'The Horsemen are coming': Rethinking the Pondoland Rebellion

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During the 1950's, a series of peasant revolts took place in the South African homelands. Whilst they occurred from Zeerust to Witzieshoek, by far the largest was the Pondoland rebellion of 1959-61. It culminated in the declaration of a State of Emergency in the region and was only crushed when large numbers of police and troops were rushed to the area. It was significant not only on account of its size, but also owing to the emergent social movement which led it, and the broad nature of the protest which included not only armed conflict, but also consumer boycotts.

The Course of the Rebellion

The roots of the rebellion lay in land reclamation programmes, the introduction of the Bantu Authorities system, and, more specifically, changes in the nature of tribal authority. The elevation of Botha Sigcau to the Chieftainship of East Pondoland was fiercely opposed as many Mpondo believed he was not a legitimate hereditary tribal chief.1 Instead, they believed, the titled should have devolved to his half brother, Nelson Sigcau. Furthermore, Chief Sigcau had accepted the system in 1958, which, inter alia, had resulted in the increase of his own salary from £700 to £1500 per year.² The first indication of widespread dissatisfaction occurred at Lusikisiki in East Pondoland at a meeting called by Sigcau. As a sign of no confidence, one Mngqingo gave the traditional insult of displaying his buttocks to the Chief.³ The meeting ended in chaos, with the police being summoned. Mngqingo fled to the forests, where he gathered a large peasant army. When the police appeared to have given up the hunt launched for him, Mngqingo re-emerged and disbanded his impi, only to be arrested and banished to the district of Cala. Sigcau subsequently attempted to call a meeting in the Lusikisiki district, where he was again faced with sustained opposition and was forced to flee. Many more junior chiefs had accepted new positions in the Bantu Authority system without going through the formality of consulting their followers, which led to even greater opposition to the system. During 1958, representatives of all Pondo districts were invited to attend a meeting called by Sigcau, and the then Minister of Bantu Administration, De Wet Nel. The Minister appeared to offer the Mpondo a degree of local autonomy. However, in practice power remained concentrated in the hands of Sigcau. As a result of this, by 1959 the tribal ties of authority fell under increasing strain.7

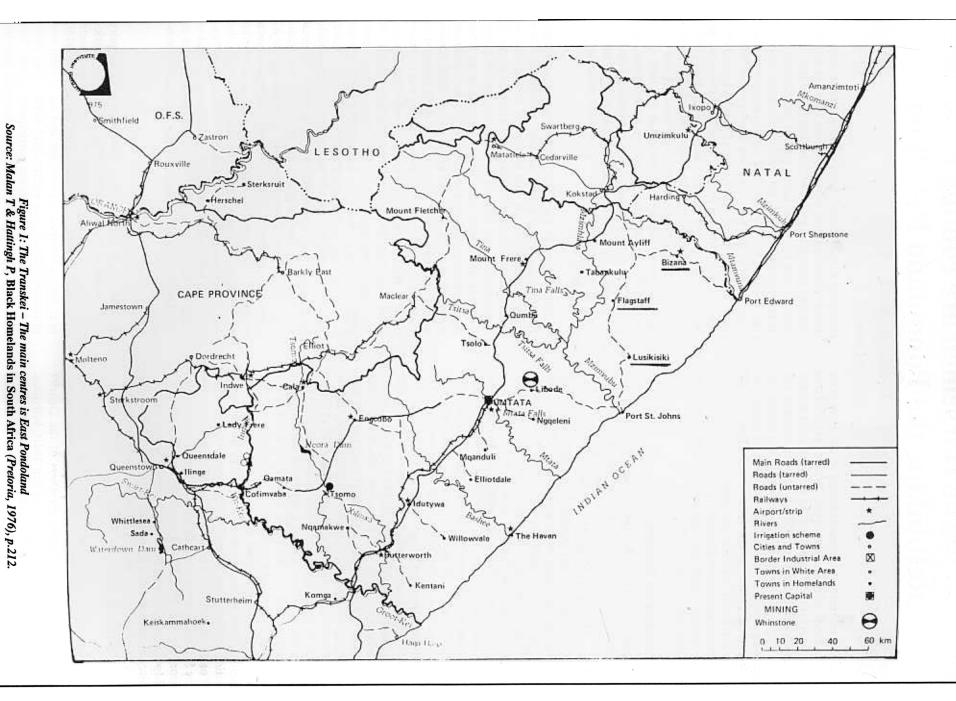
The tensions came to a head when, at the Isikelo location in the district of Bizana, the people demanded that Mr. Saul Mabule and other members of the District Authority should come and explain their activities. However, Mabule failed to arrive at the agreed time. One Sunday, several weeks later, followed by women

chanting a traditional Xhosa war-cry, a large impi entered Mabule's kraal, burnt down his huts and slaughtered his livestock.8 Police were rushed to the area. However, it was too late. Large groups of tribesmen, on horseback and on foot, gathered on the steep ridges of the hills of Pondoland. The social movement that emerged from this gathering was known as the "Mountain", or alternatively, the Kongo (probably named after the anti-rehabilitation peasant movement that emerged in the neighbouring Zentisi district in the late 1940's) with a leadership cadre, known as the "Hill". Apparently, the "Mountain" was run on cell lines. 9 At the time, government spokesmen played down the role of the movement, alleging that it was run by "agitators" as a cover for extorting money. 10 The "Mountain" soon established itself as an alternative political structure, assuming responsibility for a range of tasks, including the allocation of land.11

Shortly thereafter, the "Hill" summoned a local magistrate to come and hear the peasantry's grievances. When he refused to deal with this movement, widespread violence broke out, with the kraals of alleged informers, collaborators and "kulaks"12 being torched.13 Lodge suggests that those who were targeted were often warned in advance with the message "the horseman are coming", in order that they might vacate their homes, before the burnings.¹⁴ Nonetheless, many perished in their kraals. On June 1960 a mass meeting was called on Ngquza Hill, probably by "Kongo" leadership figures. Harvard aircraft bombed the meeting with teargas. At this, the crowd began to fly white flags. Nonetheless, policemen burst out of the surrounding bush, at least two firing with Sten automatic rifles into the crowd. Eleven were killed, whilst 23 were arrested and variously sentenced to imprisonment and/or floggings. 15 The dead were buried in shallow graves at the scene of the meeting.16 At the trial of those arrested, the presiding magistrate said that the police action "was excessive, even reckless".¹⁷ The inquest into the deaths of the eleven revealed that five were shot in the back. Once again, the use of Sten guns was condemned as "reckless" and "unjust". 18 It was found that the police action amounted to culpable homicide and the matter was handed over to the Attorney-General, who, however, declined to prosecute.

A subsequent Departmental Commission of Enquiry into the disturbances claimed that the Mpondo's grievances were devoid of substance. These findings were rejected by a meeting of 6000 tribesmen at Imzia Hill, near Bizana. Instead, a consumer and tax boycott was instituted. During the weekend of 5-6 November 1960, at a mass meeting, which the participants called "The Pondo People's Court", held at Ndhlovu Hill, near Bi-

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zana, it was decided to extend the consumer boycott to all the towns in the district. ²⁰ It was also decided that people should not enter the towns, but should rather conduct all their purchases at trading stores in the reserves and locations. However, the boycott seems to have been really effective only in Bizana. The boycott was extended to include recruiting by the Native Recruiting Corporation. However, a corporation spokesperson claimed that recruiting continued at a "normal" level. ²¹ On Monday, 7 November, a Bizana magistrate convened an official meeting of all tribesmen in the area. Nobody seems to have attended the meeting, other than government officials and the press. ²²

The next major outbreak of violence took place in the Flagstaff District. A strong police patrol was ambushed and stoned by over 500 Mpondo.²³ The police retaliated by firing over the heads of the crowd. Two policemen were injured in the clash and one tribesman was arrested.²⁴ Prior to the ambush, a number of telephone poles in the area had been cut down. Meanwhile, five more kraals of suspected "collaborators" were burned.

On the 19 November 1960, the "Hill" called another mass meeting, this time at Ngqindile, near Flagstaff. Vukayibambe Sigcau, the half-brother of Paramount Chief Botha Sigcau, informed the police of the meeting. He then participated in the police operation to disperse the meeting, personally firing shots into the crowd. ²⁵ In addition, the police fired teargas. At least one protester was killed. ²⁶ That night, an impi attacked Vukiyamba's kraal in the National location, near Flagstaff. However, the assault was repelled. The following evening, the assault was renewed. This time it succeeded and the Chief and two of his Indunas were slain in their beds. Two others were wounded in the assault. In addition, ten huts in the kraal were burned.

The Chief was probably the most important representative of the Bantu Authorities system in the area, next to his half-brother.²⁷ Many of the other Chiefs who had supported the system had already fled the area and were in hiding in other parts of the homeland.²⁸ The attack represented the climax of a week of unprecedented levels of violence in the area. In revenge, followers of the slain chief burned five other kraals in the region. Meanwhile, the consumer boycott of Bizana traders entered its third week.²⁹ The following evening, six more kraals of suspected supporters of the Bantu Authorities system were torched.³⁰

During the following week, the pogrom against suspected agents of the system was further extended to 'kulaks'. Over fifty huts belonging to wealthy peasants were torched.³¹ There were also violent clashes in the Bala location near Flagstaff. Police reinforcements were rushed to the area, whilst military spotter aircraft monitored any gatherings on the hills.³² Despite the renewed violence, the consumer boycott began to crumble. As one trader remarked, "it was as dead as a dodo".³³ This was most probably due to increased prices demanded by rural traders, profiting from the boycott.

The renewed violence led to the near-total collapse of the tribal authority system.³⁴ There was an attempt to maintain the boycott, but relax it to only encompass traders with Afrikaans names.³⁵ It is unknown how successful this attempt was.

Finally, on 30 November 1960, a partial State of Emergency was declared in five districts of Pondoland namely Bizana, Flagstaff, Mount Ayliff, Takankulu and Lusikisiki. Entry without a permit was prohibited to all except residents of the area, medical doctors, clergy and government officials. This meant that the national road



Figure 2: The "Mountain Gathers" (Source: The Port Collection)

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Figure 3: After the Burnings (Source: The Port Collection)

from Kokstad to Umtata was effectively closed to most traffic. The maximum fine a chief could levy was increased from £25 to £50,36 whilst they were also given the power to banish tribesmen. These additional powers were never revoked. De Wet Nel placed the sole blame for the rebellion on "communist agitators" from outside the Transkei who "were doing all they can to wreck ... the positive development of Bantu Authorities in the area".37 In addition, he asserted that the newspapers assisted the campaign, by alleging that there was widespread dissatisfaction with the Bantu Authorities system.38 Subsequently, the police conducted sweeping raids in the district against tax evaders. As a result of this action, many boycotters resumed paying their taxes. 39 A "Bantu Home Guard" was established under the control of the chiefs. Through the Emergency measures and police action, the resistance was effectively suppressed. By January 1961, the consumer boycott had ended, whilst in Lusikisiki hundreds of tribesmen were forced to apologise publicly to Chief Botha Sigcau. 40 However, by 20 April 1961, 524 alleged participants of the rebellion remained in police detention.41

Explaining the Rebellion

Ostensibly, the rebellion was triggered in reaction to the introduction of the Bantu Authorities system. In practice, the causes were far more complex. Certainly, there was a great deal of resistance to the measures, first accepted by the Transkei General Council in 1955, and implemented during the following year.

The new system was, as J. Copelyn notes, intended to place certain "categories of administration in the hands of the bantu", while retaining ultimate authority in the hands of central government.⁴² It brought into being a hierarchy of tribal, district, regional and territorial authorities, whilst greatly increasing the powers of the chiefs, officially described as the "true leaders of the Bantu people" 43. In essence, the new system resulted in increased taxes, a shift away from elected authority, and a reduction in popular participation.44 The system was imposed from outside with little consultation. As Hammond Tooke notes, there was no correspondence with earlier structures of chiefly power.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the autonomy of headmen was sharply reduced. Whilst it would be erroneous to blame the widespread opposition as largely due to misunderstandings or a failure to explain the system fully,46 there certainly was a widespread belief that land reclamation schemes were part of the Bantu Authorities system. According to Chief Maksonke Sigcau, (the half-brother of Chief Botha) the first signs of trouble came in 1957, when a local magistrate, Mr. Midgley, called a meeting to explain the new system.⁴⁷ At the meeting, the magistrate met with sustained opposition, with members of the crowd claiming that the system was simply another name for land reclamation.⁴⁸

The government's introduction of the reference book (dompas) system entailed considerable additional expenditure for migrant workers. Workers had to travel to their regional magistrate's office at the start of a contract and return there on its completion. In addition, the contract system meant that workers were not assured of continued employment in the same job. This seems to have greatly increase dissatisfaction with the new status.

A further cause of discontent seems to have been the personal style of authority exercised by Chief Botha and some of his subordinate chieftains. It seems to have been commonly perceived that Chiefs had been reduced to carrying out the orders of central government, rather than being figures of authority in their own right.⁴⁹ According to a member of the Isikelo tribal authority, Obedia Pinyana, the people believed "a good chief did not go against the wishes of his people", which Botha Sigcau was perceived to have done.⁵⁰ Several white traders in the region claimed that, on a widespread scale, Chiefs demanded bribes from their followers, in return for services rendered.⁵¹ As Mayer notes, "complaints about the chiefs' injustice, corruptibility and the high bribes people had now to offer were heard on all sides."52 This was particularly the case as far as the allocation of land was concerned, where chiefs would often extract bribes from several individuals in return for the same piece of land.⁵³ It was also argued that the increase in the judicial powers of chiefs had served to fuel dissatisfaction. The findings of the Departmental Committee noted that there was "considerable unhappiness' over changing structures of authority, whilst it

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"appeared that the appointment (of Botha Sigcau) went against the wishes of the majority of people".⁵⁴ In his evidence to the Commission, Mr. T. Ramsay, the Chair of the Native Appeal Court and Former Chief Magistrate in the Transkei, stated that Botha Sigcau "did not enjoy the confidence of his people", and made little effort to "keep in touch with them".⁵⁵ There seems to have been considerable dissatisfaction with the removal of chiefs opposed to the Bantu Authorities system, whilst many Mpondo continued to favour the claim of Nelson to the Paramountcy over that of his half-brother Botha.

To fund the Bantu Authorities System, the General and Local Tax of £1/10 per annum had been replaced by a new General Tax of £1/15. In addition, the Stock Rate tax per head of livestock had been increased. Typical of the wider dissatisfaction with increased taxes was the meeting in the courtyard of the local BAC Office, where 300 representatives of the Imzizi tribe, representing 17 000 people, claimed that they had "originally agreed to pay tax", which had now been increased without their consent. So As representative of the Bizana Village Management Board, Dr. Riekert, claimed that part of the dissatisfaction with the new taxes stemmed from a popular belief that they had been put up at the instigation of Chief Botha Sigcau "to pay his £2400 salary a year". So

A factor which could well have served to exacerbate tensions was the behaviour of the Magistrate of the Lombani location, Mr. Fenwick. Evidence to the Departmental Commission, including the testimony of the local district surgeon, alleged that he suffered from paranoia, was frequently drunk, deliberately tried to provoke tribesmen and attempted to persuade the police to fire into crowds of protesters in the location.⁵⁸

Whilst there is only limited evidence to support or disprove the allegations, certain witnesses to the commission claimed that increasing uneployment in the region had resulted in many of the youth being unable to find jobs as migrant labourers.⁵⁹

However, the greatest trigger of discontent seems to have been land reclamation programmes. It seems that the violence was triggered off by announcements by the authorities that kraals were going to be concentrated in certain areas, whilst certain land would become plantations. 60 As noted earlier, there was widespread suspicion of land rehabilitation schemes, with many believing that their land would now be taken away from them. As one refugee from the fighting, William Nene, noted, "we Pondo are respectful of our born chief and we hold feasts for him, but on this occasion we held a feast for him (where he tried to persuade the people to accept land rehabilitation) and he was forced to run away".61 An important exception to the general dissatisfaction with the chieftainship system was in West Pondoland. Most of the Libode and Ngquleni accepted land rehabilitation and did not assume a major role in the rebellion owing the efforts of their popular chief, Victor Poto.⁶²

Attempts to separate arable from grazing land seem to have been especially unpopular. Furthermore, it was

commonly held that the introduction of inoculations had been responsible for increased numbers of deaths amongst cattle.⁶³ During the rebellion sipping tanks were destroyed and a government tent associated with the rehabilitation scheme was burned. In addition, the building of fences in an attempt to restrict grazing was widely opposed. In his evidence to the Commission, James Eayers, a trader in the Port St Johns area, recalled the case of an individual who had attempted to fence his lands, only to have his neighbours cut his fences and drive his stock into his lands.⁶⁴ It was widely believed that any land rehabilitation would reduce stock holdings, and it was therefore fiercely opposed. As a ordinary resident of Lusikisiki claimed, "the land has always been stable by the act of God", regardless of farming practices. 65 As Haines and Tapscott note, whilst "land reclamation measures were in the abstract not unreasonable. they usually served to reinforce the already precarious existence of the vast majority of the peasantry."66

As noted above, several government spokesmen blamed the Mpondo rebellion on outside "agitators". Nonetheless, there seems to have been very little evidence of direct involvement by the ANC or other political movements. In his evidence to the Departmental Commission of Enquiry, a rebel, one W. Mpahla, claimed that he had joined the uprising on the orders of his Chief. There was "no Congress here".67 A police sergeant, B.S.H. Lehkuhle, claimed that neither the ANC nor the PAC had proved capable of gaining a foothold in the area. Mbeki claims that towards the end of the rebellion,68 the Mountain leadership adopted the Freedom Charter.⁶⁹ However, there is no proof whatsoever that they ever did so. Whilst the government claimed that outside influences were responsible, they were never able to produce concrete evidence of this.

In an in-depth interview with a Mpondo migrant turned political activist, 'M', Beinart records his claim that he influenced a leading councillor of the Amadiba Chief, Theophilus Tshangala, to rebel, by showing him ANC literature. 70 However, Beinart suggests that these claims may have been rather exaggerated, as Tshangala also seems to have feared the effects of stock-culling on his own sizeable herds.⁷¹ In evidence to the Departmental Commission of Enquiry, one witness (himself a victim of the kraal burnings) claimed that whilst the 'young people' were interested in the ANC, they in fact acted in a spontaneous fashion, without any outside prompting or leadership.⁷² Nonetheless, a half-brother of Botha blamed the violence on an 'evil element', probably brought in by migrants under the instigation of the ANC.73 Meanwhile, the head of the Amangautyana tribal authority blamed both the ANC and evangelists operating in the area.⁷⁴ Certainly, many migrants from Pondoland worked in rural Natal, the scene of much political protest in the years 1958-9, whilst there seems to have been growing support for the Congress Alliance in that region. As Beinart and Bundy note, the rebellion seemed strongest in those areas which had large migrant populations. 75 However, other factors could well have prompted the migrants to support the rebellion, including the pass laws and a possible rise in unemployment. Whilst there does seem to have been a definate Congress

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presence in Pondoland, there is little evidence that it was one of the major causes of the rebellion.

The 'Mountain' as a Social Movement

Thus, there seems to have been only limited involvement of established political organizations in the revolt. This raises the question as to whether the 'Mountain' can be considered a social movement. The 'Mountain' was concerned both with "defending communities" and opposing the actions of central government. It opposed the process by which chiefs were reduced to little more than tools of central government. It generally sought to defend and preserve a vanishing way of life, based on traditional notions of grazing rights and a deep-suspicion of the imposition from outside of land rehabilitation schemes, or even vetinary controls, where this had taken place without adequate consultation or explanation. Furthermore, there was a com-

mon belief that Chief Botha Sigcau had 'sold' the country to the central government.⁷⁷

Castells asserts that the closure of almost all legitimate channels of protest (and thus any chance of conflict becoming institutionalised) provides the basis for the rapid expansion of social movements. Again, the Bantu Authorities system resulted in a shift away from consultation an representation, an ultimate centralization of power in central government and the erosion of traditional mechanisms of accountability.

A further issue in understanding the 'Mountain' phenomenon is its millennial dimension. As Eric Hobsbawm notes, "even those who accept exploitation, revolution and subjection as the norm of human life dream of a world without them: a world of equality, brotherhood and freedom, a totally new world without evil. Rarely is this more than a dream. Rarely is it more than a apocalyptic expectation, though in many societies the millennial dream persists, the Just Emperor will one day appear, the Queen of the South Seas will one day land (as in the Javanese version of this submerged hope), and all will be changed and perfect".⁷⁹ In the case of the "Mountain", "some say we are waiting for Russia, who will come and free us from the yoke of the government".80 There is little doubt that this was the Russia acting in the role of a deus ex machina, rather than the result of an acceptance of Marxism-Leninism.

Radicals or Conservatives?

The question as to whether the rebellion can be considered a radical outburst or a conservative reaction deserves some further consideration. Beinart and Bundy argue that it is vital to address the question of class, rather than simply dismissing it as "a wilful and recalcitrant tribal movement".⁸¹ Whilst clearly the rebellion was clearly a far more complex phenomenon than simply the latter, the question of it being based solely in class tensions is open to contention.

Certainly, the wealthy were one of the primary targets of the rebels. One of the witnesses to the Commission, Columbus Madikizela, noted that "not one kraal that is shabby is burnt out. Even if the poor owners are sympathetic to the Bantu Authorities (system), they are not burn out (sic)".82 Widespread bribery in the allocation of land had resulted in the poor, during the period leading up to the rebellion, rarely getting new grazing allotments. A Loteni Location resident and member of the local tribal authority received an anonymous letter that stated "we are natives like yourselves, but we are suffering great hardships all the time, while you are living in comfort".83

The Rev. Madikaza, a local minister who was forced to flee from the rebels, argued that "every leader or educated person is blacklisted". 84 However, the division was



Figure 4: One of the Arrests (Source: The Port Collection)

not only on class lines. At least one minister had his house burned down by leading members of his own congregation. Many teachers seem to have favoured the rebels. Whilst the wealthy generally sided with the authorities, several prominent community leaders joined the rebels. Haines et al note that, the fact that there were some chiefs who rejected the system "served to channel opposition to tribal authority and identification of popular and unpopular chiefs; the legitimacy of the chieftainship system was seldom challenged." Furthermore, those with large stock holdings could have been prejudiced by land reclamation programmes. 87

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In understanding social protest and change, Castells argues that class analysis on its own is not sufficient there is a need to develop a more comprehensive view of social causality able to account for the full diversity of the human experience.88 Whilst the poor and unemployed seem to have played a major role in the rebellion, it is also important to note that not all the wealthy benefitted by government actions such as land reclamation projects. As Moll notes, by the late 1950's, the chiefs had used their new powers to extend their control over the rural relations of production. 89 Meanwhile, the shift of power away from elected and representative structures to the chiefs denied the black petit-bourgeois (such as teachers) in the area any channels to voice their grievances. Haines and Tapscott suggest that intellectuals often had links with either the Cape African Teachers Association and/or the All-African Convention, which helped draw the linkages between rural and broader political struggles.90 Even in terms of tribal practice, the powers of the chiefs had been substantially increased.91

This need not imply that the rebellion was simply a reactionary outburst, but rather draws attention to its multiclass dimensions. Certainly, many of the demands expressed were conservative - especially as far as access to the land and the introduction of modern agricultural technology was concerned. However, as Hobsbawm notes, "a social revolution is no less revolutionary, because it takes place in the name of what the outside world considers 'reaction' against what it considers 'progress".92 It has been argued that the contradictory nature of the resistance and its "defence of traditional practices helped maintain the ideological terrain on which the institution of chieftaincy (albeit distorted) could survive."93 Nonetheless, despite its complexity, the rebellion represented one of the most sustained challenges to the Bantu Authorities system. Even its millenarial dimension need not be seen as parochial, but rather as "a primitive version of reform and revolution".94

Conclusion

Sparked off by resistance to the Bantu Authorities system, the Mpondo rebellion was the result of a combination of factors, ranging from dissatisfaction with widespread corruption to changes in traditional agricultural practices. The movement that emerged to lead the rebellion, the "Mountain", reflected some of this complexity. A true social movement, it sought to preserve a vanishing way of life, yet mount a sustained challenge to the wider socio-political order. Whilst the rebellion, was ultimately crushed, with the representatives of the Bantu Authorities System emerging with strengthened powers, it demonstrated the force of the opposition both to changes in rural relations of production and to increasingly autocratic governmental structures.

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