

**A TRIBUTE TO
THE FARMERS OF ZIMBABWE**

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Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the land (William Jennings Bryan, 9 July 1896).

How prophetic these words are proving to be for Zimbabwe. In making this statement, however, Bryan could never have dreamt of a government purposefully destroying its own farms. The Zimbabwe Government's campaign to obliterate commercial agriculture, under the guise of agrarian reform, but in reality in the interest of retaining power through illegal and violent means, has been largely effective. A major part of this campaign has been incessant propaganda, based on distortions and lies, designed to give it respectability. Further deceptions have sought to give the impression that the pretence of agrarian reform has been successful. It can be expected, also, that there will be attempts to mask the past achievements of the commercial farmers. It would be a tragedy if these truly remarkable achievements, and the tragic sufferings of these farmers, were not fully documented, lest distortions become accepted history.

Virgin land

The first white hunters, traders and missionaries who, in the 19th century came to the region that was to become Rhodesia and subsequently Zimbabwe, found a land devoid of infrastructure. The wheel was not yet in use; there were no roads. Early travellers record travelling often for days without seeing any human habitation. With a population of about a quarter of a million people at the time, indeed most of the land was not occupied. Commercial farming started in the 1890s on what was, for the most part, virgin land. There were no roads or railways, there was no electricity or telephone; there were no fences, boreholes, pumps, windmills, dams, irrigation schemes; there were no cattle dips, barns or any other farm buildings.

These first farmers had to discover how to contend with predators that killed their livestock and other animals that consumed their crops; how to control diseases, pests and parasites of livestock and crops that were foreign to them. While some guidance could be drawn from South Africa, knowledge and experience built up over generations in the developed world had limited application, since the local climate, soil and vegetation were vastly different.

Breadbasket

From this starting point, fraught with difficulties, agriculture developed faster than it had anywhere else in the world. The agricultural infrastructure was rapidly developed and soon the country became self-sufficient in most agricultural products. In many cases production levels and quality equalled or bettered those in the developed world. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Year Book of 1975 ranked the then Rhodesia second in the world in terms of yields of maize, wheat, soya beans and groundnuts, and third for cotton. In the combined ranking for all these crops Rhodesia ranked first in the world. Some of these rankings were, in fact, reached long before 1975. Rhodesia's Virginia tobacco was rated the best in the world in yield and quality, while maize entries in world championships were consistently placed in the first three places. The world's largest single citrus producer was developed early in the country's history. The highest quality breeding stock of numerous breeds of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and poultry were imported. At the same time the

indigenous cattle were developed through breeding and selection to highly productive and respected breeds. The Tuli, for example, has been imported into a number of other countries. Zimbabwe beef was favourably regarded on the most discerning European markets. Wildlife was incorporated into farming systems to develop a highly successful eco-tourism industry and endangered species found their most secure havens on farm conservancies.

Zimbabwe was the world's second largest exporter of flue-cured tobacco. This, together with exports of maize, soyabeans, cotton, sugar, coffee, tea, fruit, vegetables, flowers and beef, made agriculture the major source of foreign currency. Agriculture contributed more to the gross domestic product than any other industry. It was the largest employer of labour, providing employment for about a third of the total labour force. Zimbabwe, due to its technologically advanced commercial agriculture, earned the reputation of being the breadbasket of central Africa.

To-day foreign aid is considered indispensable for development in the developing world. In Rhodesia agriculture, like other industries, developed with no such aid. Commercial farmers also did not benefit from the free seed, fertilizer, tillage and other inputs currently being dispensed in an effort to induce production from the resettled farms. However, agricultural departments and training colleges set up by the colonial government to service all farming sectors regardless of colour, played a crucial part in the development of agriculture. Without the outstanding contributions of the Department of Veterinary Services the livestock industry could not have developed and exports of animal products could not have been established. The Department of Research and Specialist Services and the Tobacco Research Board developed improved crop varieties for local and regional use and researched optimum crop and livestock nutrition and management techniques. The Department of Conservation and Extension was established to ensure that the land was farmed in accordance with its potential for sustainable production. It provided a sophisticated farm planning service, agricultural extension and specialist advisory services. These departments, employing highly qualified and dedicated staff, were rated among the best in the world and the agricultural colleges turned out farmers of the highest calibre.

Outposts of civilization

The benefits accruing to the country from the commercial farming sector extended far beyond the value of agricultural products and employment. The farmers contributed to the leadership, fabric and welfare of society out of all proportion to their numbers. It was largely this fact that was to make them the prime target of a government desperately clinging to power. Each farm was, to a greater or lesser extent, an outpost of civilization. Many farms established schools for the children of their workers. Every farm was a clinic and dispensary and ambulance service for the surrounding areas. The relationship between farmer and worker was more intimate and benevolent than in any other industry. Commercial farmers tended to be exemplary neighbours to the communal area peasant farmers, providing unpaid help in many ways. It was from the agricultural shows organized by farmers that the Central African Trade Fair grew.

All these contributions to the growth of the economy and the welfare of the country emanated from fewer than five thousand farmers, on less than half the land.

Terrorist targets

After the Rhodesian Government's unilateral declaration of independence in 1965, the tenacity and initiative of the farmers in diversification significantly helped the country to survive the comprehensive sanctions that were imposed upon it. The few agricultural products that had hitherto been imported were quickly brought into production locally. And it was the farmers who bore the brunt of the terrorist attacks during the ensuing Rhodesian war. They were under continuous threat of armed attacks on their homes, ambushes, and land mines. Many farmers and their family members and workers were murdered. And yet they continued production. Independence in 1980 brought relief to most of the country but not to Matabeleland. Here attacks by "dissidents" resulted in even more farmers being murdered than had been the case during the war.

From the mid 1980s there followed little more than a decade of comparative normality, during which farmers had to contend only with drastic shortages of many inputs. It is worth noting that during the first two decades of the post independence period the government was encouraging the continuance of commercial agriculture. The government claimed first option rights on all land sales but nearly half of the farmers on the land in 2000 had purchased their farms during that period with government approval.

The worst nightmare for the farmers was to come from 2000 onwards. In 2000 an unrigged referendum was held on the Zimbabwe Government's proposed alterations to the constitution. It came as an unbearable shock to Mugabe and his ruling ZANU (PF) party when the result showed that they did not have majority support. It was unthinkable that they would ever relinquish power. From this time on the Mugabe government made the retention of power at any cost its prime focus. The farmers, although making up only a minute fraction of the population, were seen as key supporters of the opposition who could influence their large labour force and hence other rural people, potentially the government's main support base. The farmers were, therefore, first to be punished by vindictive and brutal attacks; then driven from their farms by government-sponsored agents so that they could no longer make a meaningful contribution to the opposition. At the same time, those incited by the government to invade the farms, and those to whom dispossessed land was given, could be expected to be loyal government party supporters. There had previously been ample opportunity for genuine, orderly land reform, with offers of international donor funding, but the land was to be used as a political tool. Now, 20 years after independence, this violent campaign was suddenly instituted to retain the ruling party's grip on power. Disguising this under such emotive rhetoric as "agrarian reform", "land redistribution to the landless" and "recovery of stolen land" has deceived and earned the support of many naïve observers. It has provided an excuse for other knowing, but equally malevolent leaders, to support these actions.

This "land reform" took the form of state-sponsored terrorism conducted by rabid bands of so-called war veterans or, as political analyst John Makumbe has put it, "ZANU (PF) hoodlums and hired hands". The findings of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Forum Report were that this was a government-planned seizure of land, not a spontaneous seizure by landless blacks, as claimed by the government. In this government-sponsored frenzy farmers and their workers were violently attacked and many were murdered, their property was wantonly destroyed or stolen, their farm animals and pets were cruelly maimed and killed, and wild life on the farms was decimated. Farmers and their families lived for extended periods in states of siege, surrounded by threatening armed thugs. Adding insult to injury, these people would often demand favours and assistance from the farmers. Many farmers were illegally detained. Ultimately the unbearable pressure, or the direct threat to their lives,

has forced more than 90% of the farmers off their farms. According to the Human Rights Forum Report, more than 10 000 farm workers are believed to have died after their expulsion from farms, as a consequence of loss of employment, housing, nutrition and access to health care on the farms.

Total loss

It is difficult for city dwellers to fully comprehend the enormity of what has happened to these farmers. In addition to the abuse, violent attacks and cold-blooded murders, farmers in one sweep lost their homes, their land, their crops, their animals and their equipment; they have had their businesses, built up often over more than a generation, closed down, their livelihood terminated; all this with, as yet, no compensation or insurance coverage. Farm workers too have been left homeless and unemployed. Through all of this there was no one to whom the farmers could turn for help; there was no public protest on their behalf. There was no recourse to law since the law was no longer applied. Court rulings were ignored. The police were usually fully aware of what was happening; often they supported or participated in the violence. There was even a case where a police roadblock knowingly allowed free passage to cars carrying armed assassins, both on their way to murder a farmer and on their return after the deed had been done.

Starvation

Most of the farms now lie largely derelict and unproductive. Many are occupied, not by the peasants the campaign was proclaimed to provide for but by ruling party cronies, army, police and church leaders, favoured in order to win their political allegiance. Although the farms were taken over as fully functioning concerns, production immediately fell to such low levels that the country now faces widespread starvation and is dependent on food aid. Dr. J. L. Grant, former Deputy Director of the Commercial Farmers Union, estimates that the production of maize and soyabeans has fallen by more than 50%, while tobacco and coffee production has declined by more than 75%. The commercial beef herd has declined by more than 80%. This, together with lack of control of stock movements and consequent outbreaks of foot and mouth disease, means that beef can no longer be exported.

In a recent radio interview the Zimbabwe Minister of Lands and Resettlement was asked why it was that Zimbabwe, formerly referred to as the breadbasket of central Africa, was now suffering perpetual severe food shortages? Drought has been the usual excuse offered for this, even in seasons of adequate rainfall. On this occasion the excuse given was that it took time for new farmers to get into production. This was in spite of the fact that they took over established farms, often with standing crops. Ironically, within days of this interview it was reported that, as a result of dispossessed Zimbabwe farmers settling in Zambia, within one season that country already had an exportable surplus of maize.

What has happened to the economy of Zimbabwe, mainly as a result of the destruction of its farms, is now evident to all.

So much was owed by so many to the initiative, enterprise, energy and courage of so few; yet, when the farmers were being persecuted, no one intervened on their behalf. It is to be hoped that the amazing story of the farmers of Zimbabwe will be recorded more fully and published, that the perpetrators of the crimes committed against them will be brought to justice and that the farmers will receive fair compensation for their persecution and losses.

Author Details

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- [Vol 13, No 1 \(1978\) - Articles](#)
A review of experiments comparing systems of grazing management on natural pastures.
[ABSTRACT](#)
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Patterns of defoliation in four- and eight-paddock grazing systems.
[ABSTRACT](#)

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