South African Race Riots

By George Padmore

Apart from the dead and the physical suffering endured, the most tragic consequence of this unprecedented outburst of mob violence from the point of view of non-European race relations, is the hatred and bitterness which these communal conflicts invariably leave as their legacy. However, efforts which have already been made to restore friendship and cooperation between the two communities are meeting success. Immediately after the fighting subsided, the leaders of the Indian and African National Congresses, the two leading non-European political organizations in South Africa, issued a joint statement appealing to their respective followers to close ranks in face of the provocation and incitement to racial hatred from European politicians and other agents of the Herrenvolk government.

A joint commission from the two bodies has also been set up to inquire into the economic and social causes of the unrest and to take immediate steps to remove such grievances as may exist between the two racial groups, and thereby re-establish friendship and cooperation on a more permanent basis between the African and Indian communities in Natal. Representatives of other non-European progressive organizations, as well as outstanding Africans and Indians, have united to support this gesture of good will and statesmanship on the part of the leaders of the African and Indian National Congresses.

Historical Background

The outbreak of the riots was spontaneous and took the leaders of the two racial communities completely by surprise. "Several false culprits can be acquitted at this. It is perhaps the first serious riot of modern times for which the communists have not and cannot be blamed," says the London Observer. The causes have to be looked for elsewhere.

It is significant that Field Marshall Smuts, seeking to make political capital out of the suffering and tragedy of these dark-skinned folk whom he so ruthlessly oppressed when he was Prime Minister, hastened to fasten blame upon his political rival, Dr. Malan, the leader of the present Boer Nationalist government. But this clumsy maneuver does not deceive the Africans. They know that the difference between Smuts and Malan is that of degree rather than of kind—the difference between Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

Repudiating the hypocrisy of "Janus" Smuts (this political Jekyll) and Hyde, who, like his friend Churchhill, poses to the outside world as a great liberal but is a reactionary tyrant to colored races), Inkundla Ya Bantu declares: "It is dishonest to accuse Dr. Malan or the Nationalists of being the main cause of the riots or to say that their rise to power has resulted in the Durban riots. A deep and fostering sore has been developing in the body of the African people against oppression and its agents since Union. It is the sore caused by segregation. It was not Dr. Malan who advised the delegates to the National Convention in 1910 to leave giving the African a voice in the affairs of his country to the abler minds of the future; in other words who silenced the voice of liberalism to ensure that the point of view of the oppressors of the former Dutch Republic prevailed. It was General Smuts himself, who, today, would hold the Nationalists as surely responsible for the Durban disasters. The Durban riots are the fruit of fatal blunders of the men who drafted the Act of Union—leader among them was General Smuts who was prime minister of the Union for ten years, and in that time did nothing..."
to give the African new hope. The Nationalist rise to power merely accelerated a process already in motion. To hold the Nationalists alone responsible for these disasters is just cant."

All the white politicians, British as well as Boer (Dutch), are equally responsible. Their hands are stained with the blood of Africans and Indians. By their incitement to racial hatred they hope to divert the attention of the non-Europeans from their real oppressors, the white overlords, just as the American Dixiecrats exploit racism for political ends. In South Africa, the quickest and surest way to election in Durban is to stand on an Asiatic platform.

"Over the last three years anti-Asiatic propaganda has been preached by prominent men in Durban," reports the South African correspondent of the liberal Manchester Guardian. "They have made Durban a city of hate. It was in this atmosphere of racial strain and tension that an incident precipitated the bloodiest riots on the night of January 13th last."

**How the Trouble Started**

The trouble started about 9 o'clock, when some Africans queueing up for buses operated by wealthy Asians, saw an Indian fruit vendor strike a Zulu child, George Madono. The crowd remonstrated with the man and a palaver ensued. Words led to blows. Then someone raised the false alarm that the boy had been killed by the Indian. Fighting spread in the wake of the rumor.

According to an eye-witness: "The incensed Africans turned on Indians in the vicinity with sticks, stones, and broken bottles, which they hurled at passing buses and cars operated by Indians. Fighting spread quickly as Africans pursued the vehicles. Vegetable carts were overturned and shop windows shattered. Indians attempting to make a getaway in buses, cars, and taxis were met with a hail of missiles.

As the situation was assuming ugly proportions a storm broke over the city and a heavy downpour of rain drove the rioters off the streets. Thanks to this timely intervention of Providence, calm was restored temporarily. On the following day, however, renewed fighting broke out in various parts of the city. The agents-provocateurs had gone to work. In order to eliminate business rivals, Europeans incited the Africans to attack the stores of Indian merchants. It was not difficult to arouse the resentment of the unsophisticated Zulu against Indian shopkeepers, who habitually overcharge natives, and Indian landlords, who exact the maximum rents for pitiful tin-roofed shacks, and who are merciless in evictions.

While there are many poor Indians belonging to the working class of Durban, it is the luxurious suburban villas and sleek American high-powered limousines of the wealthy Indian merchant class that arouse the envy and jealousy of the under-privileged Africans. And since their white oppressors are armed, it is easier for the Africans to release their frustration against defenseless Indians. When such communal outbursts occur it is the poor who suffer far more than the rich.

At the height of the shopping period on Friday, January 14, bands of Zulus, chanting their traditional war songs, stormed through the Indian quarters, looting shops and setting houses on fire. As the Indians deserted their shops and stores, white hooligans joined the mobs in looting, which went on all day. "Though after Friday the police made every effort to quell the riot, there is evidence to show that many lives and properties could have been saved had not many European policemen encouraged Africans to attack Indians," reports the Cape Town Guardian.

The same report says: "The Natal Indian Congress has also received the car numbers of European-owned cars the occupants of which were seen helping Africans to loot shops and houses. Many reports have been received from Indians, Africans, and Europeans to the effect that European-driven trucks transported Africans to fighting zones during the riots. One African has admitted in court that he was told to attack the Indians by a European."

"It was only when the situation threatened to get out of hand and the Africans might have attacked the European business section that the Government declared a state of emergency and flew troops into the city. These white soldiers (for only Europeans are allowed to bear arms in South Africa) immediately turned their guns upon the unarmed natives. This accounts for the large number of African casualties. Bullets took the place of tear gas and batons in restoring "the majesty of the white man's authority."

To silence his critics, Dr. Malan has announced the setting up of a judicial commission of inquiry (consisting of Justice F. P. van der Heever, chairman, Ryle Masson, chief magistrate of Johannesburg, and H. F. W. Schultz, chief magistrate of Durban. Ed.), which makes the affair sub judice. "Evidence will be given before this commission by both Indians and Natives. Among the leaders of both races who will testify before it we doubt whether there will be
South African Riots
(Continued from page 111)

found a single friend of the white man," says the influential Cape Town Argus. "The white man no longer enjoys the confidence of the races over whom he rules."

Europeans to Blame

Whatever may be the findings of the official commission of inquiry, the Durban municipal authorities cannot escape moral responsibility for the conditions which provided the social explosive to the riots. They have done less than any other South African city authorities to provide housing and other social amenities for their black population. According to the Broom Commission Report, published in March 1948, there were 23,000 Africans living in shacks under conditions that, in the words of the report, constitute "the health of all races in and around Durban, a deadly menace which must be removed at once."

The Commission also reported that the infant mortality rate among Africans is about the highest in the world. The Africans are riddled with T.B., amoebic dysentery, and V.D. Not a house has been built, not a clinic opened for the blacks since the publication of the Broom report. Social conditions such as those exposed by the Commission are turning the Africans into a nation of bigger Thomens.

The South African Color bar system, the most cruel caste system in all the world, permeates every aspect of life. It gives rise to the most cruel forms of political oppression, social repression, and economic exploitation. It enables a white minority of two million British and Dutch settlers to exercise dominion over eight million unarmed Africans.

The black man in South Africa is a slave in his own country. He is the helot of the helots. The tragedy of the human race is that he is deprived of any possibility of developing his potentialities, has no scope for his energies. He is doomed to be a hewer of wood and drawer of water for others. His children are without a future. His whole life is one of thwarted emotions which find relief in drink. It is not surprising, therefore, that his pent-up frustrations, seeking an outlet, should burst out in riots directed against another surpressed group. But why should Africans hate Indians when they, too, suffer many of the same indignities?