless, back-boneless animals, which may be destroyed, but can scarcely be killed» anticipates the «protracted, thankless, invertebrate war» which, according to Callwell, showed up in «the quelling of rebellion in distant colonies».³⁰

Such concerns raised by the nature of colonial warfare and the proposed remedies were shared by Wolseley, whose recipe for a swift victory was based on both the attack on the king's residence or some other vital points of the country – provided there was any – and the deprivation of the enemy of his resources. According to Wolseley's dictum, quoted at length by Callwell,³¹ «in planning a war against an uncivilised nation who have perhaps no capital, your first object should be the capture of whatever they prize most, and the destruction or deprivation of which will probably bring the war most rapidly to a conclusion». «Thus» – Wolseley continued – «the capture of their cattle and the destruction of their crops and of the grain stored in their kraals or villages in depriving them of food is most efficacious».³² In any case, aside from the usual advice to «strike hard and strike quickly», Wolseley refrained from offering a comprehensive and carefully laid out analysis of colonial warfare and its predicaments; the preface to the fourth edition of his *Soldier's Pocket-Book* unambiguously declared to deal «with all subjects connected with the actual practice of warfare, especially under those phases in which it is most commonly presented to us in our wide-extending Empire», directing the reader interested in the study of science of war to «Sir Edward Hamley's most admirable work».³³ Thus, the nature and genesis of Wolseley's ideas on colonial warfare could be outlined only by taking into con-

30 DA COSTA PORTER, «Warfare», cit., p. 310; CALLWELL, *Small Wars*, cit., p. 27.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

32 Garnet J. WOLSELEY, *The Soldier's Pocket-Book for Field Service, Fourth Edition*, Revised and Enlarged, London, MacMillan & Co., 1882, p. 398. The section dedicated to colonial warfare, under the heading of «Wars in Bush or Hill Country with Savage Nations» appeared in this edition for the first time and was slightly reworked for the Fifth Edition of 1886.

33 *Ibid.*, p. iii.

sideration an assortment of letters, articles and memoranda. For instance, his recommendation to capture whatever the enemy prized most can be traced back to the planning and execution of the 1873-74 campaign against the Ashanti Empire: already in the first memorandum submitted to Lord Kimberley,³⁴ of which no original copies survive but whose text is preserved by Brackenbury in his history of the campaign, Wolseley stressed that after freeing the British Protectorate from the Ashanti invaders, his intention was «to advance into the Ashanti territory, and, by the seizure and destruction of Coomassie, strike a decisive blow at the Ashanti power».³⁵ A swift victory, followed by a timely retreat, was all the more essential because, as pointed out in a letter to his brother, «the season for operations is December, January and February, when inland the climate is by no means bad».³⁶ Judging from this letter and another one addressed to Evelyn Wood, it is also apparent that the first scheme submitted to the War Office envisaged a strike deep into the Ashanti Empire by means of going up the Pra River, thus proposing again the general concept of the 1870 Red River Expedition.

As noted by Adrian Preston, the first modern editor of Wolseley's diaries and journals – and hardly a sympathetic one – the Red River Expedition, «Wolseley's first independent command and a cameo of logistical planning [...] left an indelible mark upon the few inflexible strategic concepts that Wolseley [...] possessed».³⁷ That the basic scheme of the Gordon Relief Expedition had been borrowed, once again, from that earlier model, was a notion already clear to its contemporaries.³⁸ Hence, Wolseley's ostensible lack of strategic inventiveness and

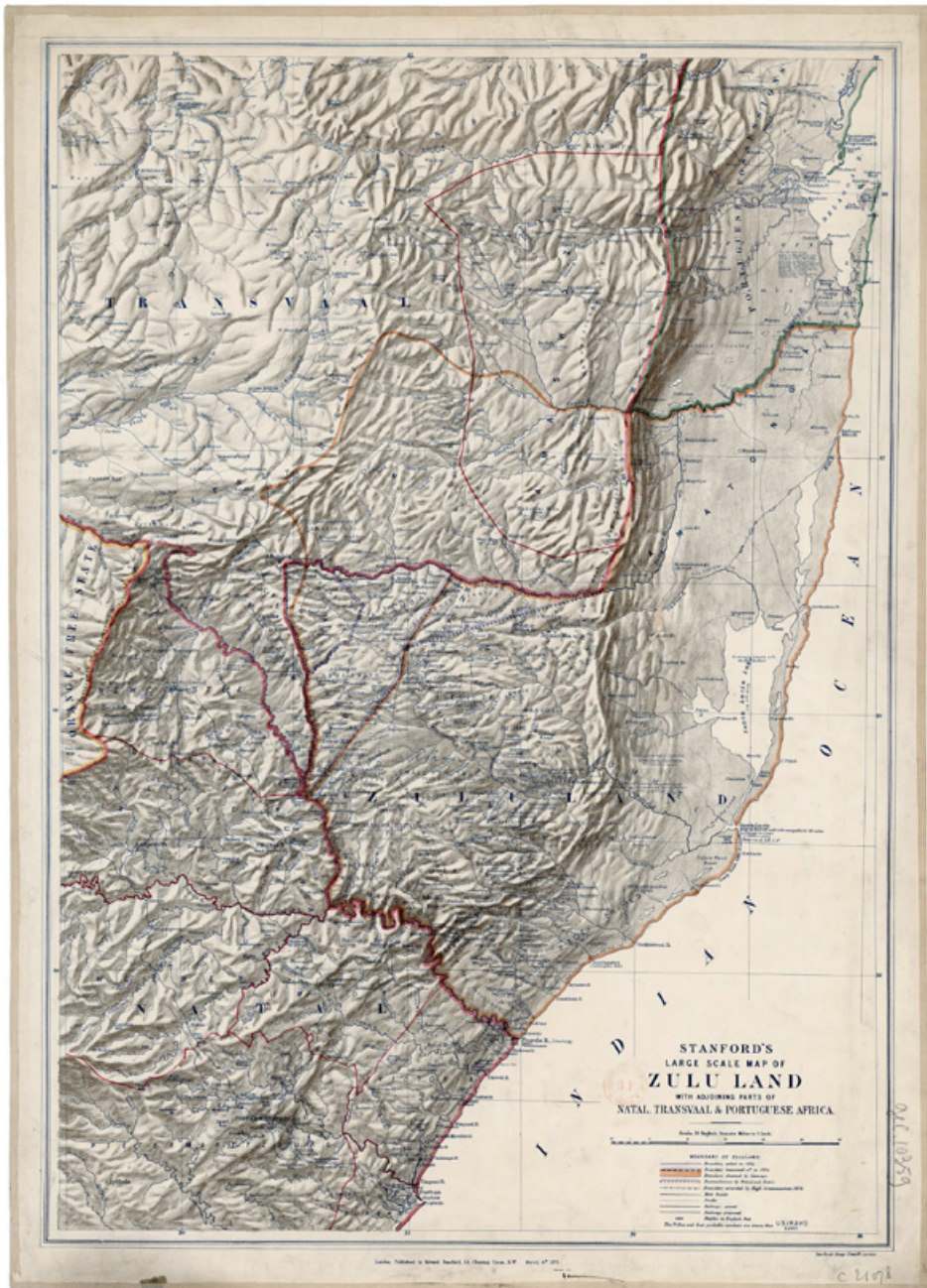
34 John Wodehouse, 1st Earl of Kimberley (1826-1902), Secretary of State for the Colonies in 1870-74 and again in 1880-82; see, John POWELL, "Wodehouse, John, first earl of Kimberley, in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/36987>.

35 BRACKENBURY, *Ashanti War*, cit., vol. I, p. 117.

36 "Wolseley to Surgeon Major Richard Wolseley", in Ian F. W. BECKETT (Ed.), *Wolseley and Ashanti. The Asante War Journal and Correspondence of Major General Sir Garnet Wolseley, 1873-1874*, Stroud, The History Press for the Army Records Society, 2009, p. 57.

37 Adrian PRESTON (Ed.), *In Relief of Gordon. Lord Wolseley's Campaign Journal of the Khartoum Relief Expedition 1884-1885*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1967, pp. xvii-xviii.

38 On April 25, 1884, Lord Hartington, the then Secretary of State for War, wrote to Sir Frederick Stephenson, first GOC of the British Army of Occupation in Cairo, stating that «Lord Wolseley has underrated the difficulties of the Nile route, relying very much as he does on the experience under different conditions of the Red River Expedition». The letter is reproduced in Bernard HOLLAND, *The Life of Spencer Compton, Eighth Duke of Devonshire*, London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1911, vol. I, p. 451.



Edward Stanford, (1827-1904), *Zululand with adjoining parts of Natal, Transvaal & Portuguese Africa*, 1879. Bibliothèque Nationale de France., Département Cartes et plans, GE C-10359 (published with reserve in Commons Wikimedia, SA NC)

inflexibility was subjected to harsh criticism in the aftermath of the campaign's failure, all the more because the choice of the Nile as a line of advance had been vehemently contested.³⁹ In the course of the acrimonious strategic debate, Lord John Hay had a point in highlighting that «obviously the proposal is made in the belief that the features and circumstances of the Nile in those parts are very similar to those presented to the Red River Expedition»; and, being such a similarity untrue, he felt «compelled to report unfavourably on [the] proposed operation».⁴⁰ However, if considered in the context of what is pointed out by Daniel R. Headrick about river steamboats as the chief means of the European penetration in Asia and Africa,⁴¹ Wolseley's insistence on choosing rivers as the main lines of advance during a campaign seems less obtuse than usually suspected and, we dare say, lends credibility to him as a strategist attuned to the realities of the day and sensible to the new possibilities offered by technological progress.⁴²

In this respect, Preston's interpretive suggestion of Wolseley as the proponent of an amphibious strategy⁴³ – and his Ashanti Ring as something more than the mere outcome of a personalised approach to command, and as such opposed to the rise of a continental school represented by the Indian Army – is intriguing, albeit not entirely devoid of pitfalls. Specifically, it is convincing that the «continental Indianisation of British strategic policy seemed not only logical but

39 As for the so called “Battle of the Routes” preliminary to the planning of the campaign, see Halil KOCHANSKI, *Sir Garnet Wolseley. Victorian Hero*, London and Rio Grande, The Hambledon Press, 1999, pp. 156-157.

40 Vice-Admiral Hay was the then Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Station. His letter, addressed to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty and based on the report made by Commander T. F. Hammill, is reproduced in H. E. COLVILLE, *History of the Soudan Campaign. Compiled in the Intelligence Division of the War Office*, London, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1889, Part I, pp. 37-38.

41 Daniel R. HEADRICK, *The Tools of Empire. Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 18-19.

42 Rather the opposite of the figure sketched by Ian Hamilton, that of a «leading soldier of the greatest industrial nation of the nineteenth century» re-embarking «upon the methods of the ninth century». Hamilton might have a point as for the untimely and chaotic organisation of the Camel Corps entrusted with the dash through the Bayuda Desert, but as a former Indian officer and protégé of Lord Roberts, his opinion was anything but unbiased; see Ian HAMILTON, *Listening for the Drums*, London, Faber and Faber, 1944, pp. 176-177.

43 On this point also see, Adrian PRESTON, “Frustrated Great Gamesmanship: Sir Garnet Wolseley's Plans for War against Russia”, 1873-1880, in *The International History Review*, 2:2, pp. 239-240.

unanswerable»; all the more so in view of the continental commitment pursued during the First World War, when the «land-powers capacities for defensive concentration and manoeuvre» backed by a «spreading web of interior railroads», as first practiced by the British in India, were fully brought to bear in the war against Germany.⁴⁴ En passant, and without wishing to hint at any kind of crude technological determinism, we believe that Preston's intuition is also substantiated by some broader facts: with the partial exception of the Ganges River – which, anyway, became increasingly difficult to navigate due to «massive deforestation, erosion and silting» – the other rivers of India were «too shallow or fickle to become major highways of steamer traffic».⁴⁵ Therefore, aside from the immediate imperatives of the defence of a vast continental landmass from the alleged Russian menace, there were multiple reasons for the development in India of a railway network – in turn giving rise to a new continental school of strategic thinkers – while the rest of the British Empire continued to be an essentially maritime network: one whose existence depended on the defence of the sea lines of communication. Nonetheless, in Frederick Roberts' letter quoted by Preston, where Roberts expressed his deep puzzlement at Wolseley's choice for the Nile route, the same also suggested the long-discussed Suakin-Berber route as an alternative.⁴⁶ Such a choice, though, would have implied the close cooperation of the Royal Navy in maintaining Suakin as the main base of operations, landing all the supplies the Expeditionary Corps would have needed in its advance along the Suakin-Berber route: the very option Wolseley had rejected, thus starting the feud with the Royal Navy we already mentioned above.⁴⁷ Therefore, we see how the

44 Adrian PRESTON, «Wolseley, the Khartoum relief expedition and the defence of India, 1885-1900», in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 6:3, 1978, pp. 257-258. As for the shift of the British strategy from the «limited/maritime construct» shaped by Julian Corbett to a full continental commitment along the lines of a «German strategy», see Andrew LAMBERT, *The British Way of War. Julian Corbett and the Battle for a National Strategy*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2021, pp. 307-335.

45 HEADRICK, *Tools of Empire*, cit., p. 23.

46 «Reinforcements could only reach them *via* Suakim [sic], and under the most favourable circumstances, several weeks must elapse before a properly equipped force could march to Berber. I could never understand why Wolseley insisted upon the Nile route». See «Roberts to Grant Duff», in Brian ROBSON (Ed.), *Roberts in India. The Military Papers of Field Marshal Lord Roberts 1876-1893*, Stroud, Alan Sutton for the Army Records Society, 1993, p. 316.

47 See notes 39 and 40.

dividing line between the two “schools” of strategic thinking was more blurred than Preston maintained, and that Roberts himself still relied on a combined operations scheme when it came to offer an answer to the Khartoum quandary. We do not intend to argue that such a distinction between strategic approaches did not actually exist; only that, still at this stage, the difference rose to significance on specific issues, such as the war planning against Russia.⁴⁸

Campaigns against nature

In *Small Wars*, a long and detailed recounting of the Nile route, its salient features and the difficulties encountered by the Relief Expedition was attached to the end of Chapter V as an example illustrating the extent to which the organisation of supplies weighed on colonial warfare.⁴⁹ Such a choice is hardly surprising, not only for his paradigmatic value – the author cared to stress that by the time the Desert Column reached Gubat, both that and the River Column had become «practically inoperative [...] on account of supply»⁵⁰ – but also because Callwell had a profound knowledge of the subject: at the time he was assigned to the Intelligence Department «he had been in entire charge of matters in connection with Egypt and the Sudan» and he had also been tasked with revising and completing Colville’s Official History.⁵¹ Indeed, if one of Callwell’s well-known dicta is that «it is perhaps the most distinguishing characteristics of small wars [...] that they

48 Based on what Preston stated in his “Frustrated Great Gamesmanship”, Beckett recently suggested that Wolseley’s amphibious vocation amounted to championing the idea «that any war fought against Russia should be primarily amphibious and aimed at peripheries such as the Baltic Sea, Black Sea, or the Turkestan/Caspian area. Any posture adopted by the Indian army should be primarily offensive»: see, Ian F. W. BECKETT, *A British Profession of Arms. The Politics of Command in the Late Victorian Army*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2018, pp. 74-75. We may add, though, that Wolseley’s stance was liable to play into the hands of those in India who upheld a strategy of “masterly inactivity”, as opposed to the supporters of a “forward policy” like Roberts.

49 CALLWELL, *Small Wars*, cit., pp. 68-70.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

51 C. E. CALLWELL, *Stray Recollections*, London, Edward Arnold & Co., 1923, Vol. I, pp. 318-322. According to the author, in addition to completing the History after Colville fell ill and proved unable to bring the work to a conclusion, Callwell was also tasked with expunging the opening chapters Sir Evelyn Baring had taken exception to on the grounds that «they went into political matters relating to the events which had led up to the expedition [...] and [...] they conveyed an entirely false impression as to some aspects of those political matters».

are in the main campaign against nature», the Nile Campaign was all the more relevant inasmuch as «it was essentially a campaign against nature, a struggle against the difficulties arising from supplying the wants of troops traversing great stretches of desert country». ⁵² Such a forceful statement might engender a common misconception: namely, that provided that all the difficulties related to the barrenness of the theatre of war were overcome, the fight proper would have had a foregone conclusion due to the technological and organisational superiority of the Europeans. Apparently, the idea was already widespread then, with Da Costa Porter candidly admitting that, as for the battle of Amoafu fought during the Ashanti Expedition, «by the small loss inflicted to our men [...] I have been accustomed to regard the fighting as mere child's play»; this until a veteran had startled him by saying «that at one moment he thought matters very critical». ⁵³ It seems that, due to his own field experience and by querying veterans of other colonial campaigns, Da Costa Porter had come to the conclusion that «savage wars are fought against immense odds» to the point that «a feather would [...] turn the scale»; in other words, while concentrating enough forces on the battlefield would of course secure the victory, the challenge posed by colonial campaigns was precisely that of being able to concentrate enough forces, well fed and with enough ammunition, at the right moment. At Isandlwana, Da Costa Porter concluded, «the scale was turned, the disaster occurred». ⁵⁴

The hair's breadth between victory and defeat in colonial warfare – or the feather capable of turning the scale, according to Da Costa Porter – was aptly expressed by Callwell when he noted that «so great indeed are the difficulties that arise in many small wars from supply, that it becomes necessary to cut down the forces engaged to the lowest possible strength consistent with safety». Borrowing the words of Henry IV, the author thus concluded: «invade with a large force and you are destroyed by starvation, invade with a small one and you are overwhelmed by a hostile population». ⁵⁵ Again using the Zulu War as an example, Da Costa Porter noted that «nothing could be obtained by the country. Everything had to be carried; the army had to be absolutely self-supporting. And so it must

⁵² ID., *Small Wars*, cit., pp. 44, 68.

⁵³ DA COSTA PORTER, «Warfare», cit., pp. 338-339.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

⁵⁵ CALLWELL, *Small Wars*, cit., p. 60.

be in all our native wars». ⁵⁶ In consequence, any force had to be accompanied by a far bigger logistic train than regular armies were accustomed to; and this had to be fed in turn, further compounding the logistic strain. Thus, it seems plausible that a division of force might have represented an attempt at addressing and relieving such logistic strain. Indeed, Callwell observed that «the division of force in the theatre of war», one generally held to be a display of bad strategy in the regular war, was often necessary in small wars, also managing to mention supply issues as one of the motives making such a division desirable. However, this by no means seems to have been the chief reason justifying a similar course of action. ⁵⁷

According to Callwell, far more poignant in motivating a division were the diverging objectives of a campaign – for instance, an invasion of Afghanistan requiring two different lines of advance, one to Kabul and the other to Kandahar – and the desire of overawing the enemy with a show of force, or confusing his plans so that «in attempting to cover all points he covers none». ⁵⁸ Already in Da Costa Porter’s essay it is made clear that «the first question which will strike every organiser of an expedition must be, shall I advance in one column, or in two, or in three?» The author never makes mention of compelling logistic constraints in order to justify a splitting-up of the available forces: provided that «sufficient men are available to render each column strong enough for independent action» – and taken for granted, we may gloss, that the logistical apparatus was enough to support separate masses of soldiers – there were different considerations that «may induce us to use more than one line of advance». ⁵⁹ The plan of invasion of the Zululand, subjected to a critical reappraisal by the author, provides the reader with one of these considerations: while Da Costa Porter predictably found fault in a scheme according to which the different columns had been erroneously presumed to be strong enough to resist any attack, he deemed that it was reasonable to expect that the moral effect engendered by a division in multiple columns «have some weight even with a nation like the Zulus»; besides, such an arrangement was the best one to protect the colony of Natal from potential enemy forays. But, more importantly, «by increasing the area of country occupied and

⁵⁶ DA COSTA PORTER, “Warfare”, cit., p. 321.

⁵⁷ CALLWELL, *Small Wars*, cit., p. 109: «supply is a great difficulty, and only a certain amount of supplies can be moved along a particular route within a given time».

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-110.

⁵⁹ DA COSTA PORTER, “Warfare”, cit., p. 317.

devastated by our men, it was also thought that the rigour of war would the sooner be brought home to the natives, and a speedier conclusion to the war be brought about». ⁶⁰ Although published three years after the disaster of Isandlwana, such an analysis remained consistent with Frederic Thesiger's ⁶¹ first memorandum addressed to Henry Bulwer, ⁶² in which the general identified «five main lines of advance from Natal and Transvaal into Zululand [...] equally adapted for attack or defence», proposing to occupy all of them with an equal number of columns «thoroughly complete in every particular». ⁶³ This arrangement would not only have ensured the defence of Natal against the possibility of Zulu raids which, we know, Chelmsford considered rather high; ⁶⁴ in case of a general invasion of the Zululand, it would have also made the British forces spread out on the enemy territory burning down the kraals, seizing the mealies and resorting to any means to compel the Zulus to accept a general engagement. This relatively reckless approach was engendered in Chelmsford by his particular experience of the kind of desultory warfare typical of the Ninth Frontier War against the Xhosas, ⁶⁵ and by a more general over-reliance on the technological edge enjoyed by the British troops on the battlefield. ⁶⁶ En passant, this over-reliance turned out to be fateful in more than one occasion: by studying the correspondence of William Hicks Pasha during the 1883 Sennar and Kordofan campaigns, it is quite apparent that Hicks duly recognised the low morale of the troops, the questionable competence of the European officers attached to his command and, still, showed confidence in the

60 *Ibid.*, p. 317.

61 Frederic Augustus Thesiger, 2nd Baron Chelmsford after the death of his father on October 5, 1878. Henceforth addressed as such.

62 Lieutenant Governor of the Colony of Natal (September 1875 to April 1880); see John LABAND, *Historical Dictionary of the Zulu Wars*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, p. 22.

63 John P. C. LABAND (Ed.), *Lord Chelmsford's Zululand Campaign 1878-1879*, Stroud, Alan Sutton Publishing for the Army Records Society, 1994, p. 6.

64 “Lieutenant-General Thesiger the Hon. F. A. Thesiger to Colonel F. A. Stanley”, in *Ibid.*, p. 13.

65 John LABAND, *The Shadow of Isandlwana. The Life and Times of General Lord Chelmsford and his Disaster in Zululand*, Barnsley, Greenhill Books, 2023, pp. 204-205.

66 «I am induced to think that the first experience of the power of the Martini Henrys will be such a surprise to the Zulus that they will not be formidable after the first effort»: KZNA, *Wood Mss, II/2/2, Chelmsford to Wood*, 23 Nov. 1878, quoted in BECKETT, *Profession of Arms*, cit., p. 201.

final outcome, provided that his men merely learnt how to fire low.⁶⁷ As for the Zululand, the concern of the British general commanding officer was to prevent the enemy from evading a decisive battle, but aside from Chelmsford's specific miscalculations, this remained the chief concern of colonial warfare *en général*. As we already pointed out, Da Costa Porter stressed that against so a mobile enemy such as that represented by the "savage" nations – one not constrained by the customary burden of maintaining lines of communication – any strategical combination was useless: after examining the opening stages of the Zulu War he further reiterated the concept by pointing out that «no stress should be laid upon the strategical importance of the movement». The «only comparative certainty of meeting the enemy» laid in advancing deep in the enemy country and «bringing the rigour of war home to him».⁶⁸

A lesson they will not forget

As already highlighted, success in colonial warfare depended on the ability of striking some kind of delicate balance between the two extremes of deploying a large force, which ran the risk of being crippled by the logistic constraints of a barren and underpopulated theatre of war; and a small force, flexible and commensurate with such a logistic challenge, but liable to be overwhelmed by the enemy numerical superiority. It is worth asking whether these early theorists of colonial warfare ever managed to realise that success also depended on striking another kind of balance: namely between desultory and dragged-on operations, and levels of sheer violence liable to turn the scale and become counter-productive. Whittingham aptly noted that, according to Callwell, the conduct of small wars «justified a degree of violence that would not have been permissible in regular warfare».⁶⁹ In *Small Wars* this level of violence was justified by two strictly-intertwined reasons: the need to attain a «moral effect [...] often far more im-

67 «I never in my life saw such a rabble – like a flock of frightened sheep. [...] If my Egyptians only stand firm I am prepared for 40.000. I learnt 'stand firm' – 'fire low' in Arabic and [...] I went up and down the ranks while they were firing, quietly repeating these two short sentences»; see M. W. DALY (Ed.), *The Road to Shaykan: Letters of General William Hicks Pasha written during the Sennar and Kordofan Campaigns, 1883*, University of Durham, Occasional Papers Series No. 20, 1983, pp. 35, 87.

68 DA COSTA PORTER, "Warfare", cit., pp. 315, 317.

69 WHITTINGHAM, "Savage Warfare", cit., p. 594.

portant than material success», brought about by operations «sometimes limited to committing havoc which the laws of regular warfare do not sanction»;⁷⁰ and the racist belief that such a moral effect was particularly impactful on the «lower races» because they were «impressionable» and «greatly influenced by a resolute bearing and by a determined course of action».⁷¹ It also apparent that, for Callwell, it was not just a matter of waging war in a fashion attuned to the alleged low levels of civilizations of the savage nations, as true in the recommendation «of bringing such foes to reason [...] by the rifle and sword, for they understand this mode of warfare and respect it».⁷² If the stress on the moral effect was clearly aimed at swiftly bending the enemy will, thus overcoming the otherwise insurmountable advantages enjoyed by the natives, it is reasonable to conclude that such a moral effect was confidently presumed to be decisive: if the savages were impressionable just because of their primitive nature, then their primitive polities were liable to be disarticulated by a sufficiently brutal display of force.

In a way this conclusion was anticipated already by the writers preceding Callwell: in Da Costa Porter «the capture and destruction of the king's residence has usually sufficed at least to alter the character of the war» because if the native king inspires «awe, physical or superstitious, in the hearts of his subjects [...] should he, however, fail in war, his potency vanishes at once».⁷³ By the time he was writing his essay, stressed Da Costa Porter, the validity of this assertion was showed by the examples of Kumasi, Ulundi, Sekhukhune's stronghold and Magdala, representing either the king's residence, some kind of final place of resistance for the natives, or both.⁷⁴ In fact, the recourse to such vigorous measures, as the destruction of the king's residence and the burning of the crops, was dictated by the belief that «the savage on war path can seldom be influenced by mild measures. To spare his home and crops seems to him a sign of weakness, and generally acts as an inducement to hold out longer against our efforts».⁷⁵ Crop

70 CALLWELL, *Small Wars*, cit., p. 42.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 72. See also p. 78: «The records of small wars show unmistakably how great is the impression made upon semi-civilized races and upon savages by a bold and resolute procedure».

72 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

73 DA COSTA PORTER, «Warfare», cit. p. 312.

74 *Ibid.*, p. 311.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 315.

destruction was not restricted to the attempt to disarticulate relatively organised polities like the Zulu Kingdom; for instance, in recounting his experience during the Kafir War of the 1850-53, colonel John C. Gawler made clear that preventing the Xhosas from «cultivating anywhere» represented an integral part of the strategy aimed at ejecting them from their lands.⁷⁶ Indeed, the writings of this age bear the marks of cursory recommendations to moderate the violence exercised in small wars: according to Da Costa Porter «wanton and unnecessary cruelty [...] should never be resorted to under any circumstances»⁷⁷, thus anticipating Callwell's word of caution that «there is a limit to the amount of licence in destruction which is expedient»; a limit dictated by the purpose to «ensure a lasting peace» which could be achieved only if «the overawing and not the exasperation of the enemy is the end to keep in view».⁷⁸ Still, it is apparent that widespread violence and destruction were fundamental aspects of colonial warfare and, far from being considered indiscriminate and therefore reprehensible, were openly advocated by its early practitioners and theorists in the name of the attainment of a swift and decisive victory.

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⁷⁶ COLONEL GAWLER, late 73rd Regiment, “British Troops and Savage Warfare, with Special Reference to the Kafir Wars”, *RUSI. Journal*, 17:75, 1873, p. 925.

⁷⁷ DA COSTA PORTER, “Warfare”, cit., p. 315.

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