

# THE GREAT ROBBERY

By Julia Bastian

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WHITE OCCUPATION in South West Africa is less than eighty years old, which is surprising when one remembers that the white man has been in South Africa for three centuries, and in Angola, in the north, for four. It is true that explorers, elephant hunters, missionaries and traders had all left their mark, but not until 1889 did German troops set up the first garrison. Shortly afterwards diamonds were discovered on the Kimberley fields and South West Africa emerged as a modern source of wealth. Thereafter the territory was scrambled for and carved up without reference to its inhabitants.

The story of South West Africa and the history of segregation are told with explosive force in a recently published book\* by Ruth First, a South African journalist, wife of barrister Joe Slovo (now a political refugee in England), and mother of three girls. She is now held in the custody of the South African police; her book is banned in South Africa.

Ruth First draws comparisons with King Leopold's rubber régime in the Congo, the exploitation of the African slave trade by the English, Portuguese and Dutch, and the suppression of Algeria by the French — each no less ugly.

Following the German occupation, rule by tribal Chiefs and their long-established customs were soon replaced by German Law. The tribes had no understanding of private land ownership, and the Chiefs were bullied into boundary agreements which eventually led to the confiscation of much tribal land. As more and more was taken, the Herero tribesmen awoke to realise that their land and their waterholes "belonged" to the Germans. Anger and fear mounted until in 1904 the Germans routed the Herero in a bloody campaign. Remnants of the tribe roamed the country dying of hunger — their land, herds, liberty, family life, all lost, their tribal cohesion shattered. Some few years later the Namas and Berg-Damara tribes were defeated in precisely the same way.

The Herero, we learn, were reduced from 80,000 cattle-rich tribesmen to 15,000 starving fugitives, while more than half the other two tribes died. Germany had crushed the rebellion. Now, all "natives" over the age of seven had to carry passes, and no tribesman could acquire land or animals without official permission.

The starving survivors were herded into labour camps, swelling the supply of cheap labour to farmers and indus-

trialists. Meanwhile, tribal lands were expropriated, surveyed and sold to settlers, many of whom were German officers only too glad to discard their uniforms and farm the land in peace. By 1913, from Germany's point of view, South West Africa could be described as thriving. Diamonds had been discovered, copper mines were being worked and harbours developed. Seven years later Germany was out.

After the first world war the colonies were wrested from her on the doubtful grounds that "Germany had no moral right to colonies." This power-political move was cloaked in a moral issue, and politicians took on a suspiciously virtuous note. Lord Balfour in 1918 spoke of the "God-willed capture of the German colonies," (which indicates quite clearly that God's will and the whole concept of Justice was as confused then as ever).

The idea, sometimes credited to General Smuts, of international mandates had been devised. It was surely a curious thing, the author suggests, that South Africa should have been chosen to control South West Africa. Her own Land Act of 1913, which severely limited the acquisition of land for African occupation, had already caused an outcry, while her constitution, little more than a decade old, had a colour bar at its base. Yet, subject to supervision by the League of Nations, South Africa was to acquire complete control.

The Government lost no time in expropriating all valuable industrial areas, and declared all un-allocated land to be Crown property. A Land Board was set up to hand out farms to any whites who wished to settle there — and the land rush was on. In these few frenzied years of land settlement, the "sacred trust" was secured as a white man's country.

African tribes were powerless. When they asked for the return of tribal lands, the Government simply did not acknowledge their claim to any land, but condescended to allot Reserves, often without waterholes, and almost always on the poorest grade scrubland such as the arid Kalahari sandveld.

One effect of this massive land "theft" is the white man's cruel system of labour control. It was — and still is — essential for whites to draw on plenty of cheap African labour. A Police Zone was therefore set up to keep the bulk of the African people behind a narrow strip of land in the north. Once behind the Red Line the tribesmen must produce a permit to come outside

\**South West Africa* (Penguin African Library. 5s.)

it — or face a criminal prosecution. Holding a permit, a tribesman may enter a labour area on contract and earn a low cash wage, on the condition that he returns to his rural slum in the Reserve at the end of the contract period.

Everywhere there are men without families — while back in the Reserves there are wives without husbands, children without fathers, and villages deprived of their young men. The social and human consequences of the contract labour system are as brutal as the whiplash to the slave and as inhuman as chains about his neck.

So it is that the effects of migrant labour and life in small crowded Reserves, together with the harsh and often ridiculous taxes imposed on the African, have undermined his way of life. He is kept rootless, *un-settled*, unskilled and wretched.

Today the white man's heart seems in the grip of fear. Because of this, Africans must live with endless slips of paper — permits to seek work; permits to enter certain areas; service contracts to prove they are working; passes to prove they are schoolboys and too young to carry passes; certificates authorising residence in the area; permits to travel; tax receipts; exemptions from curfew. Passes and permits plague their lives. For every move there must be the Government's stamp of authority.

Yet why the fear? There seems little doubt that this country, abundantly rich in natural resources, could support all its indigenous inhabitants and a huge number of white and coloured population too with plenty for all — were it not so pulled apart by racial privilege. Is there any justification, the author asks, why one-seventh of the total population should enjoy the exclusive use of two-thirds of the land? To which one can only reply that Might attempts to make it Right.

At last the world has woken up to realise that there is a weakness in the mandate system, but now only the United Nations can modify the international status of a territory. Year after year the question is thrashed out. Between 1950 and 1956 the International Court of Justice gave three varying opinions on what had better be done — and this is understandable when one remembers that they are attempting to solve this gigantic problem in isolation from general principles of justice that will apply to *all* men.

South Africa continues to reject every solution proposed, refuses to negotiate, or to recognise the authority of the very committee set up to look into the matter. Dr. Verwoerd, it would appear, believes himself to be completely right and the United Nations completely wrong. "Apartheid," he says, "is the most *profitable* policy for South Africa, and the world opposes it because it does not understand."

Perhaps few people do understand. While Ruth First senses acutely the injustice of the system on which the whole political situation has boiled up, she puts her faith in the U.N. Trusteeship Committee and political rights

for the African *alongside* his white brother. This, though obviously desirable, could not solve the economic problems, nor raise the level of wages.

For the problem of South Africa is at root the land problem. Political liberty without economic liberty is the shadow without the substance. As Henry George wrote in *Progress and Poverty* — "To put political power in the hands of men embittered and degraded by poverty is to tie firebrands to foxes and turn them loose amid the standing corn; it is to put out the eyes of a Samson and to twine his arms around the pillars of national life . . . It is not enough that men should vote; it is not enough that they should be theoretically equal before the law. They must have liberty to avail themselves of the opportunities and means of life; they must stand on equal terms with reference to the bounty of Nature. Either this, or liberty withdraws her light. Either this or darkness comes on, and the very forces that progress has evolved turn to powers that work destruction . . . Unless its foundations be laid in justice the social structure cannot stand."

## THEY SAY

### Room at the Top for Mr. Holland

WE SHALL WIN the next General Election for a number of reasons. The first is that we have a young and vital team of senior Ministers producing brilliantly conceived policies for the future based on a dozen years of solid achievement.

The second is that this outstanding combination of youth and sheer brainpower is co-ordinated and led by the most experienced politician currently active in British political life.

But nothing affects the results of an election so much as the timing of it, and in Harold Macmillan we have a proved master in the art of political timing.

—Philip Holland, M.P.

### Not So Wise

IT'S A STORY that may have been told before, but it's worth repeating. It is about the wise old owl who offered a solution to a problem. But to carry out his advice would have involved rearranging the forces of Nature.

"Wonderful," said the lesser creatures, admiringly. "Now tell us how to do it."

"Don't ask me," said the owl. "I'm here only to decide policy."

Somehow it's hard to forget that story when reading of the wonderful things that state economic planning and control is going to accomplish in the industrial field — according to leaders of the Left.

—Aims of Industry.