

The international context of the creation of the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885

Henryk Zins

Department of History
University of Botswana

Introduction

In 1884 Cecil Rhodes declared: "Bechuanaland is the neck of the bottle and commands the route to the Zambesi. We must secure it, unless we are prepared to see the whole of the North pass out of our hands... I do not want to part with the key of the interior, leaving us settled on this small peninsula"¹

For the same reason Rhodes called Bechuanaland the Suez Canal and in 1883 said: "I look upon this Bechuanaland territory as the Suez Canal of the trade of this country (sc. Cape Colony), the key of its road to the interior."² He also told the Cape parliament that that Suez Canal led to a land beyond the Transvaal (sc. later Rhodesia), which had great prospects. For him, Bechuanaland was the key to the interior and the little-known reaches beyond. "I solemnly warn this House—he said—that if it departs from the control of the interior, we shall fall from the position of the paramount state in South Africa, which is our right in every scheme of federal union in the future, to that of minor state."³

Cecil Rhodes desperately sought to keep the road northward free of interference from the Transvaal and Germany. His political activities, together with other factors, made the Cape parliament favour Bechuanaland's annexation by the Cape Colony. Urging the Cape parliament to prevent the Transvaal from acquiring the whole of the interior, he repeated his words about the role of Bechuanaland as the Suez Canal and the neck of the bottle that commands the route to the Zambezi from the South.⁴ In 1884 the British government, after some hesitations, accepted the notion that Bechuanaland was very vital to British. In 1885 general Charles Warren's expedition to Bechuanaland took place and the Bechuanaland Protectorate was created.

The question arises what was the wider political context of those developments? How dangerous was the Transvaal and German expansionist policy to British position in Southern Africa? Was Cecil Rhodes only expressing the British fears or was he rather looking for justification of British imperial plans in that area? Was the annexation of Bechuanaland mainly the British expansionist move or a defensive strategy against a possible Transvaal-German alliance?

In this short article I would like to examine the international background of British expansion which led to the creation of Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885. First I am going to discuss the role of missionaries in British imperialist policy in Southern Africa and then the clash of British, Transvaal and German interests in that part of Africa.

It is an interpretative article on a polemical issue. Its aim is not to discover new facts but rather to critically analyse and systematize the historiographical material from the point of view of the role of the Transvaal and German expansion in Southern Africa in the British decision to occupy Bechuanaland. The polemical edge of this article is mainly directed against the opinion of R. Robinson and J. Gallagher who thought that the danger of German-Transvaal alliance for Britain was only "imagined"⁵ and were minimizing that factor.

In this article also the missionary factor is more extensively examined than, for instance, in J. Butler's article of 1967⁶ which is practically the only earlier attempt to

discuss more directly the German and Transvaal expansion from the point of view of British policy in Southern Africa.

The Missionary Factor and British Imperial Interests in Africa

The 19th century Bechuanaland is a good example of the well known observation that quite often "the cross came before the flag" in European expansion in Africa at that time. Before political interests of Britain, the Transvaal and Germany clashed in that areas, the missionaries had been the first to "discover" Bechuanaland for the West. They also were the first to connect religious and imperialist aims of Europeans in their African expansion.

The relationship between Christian missions, African societies and European expansion has been examined many times since the pioneer work of Roland Oliver on the missionary factor in East Africa.⁷ Of similar importance are the studies of J. F. Ade Ajayi for Nigeria,⁸ Robert I. Rotberg for Northern Rhodesia⁹ and many others. For Bechuanaland let me quote A. Sillery's work on John Mackenzie¹⁰ and also a short article of Anthony J. Dachs on missionary imperialism which focuses on Bechuanaland.¹¹

There is no need here to examine the early and not very successful efforts of missionaries of the London Missionary Society who from the beginning of the 19th century, for instance James Read, John Campbell and other, were active in Bechuanaland. What is important to note is that throughout the 19th century the Tswana were showing suspicion and even hostility to radical change. In 1878 the southern Tswana even rose in arms against alien pressures on their life and customs, rejecting social and economic change which had followed missionary settlements. The Tswana were interested in developing trade with the newcomers but on condition that they would not preach the new religion and the new concept of life. They rejected any foreign attempts to change the old way of life. They easily discovered that foreign preaching was undermining the Tswana life, their social and political system and they feared that the missionaries aimed at changing their customs and beliefs. More successful they were in spreading better methods of irrigation and cultivation but this area is beyond our discussion here.

What should be, however, emphasized is the fact that the power to which the missionaries looked was the secular force of British imperialism.¹² Already since the middle of the 19th century they called upon the British government to preserve their mission field from Boer expansion from the Transvaal. David Livingstone directed his efforts to the north to occupy the interior before the Transvaal settlers could spread their influence there. For Livingstone such a pre-occupation was the only remedy.

It was the missionary concept of the 'Road to the North'¹³ that became so much connected with Rhodes' view of Bechuanaland as the 'Suez Canal' and which had such a strong appeal to the British and, first of all, Cape government. This was originally the missionary view that in terms of secular politics the road along the Bechuanaland mission stations was the key to the balance between British colonies and Boer republics.¹⁴ The view that missionary settlement, imperial security and commercial interests were associated with each other had, of course a strong appeal to the British public and government. It was David Livingstone who demanded the exercise of British power to protect the "English route to the North".

From the above remarks it is clear that British missionaries in Bechuanaland attached an empirical importance to the achievements of their missionary activities. When John Mackenzie, the celebrated humanitarian imperialist and missionary, wrote in 1876 that "the old feudal power of the native chiefs is opposed to Christianity,"¹⁵ he was strengthening British imperial aims with religious argumentation. He believed that to make Bechuanaland Christian, the missionary had to make it first British.

Of greater appeal for the British government was the discovery of gold in the Ngwato country in 1868 which made the missionaries more optimistic about the British direct involvement in Bechuanaland. John Mackenzie even called on Englishmen to fill the country and exploit its gold for imperial purposes. This celebrated missionary was thinking along economic lines when he wrote in 1868 that Bechuanaland "must and will be opened up. It contains gold."

In his popular book *Ten Years North of the Orange River*¹⁶ Mackenzie called for the British occupation of BaTawana territory for the protection of its inhabitants threatened, as he thought, by the Tati gold rush. This British missionary was also aware of another growing threat, that of Cape colonial and Boer filibuster land-grabbing. Mackenzie became very much involved in writing and lecturing to reach a British audience and in 1884 he was appointed a Deputy Commissioner for Bechuanaland. Because of his opposition to the Cape Colony government he was, however, soon dismissed by the High Commissioner in the Cape Colony, Hercules Robinson. Mackenzie was of the opinion that Bechuanaland should be in future ruled by the British not from the Cape Colony but directly from London and that not local freebooters but English farmers should develop the area. He succeeded in convincing General Charles Warren to his ideas and even accompanied him in 1885 on his expedition to establish the Bechuanaland Protectorate.¹⁷

The missionaries welcomed to Bechuanaland the British expedition of Charles Warren and it was the mission press that printed the notice calling on the Tswana to surrender. They argued that the intervention of a British administration was essential to peace, to preserve order between the races, to maintain the Road to the North from the Transvaal and to promote change. Using religious arguments they maintain that the British occupation of Bechuanaland was the precondition of its Christianization. Like in other parts of Africa, religious and political factors were closely interwoven in the missionary work also in Bechuanaland.

From the 1870s the missionaries to the Tswana had concluded that they had to do all they could to bring in the imperial government to promote as well as protect their religious work. But, at the same time, to quote A. J. Dachs, "the missionaries were as much agents of alien political expansion as traders, consuls and concession hunters. By their settlement they threatened independence; by their connexions they invited the imperial replacement of resistant African rule."¹⁸ Their main thrust was, of course, the spreading of Christianity and Christian education. But those other aspects and by-products of their activities should not be overlooked as sometimes was the case in older historiography.

The German-Transvaal Factor and British Expansion

Cecil Rhodes, the architect of British policy in Southern Africa, declared in 1897 before the Select Committee of the House of Commons, that he was really responsible for the conspiracy to overthrow the government of the Transvaal in 1895 because he was convinced that the Transvaal was trying to introduce the influence of another foreign power in the already complicated systems of South Africa. By another foreign power he meant Germany.¹⁹ The analysis of Transvaal and German policy in Southern Africa in the early 1880s allows to find the answer to the question: why Britain decided to create the Bechuanaland Protectorate and the Crown colony of British Bechuanaland in 1885?

The German-Transvaal danger for the British domination in Southern Africa was often underrated in older historiography which was taking official statements of the British government without much criticism. Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher have even argued that the German threat in Southern Africa was rather "imagined" in 1884 and that German interference had never been a serious menace to British supremacy in that region.²⁰ Of more moderate opinion is R. L. Lovell²¹ and those historians who think that

the German factor was important only in periods of acute conflict between Britain and Germany on Southern African issues. The last opinion seems to be much closer to the truth and the short period in 1884-5, when the future of Bechuanaland was settled by the British, belonged to such periods. It was also only at the end of the 19th century that the German interest in Southern Africa became important again and induced the British government to return to the policy of intervention in the Transvaal.

In the light of more recent research one has to agree with D. M. Schreuder²² that the German factor has been rather underrated than exaggerated in studies on Southern Africa for the period before 1885, especially in British historiography dealing with the British expansion in Southern Africa in the 1880s and the German-Transvaal connection.

Let us start from the examination of the Transvaal factor. During the period under discussion Afrikaner nationalism was on the rise and ideal of Youth Afrikaner Party was a united South Africa. In the same direction was working the Afrikaner Bond founded in 1879. Its aim was the establishment of a Federal Afrikaner Republic and the expulsion of the "English usurper" by arms and with the aid of foreign power, especially Germany by boycotting English people and English trade, by protecting the interests of the Boer farmers and by the assertion of the Afrikaans language.²³ The idea was to make the Transvaal "the paramount Power" and the eliminate from there the power of Great Britain.

In search of new farms the Boers penetrated on their own hand the border eastwards, and from 1882 onwards into Zululand, taking up land for farming. In due time they founded the New Republic there. On the western frontier they trekked into Bechuanaland, instigating the quarrels of rival Bathaping and Barolong chiefs. They were rewarded with grants of land by those whom they supported. Since the 1840s Dutch-speaking traders and hunters from the Transvaal already moved through parts of Eastern Bechuanaland, settling in Molepolole. Some of them seized the Bathaping land ruled by Mankurwane and created the independent Republic of Stellaland around Vryburg. They also took Barolong land near Mafikeng and called it the Republic of Goshen. In 1884 Paul Kruger, the ruler of Transvaal, tried to make Goshen part of the Transvaal.

All those movements made it clear to the British government that the Road to the North was in danger, that the expansion of the Transvaal threatened to cut the Cape Colony off from that connection—the only trade route to the north.

At the same time the German increasing interest in Southern Africa gradually started to endanger the British position there. In 1880, Sir Bartle Frere, High Commissioner for South Africa, sent to the Colonial Office in London an article of Ernst von Weber, a German writer and politician in which Weber was urging the establishment of a German colony in the Transvaal.²⁴ Weber suggested a German settlement in Matabeleland, where the Boers might join their German kindred in a colony free from British interference.

At the beginning of the 1880s the number of Germans in Southern Africa was still very small but already since the 1860s German entrepreneurs played an important role in the development of diamonds fields there. Of great interest is the case of F.A.E. Lüderitz,²⁵ a leading German merchant from Bremen very much interested in overseas trade, who established a post at Angra Pequena in South West Africa in 1883, and a year later tried to gain concessions at St. Lucia Bay, between Durban and Delagoa Bay.²⁶

The activities of German missionaries in south-east Botswana existed already in the middle of the 19th century but it was only in the 1870s that the German missionaries and merchants, especially from Hamburg and Bremen, began to take an interest in the Transvaal, encouraged by Ernst von Weber who in 1875, together with Lüderitz led a delegation to Bismarck to urge the establishment of a German colony in the Transvaal. They received, however, a discouraging reply because at that time Bismarck was not yet fully interested in German colonial expansion in Africa. Gradually he changed drastically his policy in this matter, using it also as an "election stunt" to divert the longest socialist

party in Europe from an electorate victory in 1884.²⁷ But the idea of Germany colonies in Southern Africa had already an increasing number of followers in Germany. Friedrich Fabri's book *Bedarf Deutschland Kolonien?* (Does Germany Need Colonies?), published in 1879 in Berlin, caused in Germany agitation for the acquisition of colonies and brought about the intensification of the colonial spirit.²⁸ In the same year German missionaries in South West Africa were trying to get Bismarck to make some annexation, the problem of Damaraland.²⁹ In 1882 the *Deutscher Kolonialverein* (German Colonial Society) and in 1884 the *Gesellschaft für Deutsche Kolonisation* (Society for German Colonisation) were organised and began to mobilise a wave of colonial enthusiasm in Germany and enlist financial support for colonial expansion. Their main argument was that German economy would be able to overcome stagnation only by securing colonial sources for raw materials and markets for German finished goods. Berlin and Hamburg imperialists were talking about "second India" for Germany in Southern Africa.

German intention of creating a powerful German colony in Central and Southern Africa began to appear in Berlin colonial propaganda already in 1880. It influenced early attempts to expand the German 'protectorates' along the coast toward the inland regions of the African continent. It was expected—writes a contemporary German historian Helmuth Stoecker from the University of Berlin—that those German attempts of obtaining vast colonies, uniting large stretches of African territories, would offer access to the markets of the African interior.³⁰ Britain's decision to create the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885 was made—writes Stoecker—"to forestall Germany."³¹

There is no need to mention about different German moves towards the acquisition of colonies in Southern Africa in the late 1870s and early 1880s. On 24th April 1884, Bismarck had instructed the consul at Cape Town that Lüderitz and his settlement were under the protection of Germany. A German warship patrolled the Cape coast. Yet the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Granville stated in the House of Lords on 12th May 1884 that Germany had not claimed sovereignty over any part of South Africa. But already a few weeks later, the German protectorate of South West Africa was declared. The danger of German-Transvaal alliance was becoming real.³²

It seems that the hesitant and not very consistent character of British foreign policy in Southern Africa in the early 1880s was the result of much broader international issues. The occupation of Egypt in 1882 and rivalry with France over colonies in Africa, conflicts with Russia in Asia, etc., "had absorbed British forces with the result that Britain was not interested in additional frictions or conflicts with Germany over comparatively unimportant matters."³³ Some historians in discussing political issues of Southern Africa at the end of the 19th century quite often forget about that broader context of British imperial policy.

From the British point of view, the real danger for the British position in Southern Africa was coming with the possible German alliance with Boers trekking west, which could form a Teutonic belt across the continent, making the future British expansion there very difficult if not impossible. The Transvaal delegation which in 1883 visited Germany, negotiated for a loan in Berlin. The German flag had been hoisted over the settlement founded by Lüderitz, Germans were preparing their interference in the Zululand. Bismarck invited the Boer delegates to Berlin and they were received by the Kaiser, to whom Kruger spoke about his own German origin. He also assured the German emperor that in case of need he would be faithful to the tradition of looking to Germany for help. The visit was followed by the conclusion of a treaty of amity and commerce between Germany and the Transvaal.

The creation of the German South West Africa (Namibia) in 1884 strengthened the seriousness of German presence in Southern Africa for British political plans and aspirations. The very presence of Germans in South West Africa gave a new dimension to the political geography of Southern Africa and seemed to undermine the balance of

power there, so much favourable earlier for Britain.³⁴ By bringing South-West Africa into the German Empire—writes D. M. Schreuder—Bismarck had soon drawn all South Africa into the vagaries of international relations and politics.³⁵ Such developments were making Britain more vulnerable to German and Boer challenge along the Indian Ocean rim of South Africa.

All these and other developments only convinced Cecil Rhodes and the British government more strongly about the need to counteract the German and Transvaal expansion. It led to a better understanding of the importance of Bechuanaland as the Suez Canal in that area.³⁶ A little earlier a kind of a Monroe Doctrine for Africa was developed in England in the interest of the British monopoly there. Already in 1875 Lord Carnarvon, the British Colonial Secretary wrote:

I should not like anyone to come too near us on the south towards the Transvaal, which must be ours; or the North too near to Egypt... To a considerable extent if not entirely we must be prepared to apply a sort of Munro doctrine for Africa.³⁷

In Cape Colony there were in 1884 more and more voices encouraging Britain to annex the whole territory between the western Transvaal border and that of German protectorate of South West Africa.³⁸ The Cape Colony pressed very hard to keep the Germans out of South West Africa and demanded the declaration of an English Monroe Doctrine for that region. Cecil Rhodes very strongly supported the idea of British expansion from the Cape towards the north. He saw, as was already mentioned, in the occupation of Bechuanaland the necessary move to safeguard the Road to the North and check German and Boer expansion.

Sir Hercules Robinson, the British High Commissioner in the Cape in those years, telegraphed on 24th September 1884 to London that in view of German annexations and other moves calculated to cripple Cape Colony, decisive measures should be taken for maintenance of British authority in South Africa. He thought that it was necessary to annex Bechuanaland at once.³⁹ Throughout the autumn of 1884 commercial groups in England, alarmed at the prospect of a railroad from the Transvaal to German South West Africa, also urged the British government to annex Bechuanaland—the territory between them.⁴⁰

For different diplomatic reasons London showed for quite a long time its reluctance to intervene and the British government was divided on this issue. Whereas some ministers, for instance Chamberlain and Harington, supported the demand for a protectorate in Bechuanaland, the British Cabinet as a whole was against it, indicating the risk of another Boer war. At the end of 1882 Lord Debry even declared: "Bechuanaland is of no value for us... for any Imperial purposes... it is of no consequence to us whether the Boers or Native Chiefs are in possession."⁴¹ From the point of view of global imperial British policy he had a different perspective and understanding of Southern African realities than Cecil Rhodes. Further developments of the next few years proved that it was Cecil Rhodes and not Lord Derby who was able to define more correctly British interests in Southern Africa. It was through Rhodes and Cape Colony that British interests in Southern Africa were better taken care of, especially when for different diplomatic reasons London could not act directly.

Basically, the British government did not want a clash with the Transvaal. It was mainly the Cape Colony government that was pressing in 1883 in London to check the absorption of Bechuanaland into the Transvaal using Cecil Rhodes' argument that through Bechuanaland ran the Road to the North, which was the only free access for the Cape Colony to the African interior. The British Government gradually accepted that argument and the decision of sending Warren's expedition to Bechuanaland in 1885 should be seen in this context.⁴² The advent of Germany on the coast and her claims in

the hinterland seemed to make the Transvaal more dangerous. Lord Derby, who some months earlier described Bechuanaland as worthless, now in 1884 agreed that it was of great importance as the territorial edge between the German hinterland and the Transvaal Republic. In this context, the occupation of Bechuanaland was undertaken to strengthen the British supremacy against further German and Transvaal expansion.

Conclusion

Warren's expedition and the creation of Bechuanaland Protectorate and British Bechuanaland in 1885 were the culmination of that complex international situation that was seriously threatening British interests in Southern Africa. In the light of the state of historical research, which we have tried to examine above, it seems correct to conclude that the German threat was not—contrary to R. Robinson and J. Gallagher—"imagined" only. British decision to intervene in Bechuanaland, strongly influenced by Cecil Rhodes and Cape Colony government, was a logical political consequence of different international pressures and developments in Southern Africa which were discussed above in this article. There is no doubt that London feared the potential German-Boer connection through Bechuanaland and was afraid that the very important Road to North might fall into alien hands. In 1888, Cecil Rhodes expressed very clearly the British motives of the occupation of Bechuanaland, saying that "if Bechuanaland was lost to us, British development in Africa was at an end."⁴³

In final conclusion we must agree with D. M. Schreuder that the advance of the British empire into Bechuanaland was certainly in response to German and Boer expansion in Southern Africa.⁴⁴ Of a similar opinion are Botswana scholars today. T. Tlou wrote that the reason for the British decision to create the Bechuanaland Protectorate was "not so much that the Batswana interests were really paramount in British strategy for Southern Africa, but rather they [the British] feared among other things the colonisation of Botswana by the Germans from Namibia"⁴⁵ In the popular *History of Botswana*, T. Tlou and A. Campbell express a similar view writing that Britain feared that the Germans and the Boers "would unite against her and form a colony which would join the German colonies in Namibia and Tanganyika and Boer republics in the Transvaal."⁴⁶

At the same time, the creation of the Bechuanaland Protectorate in 1885 became the "springboard" for the British empire in Zambesia and opened a new chapter in the history of British expansion in Southern Africa.

Notes & References

I would like to thank the German Embassy in Namibia, the Namibian-German Foundation in Windhoek, and the National Archives of Namibia for bibliographical information and copies of German works on Southern Africa.

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 33. I. Geiss, *German Foreign Policy, 1871-1914* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 49.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
 35. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
 36. A. Sillery, *Botswana: A Political History* (London: Methuen, 1974) pays very little attention to the international context of the creation of the Bechuanaland Protectorate. The same is true about A. Sillery, *Founding a Protectorate*, quoted above.
 37. C. F. Goodfellow, *Great Britain and South African Confederation, 1870-1871* (Oxford: University Press, 1966), where this problem is examined in detail.
 38. R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, *op.cit.*, p.206.
 39. *Ibid.*
 40. J. A. I. Agar-Hamilton, *op.cit.*, pp. 283-95 and D. M. Schreuder, *The Scramble for Southern Africa*, pp. 88ff. and 408ff.
 41. R. Robinson and J. Gallagher, *op.cit.*, p.203.
 42. K. Shillington, *op.cit.*, pp. 168ff.
 43. Vindex, *op.cit.*, p. 215.
 44. D. M. Schreuder, *The Scramble for Southern Africa*, p. 159.
 45. T. Tlou, 'Documents on Botswana History: How Rhodes Tried to Seize Ngamiland,' *Botswana Notes and Records*, 7, 1975, p. 61.
 46. T. Tlou and Campbell, *History of Botswana* (Gaborone: Macmillan, 1989), p. 148. See also I. Schapera, *The Tswana* (London: International African Institute, 1968), p. 16. His emphasis on the Boer expansion is correct but is only a part of the story.