

A COMMUNIST HISTORIAN'S VIEW OF THE HISTORY OF AFRICA

Sik, Endre: *The History of Black Africa*. Vol. I, 1966, pp. 397, published by Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest.

This is the first volume of a projected three volume work on the history of Africa south of the Sahara, i.e. that area of Africa generally known as "Black Africa" or the Africa of the Negro and the Bantu. Up till now the author has completed the first two volumes of this great work, both of which have appeared in Hungarian and French editions.

The first volume starts with the pre-European period and ends with the final occupation of Africa by the European powers and it may safely be said that of all the books on the history of Africa that have appeared after 1945 — and those interested in Africa have to cope with a veritable deluge of such books — this work by Endre Sik is academically speaking, the most impressive. It is at the same time the most controversial especially in the sense that it is in fact a re-interpretation of known factual material from an ideological point of view which is radically different from that of the "West", i.e. the non-Communitic group of countries of which the Republic of South Africa is a supporting member.

About the author

Endre Sik was born in 1891 in Hungary. During the First World War he was a prisoner of war in Russia. After the war he lived in the Soviet Union where he lectured at different universities. He returned to Hungary soon after 1945 where he joined the foreign service of his country first as Counsellor of the Embassy and later as Minister of the Hungarian People's Republic in Washington. At the beginning of 1949 he returned to Hungary where he was appointed head of the Political Department at the Foreign Office. From 1953 to 1961 he was Foreign Secretary after which he retired and has since then devoted himself to the study of the history of Africa. He is a member of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Working People's Party.

Pre-History and History

Generally speaking American and English historians regard the partition of Africa by the Europeans simply as a continuation of an existing historical development of the areas occupied by each of the European powers and the history of the people encompassed in each area is then reconstructed from legends and other oral traditions. In this way a "history" for each area is evolved. Endre Sik does not agree with this approach. He believes that prior to the slave trade period, many of the peoples of Africa had not yet emerged from their primitive conditions and he believes, because of the overall unreliability of oral traditions, that the history of these people rightly belongs to the province of ethnography. At the same time there were also areas in which "classless society had

already greatly disintegrated and where a slaveholding or feudal state was in full development”.

In this sense a history of “Black Africa” does not exist for the author. What did exist was the histories of hundreds of peoples and tribes and of a multitude of tribal alliances and “state formations created by them in the course of history”. Prior to the coming of the White man, the majority of the African people still led a primitive and barbaric life. The State, taken in the real sense of the word, was a notion unknown to most. Classes did not exist either or at most only in embryo. The author therefore feels that it is unrealistic to speak about their “history” in the scientific sense of the word before the coming of the European which he describes as “invaders”.

By “history” the author understands not simply a chain of successive happenings bearing upon the destinies of various human groups, but a process of “great universal interest which is precisely the resultant of these many wills operating in different directions and of their manifold effects upon the outer world”. Endre Sik therefore feels that though we possess a rich historiography on Africa, it is of questionable value, because most authors, instead of investigating and analyzing “the actual socio-economic forces of historical development” distract attention from these questions. At the same time they delve into obscure questions such as the origin of the Negroes, Zimbabwe etc. or investigate “secondary superficial occurrences” such as the lives of colonizers, military commanders, etc. In many instances facts are falsified “presenting them to the advantage of capitalism with a view to justifying past and present policies of colonial oppression and exploitation”. In fact most historians, according to the author, treat Africa from the point of view of the European colonizers who study “not the history of African countries and peoples, but only the chronicle of the conquest and colonization of Africa by the European powers”.

It was since the fifteenth century that the history of Black Africa has become an integral part of the history of “the rise and growth of world capitalism” and the end of the eighteenth century could be regarded as the end of “the age of primitive accumulation of capital”. The author quotes Karl Marx when he points out that the African slave trade that preceded this age, was “the chief momenta of primitive accumulation . . . The stolen resources of Africa, the sweat and blood of its sons and daughters were one of the main sources of the primitive accumulation of capital”.

There is therefore for the author, a twofold necessity for the “scientific study” of Black Africa. Firstly such a study is of importance because it “brilliantly substantiates and most vividly illustrates a whole series of theses maintained by Marx, Lenin and Stalin in the field of historical science”. It supports the doctrine of Marx on primitive accumulation, and proves the Leninist teaching “about the colonial policies of pre-imperialistic and imperialistic capitalism” and it substantiates the teaching of Stalin “about the origin of nations and of their national problems”. In the second

instance "for the people of present day Africa, whether still oppressed and struggling for liberation or already independent, as well as for the world proletariat of our time, an objective, scientific study of African history is a political document, a part of the bill which they will in due time present to their adversary and debtor, contemporary world imperialism, successor to the slave dealers, the invaders and butchers of the African peoples from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries". The study of the history of Africa the author feels is politically significant because it "can and must enrich the experience of the African peoples in their present and future struggles against imperialism".

In view of the above, the author feels that in order that a study of the history of Africa be fruitful, the different historical epochs should be starting points and not the different geographical areas. The "essential character" of each epoch must be determined, because it was the events themselves that broke up Africa into different regions and within these historical regions, each of which includes a number of countries and peoples, the delimitations between the individual countries and peoples as they actually existed in that epoch must be retained. The history of Africa therefore must be divided into the following epochs:

- I. Ancient times to the end of the fifteenth century.
- II. The slave trade period which lasted from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.
- III. The epoch of the conquest and partitioning of Black Africa which can be subdivided into —
 - i) the period circa 1789-1850;
 - ii) from 1850 to the late seventies;
 - iii) the period from the late seventies to 1900.
- IV. Black Africa under imperialism:
 - a) The period before and during World War I;
 - b) the period between the wars (1918-1939);
 - c) World War II and the disintegration of the colonial system.
- V. The first steps of the newly independent African countries.

In this the first volume (English edition) of the history of Black Africa, the author deals with the first three "epochs".

The Intruders

The author views the Europeans and Muslim Arabs as intruding into Africa and subjugating the indigenous populations. The Christian missionaries and explorers were the reconnoiterers of "European capital" whose "function it was to find out the chances and prospects for colonial exploitation of these countries and to prepare their seizure". An explorer like the well-known Stanley was therefore an instrument of "European capital" and the author refers to him as "another scoundrel of great caliber and high abilities".

Religion was the vehicle or instrument used by the Europeans and Muslims to blunt the spirit of resistance of the indigenous peoples. For instance a characteristic of the Portuguese colonization in the sixteenth and

eighteenth centuries was the utilization of the "superstitiousness of primitive African peoples by stupefying them with Christian religion as preached by their missionaries", while the American slaveholders kept their slaves in subjection by teaching them "the religious spirit". In the central Sudan the *Gamergu* tribes safeguarded their independence, but "those of them living near the caravan routes adopted Mohammedanism".

The moving principle behind the slave trade was according to the author, capitalism, but it was nationalistically orientated. The result was that "during the three hundred years of the slave trade the capitalist robbers had endless conflicts and skirmishes with one another around the spoil" and as the author so poignantly states, the result of the slave trade was "to some extermination; to others expulsion from their territories; again to others — loss of their sons and daughters; and to the rest of them destruction of their economies, retardation of the development of productive forces". The abolition of the slave trade was simply an "act of hypocrisy" which inter alia led to the expansion of British interests. The industrial revolution in Europe was the motive behind the abolition of slavery because "with the consolidation of industrial capitalism in the most advanced countries of Europe, mainly in Great Britain, the colonial policy of the European powers in Africa changed. These powers began striving to create conditions for the exploitation of large masses of the African population on the spot, for the extraction of the products and raw materials most needed by industrial capital". It is the point of view of the author that the resultant wars of conquest were waged under false slogans, like the "fight" against the slave trade, etc. To carry out their plans of conquest, the imperialist governments simply resorted to provocation by either setting one tribe against the other or by "insulting the Africans in order to prompt them to revolt and attack the Europeans, thus creating a convenient pretext of intervention . . ."

The Reaction of the Indigenous Peoples

As the European conquest of the vast African continent gradually began to unfold from the late eighteenth century and gained momentum during the nineteenth century, the peoples of Africa "resisted bitterly". On the one hand this conquest led to "liberation struggles" by the African peoples and on the other hand it resulted in conflicts between the European powers. By correlating in time the various campaigns of the European powers in Africa, the author points out that it is according to his view no exaggeration "to say that during the last two decades of the nineteenth century the whole of black Africa constituted one compact nucleus of the African people's defensive wars and emancipatory uprisings". The struggle of the African peoples was of no avail, imperialism was triumphant and led to the final subjugation of the peoples of Africa.

The outward forms these struggles took were either active fights or passive resistance. In some instances those actively fighting against the imperialists created tribal alliances and confederations. Other tribes

hid themselves and changed their residence frequently. In describing these wars, the author more often than not makes use of emotionally laden words like "heroic resistance", "defensive struggle", "brilliant struggle", "victoriously marched . . .", "wars of liberation", "oppressors", etc. "These defensive wars" and "insurrections" in the early period took place under the cover and slogan of the "struggle against the whites" and the net result of these wars was to "prepare and train the popular masses of Africa for the national liberation and class struggles to come".

South Africa

On the whole the author is surprisingly sympathetic towards the Afrikaans-speaking population in his treatment of South African history especially because of their "struggle against British Imperialism". The Boers fought righteous "anti-imperialistic wars" against Britain in the same way as the Ethiopians fought against Italy and the Malagasy against France. The Boers' treatment of and attitude towards the Bantu and other indigenous people are however, decried. He points out that the purchase of the Cape Colony by the Dutch East India Co. in exchange for goods worth approximately nineteen rand, is a typical example of how the early European conquerors tried by "peace treaties" to take possession of African territories. The colonizers, because they "entertained vain hopes for their subjugation, decided to exterminate" the Bushmen totally.

In dealing with the Patriot movement of 1779-1795, the author describes their petition to the Company as "a peculiar medley of progressive and reactionary aspirations", and the revolt of Graaff-Reinet and Swellendam in 1795 "took a completely unexpected turn: in the revolt of the colonists Britain found a pretext for intervention".

The emancipation of the slaves is seen as the major cause of the Great Trek. "Having lost the basis of their well-being, the affluent owners of land and slaves became poor peasants (Boers) who had to live by their own labour. This was the main cause of the trek". In the interior where they, the Boers, established their republics, they had to do with the "troops" of Dingaan and accepting Moffat's characterization of Umsilikazi, the author believes that it is a "historical slander" to describe this chief of the Ndebeles as a "bloodthirsty tyrant". On the contrary Umsilikazi was "an exceptionally fair, gentle and peace-loving man".

He describes the Boer farmers as follows: "The ordinary Boer farmer's patriarchal views (love of freedom and independence, craving after total democracy for 'his people', religious and racial prejudices, hostility towards the Africans, and suspecting everything 'alien') were combined in him with the ardent patriotism characteristic of the most progressive elements of the Boer people with their conscious hatred for the English, and with a practical mind and great diplomatic abilities".

After gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand in 1886 the Uitlanders "pursued subversive activities in the Boer republics and in 1895 organized the Jameson raid", while Cecil John Rhodes "resorted to a policy of

provocation". The ensuing war was lost by the Boers despite their heroism, inter alia, because of their "religious prejudices which compelled them to treat the enemy as becomes Christians".

The author makes a clear distinction between the Boers and their "struggles against the British" and the Europeans in general. In the latter instance the Europeans (Boers and British) were colonizers whose colonizing activities led to the "*peculiarity of the relations between colonizers and Africans* (Italics by the author). In this respect South Africa showed many symptoms that existed nowhere else in African colonies in that period: the systematic extermination of the aborigines, the dispossession of entire tribes of their territories, the transformation of large numbers of Africans into 'labourers' (half-slaves or serfs)". The author feels it is a pity that the Boers in their fight against British imperialism were unable to turn to their natural allies, the African people, to help them in this "righteous struggle".

Conclusion

In the field of historical methodology two schools of thought have cristalized during the past fifty years. Firstly there are those historians who might be described as belonging to the "objective scientific" school who believe that historical facts are reflections of past actuality and that it is possible to reconstruct the past *through* the facts. They accept the proposition that a certain amount of subjectivity would inevitably be reflected in this reconstruction procedure, but this subjective aspect is something inevitable that by and large should be overcome as far as possible. Secondly there is the school of thought which accepts the fact that we are the result of the past (the historicists) and it is this selfsame subjective element in our lives which is the result of history and which gives meaning to our lives. Subjectivism is therefore historically derived and is an historical objective reality in terms of which the past can and must be interpreted. Historical facts are dead facts and can only be given meaning if interpreted in terms of the subjective reality of the historian's world and time. According to this school of thought, the historian lives in a fool's paradise who believes that the aim of the historian is to reconstruct past actuality — *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*. We do not study the past for its own sake but only that section of the past which gives meaning to the present. Logically it boils down to the fact that only the present can give meaning to the past. The problem naturally is what we understand by the term "present".

Obviously Endre Sik belongs to the latter school of thought. The terms of reference — in his case based on Marx, Lenin, Engels, Feuerbach and Stalin — which give meaning to the historical world he lives in, are also meaningful terms or tools by means of which the "dead" past can be interpreted or re-interpreted. Thus terms like *capitalism, popular masses, subversion, defensive wars, wars of liberation*, etc. although modern in their derivation, are for the author, key words in the process of giving

meaning to the multitude of factual material which otherwise would have become mere facts in time.

The final question we may ask is: when is history "history" and when does it become propaganda for a way of life?

T. S. van Rooyen

BOEKE ONTVANG VIR BESPREKING

- Barnett, Corelli*: The Swordbearers. Studies in Supreme Command in the First World War. R1-15, pp. 429. Penguin Books, 1966.
- Bird, W.*: State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1882. (Africana Collectanea Volume XIX). R6-30, pp. VII/379. Facsimile reprint, C. Struik, Cape Town, 1966.
- Birley, Anthony*: Marcus Aurelius. 50/-, pp. XIII/354. Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1966.
- Bontinck, François*: Aux Origines de l'Etat Independant du Congo. Documents tirés d'Archives Américaines. Cinquième volume publié par la Faculté de Lettres de L'Université Lovanium de Léopoldville. Pp. XIV/473. Editions Nauwelaerts, Louvain, 1966.
- Bouws, Jan*: Die musieklewe van Kaapstad, 1800-1850, en sy verhouding tot die musiek-kultuur van Wes-Europa. Pp. 197, A. A. Balkema, Kaapstad, 1966.
- Bradlow, Frank R.*: Bowler's four views of Cape Town. (Facsimile reproduction of the original litographs). Pp. 22; A. A. Balkema, Kaapstad, 1966.
- Bryant, A. T.*: Zulu medicine and medicine-men. R3-25, pp. 115; C. Struik, Cape Town, 1966.
- Bulletin* van die Suid-Afrikaanse Vereniging vir die bevordering van Christelike Wetenskap. Augustus 1966; Nommer 6.
- Carr, E. H.*: The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923. Vols. 1-3. R1-27 each, pp. 448, 407, 596; Penguin Books, 1966.
- Cobban, A.*: A History of Modern France. Volume 2: 1799-1871, Volume 3: 1871-1962. 56c each, pp. 246, 272, 2nd edition; Penguin Books, 1966.
- Deakin, F. W.*: The last days of Mussolini. R1-15, pp. 378; Penguin Books, 1966.
- Deakin, F. W.*: The Brutal Friendship. Mussolini, Hitler, and the fall of Italian Fascism. R1-63, pp. 575; Penguin Books, 1966.
- Hibbert, Christopher*: The Roots of Evil. A Social History of Crime and Punishment. R1-27, pp. 559; Penguin Books, 1966.
- Honikman, A. H.* (ed.): Cape Town. City of Good Hope. Pp. 279; Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1966.
- Jones, Sheila*: A Student's History of Russia. Pp. XII/221, 18/6; Pergamon Press, Oxford etc., 1966.
- May, John*: The Progress of Man. 17/6, pp. 160; Pergamon Press, Oxford etc., 1966.
- McIver, J. R.*: Gems, Minerals and Rocks in Southern Africa. R15, pp. 268; Parnell and Sons, Cape Town-Johannesburg, 1966.
- Turner, E. S.*: Roads to ruin. The shocking history of Social Reform. 80c, pp. 284; Penguin Books, 1966.
- Wain, John*: The living world of Shakespeare. A Playgoer's Guide. 65c, pp. 284; Pelican Books, 1966.
- [Penguin Books (Pelican) word in Suid-Afrika versprei deur Longmans Southern Africa (Pty.) Ltd., P.O. Box 1616, Cape Town.]