

BOOK REVIEW

VERWOERD'S RULE IN S.W. AFRICA

Idris Cox

SOUTH WEST AFRICA · Ruth First
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ONE IS ACCUSTOMED in recent years to the increasing output of new books on the African continent, and on individual African countries. Many of them have put the spotlight on apartheid rule in South Africa, but few of them have given adequate attention to South-West Africa. This was formerly a German colony which became a League of Nations 'mandate' territory under South African administration after the first world war, and a Trust Territory of the United Nations after the second world war, also to be administered by South Africa.

This scarcely disguised colony of South Africa is the subject of a recent book by Ruth First, a brilliant writer and journalist, who herself has long been active in the freedom struggle against apartheid rule in South Africa, and was banned and kept in solitary confinement for more than three months without charge since she wrote this book.

Few authors have such a magnificent grasp of their subject, or are so capable of expressing their thoughts. Moreover, the book itself is the outcome of an extended visit in South-West Africa, made possible by the exercise of considerable skill in face of close and persistent police supervision, and the whole-hearted co-operation of its inhabitants who recognised the author as one who would tell the truth to the whole world.

It is a powerful indictment of a vicious police state system which is

many respects is even worse than that of South Africa itself. This has arisen partly from the legacy of former German colonial rule, the open enticement of Boer settlers after it became a 'mandated' territory, and the later development of trade unions and the liberation movement—compared with South Africa itself.

Nothing was easy for the author, except the friendliness of ordinary Africans. She describes how interviews were conducted on street corners, in motor-cars, under a tree, and in crowded shops. Some had to be cancelled, for it was most unusual for a white woman to have friendly talks with Africans. But what she was unable to gather on the spot Ruth First more than made up for by the most intensive study and research of earlier works on South-West Africa and of the available documents and reports.

Vast Area

South-West Africa is two-thirds the size of South Africa itself, bigger than France and Britain put together, and with only 520,000 population (4 per cent of South Africa) it is the most sparsely populated territory in Africa south of the Sahara. Africans number 428,000, six times the White population of 73,000, of whom nearly one-fourth are Germans. Among these there was a growth of Nazi ideas from 1932 onwards, and many of them became Nazi soldiers and pilots in the second world war.

Much as in South Africa, two-thirds of the land is for the exclusive use of the Whites, only one-seventh of the total population. About 6,000 farmers out of the total White population of 73,000 occupy and farm 40 million hectares of land. Nearly half the African population (170,000) are confined to a closely-guarded 'Police Zone' of less than one-seventh the White farm land. Outside the 'Police Zone' there are 260,000 Africans living on 16 million acres.

Poverty and Huge Profits

Within the 'Police Zone' Africans must have passes for travel, work, residence, and for almost every facet of human existence. Employment depends mainly on contract labour (one or two years) and the daily wage in mines varied in 1962 from 1s. 9d. to 2s. 3d., and on farms from 1s. 0d. to 2s. 6d.

For the year 1958-59 the average cost per child in White schools (excluding hostel expenses) was £42 19s. 0d., for an African child within the 'Police Zone' £13 19s. 4d., and outside the 'Police Zone' £1 16s. 2d. Total expenditure on education that year for White children was £1,121,585 (12,740 of them) and for African children (numbering over

32,000) it was less than £200,000—about one-sixth of that allocated for a far smaller number of White children.

In striking contrast to the African mass poverty and the small pittance allocated for the education of African children are the gigantic profits made by the big overseas monopoly firms. Most of these are not exclusively confined to South-West Africa, but also have widespread interests in South Africa and elsewhere in the continent, as well as other parts of the world.

They include the Consolidated Goldfields of South Africa, South African Minerals Corporation, and the Selection Trust, which also has vast interests in the Rhodesias, West Africa, and in the United States. Linked with the latter is the American Metal Climax which controls mining, metallurgical, oil, and gas industries through its subsidiary companies. There is also the Tsumeb Corporation, which is a giant complex of American mining companies, and Tsumeb Mines is its registered company in South-West Africa.

One example of the huge profits will suffice. In 1961 the Consolidated Diamond Mines (part of the giant Anglo-American gold, copper and diamond empire of De Beers) made £15,553,197 in profits, nearly twice the total £8,079,710 budget for South-West Africa that year!

White Minority Rule

In the whole of South-West Africa there are only 30,000 voters (less than one English constituency) and all of them are White. All decisive matters are under the control and authority of the South African Government, and the South-West African Assembly at Windhoek (the capital) is left to handle education, health, public works, agriculture, and mining. It has recently been given powers to deal with 'Native' or 'Bantu' affairs, and is now engaged in creating a segregated 'Bantustan' on similar lines to that of South Africa.

Not only is the eighteen-member Legislative Assembly confined to Whites, but it is Whites only who occupy the key positions in the civil service. Outside the towns and the big villages the classic British method of 'indirect rule' is applied by choosing traditional Chiefs or Headmen to run local affairs.

A World Challenge

This then, is the United Nations 'trust territory' for which South Africa was appointed the 'guardian'. The growing opposition to exploitation and apartheid rule began to express itself over a decade ago—though there were numerous rebellions against pre-1914 German rule and since, particularly by the Herero people.

In the early 1950's trade unions came into being, and in 1954 was

formed the South-West African National Union (SWANU) led by Jariretendu Kozonguizi, as well as the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) led by Mburumba Kerina. Though there are differences between the two organizations the pressure of the growing tense struggle for the liberation of South-West Africa has brought them closer together, and now there is more to unite than there is to divide them.

Just as the liberation movement in South Africa (among other forms of activity) exercised its pressure to influence the United Nations to condemn apartheid rule, so have the Herero and Nama Chiefs and the liberation movements in South-West Africa made the fullest use of their opportunities. In 1946 there was only one solitary petition to the United Nations, but in 1960 there were no less than 120 of them.

However, experience has proved that even majority or unanimous condemnations of apartheid rule by the United Nations are not sufficient; and this is also the experience of South-West Africa. Even more, Verwoerd has either done his utmost to prevent U.N. Commissions of Inquiry reaching South-West Africa, or cleverly distorted the findings of the two-man U.N. Commission of Inquiry which was allowed on a ten-day restricted visit to South-West Africa in the early summer of 1962.

The obvious failure of the United Nations to take decisive action explains why there is growing impatience among South-West African liberation leaders. Ruth First correctly points out that 'an awareness is spreading among Africans that the United Nations will act only for those who first act themselves'. The first necessity is for closer relations between the liberation movements in South Africa and South-West Africa, for 'the struggle for rights and independence of the two peoples must be joined, the sooner the better'.

It's a crucial issue not only for the people of these two territories, or even for the African continent on its own. The situation in South Africa and in South-West Africa is a challenge to the whole world. The outstanding merit of this book by so brilliant an author is that an unanswerable case has been made for international action.