

A reader criticises WSWS review of radio program on the Anglo-Boer War

11 October 1999

The WSWS received the following letter in response to our September 29 review of a BBC Radio retrospective on the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

My opinion is that you missed the point. The English were responsible for far more harm on the African continent than the Nazis. Hitler's rule lasted less than 10 years.

The English were the best in the atrocity business. They were number one in slavery, child abuse was their speciality and their campaigns to subjugate "inferior" races was unexcelled.

The treatment of their own people from Queen Elizabeth until not too long ago is a story that should be told.

How many Nazis executed people by hanging, but not until dead, then sitting them up in a chair to slit the abdomen and removing intestines to be burned while the victim watches? Finally the victim is cut in quarters.

Perhaps this article would have been written differently had your sources not had such an English bias.

Sincerely,

MM

Dear MM:

Your complaint seems to be based on a number of misconceptions.

I would firstly like to say that the article was a review of a programme on BBC Radio 4. The programme makers interviewed a number of leading historians in both the UK and South Africa. The recent work of these academics has shed new light on the Boer War. As Marxists, it is our belief that this kind of serious research should be viewed objectively and incorporated into our analysis.

Your criticisms of the article arise from the misconceived notion that imperialism is something that

can be assessed arithmetically. You seem to think that we can arrive at an understanding of it by adding up the crimes and human rights abuses of one country and comparing them to the total of another. On that basis, of course, the British state would win hands down when compared to any other. In India, Ireland and Africa, to name only the most prominent examples, they left a trail of death by famine and massacre.

But arithmetic is not a good guide in history or politics. One imperialist power cannot be weighed against another in this way, as though we could then determine which represented the greater or lesser evil. This method leads you to underestimate the historical significance of Nazism in Germany, on the basis that in the space of a decade it did not murder as many people as the British state had in the course of several centuries.

You do not appear to understand the historical significance of Nazism, which was the most extreme expression of imperialism. Nazism was an attempt by the capitalist class to destroy the ability of the working class to act as an independent political force. Above all, the Nazis wanted to destroy the only workers state in the world—the Soviet Union. It was the Russian working class that prevented the Nazis from doing so and ultimately defeated them, despite the sabotage of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Many millions more would surely have died at the hands of the Nazis if the Soviet and European working class had not been so resolute and courageous.

The Nazis campaign of genocide against the Jews, Gypsies and others was an attempt to use these minority groups as scapegoats for the economic catastrophe that had overwhelmed Germany during the depression. They set out a deliberate and conscious programme of genocide at the Wansee Conference. The Nazi concentration camps were a highly organised and

efficient economic system that exploited everything from the labour of their victims to their gold fillings, hair and human fat.

The reason why so many died in the British camps in South Africa was largely due to the gross incompetence and indifference of the military authorities running them. When the camps were handed over to civilian authorities as a result of a massive campaign of protest in Britain and elsewhere, the death toll fell. By the end of the war, the death rate in the camps was lower than that in Glasgow—one of the poorest working class districts in Britain.

The British government did not make these changes because they were more humane than the German ruling class in the Nazi period, but because they still had to take account of public opinion at home. This was expressed in the campaign sparked off by Emily Hobhouse, who went to see the camps for herself and exposed the horrors that were taking place. Emily Hobhouse could only mount her campaign because the British ruling class had to deal with an increasingly militant and politically conscious working class. Anyone who had attempted to do this under the Nazis would quickly have found themselves in a concentration camp.

The *World Socialist Web Site* does not have an “English bias” and is conscious of such dangers when examining source material. We give frequent coverage to the present-day crimes of British imperialism, for example in Iraq and the former Yugoslavia, as well as running historical articles dealing with such questions as the suppression of the Mau Mau in Kenya.

You seem to ascribe the blame for imperialism's crimes to whole national groups. But the “German people” are no more responsible for the Nazis' crimes than are the “British people” collectively responsible for the crimes of British imperialism. These crimes were carried out in the interests of a definite social class—the same class responsible for the suppression and exploitation of working people in Britain.

Yours sincerely,

Brian Smith

See Also:

BBC Radio retrospective on the Anglo-Boer war, 1899-1902

[29 September 1999]



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