

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88509-6 - Guns, Race, and Power in Colonial South Africa

William Kelleher Storey

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I

Guns in Colonial South African History

In 1971, the historians Shula Marks and Anthony Atmore wrote that during the colonial period South Africa became a “gun society.” They suggested that “the role of firearms in southern African society deserves at least one major study.”¹ Their challenge is taken up by the present study, which focuses on the history of South Africa prior to 1910.²

In South Africa, guns and colonialism went hand in hand. Starting with the earliest contacts between Africans and Europeans, guns became important commodities in frontier trade. Colonists and Africans alike – particularly the men – considered guns necessary tools for hunting and fighting. In the nineteenth century, the focus of the present study, guns were associated with the depopulation of game animals; the development of capitalism; and the establishment of new colonies, republics, and chiefdoms. Legal restrictions on gun ownership came to mark who was a citizen and who was not.

This book does more than assess the influence of guns over historical outcomes, as other scholars have done. It explores the ways in which people involved guns in changes in society, politics, and ecology. All the while, firearms were undergoing a technological revolution. The

¹ Marks and Atmore, “Firearms in Southern Africa,” 517.

² Legally speaking, the country known as “South Africa” did not come into existence until 1910, when the Union of South Africa was formed from the Cape Colony, Natal, the Orange Free State, and the Transvaal. However, during the nineteenth century, which is the focus of this study, most English-speakers referred to the region south of the Limpopo River as “South Africa.” This is the term that is used here. This study does not give much consideration to the other parts of “Southern Africa,” such as present-day Botswana, Namibia, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

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increasing lethality of guns persuaded South Africans to reconsider ideas about citizenship, institutions, and identities. People who owned guns came to support ideologies that they associated with technological changes. At the same time, ideologies were being reflected in the design of the guns themselves.

The first three chapters trace the spread of guns in South Africa during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Beginning in the middle of the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) encouraged settlers to procure firearms and to serve in the militia. Until the end of the eighteenth century, gun ownership and militia service were encouraged and even required by the VOC, but the Boers who crossed the colonial boundaries into the African interior were forbidden from selling guns to Africans. These regulations were ineffectual yet remained in force even after the advent of British rule in 1795.

British rule transformed South Africa's economy, polity, and society. South Africa became engaged with the world's most powerful industrial economy, a process that reoriented South African markets and politics. British liberals came to have great influence in the Cape Colony, where they advocated free trade, slave emancipation, and evangelical Christianity. Thanks to liberal influences over the course of the early nineteenth century, trade became free and the slaves were emancipated. Meanwhile, Christian ideas entered into African thinking. Evangelicalism and liberalism were associated with humanitarianism. Yet in South Africa, as in Europe and the United States, evangelicals and liberals were satisfied with a kind of superficial humanitarianism that made plenty of room for an underlying utilitarianism. The liberals and evangelicals who called themselves "friends of the natives" rarely considered Africans to be their social equals. Furthermore, liberal merchants and missionaries benefited economically and professionally from dominance.

Merchants and missionaries encouraged Africans to take up firearms as a way to gain security on a violent frontier. Guns were also a means for killing game animals. In 1812, after commenting on the extraordinary animals of the South African interior, the famous English traveler William J. Burchell wished that guns would spread more extensively to help people kill off the unwanted beasts. This in turn would result in the extension of modern, productive agriculture.³ Animals died and agriculture spread. During the nineteenth century, Africans and settlers saw

³ Burchell, *Travels in the Interior*, 2:369.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Guns in Colonial South African History*

3

guns as hallmarks of modernity, yet for most people in South Africa there was precious little security. The spread of European settlement and government caused major disruptions to African societies, even as the British colonies at the Cape and Natal, together with the Boer republics, attempted to rein in disorder. Part of their efforts involved gun control. The republics prohibited Africans from gun ownership, while the Cape and Natal imposed various restrictions on ownership and trade, including licensing and fees.

As Europeans were settling South Africa, firearms designers were spurred on by rivalries between European states as well as by the American Civil War. Firearms became much more effective. First, hunters and soldiers replaced flintlock ignition systems with percussion caps. Next, smoothbore muzzle-loaders were replaced by more accurate rifled muzzle-loaders. Then, rifled muzzle-loaders were replaced by quick-firing rifled breechloaders. The uptake of new weapons flooded world markets with secondhand muzzle-loading muskets and rifles that sold at cut-rate prices. At the same time as these weapons were becoming easily available, more Africans migrated to Cape farms and to the Kimberley diamond diggings, where they earned cash to buy guns. While Africans armed themselves, the opening of the Kimberley diamond mines and the commercialization of agriculture inspired British investors to buy South African shares, putting increased pressure on colonial governments to ensure order.

Order was endangered by armed Africans, according to settlers, who convinced the governments of Great Britain, the Cape Colony, and the Colony of Natal to implement disarmament. In 1859, Natal required all Africans to register their firearms with the lieutenant governor. This did not totally disarm Africans, but it was a crucial first step. In 1878, the Cape passed legislation allowing the governor to disarm entire districts. Disarmament occurred at the same time as Britain was attempting to unify the chiefdoms, colonies, and republics of South Africa under one form of government. Confederation became a famous failure, while disarmament became a patchy success.

Descriptions of insecurity and risk intensified during the 1870s, as South Africa's mineral revolution raised the stakes for settlers, Africans, and Britons alike. At the Cape, the governor, Sir Bartle Frere, who is most famous for starting the Anglo-Zulu War, also attempted to change opinions about the importance of guns for modern civilization. He moved to disarm Africans, claiming that "in a well-ordered community where the police protects the unarmed, the carrying of arms is entirely superfluous."

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[More information](#)

Frere and other Englishmen had come to believe that security was the concern of the state, not the individual. Orderly communities did not need individuals to carry guns.⁴ Many Africans had to surrender their guns under the terms of a new Peace Preservation Act passed in 1878. This diminished their ownership of guns but it did not sever the ideological ties between the bearing of arms and the performance of civic duties. In 1898, at the outbreak of the South African War, many African and “coloured” men clamored to bear arms in the service of Britain, while plenty of Africans rode off to war in the service of the Boer commandos.⁵

During the second half of the nineteenth century, two key civic questions came before South Africans. To what extent should the colonies, republics, and chiefdoms of South Africa be independent or united, either with each other or with Great Britain? And to what degree should Africans and Asians be given the rights of citizens? Liberal ideas about citizenship sat uneasily in a racially divided South Africa. The foundations of racial discrimination were laid in the seventeenth century when the Cape Colony was founded by the Dutch East India Company. Under Dutch rule, racial divisions were given the sanction of law, mostly as a way to support slaveholding. As Europeans extended their reach into the interior, they lived among indigenous people and often placed them in relations of subordination. Servants, spouses, and slaves often happened to be African – sometimes they were Asian – but fully fledged discrimination on the basis of race did not begin to develop until the nineteenth century under British rule.⁶

At first the British continued legal discrimination. Then, in the 1820s and 1830s, British liberals limited legal discrimination and emancipated the slaves. It would be naïve to take the progressive view and say that these were early, tentative steps toward equality. The African experience of liberal colonialism was much more troubling. As the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have written, “Colonialism held out the promise of equality, but essentialized inequality in such a way as to make it impossible to erase; held out the promise of universal rights, but made it impossible for people of color to claim them; held out the promise of individual advancement, but submerged it within the final constraints of ethnic subjection.”⁷ The historian Clifton Crais has also shown, in *White*

⁴ BPP [C. 2569] 1880, No. 13, Frere to Hicks Beach, March 15, 1880, pp. 19–20.

⁵ Nasson, *Abraham Esau's War*, 41–63.

⁶ Newton-King, *Masters and Servants*, 232–4.

⁷ Comaroff and Comaroff, “Revelations upon *Revelation*,” 121.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Supremacy and Black Resistance, the vehemence of settler racism in the Eastern Cape during the 1830s and 1840s, even as liberals were gaining ground in Cape Town, in the Western Cape.

It was in the 1870s that humanitarian, liberal racists in Cape Town and the Western Cape shifted toward the more strident, utilitarian racism of the Eastern Cape. The 1870s were a time when British and European racism was becoming increasingly chauvinistic and pseudoscientific. During the discussions about confederation, racially discriminatory legislation began to be passed in the guise of laws that were intended to disarm Africans and to arm settlers. Discriminatory laws had been on the books since the days of slavery. Even after the emancipation of the slaves in the 1830s, discriminatory laws continued to regulate labor, travel, and voting. The new gun control measures of the 1870s pushed legal discrimination further: the Cape took a step in the direction of the Boer republics, which denied Africans all rights of citizenship, including the right to own a weapon. Africans could not be citizens of the republics, nor could they own weapons, although the intricate relations of paternalism included the idea that servants helped masters to bear arms.

In the 1870s, British and colonial politicians seized on the risks of proliferation as a way to reconfigure ideas about citizenship and identity and make Cape political culture resemble the political culture of the republics. “Blacks” would be disarmed at the same time as they were being disenfranchised. This conjunction of problems, the exclusion of non-Europeans from citizenship, the production and proliferation of better guns, and the desire for political unity, may have been coincidental. I argue that it was not, and that these technological and political processes were closely related.

This book brings together social, political, and cultural history with technological history, showing the richness of South African debates about technologies imported from the West and bridging the gap between historians of nineteenth-century South Africa and historians of nineteenth-century technology. The historians of technology once focused almost exclusively on Europe and the United States, believing that the countries outside of the West that adopted Western technologies did not modify or change them in interesting ways. It was also widely believed that imported technologies “transferred” with little debate. Such assumptions about the global effects of industrialization have changed a great deal in the past twenty years, as historians of technology have developed a stronger interest in European empire building. By the same token, historians of colonialism in nineteenth-century South Africa have produced

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

important works of social, political, and cultural history without much reference to technology.

This book follows a number of recent studies that describe technological exchanges from a global perspective. Authors have paid special attention to the relationship between industrialization and imperialism in the nineteenth century, when Western countries secured global dominance by using new technologies such as breechloaders, quinine, and steamships. Technology and ideas about technology were central to the formation of new global power arrangements in which London, Paris, and other imperial capitals extended their reach to remote corners overseas.⁸ And adding to the literature on technological imperialism, we now have a number of rich, local studies that describe how technical knowledge and practices circulated in more complex ways than in simple transfers from the European “core” to the colonial “periphery.”⁹

Early Approaches to the Social History of Firearms in Africa

South Africa has a rich local history as well as a close relationship with the countries of Europe. There is no better illustration of this than the social history of firearms. The topic has attracted some attention from scholars already, as has the social history of firearms in other parts of Africa. Histories of firearms in Africa have generally taken the form of journal articles about particular times and places. Most of the articles discuss social and political issues thoroughly, yet show little awareness of the dynamic relationship between society and technology. This has something to do with the fact that the articles were written by Africanist scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, a time when the history and sociology of technology was relatively undeveloped. The historians of technology had few methodological insights to offer Africanist colleagues.

When African history was coming of age as a field, there were some strong early efforts in firearms history, such as R. W. Beachey's 1962 article about the East African arms trade that was published in the

⁸ Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men*; Drayton, *Nature's Government*; Headrick, *The Tools of Empire* and *The Tentacles of Progress*.

⁹ Some representative works on science, technology, and imperialism that take into account local knowledge in the colonies: Arnold, *Science, Technology, and Medicine in Colonial India*; Dubow, *Science and Society in Southern Africa*; Fairhead and Leach, *Misreading the African Landscape*; Grove, *Green Imperialism*; Richards, *Indigenous Agricultural Revolution*; Storey, *Science and Power in Colonial Mauritius*; and Todd, *Colonial Technology*.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Guns in Colonial South African History*

7

brand-new *Journal of African History*.¹⁰ In 1966, Martin Legassick published an article about the ways in which Samori Touré used modern breech-loading and repeating firearms to resist the French. Legassick showed that Samori's success with guns had a great deal to do with social innovations, including changes in military formations, as well as support for local gunsmiths.¹¹

In the late 1960s, the social history of guns became a central focus of the African History Seminar at the University of London. Many of the seminar papers were revised and published in two special issues of the *Journal of African History* that appeared in 1971 and that have since been cited by numerous scholars. One issue, edited by Gavin White, focused on West Africa, while another, edited by Marks and Atmore, focused on southern Africa. The articles traced the history of the gun trade in Africa in detail, arguing that guns often had significant social and political consequences. In the case of South Africa, Marks and Atmore argued that starting in 1652 the acquisition of guns, shooting skills, and martial organization played an important role in the extension of settlements and colonial rule. Under the Dutch, and later under the British, the Cape Colony became a gun society, where the balance of power reflected the possession of guns by states and societies. At the same time, the authors tended to downplay the importance of early firearms, on account of their technical shortcomings. Old muskets had their limitations, while in the early years there were some people without firearms who managed to defeat people with firearms.

The 1971 articles considered whether the possession of guns fostered imperialism or resistance. The acquisition of guns and shooting skills had a direct bearing on tactical and strategic outcomes among South Africans. During the 1970s, other Africanists began to explore the relationship between technological, social, and political history. In 1971, the anthropologist Jack Goody published a book, *Technology, Tradition and the State in Africa*, in which he argued that there was a close correlation between West African political structures and the "ownership of the means of destruction," including guns and horses. Forest states like Asante, Benin, and Dahomey tended to have private, slave armies that used guns and were closely controlled by a centralized ruler. By contrast, savannah states like Bariba, Gonja, and Oyo were less centralized and

¹⁰ Beachey, "The Arms Trade in East Africa in the Late Nineteenth Century."

¹¹ Legassick, "Firearms, Horses, and Samorian Army Organization 1870–1898."

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

tended to deploy cavalry units. Similarly, an article and book by Joseph Smaldone explored the importance of firearms for the political history of the Central Sudan. Smaldone argued that when the states of the Central Sudan took up modern firearms in the late nineteenth century, the impact on warfare was not so great, but the impact on the feudal system was profound. Rulers bought guns and trained slave-soldiers to fight with them as a way of rendering vassals more dependent.¹² Smaldone's work, like Goody's, assessed the impact of guns on the state but had little to say about the impact of the state on guns, either in terms of regulation or in terms of technical development. The technology and the polity were seen as separate analytical categories.

While Smaldone and Goody argued for the importance of guns for politics, scholars of the Atlantic slave trade argued for the importance of guns in commerce. In analyzing the role of guns in the slave trade, they confirmed centuries of speculation about the so-called gun–slave cycle. Joseph Inikori demonstrated statistically that a gun–slave cycle did, indeed, exist. In an article he argued that guns and gunpowder were an essential component of the Atlantic slave trade during the eighteenth century. Almost every slave-seller along the Gold Coast and Slave Coast received guns and powder, among other commodities, in exchange for slaves, while those who sold other commodities to Europeans frequently did not require guns. Inikori's findings were supported by additional research published in a 1980 article by W. A. Richards, although both their findings about the importance of the gun trade for the slave trade were contradicted by Philip Curtin's study of Senegambia, where he found no correlation between the statistical evidence on gun imports and slave exports during the same period.¹³

The articles that established the existence of a gun–slave cycle in certain parts of West Africa also emphasized the impact of guns on politics, yet went beyond Smaldone and Goody to show that politics were influencing the regulation and design of guns. Inikori and Richards both presented evidence that African buyers placed orders for many different types of flintlock muskets. Designs varied depending on price as well as particular

¹² Smaldone, "Firearms in the Central Sudan" and *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate*. For gunmaking in the Western Sudan, see McNaughton, *The Mande Blacksmiths*, 35–39, and plates 28–30.

¹³ Inikori, "The Import of Firearms in West Africa 1750–1807." Richards, "The Import of Firearms into West Africa in the Eighteenth Century." Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa*, 321–25. See also Smith, *Warfare & Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa*, 80–89, 141–5.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Guns in Colonial South African History*

9

uses. This hinted at a dynamic relationship between politics and technological design, a hint that might have been explored further had better methodologies from the history of technology been available at the time. For the same reason, a similar suggestion by Gemery and Hogendorn about the role of technological innovation in the growth of the slave trade could not have been fully explored.¹⁴

Instead of following the lead of the early studies of guns and slavery, which showed a dynamic relationship between the making of economies, states, and technologies, some scholars wrote articles that completely dismissed the technical importance of guns, crediting them, instead, with mere symbolic importance. In a 1972 article, Richard Caulk argued that even at the end of the nineteenth century, when reliable, potent guns were available, firearms had a mainly symbolic importance for politics in Ethiopia.¹⁵ The importance of firearms as symbols was explored even further by Gerald Berg, who wrote in a 1985 article that the rise of Ime-rina kingdom in eighteenth-century Madagascar had little to do with the acquisition of muskets, which did not work well enough to change the balance of power. Even so, muskets meant a great deal, because Adrianampoinimerina incorporated them into the symbolism of his emerging unitary kingdom.¹⁶ The articles by Berg and Caulk show the ways in which guns may be incorporated within the political culture, but one must ask of these articles, why choose guns as symbols and not something else? Guns, even old, ineffective guns, must have had some physical quality that “worked” in some way that they would be singled out for special, symbolic treatment. The articles about guns in Madagascar and Ethiopia missed the relationship between design and politics that was touched on briefly by Inikori, Richards, Gemery, and Hogendorn.

Scholarship on the role of guns in African society and politics dried up in the 1980s. Marks and Atmore recognized that their own article about South Africa was “incomplete and cursory,” adjectives that might also be applied to the rest of the articles about guns that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s. There were only two scholarly books, by Smaldone and Goody. In 1976, the empirical and analytical basis of Goody’s book was strongly called into question by Robin Law in a journal article,¹⁷ leaving us with Smaldone’s book as the only fully fledged study of guns in an African society and polity.

¹⁴ Gemery and Hogendorn, “Technological Change, Slavery and the Slave Trade.”

¹⁵ Caulk, “Firearms and Princely Power in Ethiopia.”

¹⁶ Berg, “Madagascar’s Sacred Musket.”

¹⁷ Law, “Horses, Firearms, and Political Power in Pre-Colonial West Africa.”

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Smaldone's book and the other, shorter studies cited above were forays in social, political, and technological history that were circumscribed by the methodological possibilities of the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, the historical and sociological study of technology was in its infancy. Most accounts of guns and other technologies were written by antiquarians, engineers, or biographers who favored taking an "internal" approach to technology, focusing on the influence of individuals over design and paying little attention to cultural, political, and social influences that were "external" to the process of invention. Much of this work was impressively detailed. In the case of South African firearms, there is one book in this genre, *Die Boer se Roer* ("The Boer's gun") written by Felix Lategan in 1974, that is still indispensable. Lategan described and catalogued South African firearms in great detail, yet like most "internal" historians of technology, he had limited interest in "external" factors, such as the relationship between technological development and economic, political, and social change. By contrast, Marks, Atmore and their colleagues were well aware of economic, political, and social developments. They did not present a detailed consideration of the technology, as Lategan was able to do, but they arrived at the important insight that guns played a significant role in South African society.

That being said, Marks and Atmore's argument that South Africa became a gun society has proven difficult to test. The concept itself has problems of definition. It may be possible to define a gun society as one in which a high percentage of people own a gun. This study will present plenty of evidence to suggest that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, guns became widespread, even though gun owners were not always detected by record keepers. Yet at what statistical point can we say, with accuracy, that a gun society exists? Besides, the widespread ownership of a technology does not determine a society. Nineteenth-century South Africans owned many iron pots, but we do not say they lived in an iron-pot society. To be sure, pots have less cultural resonance than guns, which symbolized citizenship, dominance, and masculinity, in different ways to different people. Marks and Atmore did show the ways in which gun possession influenced political changes. Yet it has proven difficult to find evidence to support the claim that as a symbol or as a cultural artifact, a majority of the people south of the Limpopo made guns into a fetish. Guns were not the focus of attention at all times, but awareness of guns and the actions that could be performed with guns certainly permeated the consciousness of many South Africans. This study