

This is the last in a series of articles on:—

THE ROLE OF CAPITALISM IN SOUTH AFRICAN HISTORY

The Destruction of Tribal Society

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THE COLONISTS

WE stated in our previous article that the development of a new type of commodity farming in the Cape Colony created the need for a new class of wage labourers who could be exploited by capitalist farmers. The most important potential source of wage labour was the African population of the country. This population was however organised into a subsistence economy in which there was no need for wage labour. Tribal society was both politically and economically independent, an independence which was based on its possession of adequate means of production (land and cattle). This state of affairs was intolerable to the colonists. In order to obtain African labour to exploit they had to destroy the economic and political independence of tribal society. In order to convert the free African peasant into a chained wage worker they had to rob him of his land and his cattle so that he would have to work for the white boss in order to survive. If the African was to become a source of profits then the land which he ploughed and the cattle which he tended had to become the property of the farmer.

In 1834 the number of Africans in the employ of white colonists was still very small. But in 1858 over 33,000 African workers from the Transkei were already working in the Colony. To this figure must be added the population of the Ciskei which was almost entirely dependent on wage labour as a source of income. The destruction of the economic independence of the African had been accomplished by means of three ruthless wars of devastation. The Colonists had no chance of waging these wars with their own resources. Their role was merely that of auxiliaries for the armed forces of British Imperialism which was just as interested in the destruction of tribal society as the Colonists. Thus was born that close accord of interests between the class of South African exploiters and British Imperialism, an accord that was to determine the history of our country into our own days.

BRITISH IMPERIALISM

In discussing the interest of British Imperialism in the destruction

of tribal society in the nineteenth century, we must begin from the fundamental fact that each stage in the development of capitalism produces its own kind of colonialism. The colonialism of the Dutch East India Company was not the same as that of the nineteenth century British traders, and the latter was not the same as that of modern Imperialism.

There have in fact been three distinct stages in the development of colonialism, and South Africa has had to go through them all in turn. The first type of colonialism, practised by the Dutch East India Company, was associated with mercantile capitalism and primitive accumulation. It was based on methods of direct plunder of the colonial peoples. But with the rise of industrial capitalism in England a new type of colonialism appeared. The tremendous expansion of British industries led to an insatiable demand for markets for the new manufactured products. The colonies were therefore used as dumping grounds, and the robbery of the colonial peoples proceeded by means of the "peaceful" methods of trade.

The third, and final, stage of colonialism was reached in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when other industrial nations caught up with Britain. This led to the division of the world among the great capitalist powers and ushered in the period of modern Imperialism. At this stage it was not merely trade but the export of capital which provided the main economic basis for colonialism.

It is the second period of colonialism that we are concerned with in the present article. Industrial capitalism is the enemy of subsistence economy in every part of the world. In order to increase its markets industrial capitalism draws the whole world into its system of commodity production. In doing so it necessarily destroys all pre-capitalist forms of production in the course of time. It must transform the independent peasant into a buyer of commodities; in other words, it must separate him from the land, the cattle, etc. on which he subsists, so that he may become a worker for money. The economic basis and political independence of tribal society had to be destroyed, so that its members could appear on the market as sellers and buyers of commodities—sellers of the commodity, labour power, and buyers of the manufactured commodities of industrial capitalism.

These aims of British capitalism established a firm alliance of interests between itself and the colonial farmers. It is the destruction of tribal society by this alliance that provides the main theme of South African history during the major part of the 19th century. A great variety of methods was used to bring about this destruction.

Trade itself had a corrosive effect on the subsistence economy of tribal society. According to the Cambridge History, the traders "killed native industries, such as iron smelting, basket weaving, and pottery making. By so greatly increasing the range of native requirements, traders as well as missionaries threw upon the tribes a burden their subsistence economy could not bear."

All sorts of indirect methods were also used to draw the Africans into the commodity market and to create new needs for Britain's industrial products. A big programme of road building was embarked

upon. These roads facilitated both trade and warfare. The large force of Africans employed on road construction was paid in money and such products as sugar and coffee, in order to stimulate new wants. The wearing of European clothes was strongly encouraged. King-williamstown actually had a law to this effect. After the war of 1835 Col. Smith said to the assembled chiefs: "I was highly pleased with Dadazi, he came to me neatly dressed in clothes which he had purchased . . . why do you not all do so? This, England expects of her subjects." (Jan. 1836).

Other devices used to break up the old subsistence economy included the imposition of money fines and taxes on the African people wherever possible. At the same time, presents to chiefs usually consisted of manufactured articles, like ploughs, to encourage African buyers. Missionaries often insisted on European clothing in church and encouraged the use of other imported products. In fact, the role of the missionaries in the economic assault on subsistence society was a particularly dirty one.

This was apparent even to Governor Young, who, more outspoken than his successors, wrote about the Cape missionaries in 1800: "It appears to me that all the canting phrases of Godliness are a mere pretext . . . According to my ideas its object is clearly commercial . . . They deal largely in European goods which they supply their proselytes with to good profit." (Records of Cape Colony, Vol. 3, p.113). He quotes the case of one merchant who carried on his business in the disguise of "Treasurer and Director of the Society in South Africa for promoting the Kingdom of Christ!"

One of the most typical and powerful representatives of the forces for which commerce was equivalent to Christianity was Thomas Fowell Buxton, the great "philanthropist" and backer of Dr. Philip. His writings afford a good insight into the aims of nineteenth century colonialism. Thus, in 1840, he speaks of "bringing forth into the market of the world some scores of millions of customers who may be taught to grow the raw materials which we require, and who require the manufactured commodities which we produce . . . The principles then which I trust to see adopted by our country are these: Free trade, free labour." However, the society which he and his religious friends formed to carry out these purposes was not called a trading society; it went under the title of, "The Society for the Suppression of the Slave Trade and the Civilisation of Africa." In Buxton's own words, it was "designed mainly to diffuse among the African tribes the light of Christianity and the blessings of civilisation and free labour . . . and to unite with the above objects the pursuit of private enterprise and profit." (Letter to Trew.)

VIOLENT METHODS

The indirect methods of assault on African subsistence economy, which we have been considering, were in fact only auxiliary means subordinated to the method of direct and violent military attack. In order to draw any appreciable number of Africans into commodity economy it was necessary first to deprive them of their chief means of

livelihood, their land and their cattle. This, however, could only be accomplished by violent means.

The British army, aided by its colonial auxiliaries, effectively destroyed the material wealth of the Xhosa tribes in three gigantic marauding expeditions, referred to by our official historians as the sixth to eighth "Kaffir Wars," of 1835, 1847 and 1851. It was the turn of the Basutos next, and eventually the same fate overtook the Zulus and the tribes of the Transvaal. We may take the expeditions against the Xhosa as typical, setting the pattern for later attacks.

As regards the methods adopted against the Africans on these occasions, the Imperialist historian, Cory, has this to say: "The only really effective tactics . . . were to burn his huts and kraals, to drive off his cattle . . . and to destroy his corn and other food—in short, to devastate his country." (See *Rise of South Africa*, Vol. 5, p.365). The contemporary John Fairbairn wrote in the *Cape Times* in July 1835: "The conduct of the colonial forces has been unjust and ferocious beyond parallel . . . The atrocity of the proceedings of the Colonists is without parallel among civilised people. The Kaffirs are termed savages, but it is the Colonists who are most entitled to the appellation."

The material losses of the Africans were enormous. The old method of obtaining African land by trickery was replaced by methods of direct annexation and the expropriation of the tillers from the soil which had belonged to them for generations. The area between the Gamtoos and the Kei was taken away almost completely, and so later, was almost the whole of South Africa. In the expedition of 1835 alone almost 100,000 cattle were taken from the Xhosa people and in the two subsequent "wars" the same number again. So clear was the purpose of these expeditions that they were referred to as "Smithfield market cattle driving" by the participants themselves. The figures quoted above are based on official reports which undoubtedly underestimate the actual numbers of cattle taken. If we add to these figures the losses suffered by the Basutos, Zulus and others in subsequent operations, we arrive at a figure of not less than half a million cattle taken from the African people by the forces of colonialism.

It is a favourite myth of the history text books that the impoverishment of the Xhosa tribes was due to the Nongqause cattle killing incident. But we possess evidence that shows clearly that the destruction of the economic resources of the people had been effectively completed before the date of Nongqause. A census carried out in 1848 showed that in the Gaika district, for example, there were only 0.74 head of cattle per person and there was no longer any land for many of the inhabitants. Conditions in other districts were no better. And this was the state of affairs **before** the last great "Smithfield market driving!" Cory writes of the condition of the African people in 1852: "For fifteen months the Kaffirs had been driven from place to place; semi-starvation was rampant in consequence of the systematic destruction of the crops by the invading forces." (Vol. 5, p.450.) Compared to these factors Nongqause was a trivial matter; which was however

admirably suited to the purposes of those historians who wanted cover up the truth.

In any case, it is as well to remember that the agitation which preceded the cattle killing had a rational basis which is usually conveniently forgotten by our historians. It appears that the main content of the agitation was concerned with certain allies of the Africans, enemies of the British, who were expected to appear from afar and make an end to colonial rule. The cattle killing injunction was probably added to this by certain elements at a later date. Now, the expectation of help from outside was definitely based on news of the Crimean War against Russia on which Britain had embarked two years previously. This war resulted in a considerable reduction in the British garrison at the Cape, a fact which had certainly not escaped the notice of the Africans. With the hope of despair they exaggerated the power of these new enemies of Britain; but they were objectively correct in regarding them as their allies.

The pronouncements of the highest British authorities at the time make it quite clear that their destruction of African society was the result of a deliberate policy, and that they were very much aware of their economic aims in South Africa. Colonial Secretary Grey always gave most explicit instructions to the governors as to the policies they were to pursue against the Africans. Thus he writes to Smith at the time of "Smithfield market": "I cannot too strongly express my opinion that . . . you should not allow hostilities to be concluded by anything but their (the Africans') complete subjection and unconditional surrender." In 1849 he had given the reasons for such a ferocious policy: "I regard it as desirable that these people (the Africans) should be placed in circumstances in which they should find regular industry necessary for their subsistence"; in other words, they had to be deprived of their livelihood in order to be converted into wage workers. Moreover, he warned Smith to take care "that the natives do not by their payments and by occupations unlimited in extent acquire extensive vested interests in land to the prejudice of European settlers." The class alliance between British Imperialist and white farmer was to be maintained at the cost of the African.

Smith faithfully relayed the aims of his employers to the African people. At the close of the second big campaign he announced his aims: ". . . it is an important object to teach the Kaffirs the use of money and to clothe themselves." And to the defeated chiefs he said: "You shall have traders and you must teach your people to bring gum, hides, timber and so on to sell, that you may learn the art of money and buy for yourselves. You must learn that it is money which makes people rich." (Jan. 1836.)

The British Government spent millions of pounds financing the marauding expeditions that ruined the African people. Without this backing these expeditions could never have had the success they did. But the expenditure of huge sums on wars of destruction was thought justified by the promise of bigger profits which the breaking of African economic and political independence would bring to British capitalism.