The Importance of Operational Accounts in African Military History

Introduction

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This issue of the *Journal of African Military History* presents two articles on South Africa that demonstrate the continued importance of original research on operational history. In addition, they both highlight the important Clausewitzian point about the unpredictability of war including wars that, with hindsight, appear to have been one-sided. Michał Leśniewski looks at the Battle of Thukela, a hitherto little-known engagement between the forces of the Zulu Kingdom and the autonomous British colonial enclave of Port Natal (now the city of Durban) that allied with the Boers during the Boer-Zulu conflict of 1838. Based on archival material from South Africa and Britain, and Zulu oral accounts recorded in the early twentieth century, Leśniewski highlights Zulu commander Nongalaza kaNondela's improvisation of standard Zulu envelopment tactics that enabled his men to overcome a colonial-led force of around 500 gunmen supported by several thousand traditionally equipped warriors. The Boer-Zulu war is best remembered for its start with the Zulu killing of Boer leader Piet Retief in February 1838 and the climactic Battle of Blood River in December that resulted in the annihilation of an attacking Zulu army by the firepower of a Boer defensive wagon laager. Despite the retrospective sense of inevitable Zulu defeat evoked by the overwhelming historical memory of Blood River, commemorated by an apartheid era public holiday known as the "Day of the Vow" and by a large monument erected on the site both of which celebrated and justified white supremacy, the earlier actions in the war favoured the Zulu. From the perspective of April 1838, the outcome of the war must have seemed uncertain given that Zulu warriors with spears, axes and clubs defeated colonial trained musketeers at Thukela and then successfully ambushed a Boer mounted force eventually dubbed the "Flight Commando."

With similar hindsight, the result of the South African invasion of German South West Africa (Namibia today) during the early part of the First World

War seems a foregone conclusion given the overwhelming numerical superiority of the invaders. Nonetheless, the opening stage of the South African campaign experienced dire problems related to a surprise battlefield defeat at Sandfontein, poor logistical planning, and a Boer rebellion at home. Utilizing primary sources from archives in South Africa and Britain, David Katz shows how previous accounts of the Union Defence Force's (UDF's) defeat at the November 1914 Battle of Sandfontein during the initial advance into southern South West Africa have ignored an important operational context. Usually seen as the result of dubious battlefield tactics by South African column commander Henry Lukin and the non-deployment of another UDF column given the mutiny of its leader, Katz explains how the delay of a planned UDF landing at the port of Walvis Bay/Swakopmund left South African troops landed at Luderitz Bay exposed to German concentration. This impelled South African authorities, particularly defence minister Jan Smuts, to attempt to support the Luderitz contingent by ordering the northern overland advance of Lukin's column that encountered the Germans at Sandfontein. Changes to Smuts' original South African invasion plan, therefore, led to the UDF's first battlefield disaster and contributed to the delay in occupying South West Africa. As Katz reveals, the South African official history of the campaign written shortly after the war left out this vital detail of the operational plan to spare leaders' reputations leaving subsequent historians to repeat incomplete explanations for the defeat at Sandfontein.

In writing about battles, Leśniewski and Katz engage in a type of scholarship frequently derided by academics as old-fashioned "drum and trumpet" military history unlikely to impress university job search committees or scholarly funding agencies. Nevertheless, as two United States-based military historians argue, "Operational history enables us to make sense of the larger story of war because battlefield outcomes matter: they open up or close off opportunities to attain (or fail to attain) important political ends."¹ Such research is particularly important for African military history which largely emerged as a defined field after operational history had become undesirable leading to accounts of African conflicts devoid of the details of fighting and described by the editors of this journal as "warless wars" making no impact on our broader understanding of the history of warfare.² And as these two articles show, the history of warfare without operational or battlefield research and analysis leads to ahistorical

1 Tami Davis Biddle and Robert M. Citino, "The Role of Military History in the Contemporary Academy," Society for Military History White Paper, November 2014, 5.

2 Roy Doron and Charles G. Thomas, "Introducing the New Lens of African Military History," *Journal of African Military History*, Vol. 2, Issue 2 (December 2019), 79–92.

thinking about predictable outcomes and the repetition of myths neglecting the important principles of uncertainty and friction that influenced decisions and events as they unfolded.

It is true that some of Africa's important battles are well studied such as Mbwila in 1665, Isandlwana in 1879, Adowa in 1896, First and Second El Alamein in 1942, and the hotly debated Cuito Cuanavale in 1988. However, many of the military operations and battles that determined the outcomes of Africa's wars and therefore influenced important trends in the continent's history have never been seriously researched. Indeed, it is likely that many or most battles fought over the last two centuries in Africa, including during recent post-colonial conflicts, are not known at all. The list of important battles in African History about which almost nothing is known seems endless. One of the most significant battles in Nigerian History, the engagement at Osogbo fought sometime between 1838 and 1840, made Ibadan the dominant Yoruba state of the western region and stopped the southward advance of the Fulani jihad therefore determining the future religious character of the country with enormous political, social and cultural impact. The only account (and a brief one) of the battle was written by a West African Christian cleric turned pioneering Nigerian historian in the late nineteenth century and published posthumously in 1921.³ Similarly, the July 1896 Battle of Shangi, which resulted in the devastation of an army from the kingdom of Rwanda by Belgian King Leopold II's Force Publique, determined what eventually became the modern Rwanda-Congo border and informed violent regime change and German colonization in Rwanda. The only historian to mention aspects of the battle was a Rwandan Catholic priest associated with the Tutsi royal family who wrote in the mid-twentieth century.⁴ Many recent historians mention the battles of Osogbo and Shangi but never say much about what happened. Of course, the main problem with studying such battles is finding primary sources but, as Leśniewski and Katz prove, it is possible to discover previously unutilized or underutilized material. Is it completely unrealistic to think that a jihadist fighter at Osogbo left behind an Ajami script narrative of the battle? Is there a memoir of Shangi hidden in a Belgian archive? The same could be said of more recent engagements. While historians have dissected almost all the battles fought in Europe during the First and Second World Wars, the operational history of "Africa's World War" or the Second Congo War of 1998–2002 involving over a dozen state and non-state forces remains mys-

3 Samuel Johnson, *History of the Yorubas: From Earliest Times to the Beginning of the British Protectorate*, London: George Routledge, 1921, 285–287.

4 Alexis Kagame, *Les Milices du Rwanda précolonial*, Brussels: Royal Academy of Colonial Sciences, 1963.

terious. For example, major books on the conflict describe “a no-holds-barred bloody battle” and “heaving fighting” in October 1998 at the strategically important town of Kindu the result of which opened an important road network to Congolese rebels and their Rwandan allies that facilitated their occupation of half the country.⁵ Given limited journalistic coverage and lack of accessible military records, historians know almost nothing about that battle and many others that comprised Africa’s largest and probably most deadly conflict. And this paucity of information is not just about specific battles. Within the vast literature on counterinsurgency, examples from Kenya and Algeria in the 1950s and Rhodesia in the 1970s abound (though dwarfed by references to Vietnam and Afghanistan) but similar conflicts fought by the French in Madagascar and Cameroon in the 1950s and by many post-colonial African states are hardly mentioned. The operational military history of Africa is so impoverished that African military academies lack source material to teach African examples, relevant to their cultural and geographical context, relying mostly on standard Western case studies. As such, the work of Leśniewski and Katz highlight the potential for original and significant scholarship on African operational military history.

- 5 Gerard Prunier, *Africa’s World War: Congo, the Rwanda Genocide and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe*, Oxford University Press, 2009, 247; Filip Reyntjens, *The Great African War: Congo and Regional Geopolitics, 1996–2006*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 199.