

A Military History of
SOUTH AFRICA

From the Dutch-Khoi Wars to the End of Apartheid

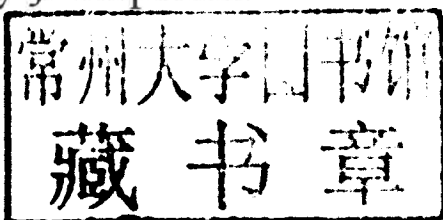


Timothy J. Stapleton

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Introduction

By singing the controversial song “Bring My Machine Gun,” South African President Jacob Zuma acknowledges not only the importance of armed struggle in ending apartheid but also the centrality of warfare and military structures to the last several centuries of South Africa’s history. This fact is also illustrated by the prominence of the memory of armed conflict to various South African identities. African nationalists proudly remember earlier African leaders such as Maqoma, Sekhukhune, and Bambatha who resisted European conquest. Zulu patriots take inspiration from the warrior legend of Shaka. Afrikaner nationalists look back on victories such as Blood River or Majuba Hill and grievances such as British concentration camps during the South African War. For many English-speaking whites, names of world war battles such as Delville Wood and El Alamein evoke a sense of shared sacrifice with Britain and its other dominions in global struggles for freedom.

Much of South Africa’s history involved a process of European colonial conquest and African resistance. During the late 1600s and 1700s the military advantage of horses and firearms enabled Dutch settlers to subjugate the Khoisan and establish the Cape Colony. Dutch eastward expansion was halted in the late 1700s by the more numerous and better organized Xhosa. The gradual dispossession of the Xhosa began in the early 1800s when the British, as new rulers of the strategically important Cape, tipped the local balance of power by introducing a standing army with artillery. In the interior and along the Indian Ocean coast, competition over growing international trade, including slaving, led to the growth of new African powers such as the Zulu, Ndebele, and Sotho kingdoms. Colonial expansion accelerated in the mid-nineteenth century as British scorched earth campaigns from the Cape forced Xhosa bush fighters to surrender. Around the same time the Boers moved inland where they used superior firepower and mobility to defeat African rivals and establish independent republics. Diamond discovery in the late 1860s invigorated British ambitions in the region leading to a period of intense warfare that began with the overthrow of remaining African states, in which new military technologies such as breech-loading rifles and extensive use of African allies were central, but ended with Boer and African

rebellions that limited imperial control. The advent of gold mining in the Transvaal in the late 1880s greatly improved the military capacity of the Boer republics. However, it resulted in the conventional and guerrilla fighting of the South African War (1899–1902) and the loss of independence to the British. The Union of South Africa was formed in 1910 as a dominion of the British Empire. South African participation in the world wars (1914–18 and 1939–45) would be important in shaping the country's internal politics and emergence as a regional power and was influenced by memories of Boer-British conflicts. As an international pariah, the apartheid regime of the second half of the twentieth century relied increasingly on military strength as antiapartheid movements launched armed insurgencies assisted by newly independent African-ruled neighbors and Eastern Bloc powers within a Cold War context. Military factors, particularly defeat in Angola in the late 1980s, were central in bringing about today's democratic South Africa.

This book presents a narrative of armed conflict and the development of military establishments in the making of South Africa. The text not only concentrates on events that took place within what is now South Africa but also follows South African military personnel to other parts of Africa and the world. Of course, telling such a broad story can be difficult. Given the combination of the great many wars in South Africa's history and the limited space of this book, some events and issues have been left out. With any chronological history of South Africa, there is the question of when to begin. Starting with European settlement at the Cape in the 1650s risks creating a false impression that history began with colonization, and it is obvious that Africans engaged in armed conflict before this time. Nevertheless, the limitations of primary sources and existing literature mean that for most of the country, it is difficult to discuss military history in detail before the late 1700s. While some background will be provided, the core of this book will deal with the period from circa 1800 to the end of apartheid in the early 1990s.

As this is a work of synthesis, another challenge is that existing historical writing is extremely uneven. There are excellent and numerous works on conflicts such as the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 and the South African War. These events are also well known through popular film, documentaries, and battlefield tours. However, other aspects of South African military history, for example, the nineteenth-century wars between the Transvaal Republic and African groups such as the Venda have not received similar attention. With some notable exceptions, there is surprisingly little written on the development of the South African military from 1910 onward. Until around 20 years

ago, historical writing on the South African War and South African involvement in the world wars underemphasized or even ignored the role of black people. Although the history of policing is beyond the scope of this book, South Africa has a long tradition of paramilitary police such as the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police of the nineteenth-century Cape Colony, South African Police infantry battalions in North Africa during the Second World War, and the police counterinsurgency unit Koevoet in Namibia during the 1980s. Writing on the regional conflicts of the apartheid period, specifically South African intervention in Angola, has become highly politicized. A host of publications seek to celebrate the former South African Defence Force (SADF), whereas others are more sympathetic to the liberation struggle. Specifically, there has been a debate over who won the Battle of Quito Cuanavale, where the SADF attacked Angolan and Cuban forces in 1987–88. Former SADF members stress the heavy casualties their side inflicted, whereas liberation movement veterans see the engagement as an historical turning point—Apartheid's Stalingrad—which caused South African withdrawal from Angola and Namibia and subsequent political change at home.¹

Military history involves the study of armed conflict and military institutions and their relationship with society. It has been criticized for focusing too much on major Western powers such as the United States and Britain, large conventional battles, land over sea conflict, military technology, and state-to-state conflict.² South African military history contains all these elements including British involvement during the nineteenth century, South Africa's role in the world wars, and a long history of major land engagements from Isandlwana in 1879 to Cassino in 1944 to Cuito Cuanavale in 1988. However, it also involves issues such as precolonial African military systems, the adaptation of irregular warfare to counter colonial technology, the development of South African air and naval power in the twentieth century, and numerous rebellions against state authority. Indeed, nineteenth-century African and Boer states did not have formal military structures, leadership, and logistics separate from the rest of society. From 1910 to the present, there has been struggle over blending different traditions of armed service, British colonial, Boer republican, and later African liberationist, into a national military establishment. Within the context of ethnicity and race, links between military service and citizenship have also been important. In short, South African military history offers a combination of familiar and unfamiliar themes.

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CHAPTER 1

Warfare and Frontier (c.1650–1830)

It is difficult to reconstruct most aspects of South Africa's history, including military history, before the early nineteenth century because of the nature of available sources. Given the documentary evidence, the long process of European colonial conquest and African resistance in the Cape is well studied. Since African languages at that time did not have written scripts, much less evidence exists for events on the interior Highveld or Indian Ocean coast that were outside the colonial sphere. African oral traditions for this period can be narrow and selective, documents produced by literate visitors are rare and usually limited by the author's understanding of local language, and archaeological research is far from comprehensive. Before the arrival of Europeans, most African societies in what is now South Africa practiced Iron Age technology, were organized in centralized states of varying sizes, and survived through herding and agriculture. Environment determined settlement patterns. Shortage of reliable water sources on the dry grassland of the Highveld meant that Sotho and Tswana speakers concentrated in certain areas where they developed relatively large towns of several thousand inhabitants each. Enjoying access to many rivers and better rainfall, Nguni-speakers (ancestors of the Xhosa, Zulu, Ndebele, and Swazi) southeast of the Drakensberg Mountains lived in many small homesteads spread out fairly evenly along the Indian Ocean coast. In the arid Western and Northern Cape many Khoisan groups survived as pure pastoralists or from hunting and gathering. The Khoisan's lack of metallurgy and agriculture meant that along the frontiers of these areas they were often absorbed by larger Sotho and Nguni communities.¹

Expansion of the Cape Colony

The Dutch East India Company established a permanent post at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 to secure this strategic point on the sea route between

Europe and Asia, and to create a reliable source of freshwater and food for their passing ships. Since the pastoral Khoisan around Table Bay were hesitant to trade a large number of cattle, the Dutch established settlers in 1657 to produce vegetables and meat. Consequent competition over grazing land between Europeans and Khoisan led to the First Dutch-Khoi War of 1659–60 in which the Khoisan groups united briefly and trapped the settlers within their fort. However, the Khoisan alliance broke down and they eventually negotiated with the Dutch. After the conflict, the Dutch erected a physical barrier—a series of fences and hedges—between themselves and the Khoisan who were pushed off their land. The Second Dutch-Khoi War of 1673–77 consisted of a series of cattle raids by Dutch settlers, assisted by impoverished Khoisan allies, which broke the power of the large Cochoqua group in the Saldanha Bay and Boland areas. European settlers expanded and many Khoisan, their cattle taken away and game hunted out, began to work for the Dutch alongside slaves imported from other parts of Africa and Asia.²

During this period frontier Dutch settlers, Trekboers, began to organize voluntary local militias called “commandos” that would mobilize for raids and defense, and then disband that would allow the Khoisan to renew their attacks. Organized between 1700 and 1715, the first commandos consisted mostly of the Company’s employees with a few settler volunteers. While the first entirely civilian commando was formed in 1715, these groups remained dependent upon the Company for ammunition. In 1739 commando service became compulsory for all frontier settlers who often brought along Khoisan servants or sent them as substitutes. Khoisan commando members were armed and received a share of captured livestock. Commando leaders were not required to get permission before raising a force for an operation but simply had to submit a report upon return. According to historian Susan Newton-King, “the commando was an institution well suited to the guerrilla warfare favored by the Khoisan. Its loose command structure rendered it highly flexible and capable of almost immediate response to surprise attack or robbery.”³

As Dutch settlement expanded north, there was a period of intense Khoisan guerrilla warfare beyond the Piketberg Mountains during the 1730s and violence in that area continued for the rest of the century. Eastward Dutch expansion across the arid Karoo and into the rich grazing land between the Gamtoos and Fish rivers led to another protracted period of conflict from the 1770s to 1790s that disrupted the settler meat industry. A major factor in these conflicts was that since the Trekboers lacked capital to employ wage labor, they captured Khoisan women and children for indentured service.⁴ In the northeast, particularly in the Sneeuberg area, violence between “Bushmen” hunters (independent Khoisan) and Trekboer herders in the early 1770s caused many

of the latter to abandon their farms. In 1774 a “grand commando” of 100 Europeans and 150 Khoisan swept the area, killing 503 Bushmen and capturing 241. Between 1786 and 1795 there was an almost constant state of warfare in the northeast and commandos killed 2,480 Bushmen and captured 654, and the Bushmen killed 276 of the Boers’ Khoisan herders.⁵

Khoisan military resistance failed because they did not produce iron weapons or tools (and the Dutch quickly banned trading iron with them), and the scale of their political organization was small making it easy for the Dutch to play groups off against one another. Additionally, imported smallpox sharply reduced the Khoisan population such as during the epidemic of 1713. The Dutch had the advantage of horses, giving them greater mobility, range, and speed, and firearms that had both a physical and a psychological impact. The Khoisan learned that they could counter Dutch firepower by adopting hit-and-run and ambush tactics and that the guns of that period did not work in the rain. Although Khoisan reliance on livestock represented a weakness as these could be easily stolen by mounted settlers, groups that had lost their cattle and resorted to hunting and gathering proved more adept at guerrilla tactics. By the 1670s the Khoisan had begun to acquire a limited number of guns through trade and capture, and this led to a series of Dutch prohibitions on trading firearms with the Khoisan that were often ignored.⁶

In the late 1700s both the eastward-moving Trekboers and the westward-moving Xhosa entered the rich grazing land between the Sundays and Fish rivers known as the Zuurveld, subjugating the original Khoisan inhabitants. Although the Trekboers still enjoyed the advantage of horses and guns, the Xhosa offered more effective military resistance. The mixed cattle-keeping and cultivating economy of the Xhosa supported a larger population than the Khoisan, and the Xhosa possessed iron weapons. In Xhosa society, boys developed martial skills by stick fighting, and upon ritual circumcision at around age 18, they were considered warriors. Wars were usually short and involved capturing cattle and occasionally burning huts. Prior to a campaign, royal messengers would gather men at the ruler’s capital where they were told about the conflict and spiritualists administered charms such as parts of fierce animals or protective herbs. Men who ignored a call to arms could have cattle taken by the ruler. On the march, armies were accompanied by slaughter cattle and women who would handle logistics. In battle, rulers directed their armies from the rear where they were protected by a reserve of experienced warriors. Sons of rulers led the younger men from the front and often attempted to encircle an enemy. Military organization was loosely based on age, but there were no formal age regiments. Each Xhosa man, like others in the region, went to war with a long cowhide shield, a bundle of long throwing spears, and perhaps one shorter spear for close combat.⁷

Warfare between Boers and Xhosa began shortly after the Cape Governor Baron Van Plettenberg visited the eastern frontier in 1778 and made arrangements with several small Xhosa chiefdoms that they should remain east of the upper Fish River and Bushmans River and consider this line the colonial boundary. That same year, frontier Boers accused the Xhosa of stock theft and attacked in an effort to force them east of the Zuurveld. In 1780 Plettenberg claimed the entire Zuurveld by declaring that the eastern border of the Cape Colony would be the entire length of the Fish River. However, by this time many Xhosa groups, including the Gwali, Dange, Ntinde, Mbalu, and Gqunukhwebe, had moved west of the Fish. The governor ordered Adriaan van Jaarsveld, commandant of the eastern country, to form a large Boer commando and expel the Xhosa east of the new colonial border. In late May and early June 1781 Van Jaarsveld and his men rode around the area informing various Xhosa rulers that they should lead their people back to the east. When they did not comply, he launched a series of attacks on the Xhosa forcefully driving them across the Fish. At the beginning of this campaign Van Jaarsveld, while seeming to negotiate with the Gwali Xhosa, scattered tobacco on the ground and, when the Xhosa rushed to pick it up, he ordered his men to open fire on them killing around 200. When Van Jaarsveld dissolved the commando in mid-July, his men had seized 5,330 cattle and killed a large but unknown number of Xhosa. This demobilization of the commando represented the end of what has become known as the First Cape-Xhosa War.

Soon after the breaking up of Van Jaarsveld's commando, many Xhosa returned to their lands west of the Fish as there was little to stop them. In May 1793 a party of Boers under Barend Lindeque, who wanted to push the Xhosa off the Zuurveld, allied with the Rharhabe Xhosa of Ndlambe who lived east of the Fish and wanted to bring the western Xhosa under his authority. The combined force raided Mbalu and Gqunukhwebe Xhosa communities, seizing about 2,000 cattle, but for reasons that are not clear the alliance broke down and Ndlambe's warriors returned to their home in the east. The Mbalu and Gqunukhwebe then retaliated by attacking Boer farms capturing 50,000 cattle, 11,000 sheep, and 200 horses. The Boers fled west off the Zuurveld. Christiaan David Maynier, the landdrost (local official or magistrate) of the new district of Graaff Reinet, organized a commando and in late August it drove the Gqunukhwebe and other Xhosa groups east of the Fish River and seized 8,000 cattle. Although Maynier's commando attempted to keep the Xhosa from returning to the Zuurveld, by November it was clear that this was impossible and the group was disbanded. This brief but intense conflict has been termed the Second Cape-Xhosa War.⁸

The British seized the Cape in 1795 in order to prevent the French from blocking the important sea route to India. In mid-July British soldiers were landed at Simonstown. When a detachment of 1,600 British soldiers and sailors landed at Muizenberg, in early August, 440 Company regular troops fled while just 350 settler, Khoisan, and mixed race volunteers repelled the attackers. Dutch colonial forces conducted hit-and-run attacks and ambushes on the British until early September when the Royal Navy landed 2,500 reinforcements and the advance on Cape Town continued. Facing overwhelming odds, the Dutch surrendered within two weeks.⁹

By the late 1790s most of the Zuurveld was controlled by the Gqunukhwebe and other Xhosa groups with the Boers occupying just the western portion near the Sundays River. More Xhosa had moved west onto the Zuurveld in the mid-1790s because of the power struggle among the Rharhabe Xhosa between rival leaders Ndlambe and Ngqika. In March 1799 a British military force under Brigadier General Thomas Vandeleur was sent by ship from Cape Town to Algoa Bay and then marched inland to suppress a Boer rebellion in Graaff Reinet. In April Vandeleur received instructions from the British acting governor Major General Francis Dundas that the Xhosa should be removed east of the Fish River. It is not clear if the subsequent fighting began when the Gqunukhwebe ambushed the British or Vandeleur ordered an attack on the Gqunukhwebe. What is certain is the Gqunukhwebe, under Chungwa, conducted several tenacious attacks against the British but were eventually driven back by concentrated musket and artillery fire. Disconcerted by determined Xhosa bush warfare, Vandeleur led his force back to Algoa Bay from where he shipped most of his men to Cape Town. Around the same time Khoisan and mixed race people staged a rebellion against the frontier Boers who held many of them as indentured labor. They eventually rallied around three leaders: Klaas Stuurman, Hans Trompetter, and Boesak. Historians have noted that this rebellion differed considerably from previous instances of Khoisan resistance as the rebels did not seek to prevent colonial expansion but were colonized people who aimed to overturn settler dominance from within. Although they initially sought protection from the British, the rebels saw Vandeleur was sending his soldiers away and therefore made an alliance with the Gqunukhwebe Xhosa. This alliance between rebel Khoisan servants and Zuurveld Xhosa was also a new development. During June and July 700 Khoisan rebels, about half mounted and 150 armed with guns, along with Chungwa's warriors attacked Boers along the Zuurveld and further west toward Swellendam. Vandeleur raised a commando of 300 Boers that was defeated by 150 Khoi and Xhosa near the Sundays River. In August Governor Dundas arrived on the frontier with 500 soldiers and

immediately negotiated a cease-fire with the Khoisan many of whom agreed to return to working for the Boers and the Gqunukhwebe who were permitted to live between the Sundays and Bushmans rivers.

In July 1801 Boers in the Graaff Reinet District briefly rebelled against British colonial authority because they objected to Khoisan servants attending Christian church and being taught to read and write by missionaries. Many Khoisan fled in the face of Boer attacks. This reignited the Khoisan rebellion and armed groups began to raid Boer farms. In January 1802 Tjaart van der Walt, the landdrost of Swellendam, led a commando of 88 Boers in an attack on a Khoisan rebel stronghold but on the return journey they were ambushed and forced to surrender all the captured livestock. In May Van der Walt returned with a force of 700 men and spent several months trying to sweep both the Khoisan and Xhosa east of the Zuurveld. In early August Van der Walt was killed in a predawn attack on a band of Khoisan and lacking leadership the Boer commando dispersed. In turn, during September and October 1802, the Khoisan and Zuurveld Xhosa launched a concerted westward offensive destroying Boer farms as far into the Cape Colony as Knysna and Plettenberg Bay. Defended by a few Boers, the only colonial outpost left on the eastern frontier was besieged Fort Frederick at Algoa Bay. In March 1803 the British pulled out of the Cape Colony and handed it back to the Dutch Batavian Republic. The new Batavian officials, lacking military strength, ended the conflict on the eastern frontier through negotiation. Khoisan rebels were placated with land grants for their leaders and promises of better treatment by the Boers who slowly returned to the Zuurveld. Although the Fish River was still considered the eastern border of the colony, it was not enforced and the Batavians held a conference with the Zuurveld Xhosa chiefs in which the latter were permitted to remain where they were for the time being. As such, this concluded the Third Cape-Xhosa War, which lasted for four years and involved a major rebellion of Khoisan colonial subjects.¹⁰

Although settlers were required to participate in regular military drills and could be called up in defense of the colony, Company officers of the eighteenth century considered them poorly trained, undisciplined, and rebellious. This led to investment in fortifications and experiments with military recruitment of blacks and mixed race people. In 1722 a militia was created consisting of free blacks, manumitted slaves, convicts whose sentences had expired and those who had been banished from the eastern territory. By the 1730s Khoisan and mixed race men had been incorporated into settler commandos and frontier policing was transferred to local burgher war councils. In the 1770s, the formation at Stellenbosch of a black and mixed race militia called

the “Free Corps” seemed to indicate the beginning of racially segregated military service. Fear of the Cape coming under attack because of Dutch involvement in European conflict led to the recruitment of 400 Khoisan and mixed race men as the “Corps Bastaard Hottentotten” in 1781 which was disbanded after 14 months when reinforcements arrived from Europe. In 1793, because France had declared war on the Netherlands, the Pandour Corps was formed from Khoisan and mixed race servants armed by their white masters as well as recruits from the Moravian mission at Baviaansklouf. During their first occupation of the Cape, the British recruited several hundred Khoisan and mixed race soldiers in order to cultivate loyalty among that community and discourage Boer rebellion. In 1801 the “Hottentot Corps,” also known as the Cape Regiment, was expanded to over 700 men and became a regular unit of the British Army based at the Cape. Under Batavian rule, the unit was renamed the “Corps Vrijen Hottentotten” and became a light infantry battalion. Eventually called the Cape Corps in the 1810s and Cape Mounted Rifles in the 1820s, this would be the only permanent military unit formed by the Dutch and British in the Cape Colony.¹¹

The Cape-Xhosa Wars (1811–19)

The second British occupation of the Cape in 1806 was prompted by the same strategic considerations as the first in 1795. In early January 1806 a British naval force arrived at the Cape and landed two infantry brigades of some 5,400 men north of Cape Town. A 2,000 strong Dutch colonial army, including French marines, German, and Hungarian mercenaries, Javanese artillerymen, and Khoisan soldiers and led by Governor Jan Willem Janssens, confronted the British on the slopes of Blaauwberg Mountain on January 8. After both sides exchanged cannon fire, desertion and a determined Highlander bayonet charge compelled the Dutch to withdraw inland. While both sides had sustained casualties—347 Dutch and 204 British were killed—it became obvious to Janssens that he was hopelessly outnumbered and anticipated French allies would not arrive. The British reached the outskirts of Cape Town the next day, and the Dutch eventually surrendered without further resistance.¹²

The British colonial administration of Governor Lord Caledon, lacking military resources and concerned mostly with securing the strategically important Western Cape, ignored the situation on the eastern frontier where Boers and Xhosa had been fighting over the Zuurveld. By mid-1810 most Boers had withdrawn west of the Zuurveld and the Xhosa had largely regained complete control. In September 1811 Sir John Cradock, newly

arrived governor of the Cape, instructed Colonel John Graham of the Cape Regiment to expel the Xhosa east of the Fish River that was to constitute the eastern border of the colony. By December Graham had assembled a force of around 900 regular troops—167 British dragoons, 221 British infantry, 431 Khoisan infantry, and a detachment of Royal Artillery—as well as 500 mounted Boer volunteers. This was the largest colonial army ever assembled in the Eastern Cape. Graham deployed his force in three divisions along the Sundays River and instructed them to advance east pushing the Xhosa over the Fish. The southern column under Landdrost Jacob Cuyler advanced east from the Sundays River mouth to the great place of Chungwa, elderly leader of the Gqunukhwebe. There he discovered that Rharhabe chief Ndlambe had assembled large numbers of warriors from various Xhosa groups in the nearby Addo Bush where they intended to make a stand. Cuyler's column was not strong enough to confront Ndlambe's men in such overgrown terrain. Graham, who was with the center column, decided that the center and northern columns would converge on Cuyler's position in order to drive Ndlambe from this stronghold. Anders Stockenstrom, the Graaff-Reinet landdrost commanding the northern column, felt that moving south would leave his community open to Xhosa attack. Stockenstrom, accompanied by 25 Boers, rode toward Graham to discuss his concerns, but he and most of his men were killed when they stopped to negotiate with a group of Xhosa who had just learned of colonial attacks elsewhere. Andries Stockenstrom, the landdrost's young son, then led a small patrol that drove off the Xhosa and the next day the northern column moved south to join Graham.

On New Year's Day 1812 Graham sent 500 men into the Addo Bush to root out Ndlambe's warriors. The Xhosa had chosen their ground well as it was difficult for colonial forces to concentrate their firepower, colonial horses were of little use, and when a small colonial unit was isolated, the Xhosa would break off their spear shafts to engage in close combat. However, during five days of intense bush fighting the colonial forces killed Xhosa men, women, and children, and Chungwa, too old and sick to move, was shot as he lay in bed. Quickly, the Xhosa lost confidence and fled east of the Fish River. Since the focus of Xhosa warfare was on the capture of productive resources such as women and livestock, they were profoundly shocked by this indiscriminate slaughter. Graham's men then seized cattle, destroyed crops and villages, and killed any Xhosa remaining in the area. By the end of February, 20,000 Xhosa had been expelled from the Zuurveld and the Boers began to return. Governor Cradock arranged for 22 military posts, manned by the Cape Regiment, to be built along the Fish River to prevent the Xhosa from reentering. The center of this defense system was a military camp

located around the center of the Zuurveld, and in August 1812 it was named Grahamstown.

The eviction of Ndlambe and his subjects east of the Fish River reignited conflict with Ngqika over the control of the Rharhabe Xhosa. In 1817 Ngqika gained the support of the Cape Colony by agreeing to the “Spoor Law” that sanctioned independent settler raids east of the Fish in search of allegedly stolen livestock. Not surprisingly, the main target of these attacks became Ndlambe’s people. Simultaneously, the rival Rharhabe leaders each adopted a spiritual advisor who mirrored their broader positions. Ngqika patronized Ntsikana, the first Xhosa Christian convert who preached peaceful coexistence with Europeans, and Ndlambe harbored Nxele who, though influenced by Christianity, prophesized that the Xhosa would drive out the white man.

In October 1818, Ngqika sent an army of 2,000 men, led by his eldest son Maqoma, south from the Tyume River to attack the great place of Ndlambe on the Buffalo River. During the march Maqoma’s force camped near the base of the mountain called Ntaba ka Ndoda. The next morning they continued their journey but observed a group of several hundred of Ndlambe’s warriors camped on the open plain scarred by swallow depressions known as Amalinde. Maqoma’s army charged but just as it seemed they would push their enemies back, several thousand warriors emerged from a nearby forest and rushed to join the fight. Many of these men were from the Gqunukhwebe and Gcaleka chiefdoms that had allied with Ndlambe. The clever ambush had been orchestrated by Mdushane, Ndlambe’s eldest son. The fighting lasted all day until Maqoma’s warriors eventually broke out of the encirclement and fled home. Maqoma was seriously wounded and narrowly escaped capture. Mdushane’s men, some of whom had horses and guns, pursued Ngqika’s defeated army and raided their communities, seizing around 6,000 cattle. At the Battle of Amalinde 300 of Ngqika’s men were killed, and as a result of this devastating defeat, he withdrew his great place and cattle north to the Winterberg Mountains.¹³

Ngqika appealed for British support, and in early December 1818 a colonial expedition led by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Brereton, military commander of the Cape’s eastern frontier, advanced into Ndlambe’s territory. Ndlambe withdrew his people from their villages into nearby forests where they were bombarded by two British artillery pieces. Facing little resistance, Brereton captured 23,000 cattle, gave 11,000 to Ngqika, and moved back into the colony. In January 1819 Ndlambe retaliated by launching numerous raids against settler farms west of the Fish River. Colonel Thomas Willshire was sent from Cape Town with a British regiment and Andries Stockenström,

now a landdrost like his late father, was instructed to organize a large commando. However, before the British could mount any operations, Ndlambe's warriors appeared to withdraw from the colony. In reality, they were massing in the Fish River bush in preparation for the most ambitious military endeavor in Xhosa history.

On April 21, 1819, at midday, around 10,000 Xhosa warriors from Ndlambe's Rharhabe and the Gqunukhwebe attacked Grahamstown that was now a small colonial settlement as well as military camp. A few days earlier a Xhosa interpreter, in reality a spy working for Ndlambe, had warned Willshire that the Xhosa were crossing the Fish River close to the coast and a British company was sent to patrol that area. This left Grahamstown with around 350 defenders, mostly British and Khoisan infantry, 5 cannon, and a few armed settlers. Sixty British soldiers were sent to defend the military barracks on the east side of the village, whereas the rest of the colonial force lined up on a slope in front of a stream, infantry in front and artillery on higher ground in back, to confront the Xhosa attackers. The Xhosa divided their large force into four divisions. Two of these, under Mdushane, attacked the main colonial defensive line. A third group under Nxele, who promised that colonial bullets would turn to water, assaulted the military barracks, and a fourth, the smallest division, moved around to the south to intercept anyone fleeing the settlement. Mdushane's men, who broke off the long shafts of their spears for close combat, made repeated attacks but took heavy casualties from colonial muskets and artillery firing grapeshot. Many of them were terrified by the smoke and flash of the firearms, and warriors were seen holding their hands or hide cloaks up to their eyes so they would not see it. The most intense fighting took place when Nxele's men penetrated the external walls of the barracks with some getting inside the hospital building. A wife of one of the British soldiers passed through the Xhosa, who did not molest women during war, carrying what looked like a baby but was in fact a sack of gunpowder to the beleaguered defenders. Willshire sent some Khoisan soldiers from the Cape Corps to reinforce the barracks. At this critical moment a party of 130 Khoisan buffalo hunters, Christian converts from Theopolis, arrived and their accurate shooting helped to drive off Nxele's division. After two and a half hours of fighting, the Xhosa retreated toward the Fish River but the British did not pursue for fear of leaving Grahamstown defenseless.

On the colonial side two men were killed and five wounded. Estimates of Xhosa losses vary considerably. Three days after the battle Willshire reported that 150 Xhosa corpses had been left behind, three weeks later a Cape Town newspaper claimed that 500 Xhosa had been killed, and 10 years later settler Thomas Pringle stated that 1,400 had died. In 1876 Charles Stretch, who