

Imperialism and capitalist development

In this extract from her book 'The Accumulation of Capital', the Polish-German Marxist Rosa Luxemburg — murdered by counter-revolutionary armed forces under a Social-Democratic government in 1919 — analysed British imperialism in South Africa.

In the Cape Colony and the Boer Republics, pure peasant economy prevailed until the sixties of the last century. For a long time the Boers had led the life of animal-tending nomads; they had killed off or driven out the Hottentots and Kaffirs with a will in order to deprive them of their most valuable pastures. In the eighteenth century they were given invaluable assistance by the plague, imported by ships of the East India Company, which frequently did away with entire Hottentot tribes whose lands then fell to the Dutch immigrants.

When the Boers spread further East, they came in conflict with the Bantu tribes and initiated the long period of the terrible Kaffir wars. These god-fearing Dutchmen regarded themselves as the Chosen People and took no small pride in their old-fashioned Puritan morals and their intimate knowledge of the Old Testament; yet, not content with robbing the natives of their land, they built their peasant economy like parasites on the backs of the Negroes, compelling them to do slave-labour for them and corrupting and enervating them deliberately and systematically. Liquor played such an important part in this process, that the prohibition of spirits in the Cape Colony could not be carried through by the English government because of Puritan opposition.

There were no railways until 1859, and Boer economy in general and on the whole remained patriarchal and based on natural economy until the sixties. But their patriarchal attitude did not deter the Boers from extreme brutality and harshness. It is well known that Livingstone complained much more about the Boers than about the Kaffirs.

The Boers considered the Negroes an object, destined by God and Nature to slave from them, and as such an indispensable foundation of their peasant economy. So much so that their answer to the abolition of slavery in the English colonies in 1836 was the 'Great Trek', although there the owners had been compensated with £3,000,000.

By way of the Orange River and Vaal, the Boers emigrated from the Cape Colony and in the process they drove the Matabele to the North, across the Limpopo, setting them against the Makalakas. Just as the American farmer had driven the Red Indian West before him under the impact of capitalist economy, so the Boer drove the Negro to the North.

The 'Free Republics' between the Orange River and the Limpopo thus were created as a protest against the designs of the English bourgeoisie on the sacred

right of slavery. The tiny peasant republics were in constant guerilla warfare against the Bantu Negroes.

And it was on the backs of the Negroes that the battle between the Boers and the English government, which went on for decades, was fought. The Negro question, i.e. the emancipation of the Negroes, ostensibly aimed at by the English bourgeoisie, served as a pretext for the conflict between England and the republics. In fact, peasant economy and great capitalist colonial policy were here competing for the Hottentots and Kaffirs, that is to say for their land and their labour power.

Both competitors had precisely the same aim: to subject, expel or destroy the coloured peoples, to appropriate their land and press them into service by the abolition of their social organisations. Only their methods of exploitation were fundamentally different.

While the Boers stood for out-dated slavery on a petty scale, on which their patriarchal peasant economy was founded, the British bourgeoisie represented modern large-scale capitalist exploitation of the land and the natives. The Constitution of the Transvaal (South African) Republic declared with crude prejudice: 'The People shall not permit any equality of coloured persons with white inhabitants, neither in the Church nor in the State'.

In the Orange Free State and in the Transvaal no Negro was allowed to own land, to travel without papers or to walk abroad after sunset. Bryce tells us of a case where a farmer, an Englishman as it happened, in the Eastern Cape Colony

had flogged his Kaffir slave to death. When he was acquitted in open court, his neighbours escorted him home to the strains of music. The white man frequently maltreated his free native labourers after they had done their work — to such an extent that they would take to flight, thus saving the master their wages.

The British government employed precisely the opposite tactics. For a long time it appeared as protector of the natives; flattering the chieftains in particular, it supported their authority and tried to make them claim a right of disposal over their land.

Wherever it was possible, it gave them ownership of tribal land, according to well-tried methods, although this flew in the face of tradition and of the actual social organisation of the Negroes. All tribes in fact held their land communally, and even the most cruel and despotic rulers such as the Matabele Chieftain Lobengula merely had the right as well as the duty to allot every family a piece of land which they could only retain so long as they cultivated it.

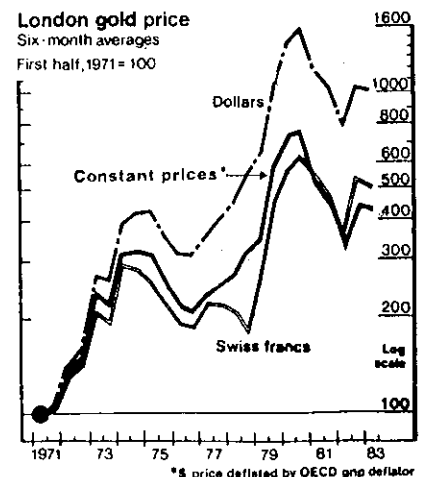
The ultimate purpose of the British government was clear: long in advance it was preparing for land robbery on a grand scale, using the native chieftains themselves as tools. But in the beginning it was content with the 'pacification' of the Negroes by extensive military actions. Up to 1879 were fought nine bloody Kaffir wars to break the resistance of the Bantus.

British capital revealed its real intentions only after two important events had taken place: the discovery of the Kimberley diamond fields in 1869-70, and the discovery of the gold mines in the Transvaal in 1882-5, which initiated a new epoch in the history of South Africa.

Then the British South Africa Company, that is to say Cecil Rhodes, went into action.

Public opinion in England rapidly swung over, and the greed for the treas-

How gold prices have changed





Rosa Luxemburg

ures of South Africa urged the British government on to drastic measures. South Africa was suddenly flooded with immigrants who had hitherto only appeared in small numbers — immigration have been deflected to the United States. But with the discovery of the diamond and gold fields, the numbers of white people in the South African colonies grew by leaps and bounds: between 1885 and 1895, 100,000 British had immigrated into Witwatersrand alone.

The modest peasant economy was forthwith pushed into the background — the mines, and thus the mining capital, coming to the fore. The policy of the British government veered round abruptly.

Great Britain had recognised the Boer Republics by the Sand River Agreement and the Treaty of Bloemfontein in the fifties. Now her political might advanced upon the tiny republics from every side, occupying all neighbouring districts and cutting off all possibility of expansion.

At the same time the Negroes, no longer protected favourites, were sacrificed. British capital was steadily forging ahead.

In 1868, Britain took over the rule of Basutoland — only, of course, because the natives had 'repeatedly implored' her to do so. In 1871, the Witwatersrand diamond fields, or West Griqualand, were seized from the Orange Free State and

turned into a Crown Colony. In 1879, Zululand was subjected, later to become part of the Natal Colony; in 1885 followed the subjection of Bechuanaland, to be joined to the Cape Colony. In 1888 Britain took over Matabele and Mashonaland, and in 1889 the British South Africa Company was given a Charter for both these districts, again, of course, only to oblige the natives and at their request. Between 1884 and 1887, Britain annexed St. Lucia Bay and the entire East Coast as far as the Portuguese possessions. In 1894 she subjected Tongaland.

With their last strength, the Matabele and Mashona fought one more desperate battle, but the Company, with Rhodes at the head, first liquidated the rising in blood and at once proceeded to the well-tried measure for civilising and pacifying the natives: two large railways were built in the rebellious district.

The Boer Republics were feeling increasingly uncomfortable in this sudden stranglehold, and their internal affairs as well were becoming completely disorganised. The overwhelming influx of immigrants and the rising tides of the frenzied new capitalist economy now threatened to burst the barriers of the small peasant states.

There was indeed a blatant conflict between agricultural and political peasant

economy on the one hand, and the demands and requirements of the accumulation of capital on the other. In all respects, the republics were quite unable to cope with these new problems.

The constant danger from the Kaffirs, no doubt regarded favourably by the British, the unwieldy primitive administration, the gradual corruption of the *volksraad* in which the great capitalists got their way by bribery, lack of a police force to keep the undisciplined crowds of adventurers in some semblance of order, the absence of labour legislation for regulating and securing the exploitation of the Negroes in the mines, lack of water supplies and transport to provide for the colony of 100,000 immigrants that had suddenly sprung up, high protective tariffs which increased the cost of labour for the capitalists, and high freights for coal — all these factors combined towards the sudden and stunning bankruptcy of the peasant republics.

They tried obstinately and unimaginatively, to defend themselves against the sudden eruption of capitalism which engulfed them, with an incredibly crude measure, such as only a stubborn and hide-bound peasant brain could have devised: they denied all civic rights to the *uitlanders* who outnumbered them by far and who stood for capital, power and the trend of the time. In those critical times it was an ill-omened trick.

The mismanagement of the peasant republics caused a considerable reduction of dividends, on no account to be put up with. Mining capital had come to the end of its tether. The British South Africa Company built railroads, put down the Kaffirs, organised revolts of the *uitlanders* and finally provoked the Boer War. The bell had tolled for peasant economy.

In the United States, the economic revolution had begun with a war, in South Africa was put the period to this chapter. Yet in both instances, the outcome was the same: capital triumphed over the small peasant economy which had in its turn come into being on the ruins of natural economy, represented by the natives' primitive organisations.

The domination of capital was a foregone conclusion, and it was just as hopeless for the Boer Republics to resist as it had been for the American farmer. Capital officially took over the reins in the new South African Union which replaced the small peasant republics by a great modern state, as envisaged by Cecil Rhodes' imperialist programme. The new conflict between capital and labour had superseded the old one between British and Dutch.

One million white exploiters of both nations sealed their touching fraternal alliance within the Union with the civil and political disfranchisement of five million coloured workers. Not only the Negroes of the Boer Republics came away empty-handed, but the natives of the Cape Colony, whom the British government had at one time granted political equality, were also deprived of some of their rights.

And this noble work, culminating under the imperialist policy of the Conservatives in open oppression, was actually to be finished by the Liberal Party itself, amid frenzied applause from the 'liberal cretins of Europe' who with sentimental pride took as proof of the still continuing creative vigour and greatness of English liberalism the fact that Britain had granted complete self-government and freedom to a handful of whites in South Africa.