

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ashley Jackson. *Botswana 1939-1945: An African Country at War*. Oxford Historical Monographs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xiii + 281 pp. \$72.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820764-1.

Reviewed by Bruce S. Bennett (History Department, University of Botswana)
Published on H-SAfrica (January, 2002)



Not long ago, one of the University of Botswana History Department's undergraduate research students set out to interview an old man about some topic, approved by the Department, but found the old man had other ideas. "I'll tell you about what I did in the war," he said. No, said the student, he was researching something on agriculture. "No, never mind that, I'm going to tell you about the war." The war, as experienced by the generation now passing away, is something they want today's Batswana to know about. Even those who will disagree with Dr. Jackson's analysis will be glad that he has set down what he has.

Ashley Jackson's book is described as an attempt at "total history," combining political, economic, and social perspectives, and making extensive use of oral interviews as well as archive sources. It is fairly closely focused on the years 1939 to 1945, dealing in turn with recruitment, the Batswana forces abroad, the Home Front, and demobilization.

This book is based upon a doctoral thesis. In studying the experience of Botswana during the Second World War, the study aimed to make a contribution to a larger debate on the effects of the war on the development of African politics and society. Jackson identifies a "consensus" view of these effects, in which sees the war as tending to undermine the stability of the British and French empires. According to this view, the war caused intensified exploitation of African labour, causing disruption and resentment. The experiences of African servicemen altered their attitudes, and there was a connection between returned servicemen and the rise of African activism, leading to nationalist activity, after the war. The author suggests (and can quote Michael Crowder to this

effect) that such radical effects have been more often asserted than demonstrated. The "consensus view," he considers, is "too metropolitan, too teleological, and too elite-based" (p. viii). What is needed is more "grassroots" study. This book, therefore, attempts to test such theories by a detailed study of one particular case.

Although the Bechuanaland Protectorate obviously had a number of unusual features, there has been an attempt in much writing to interpret the Protectorate's experiences as part of a broader pattern, which can in this context perhaps be fitted into the "consensus" view. In particular, approaches making use of underdevelopment theory have been widely followed in local writing. Jackson consistently argues against such interpretations. (It seems to me that the impact of such conclusions, if accepted, could be in one of two forms: either to undermine the wider "consensus" views, if the attempt to find consistency between Botswana and other colonies is maintained, or alternatively to undermine this attempt and support instead a more "exceptionalist" view of Botswana, as was characteristic of some early writing on Botswana.)

Whereas previous work has often presented a view of the war as unpopular and subject to widespread resistance and at least passive opposition, Jackson argues that it was broadly accepted. Previous writers have, for example, noted resistance to and evasion of recruitment. Jackson, however, argues that this has been greatly exaggerated, with particular cases being cited in a way that gives a misleading overall impression.

The economic issues of the Home Front centre on the "war lands" (special communally worked fields), and on other agricultural innovations. David Kiyaga-Mulindwa,

writing in *The Birth of Botswana*,^[1] saw the war lands as an exploitative device which was subject to deliberate evasion, but Jackson queries this “underdevelopment” approach. Notably, he raises the question of how good the rainfall was at this time, citing official records to show that poor rain, rather than innovations, may have been the biggest problem. Similarly, he argues that controls on the grain trade were not exploitative but were in fact vaguely collectivist attempts to reduce exploitation by traders. Jackson quotes District Commissioners to show that they did not think in classical laissez-faire terms, one of them apparently being shocked that traders charged prices simply according to supply and demand (p. 141). According to the author, such attempted controls were not very effective, as producers tended to act according to their perceived individual self-interest. The implication, which could be fruitful for future research, is that the crucial determinant was the logic of the capitalist economy of which Botswana was becoming a part, not the deliberate policies of the Protectorate administration, which in fact aimed at a rather different path of development.

A highly significant aspect of the APC (the Batswana forces in the British army), according to this study, is the way in which the “tribal system” was carried over into it. The power of the chiefs, some of whom were present as Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs), remained of central importance, while NCOs who lacked status within the home political structure tended to lack authority. Even (for example) the chiefs’ laws against alcohol were observed to a much higher degree than might have been expected.

Jackson finds little evidence of the sort of attitude changes among returned servicemen that the “consensus” view predicts. Instead, the returnees were re-absorbed into their old lives, and do not seem to have played any special role in civilian life. (Since the book does not cover the post-war period in detail, this finding as to their immediate return would appear to be firmer than that on their later role.) Overall, the conclusion is that the experiences of the war were successfully contained within a traditional world-view of Botswana, the Chiefs and the British. According to this world-view, the Batswana had retained a relatively independent position under their chiefs, under the ultimate “Protection” of Britain, symbolized by Mmamosadinyana (Queen Victoria). Britain could be viewed positively as the protector against the Boers, while the Chief-in the Reserve, the immediate face of authority—tended to take the blame for problems. According to the author, this pattern of relationships survived the war with much less strain than

would be predicted by the consensus view or has been suggested by previous writers. The war was a period of relatively good relations between the chiefs and the Protectorate authorities, both keen to recover from the strains of the Rey years.

Jackson does identify some issues which did cause significant strain, however. Interestingly, these have often not received a great deal of previous attention. For example, he finds evidence that delays in demobilization—which were perceived as a breach of faith—caused serious anger. Later, many returned soldiers believed that they had been cheated out of a promised post-war pay-out of some sort. This was typically blamed on chiefs rather than the British authorities, and the belief has persisted up to the present day, becoming linked to the remaining old soldiers’ feeling that modern Batswana do not sufficiently understand or appreciate what they did.

Overall, then, Jackson finds that the Botswana case does not fit the “consensus view” pattern. This study can be seen as one of a number of works criticizing, not necessarily from the same angle, the common nationalist master-narrative (and its associated underdevelopment-theory interpretations). The book suggests that the conservative forces in Botswana society at the time of the Second World War were strong, stable, and well able to maintain themselves, and that, by implication, a focus on dissent and challengers may be misleading. The Mmamosadinyana legend was more important than any embryonic nationalism. This needs to be set in a longer-term context, but it does suggest interesting possibilities about the origins of conservative politics in modern Botswana.

As was noted earlier, the study is described as an attempt to test the “consensus” theories of the effects of the Second World War. However, I am unsure whether this is in fact the best way of taking this book. The book as it stands is mainly limited to the period of the war, and for this reason it is hard to draw firm conclusions from it about the effects of wartime experience. That is, to test theories about the effects of wartime experience on the British Empire, much more study of the detail of the post-war period would be necessary than could reasonably have been expected from this particular project. The testing of these theories may have been the original inspiration, and the book certainly provides useful material towards it, but I think that what the study actually does is slightly different. It is a broad study of wartime experiences among Batswana troops and among those they left

behind, and their conceptualization of those experiences, combined with certain social and economic analyses.

Inevitably, such a study must set its limits somewhere. In this case, probably the most important limitation is one of time: the study considers the war years, and does not follow up its themes in detail after the war. Some aspects of the “consensus model” which the author wishes to test can be tested in terms of the war years alone, but others, such as the role played by returned servicemen subsequently, require a longer view. To come to a conclusion on that will require an examination of, for example, post-war political activism in particular cases. There is already some such work but it falls outside the time limits of the present study. This is not a criticism of the book as such: the study is good as far as it goes, and the limits set are reasonable ones. As a broad study, it is I think of considerable value to twentieth-century Botswana and Southern African history in general, even if its results on the “consensus model” are more limited than the original doctoral project may have envisaged. Certainly this is a work of great interest, and it is a pity that the publishers have produced such a high-priced edi-

tion when Jackson has written a book that might otherwise have sold well here in Botswana.

One welcome feature of this study is its engagement with the local historiography. Jackson has made extensive use of unpublished sources in Botswana, such as the important collection of undergraduate research essays in the University of Botswana Library (although he seems to have missed Gaelle Sobott-Mogwe’s essay, since made available in *Pula*, on Batswana women in the Second World War[2]), and he takes the arguments developed in these local debates as his starting point. He goes on to disagree fairly fundamentally with many of the conclusions, but it is good to see a western-based historian who sees African work as central rather than peripheral.

Notes

[1]. F. Morton and J. Ramsay, eds., *The Birth of Botswana: A history of the Bechuanaland Protectorate from 1910 to 1966*. Gaborone: Longman Botswana, 1987.

(2). Gaelle Sobott, “Experiences of Batswana women during the Second World War” *Pula* vol. 13 no. 1/2 1999.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Bruce S. Bennett. Review of Jackson, Ashley, *Botswana 1939-1945: An African Country at War*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. January, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5846>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.