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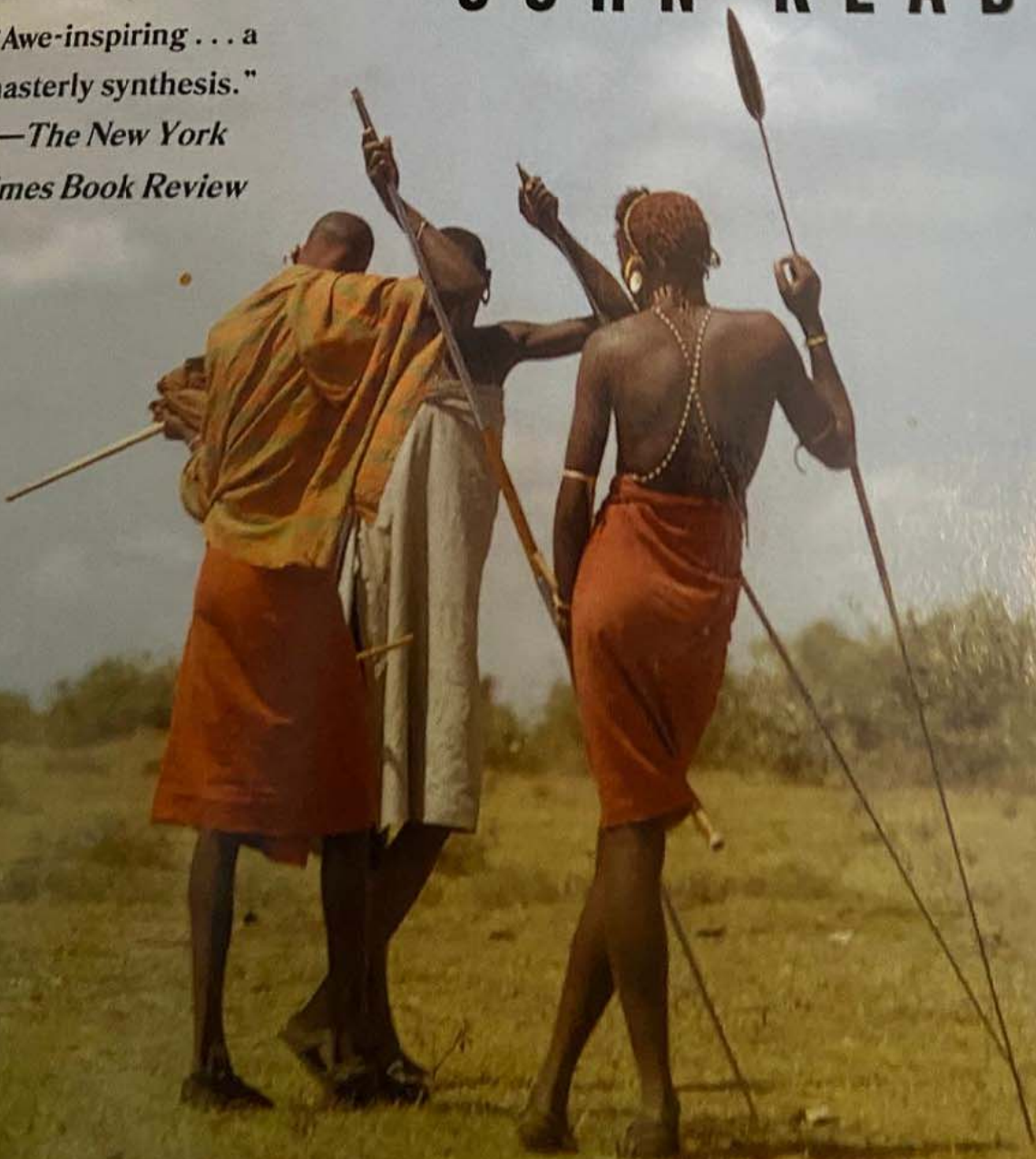
A Biography of the Continent

AFRICA

JOHN READER

"Awe-inspiring . . . a
masterly synthesis."

—*The New York
Times Book Review*



CHAPTER 49

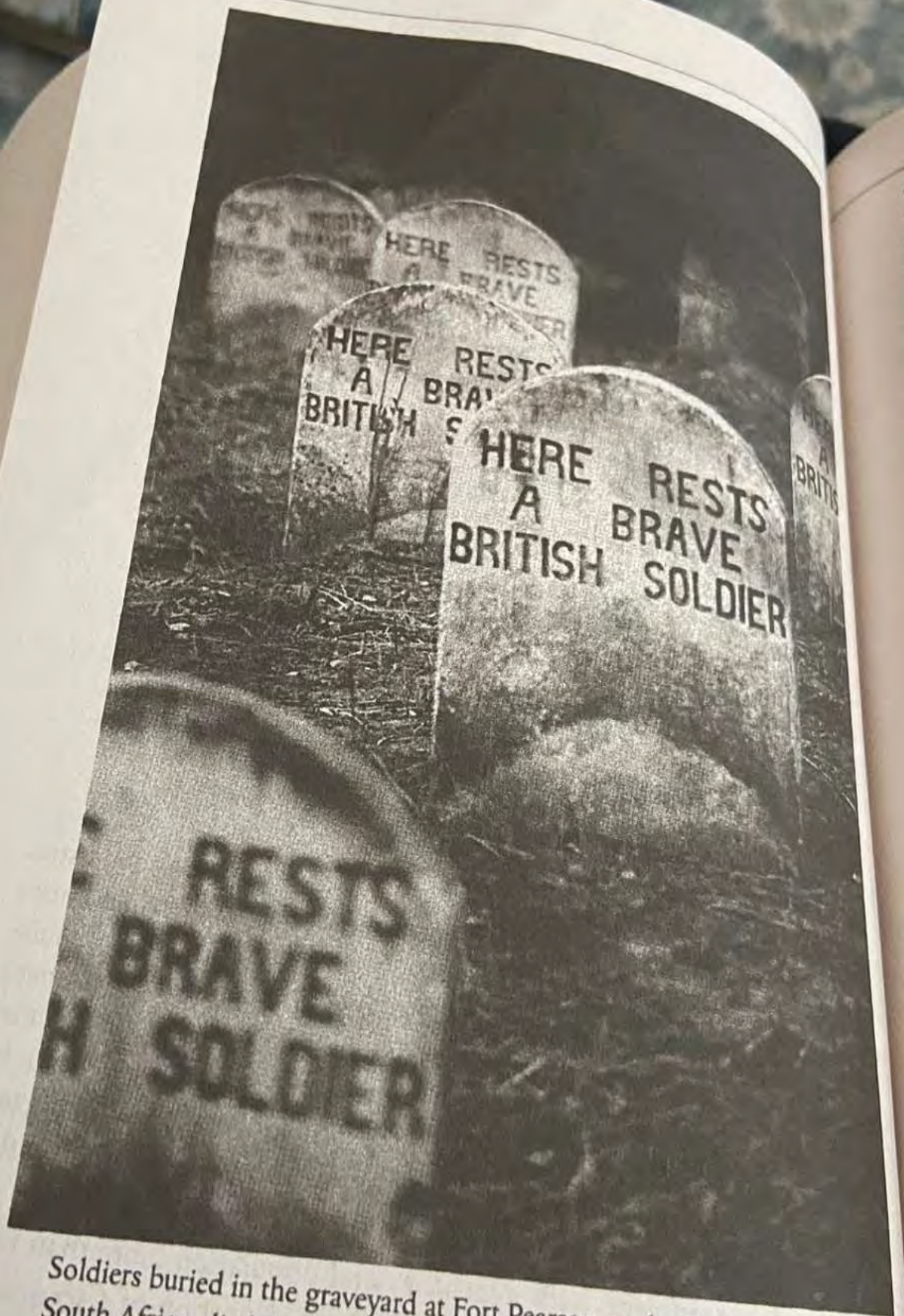
Resistance

"THE THIN WHITE LINE" of colonial authority in Africa was tested at several points but never broken. The newly invented machine-gun was a formidable instrument of colonial power, but the devastating onslaughts of drought, disease, and rinderpest (cattle plague) in the 1890s were no less influential.

Here we are, three white men in the heart of Africa, with 20 Nigger soldiers and 50 Nigger police, 68 miles from doctors or reinforcements, administering and policing a district inhabited by half a million well armed savages who have only quite recently come into touch with the white man... the position is most humorous to my mind.¹

A sense of humour was probably an essential qualification for administrative officers in the early 1900s, for "the thin white line" of colonial authority was stretched to the point of absurdity throughout Africa. Colonial administrations were woefully lacking in men and resources. The colonial government of Nyasaland (Malawi), for instance, was established in 1891 with a budget of £10,000 per year, enough to employ ten European civilians and two military officers, seventy Sikhs from a Punjab regiment, and eighty-five armed porters from the Zanzibar coast—and this for a territory of some 94,000 km² with a population of between 1 and 2 millions.²

The Uganda government had a territory and population more than twice as large as Nyasaland, still with an allocation of £50,000 per



Soldiers buried in the graveyard at Fort Pearson on the Tugela River in Natal, South Africa, died during the Zulu War of 1879

year, and was thus able to recruit 200 Sudanese troops to enforce its administrative policies. Northern Nigeria received £100,000 from 1900, which paid for six civilian administrators and a force of 2,000 soldiers (mostly ex-slaves) loyal to a series of powerful Muslim leaders, any one of which could have fielded a force many times larger than the entire colonial garrison.

Initially, European governments had expected European capital to shoulder the cost of transforming Africa. Selected chartered companies would pay for the administration and security of the territories, it was agreed, in return for exclusive rights to exploit the resources they had discovered and would develop. But European capital did not respond to the extent required. As the amount of investment required rose, enthusiasm fell. The British Imperial East Africa Company laid out about ten shillings of capital for every square mile of the territory it was supposed to develop and administer, and German East Africa was no better off.³

Only the British South Africa Company, drawing on the fortune Rhodes had garnered from the rapidly expanding South African economy, could mobilize anything approaching the capital needed to establish an adequate administration—and even its resources were stretched: “it is simply imperative that we must economise all along the line . . .,” Company headquarters told a district administrator in 1891, “the Bank will not advance another shilling. Rhodes has got an awful sickener of the Police. They are horribly expensive and do nothing but grumble. They must be reduced to a minimum.”⁴

As the failings of the chartered companies mounted, the colonial powers were obliged to raise their grants-in-aid. Some five to ten years after the start of colonial rule, most territories were receiving grants at ten times the initial rate. Thereafter, as the colonies advanced towards economic self-sufficiency, grants declined. By about 1914 they had been almost entirely replaced by local revenues.⁵

The thirty-year transition from dependency to economic self-sufficiency marks a continent-wide submission to colonial rule. It was a process which demanded the active collaboration of the African population—and at often considerable cost to themselves. Individuals and groups found themselves obliged to give up land, accede to government demands for labour, accept the imperatives of a cash economy, pay taxes, and submit to the rule of foreign law. The change was vast and all-embracing (truly a “fantastic invasion”). Why did the Africans allow it to happen, when “the thin white line” was so vulnerable?

THE RURAL FAMILIES that constituted the vast majority of the African population had little choice in the matter. Their lives were already subject to the vagaries of climate and obligations to their leaders and their kin. When circumstances were oppressive (such as where slavery persisted), they may have welcomed the change, seeing perhaps the prospect of a brighter future.

But Africa's leaders had a choice; behind the gifts, the treaties, and the promises they saw the events of the late nineteenth century as the augury of a fundamental change in the nature of the relationship that had existed between Africa and Europe for over 300 years. Where previously the Europeans had been content to trade for African commodities, they now intended to take control of production and distribution as well. Clearly, some accommodation would be advantageous to both parties but an overwhelming majority of African leaders were vehemently opposed to Europe's colonial ambitions. They determined, above all, to retain their sovereignty and independence.⁷

Lewanika, King of the Lozi (see Chapter 47), endeavoured to retain his sovereignty through compromise and negotiation. Likewise, Makombe Hanja ruler of Barue in central Mozambique, told a white visitor in 1895:

I see how you white men advance more and more in Africa, on all sides of my country companies are at work . . . My country will also have to take up these reforms and I am quite prepared to open it up . . . I should also like to have good roads and railways . . . But I will remain the Makombe my fathers have been.⁸

Other leaders, perhaps more realistic in their assessment of European intentions, rejected colonial advances outright. In 1891, for instance, Prempeh I of the Asante in modern Ghana answered a British offer of Protectorate status with these words:

The suggestion that Asante in its present state should come and enjoy the protection of Her Majesty the Queen and Empress of India I may say is a matter of very serious consideration, and which I am happy to say we have arrived at this conclusion, that my kingdom of Asante will never commit itself to any such policy. Asante must remain as of old at the same time to remain friendly with all white men.⁹

In 1890 Machemba, leader of the Yao people in what is now Tanzania, told the German commander, Hermann von Wissmann:

I have listened to your words but cannot follow you—I would rather die first . . . I do not

creature just as I am . . . I am Sultan here in my land. You are Sultan there in yours. Yet listen, I do not say to you that you should obey me: for I know that you are a free man . . . As for me, I will not come to you, and if you are strong enough, then come and fetch me.¹⁰

RESISTANCE 383

Hendrik Witbooi, leader of the Nama in South-West Africa, told the German administrator, Theodor von Leutwein, in 1894 that "the Lord God has established various kingdoms in the world. Therefore I know and believe that it is no sin or crime that I should wish to remain the independent chief of my land and people."¹¹

In 1895, Wobogo, the King of the Mossi (in modern Burkina Faso), told an officer commanding French colonial forces:

I know that the whites wish to kill me in order to take my country, and yet you claim that they will help me to organize my country. But I find my country good just as it is. I have no need of them. I know what is necessary for me and what I want: I have my own merchants; also, consider yourself fortunate that I do not order your head to be cut off. Go away now, and above all, never come back.

These cries of defiance were made by articulate men who, in some cases, also possessed the wherewithal to back their words with action. When Menelik II (1844–1913) of Ethiopia learned that the European powers had declared their intention of dividing up Africa among themselves, he let it be known that his country was not available for such treatment. Indeed, in a pronouncement addressed to the heads of state of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia in 1891, Menelik appealed for help with his own territorial claims:

I have no intention at all of being an indifferent spectator, if the distant Powers hold the idea of dividing up Africa, Ethiopia having been for the past fourteen centuries, an island of Christians in a sea of Pagans.

Since the All-Powerful has protected Ethiopia up until now, I am hopeful that He will keep and enlarge it also in the future, and I do not think for a moment that He will divide Ethiopia among the other Powers.

Formerly the boundary of Ethiopia was the sea. Failing the use of force and failing the aid of the Christians, our boundary on the sea fell into the hands of the Muslims. Today we do not pretend to be able to recover our sea coast by force; but we hope that the Christian Powers, advised by our Saviour, Jesus Christ, will restore our seacoast boundary to us, or that they will give us at least a few points along the coast.¹²

Far from helping Menelik recover lost territory, Britain and France 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 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

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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 Euro-
pean deaths from malaria by about four-fifths, making military operations pos-
sible in even the most badly infested regions; second, European troops were
armed with superior weapons—which the signatories to the Brussels Conven-
tion 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. Capa-
ble 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

corrects the widely shared assumptions of accounts: asing mastery of science, the European them. In doing so they found it easy—ther as savages or as helpless children.²⁴

savages, but nor were they universally sion. Episodes of resistance and con-frican colony, it is true, but they were or even thirty years. Conquest, where rocess of infiltration, much of which

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way—new 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

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 flows diminished 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 drought prompted the establishment of a commission to investigate the problem,²⁸ and there was even a serious proposal to flood the Kalahari (by damming 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

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, the rinderpest swept away the wealth 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... and the body is covered with open sores like smallpox.⁴⁰

Lugard concluded: "The... has caused in Africa can... starving, diseased, demo... arch-colonialist, saw an... some respects... has fr... pastoral tribes are, their... by this awful visitation... peaceful."⁴²

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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...