



AFRICA

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Far from helping Menelik recover lost territory, Britain and France actually connived to assist Italy in launching a campaign to annex Ethiopia. The Italians had already seized the Red Sea port of Massawa (in 1885, making Ethiopia a landlocked state) and negotiated a treaty which ceded Eritrea to Italy in return for recognition of the Emperor's sovereignty over the rest of Ethiopia, a very large loan, and the right to import goods (including arms and ammunition) through Italian territory.

Now they wanted more. Seizing on misinterpretations arising from differences in the Amharic and Italian texts of the treaty, Italy picked a quarrel and self-righteously invaded northern Ethiopia in 1890. Menelik protested but left the Italians alone while surreptitiously importing large quantities of firearms—from France and Russia in particular—and consolidating Ethiopia's other boundaries. In September 1895 he moved a force of 100,000 men, most of them armed with modern weapons, to the north. After a number of skirmishes, the final confrontation was fought out at Adowa, on 1 March 1896.¹³

The Ethiopians inflicted a terrible defeat on the Italians. During the battle, 3,179 Italian officers and men were killed, plus about 2,000 locally recruited troops. Many more were wounded, or missing. In all, the Italians lost over 40 per cent of their fighting force, and all their *matériel*, including artillery and 11,000 rifles.¹⁴

But the price of victory had been high. The Ethiopians had lost about 7,000 dead and 10,000 wounded. Menelik pondered the possibility of seizing the initiative and pressing forward to reclaim Eritrea. But supply lines were already overextended, food was scarce, and water supplies uncertain. Furthermore, the men were tired of fighting. Menelik led his army back to Addis Ababa, where a peace treaty signed in October 1896 recognized the absolute independence of Ethiopia and the sovereignty of its emperor.¹⁵

Eritrea remained an Italian colony despite Menelik's defeat of the Italian forces but Ethiopia was the only African state that successfully resisted European colonization. Ethiopia's mountainous and deeply rifted terrain, and the unifying influence of a powerful Christian hierarchy, doubtless were potent weapons in Menelik's armoury; but this did not diminish his achievement.

Elsewhere on the continent resistance was crushed, either by conquest or by attrition. Leaders were killed or captured and deported. Lat Dior of Cayor (in modern Senegal) was killed in action; Samori Ture, who waged an eight-year campaign (1891–98) of "remarkable tenacity and military skill" against the French in West Africa, was captured and deported to Gabon, where he died two years later. Abushiri, the hero of East African resistance, was captured and hanged by the Germans; Lobengula of the Ndebele died in flight, Prempeh I of the Asante was exiled to the Seychelles, along with Mwanga of the Buganda

and Kabarega of the Bunyoro. Behazin of Dahomey and Cetswayo of the Zulu were also banished and spent the remainder of their lives in exile.¹⁶

But even though "the thin white line" was weak and African resistance strong, advances in European technology rendered the outcome inevitable. First, the introduction of quinine as a prophylactic (in the 1850s) reduced European deaths from malaria by about four-fifths, making military operations possible in even the most badly infested regions; second, European troops were armed with superior weapons—which the signatories to the Brussels Convention of 1890 had agreed not to sell to Africans.¹⁷

While African troops were armed mostly with early-nineteenth-century muskets which took at least one minute to load, had a range of only eighty metres, and misfired at least three times in ten, European troops had breech-loading rifles from 1866 and repeating rifles from 1885. But it was the Maxim machine-gun, patented in 1884, which delivered the most deadly blow. Capable of firing eleven bullets a second into the ranks and defences of opposing forces, the Maxim gun devastated the palisaded strongholds of East Africa and the baked-mud defences of the savanna.¹⁸ With the Maxim gun on their side, French forces suffered not a single casualty when driving the Tukulor from Segou in modern Mali, and the British killed at least 10,800 Sudanese at Omdurman with a loss of just 49 dead.

In a poem entitled "The Modern Traveller," Hilaire Belloc summed up the military situation in Africa with a blunt couplet:

Whatever happens, we have got
The Maxim Gun, and they have not.¹⁹

Neither spears nor stockpiles of antiquated muzzle-loading muskets could challenge Europe's new death-dealing technology. "War now be no war," a bewildered Fulani warrior complained,

I [see] Maxim-gun kill Fulani five hundred yards away, eight hundred yards far away. It no be blackman . . . fight, it be white man one-side war. It no good . . . slave-raiding not so bad as big battle where white man kill black man long way away. Black man not get near kill white man. If he come near he die.²⁰

THE EARLY COLONIAL period has been described as a time that fostered widespread war and revolutionary change in Africa. Some accounts of African history during this period amount to a paean glorifying African resistance to

Start

colonial conquest,²¹ which at least corrects the widely shared assumptions of passive submission found in other accounts:

Backed by their wealth and increasing mastery of science, the European kings and soldiers carried all before them. In doing so they found it easy—and convenient—to treat Africans either as savages or as helpless children.²²

Africans were neither helpless nor savages, but nor were they universally committed to resisting the colonial invasion. Episodes of resistance and conquest occurred in parts of nearly every African colony, it is true, but they were mostly small actions, spread over twenty or even thirty years. Conquest, where it occurred, was but one aspect of a slow process of infiltration, much of which was completely bloodless.²³

In fact, given the fragility of the thin white line and the feeble resources at the disposal of the new rulers, any attempt to characterize the early colonial period in terms of conquest and resistance-to-conquest is seriously misleading.²⁴ More relevance must be attached to the indigenous and wholly inescapable dynamic which determined not only the fates of Africans and colonists alike, but also the entire course of human evolution—human ecology.

Demographers have estimated that by 1900 the human population of Africa was about 129 million. It had been a long slow haul from the 47 million who had populated the continent in 1500.²⁵ During that same 400 years the world population (excluding Africa) had risen from just under 500 million to almost 2,000 million. Africa's growth rate was restrained by the slave trade to some extent, but more consistently by the interrelated constraints of food production, labour availability, fertility, and disease. African populations could not escape from the cycles of boom and bust described in a previous chapter, even though the introduction of more productive crops and labour-saving technology had loosened the shackles a little.

Of the 129 million people estimated to have been living in Africa at the turn of the century, fewer than half of 1 per cent (645,000) could have been actively engaged in resisting the colonial invasion—even if all recorded instances had occurred simultaneously. Lengthy periods of time and vast expanses of territory were totally unaffected by resistance movements, to the extent that resistance clearly has more relevance as a feature of Africa's modern political history than as a determinant of the colonization process.

While resistance leaders became the heroes of national independence movements, the majority of the African population continued as before, more concerned with the day-to-day imperatives of life than with the grievances of their leaders. And the period in question—the thirty years from 1885 to

1914—saw Africa afflicted by a series of debilitating natural calamities. Calamities of biblical proportions. It was as though nature had contrived to weaken Africa just when Europe decided to take over the continent.

CLIMATE HAS ALWAYS BEEN an extenuating factor in African history. As has been described in previous chapters, a series of better-than-average rains induced population growth, human dispersal, and the establishment of villages on previously uninhabitable land. A return to average rainfall conditions inevitably caused distress. Worse-than-average rains brought disaster.

During the twenty-five years from 1870 to 1895, forty-six of the seventy-two locations from which evidence of past rainfall has been recovered (from soils, lakes, and river beds) experienced better-than-average conditions; six had average rainfall, twenty worse-than-average. The Angola coast and parts of modern Nigeria were dry; conditions in southern Africa were variable; but the Rift Valley, the Sahara, most of West and North Africa were exceptionally wet. Wells dotted the western Sahara (indicating the presence of ample grazing), and stands of forest grew to maturity in now barren regions of Mauritania and Mali.²⁶

This was a period when Lake Chad overflowed, the Senegal and Niger rivers regularly rose to flood deep depressions along their banks, and the farming potential of these rejuvenated lands was unconstrained. Wheat production on the Niger Bend region during the 1870s and 1880s thrived to the extent that grain was exported to surrounding areas. Harvests were also continually good in southern Algeria, Namibia, and the otherwise dry regions of South Africa and Botswana. The wetter conditions are confirmed by numerous quantitative measurements of rainfall and river flow. Rainfall at Freetown in Sierra Leone, for instance, averaged 35 per cent above the mean from 1880 to 1895; the Nile discharge was also 35 per cent greater.

Thus the generation that would bear the brunt of the colonial incursions was born and reared during a period of exceptionally good conditions across the greater part of the continent. Consequently, the human population was in a boom phase. Numbers were increasing—perhaps even to the extent that the labour demands of the new economic regime might have been satisfied without causing labour shortages at home.

The good times peaked in the early 1890s, however, and thereafter conditions deteriorated dramatically. A map of Africa illustrating the rainfall data for the period from 1870 to 1895 bears a healthy flush of plus signs, indicating better-than-average rainfall, but the map for the following twenty-five years is covered with minuses. Only the Canary Islands and Morocco enjoyed better-than-average rainfall between 1895 and 1920; conditions were average in

Tunisia and variable in Mozambique, but at sixty-two locations across the continent, worse-than-average conditions prevailed.²⁷

With the sudden decline in rainfall, lake levels fell, and river flow decreased dramatically. Drought was severe and widespread. The Sahel, well-watered for the previous twenty-five years, suffered year after year of extreme drought. After years of plenty, harvests failed in farming regions extending from Algeria and West Africa southward to the Kalahari. In southern Africa, unrelieved desiccation prompted the establishment of a commission to investigate the problem,²⁸ and there was even a serious proposal to flood the Kalahari (by canal from the Okavango River) in an attempt to replicate the beneficial effects of the "good" rains.

The instances seem repetitive, but the correlations between climatically induced upheavals in the human condition and major shifts in the course of African history are clearly more than mere coincidence. At the turn of the century, an African population weaned on the surpluses of previous decades was severely weakened by the austerities of drought. No wonder resistance to European colonization was not more widespread and sustained. For many Africans "the thin white line" might have seemed more like a lifeline than the advancing boundary of an aggressive foreign power, especially where it was represented by missions, churches, and schools speaking of a future in which the crushing cycles of the past would be relieved by European technology.

But worse-than-average rainfall was not the only calamity visited upon African communities during the early years of the colonial period. There were even greater catastrophes ahead. Indeed, drought and famine were merely the cruel preliminaries which increased susceptibility to the plagues that would follow.

Outbreaks of cholera, typhus, and smallpox were frequent among malnourished communities during the 1890s; jiggers (sand-fleas), introduced from Brazil via Angola in 1872, had spread along caravan routes across the continent to Zanzibar by 1898, causing terrible suffering to people who were unaware of the danger. "Those who keep the feet clean and look after them daily to extract the jiggers have little to fear from this plague," Oscar Baumann, a German traveller noted in 1894.

But left to themselves, the sand-flea larvae will grow to the size of a pea and finally break out into sores. When these appear in large numbers, they can cause blood poisoning and death. Particularly in areas where the sand-flea occurs for the first time, and where its treatment is unknown, its impact can be devastating. We saw people in Uzinza [in modern Tanzania] whose limbs had disintegrated. Whole villages had died out on account of this vexation.²⁹

From the Great Lakes region, where it was reported that smallpox had already reduced communities to one-tenth of their former size, jigger infestations had left the survivors incapable of working in their fields—harvests were left standing.³⁰ Elsewhere, locusts destroyed crops before they ripened.³¹ But the worst plagues were yet to come.

Rinderpest (cattle plague) killed between 90 and 95 per cent of all cattle in Africa between 1889 and the early 1900s. The disease first appeared in Somaliland in 1889, and spread rapidly to Ethiopia, the Sudan, and East Africa. Via the pastoralists of the Sahel corridor, the plague spread to West Africa; along the Rift Valley its devastation extended to the Zambezi, where its advance was halted—but only temporarily. The plague finally crossed the river early in 1896, and by March it was advancing through Bechuanaland [Botswana] at a rate of forty kilometres a day. Attempts to halt its progress through South Africa failed; by November 1897 the entire continent had been infected and even the animals on Cecil Rhodes's estate at Groote Schuur, near Cape Town, were dying of rinderpest.³²

The rinderpest epidemic has been described as the greatest natural calamity ever to befall the African continent, a calamity which has no parallel elsewhere.³³

RINDERPEST IS A VIRUS DISEASE, very highly contagious, which manifests itself in fever, restlessness, loss of appetite, blood-stained diarrhoea, and often also nasal discharges. Some animals become maniacal; the great majority weaken rapidly and die.

The disease has a long history.³⁴ It was known in classical times and appears to have maintained a reservoir of infection on the Russian steppes, from where epidemics periodically erupted to ravage the Middle East and Europe. The disease was brought to sub-Saharan Africa by Italian forces in 1889, with infected cattle they had imported from India, Aden, and South Russia to feed the troops then occupying Massawa. Indigenous herds, previously unexposed to the disease, lacked immunity and rapidly succumbed.

The epidemic seemed to gain in virulence as it spread—and cattle were not the only animals affected. Sheep and goats died too, and the disease virtually eliminated the populations of buffalo, giraffe, and eland that it touched, as well as most small antelopes, warthogs, bush pigs and forest hogs.

In South Africa, drastic attempts were made to halt the advance of the disease. A barbed-wire fence, 1,600 km long, was erected from Bechuanaland to the Cape-Natal coast. Police patrolled the fence; disinfection points were established; infected herds were shot—in all, over £1 million was spent on try-

ing to keep the disease out of South Africa,³⁵ but to no avail. Two and a half million cattle died south of the fence; 5.5 million south of the Zambezi, and up to 95 per cent of the cattle in Africa's pastoral regions generally.³⁶

The consequences of the catastrophe were immense, not only in terms of the hunger and death that followed the plague, but also in terms of its social and psychological impact. Cattle had long been accepted as a form of wealth that endowed their owners with power and authority. Almost instantaneously, rinderpest swept away the wealth of tropical Africa. The pastoralist aristocrats were ruined. Where herds had numbered tens of thousands, only a few dozen animals survived.³⁷ "The Fulani [in northern Nigeria], having lost all, or nearly all their cattle, became demented: many are said to have done away with themselves. Some roamed the bush calling imaginary cattle."³⁸

Oscar Baumann, who travelled through German East Africa in 1891, estimated that fully two-thirds of the Maasai population died as a consequence of the rinderpest. And nothing of the old way of life was left to sustain the survivors:

There were women like skeletons with the madness of starvation in their eyes . . . "warriors" scarcely able to crawl on all fours, and apathetic, languishing elders. These people would eat anything, dead donkeys were a feast for them, but they did not disdain bones, hides, or even the horns of slaughtered cattle . . . They were refugees from Serengeti, where the famine had depopulated entire districts, and came as beggars to their kinfolk at Mutyek who had barely enough to feed themselves.³⁹

Captain Frederick Lugard, assigned to establish the British colonial presence in East Africa, observed similar tragedies on his journeys through Kenya and Uganda in the early 1890s: "Constantly we pass dead buffaloes, carcasses a month or so old," he noted in his diary, "mostly uneaten by vultures or hyenas . . . Everywhere in the paths are heaps of bones and horns of dead oxen. It must have been a fearful plague which has swept away every living ox, and the wild buffalo also . . ."

With their cattle dead, Lugard saw surviving pastoralists eating "the fruits of the earth" which previously they had never touched.

They are forced to cultivate but apparently don't know how and produce nothing. Otherwise by this time their fields would be full of crops. It is close on six months since I passed and there is now no more food than there was then. They are half-starved-looking, most of them, and covered with Itch—a most filthy looking disease which is most contagious, and the body is covered with open sores like smallpox.⁴⁰

Lugard concluded: "The enormous extent of the devastation [rinderpest] has caused in Africa can hardly be exaggerated."⁴¹ Africans everywhere were starving, diseased, demoralized, and anxious to be friends. But Lugard, the arch-colonialist, saw an advantage in their plight. The rinderpest, he wrote "in some respects . . . has favoured our enterprise. Powerful and warlike as the pastoral tribes are, their pride has been humbled and our progress facilitated by this awful visitation. The advent of the white man had not else been so peaceful."⁴²

Furthermore, the removal of domestic cattle from Africa's tropical savannas and wooded grasslands weakened not only the African capacity to resist the colonial invasion; it also weakened their ability to reoccupy the ranges they had formerly exploited—with demographic consequences which compounded the already devastating effects of the rinderpest.

No animals clip the sward as thoroughly and as repeatedly as a herd of cattle under human control. From the first flush of green until the dry season inhibits growth, cattle keep the pastures very short indeed. It has been shown that heavy grazing actually stimulates some grasses to produce more fodder (see page 102), but it also ensures that no tree or shrub seedling can grow to more than a few centimetres in height. Their rootstocks develop formidably however, and in the absence of grazing animals the plants rapidly make up for all the growth they lost in previous years. In the space of a season or two, pasture is transformed into wooded grassland and shady thornbush thickets, creating ideal conditions for the spread of the tsetse fly.

The empire of the tsetse, initially diminished by the drastic reduction of the wild-animal populations which constituted the primary food source of the blood-feeding fly, recovered ground quickly as wild-animal numbers rose again, and extended its domain across the wooded grassland that had grown up in the absence of cattle. The wild animals carry trypanosomes in their bloodstream, the parasite which causes sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis) in people and domestic stock (see page 242). The wild hosts are immune, but when parasites are ingested by a feeding tsetse and released into the bloodstream of a vulnerable person or animal from which the fly takes a subsequent meal—then the consequences often are fatal.

It has been shown that since the constituent elements of the trypanosome cycle—the parasites, the wild-animal hosts, the insect vector, and the potential victims—have coexisted in Africa for a long time, they must have achieved a degree of ecological balance that ensured the survival of all parties.⁴³ The disease was endemic, but people and their cattle kept it under control. Pioneers were exposed to the acute dangers of the disease, but as people and their herds established control, contact with the vector was reduced. Individuals and cattle

undoubtedly continued to contract sleeping sickness from time to time, but the frequency was relatively low.

Rinderpest disrupted that ecological balance, and in susceptible regions the tsetse fly not only extended its range but the hitherto merely endemic sleeping sickness rapidly assumed epidemic proportions. The disruption was especially marked in the former cattle-herding regions of East Africa. Cases of trypanosomiasis were reported from southern Uganda in 1902,⁴⁴ and the disease had killed 200,000 people by 1906⁴⁵—two of every three who had survived the famine, pestilence, and war that had afflicted the area during the previous decade.

THE OVERALL EFFECT of the rinderpest plague, compounded by initial depopulation and the subsequent migration of people away from the bite of the tsetse fly, was to shift the ecological balance of the trypanosome cycle heavily in favour of wild-animal populations. In East Africa in particular, areas which had once supported large and relatively prosperous populations of herders and farmers were transformed into tsetse-infested bush and woodland inhabited only by wild animals.⁴⁶ Influential conservationists during the colonial period assumed that these regions were precious examples of African environments which had existed since time began. Believing that the plains and woodlands packed with animals were a manifestation of "natural" perfection, untouched by humanity, they declared that they should be preserved from human depredation for evermore. Most are now tsetse-infested game parks: Serengeti, the Masai Mara, Tsavo, Selous, Ruaha, Luangwa, Kafue, Wankie, Okavango, Kruger . . .

CHAPTER 50

Rebellion

OPPRESSIVE POLICIES INSPIRED rebellions against German colonial rule in South-West Africa and German East Africa (present-day Tanzania). Both were crushed, giving Africans a sobering foretaste of the ruthless methods they would see employed in the Boer War (1899–1902) and the First World War (1914–18).

At the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, Major H.G. von Doering, the Governor of German Togo, suggested to his counterparts in the British Gold Coast (now Ghana) and French Dahomey (now Benin) that Togo should be declared neutral, so that their African subjects would be spared the spectacle of Europeans fighting one another.¹ A nice sentiment, especially as expressed by a representative of the nation which had killed tens of thousands of Africans in the suppression of rebellion in its own colonies during the past decade.

There is a difference between resistance and rebellion, and while African resistance to the colonial invasions had sputtered ineffectively, its drive and potential dissipated by a lack of shared conviction and coordinated effort, oppressive colonial regimes tended to unite people. This was especially so in the German colonies, where even those who had suffered the recent calamities of drought, rinderpest, famine, and disease were roused to rebellion by the European determination to wrench some reward from their investment in Africa. Oppressed to the point beyond which there was nothing more to lose, the people rebelled.