The colonial conquest of Africa was primarily the work of locally raised African forces commanded by European officers. Indigenous soldiers, especially in tropical campaigns, were far more resistant to disease than white troops and had the additional advantage of being much cheaper to maintain.¹ Their recruitment was a very old practice, dating back in sub-Saharan Africa to the sixteenth century with the Portuguese in what is now northern Angola.² Whereas the French, Belgians, and Germans in the nineteenth century relied overwhelmingly on indigenous troops in their wars of African conquest, the British deployed regular troops drawn from Britain and the imperial dependencies more extensively, and they also created local militias in colonies of white settlement such as the Cape and Natal.³ It is revealing that in his famous treatise on the military techniques employed in the second half of the nineteenth century against ‘native’ forces in Africa and Asia, Colonel Charles Callwell stated firmly that the subject would be discussed solely “from the point of view of regular troops.”⁴ Nevertheless, in some campaigns, such as those in Zululand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it proved necessary for the British and colonial authorities to raise levies for combat and logistical support. In a certain sense this practice was reminiscent of the press gangs and mercenaries of the European armies of the ancien régime.⁵ In Natal, for example,

the governor, in his capacity as ‘supreme chief’ over the indigenous population, had the right to exact isibhalo, or compulsory labor and military service. Magistrates accordingly raised levies from the chiefs of the Native Reserves, encouraging recruitment with promises of pay and captured cattle.\textsuperscript{6} For their part, many African levies in those parts of the continent under colonial rule saw how their warrior traditions and concepts of masculine honor could be maintained through military service with the colonial power.\textsuperscript{7} Unfortunately for their sense of honor, levies and auxiliaries did not exclusively perform combat roles or serve as guides or scouts where their military skills were appreciated: they also labored as bearers, cooks, water-carriers, porters, and sanitary men, or handled the livestock and drove wagons and carts. Understandably, their motivation was often poor as a consequence. Furthermore, most African levies lacked adequate military training and discipline, and all were consequently prone to desert, especially in the face of military setbacks.\textsuperscript{8}

\textit{Levies and the War against King Dingane, 1838–1840}

The British were not the first to employ African levies in Zululand. The first permanent white settlement in southeast Africa was at Port Natal (now Durban), where in 1824 hunter-traders received the permission of Shaka, the Zulu king who was aggressively extending his sway in the region, to occupy the land in return for recognizing his overlordship as tributary chiefs. They adopted the local laws and customs and gathered Zulu around them who, as their clients, owed them military service. After 1832 other traders joined the settlement and brought with them numerous ‘Hottentot’ (Khoisan) retainers from the Eastern Cape who were, in fact, recently emancipated slaves.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{8} Edward M. Spiers, \textit{The Late Victorian Army 1868–1902} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 293–95.
\textsuperscript{9} The pejorative term ‘Hottentot’ was used by Dutch settlers to describe not just KhoiKhoi but a wide variety of non-white, non-Xhosa people at the Cape. Although limiting, the term Khoisan will be used for the rest of this paper. Charles Ballard, “Traders, Trekkers and Colonists,” in \textit{Natal and Zululand from Earliest Times to 1910:}