

EXTRACTS FROM

'BLACK OCTOBER': THE IMPACT OF THE SPANISH INFLUENZA EPIDEMIC OF 1918 ON SOUTH AFRICA

by

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THE GOLD MINES OF THE RAND

Without any warning, cases of what was later identified as Spanish 'flu suddenly began to appear among Black mineworkers on the central Rand about 18 September 1918. 1 Within a few days it had spread to mines all along the Reef, curtailing operations and filling existing mine-hospitals to such an extent that temporary hospitals had to be set up hastily to cope with the daily influx of new cases.

By 27 September over 14 000 cases had been reported, including more than 100 White miners. Anxiously mine medical officers submitted lung, throat, sputum and blood specimens from 'flu victims to the South African institute for Medical Research (SAIMR) for analysis, aware of the vulnerability of Black mineworkers to pneumonia and of the ~danger posed by the tightly packed conditions in the compound if the highly infectious disease were to become fatal. In an effort to restrict its progress, managers were asked to discourage their workers from visiting other mines.

Initially, the 'flu was very mild in form, deaths being rare and recovery swift. In medical circles the visitation was 'not seriously regarded'; it would only 'produce temporary inconvenience without serious loss', reported Reuters, and, 'in view of the fact that such a very large number of people have been affected, the fact that there has been only one death must be considered to be reassuring,

Nevertheless, mine officials recognised that some precautions had to be taken, for the onset of the disease was sudden, often totally incapacitating the victim without warning. The Prevention of Accidents on Mines Committee recommended that workers directly responsible for the lives of others be urged to report 'any unusual symptoms in regard to health' they experienced while on duty; in particular, it laid down that drivers 'employed in raising and lowering persons should not start the engine on any trip unless they are feeling perfectly normal,

This warning proved in vain. At 3.30am on 1 October, as he was hoisting a cage with 41 Black miners to the surface at the ERPM mine, Driver W E Hill was paralysed by a sudden attack of Spanish 'flu. As he sat before his controls, 'powerless to act ••• a multitude of lights ••• exploding before his eyes', the cage went on being raised until it hit the top of the headgear and plummeted back to earth from a height of one hundred feet. It smashed onto the collar of the shaft, killing twenty of its occupants and injuring eight. The official inquiry into the accident did not find Hill to have been 'criminally neglectful, but in view of the shock to his nervous system and owing also to the lack of knowledge of the possible after-

effects of Spanish influenza on a person who has contracted the malady', it felt he should not resume his job for at least a month, and then only if the mine's medical inspector certified him fit to do so

Yet it was not only in this indirect manner that the Spanish flu claimed lives on the mines. From early in October fatal complications became increasingly frequent among 'flu sufferers and the death-toll began to mount: 211 deaths between 5 October and 8 October, 15 203 on 9 October and 10 October 16 and 220 between 16 October and 22 October.

By early in November when the epidemic had waned, 1 147 Black mineworkers on the Rand had fallen victim to the Spanish 'flu.

In the preceding six weeks nearly 61 000 of the estimated 190 000 employed on the gold mines had been admitted to various mine hospitals with the disease.

These deaths, the debility of the survivors, the return home - despite the Native Labour Bureau's efforts to dissuade them of thousands whose contracts had expired and who wished to escape the flu cut the number of Black mineworkers on the Rand sharply.

To add to this shortage the inflow of new workers in the last ten weeks of the year was much depleted by the epidemic's ravages in the recruiting areas and the understandable 'reluctance of many to risk travelling to a disease-filled Rand. 'Of course very exaggerated ideas are to be found among the natives alienate this disease,' reported one labour recruiter from Port Shepstone on 21 October.

To make the mines' labour problem even worse, late in November Spanish 'flu began to appear in a serious form among recruits arriving from Mozambique. Under pressure from the Portuguese authorities who wished to prevent the disease spreading throughout their territory and fearful of a new wave reaching the Rand, The Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) decided to halt all recruiting in Mozambique early in December. In return, the Portuguese authorities agreed that all Mozambican workers already in the Transvaal should remain there until recruiting was restarted. In this way it was hoped to offset the effect the suspension of recruiting would have on the Rand's labour supply.

These measures remained in force until mid-March 1919 when the original arrangement was restored, only to be disrupted once again in May 1919 by a fresh outbreak of Spanish 'flu in some districts of Mozambique.

As a result of these acute disruptions of the Black labour (SUPPI), by 31 December the number of Black workers on the gold mines' (already 26% below requirements before the flu struck) had shrunk to 62% of the necessary complement.

The Black labour force 'had been depleted to a greater extent than ever before in the history of the mines, having regard to the scope of operations', observed the President of the Chamber of Mines gloomily in his Annual Report for 1918. 29

The consequent fall in output and profits was dramatic, striking a sharp blow to an industry already in the midst of a crisis of profitability. In November 1918 seventeen of the 48 mines on the Rand reported a net loss for the month. Overall profit for November of £480 102 was described in the industry as 'the poorest monthly profit since the Chamber of Mines recorded the financial results of working, the figure being nearly £300 000 below that of the strike month, July 1913,

'The influenza has indeed played havoc with the pro/fits and makes one very anxious about the future', admitted Sir Lionel Phillips, chairman of Central Mining, in a private letter to the President of the Chamber of Mines. 'One thing after another appears to rise to prey upon the gold mines.

The 'flu epidemic's adverse effect on one of the cornerstones of the mining industry's profitability, a ready supply of cheap Black labour, continued for several months, exacerbating the problem of low grade mines in particular. At the already faltering Princess Estate Mine, for instance, the 'flu 'reduced the number of natives available for work to such an extent that development operations were again impeded for several months, Together with other problems, this was to prove disastrous to its continued operation within eighteen months.

Some mines tried to speed up the introduction of jackhammers and machine-drills to reduce their labour needs, but this was a longterm solution, with political, economic and practical limits. More common, especially once World War I had ended, was a louder, more insistent demand for recruiting to be again permitted north of latitude 22° 5'.³⁹ If this was not sanctioned, warned the industry's representatives, dire consequences would follow.

In a clear bid to force the Government's hand in this matter, in May 1919 the President of the Chamber of Mines addressed an open letter to Malan, Acting Prime Minister and Minister of Mines and Industries in which he complained, inter alia, of the 'constantly decreasing supply of native labourers •••• So far as we can see,' he went on, 'nothing can now prevent a number of important mines, employing a large number of Europeans and upon whose operations the prosperity of a considerable section of the Witwatersrand depends, from ceasing operations in the next few months. The situation is one of the utmost gravity, its most serious aspect being the unemployment and distress that are bound to follow.

The following month the Government appointed a commission of inquiry to look into the overall position of the 21 low grade mines. However, its recommendation that Blacks from north of latitude 22°S be recruited⁴² was not accepted, as the premium price for gold from July 1919 rendered the position of these mines less precarious, at least for the time being. However, as the President of the Chamber of Mines recognised, the problem of the low grade mines had not been solved, 'but merely postponed'

Meanwhile, no opportunity had been lost by the mining industry ~ to impress on Government, recruiter and labourer how satisfactory medical facilities and living conditions on the mines really - were. The comparatively low mortality from Spanish • flu was widely publicised, 'eloquent testimony', declared the President of the Chamber of Mines, 'to the

medical officers of the mines, the compound managers, and the hospital staffs,. Indeed, in his presidential address the following year he regretted that labour recruiting had come to a standstill at the time, for it was impossible to prevent the 'flu spreading, 'and the natives (are better off on the mines than at their homes, and no more likely to contract the disease)

How this rosy picture of conditions on the mines was communicated to the very source of the much-desired labour is well illustrated by an item in the MatatieleMail in November 1918. This report was no more than a precis of a Native Recruiting Corporation (NRC) circular which had praised the 'prompt measures taken to combat the epidemic' and the 'thorough organisation and equipment of native hospitals on the Mines'~ it also pointed out that the 'flu epidemic had not made dreaded pneumonia any more common on the gold mines.

'The low percentage of deaths speaks well for the way the boys are treated by the mines belonging to the Native Recruiting Corporation,'
commented the MatatieleMail approvingly.

Yet it was not primarily these assurances which slowly increased the supply of labour during 1919. Far more important were the waning of the 'flu in the recruiting areas and the pressing shortage of food in areas such as the Transkei and Ciskei. In (part, this stemmed from poor harvests as a result of a severe drought and late planting caused by the epidemic. SO As early as January 1919 a well-informed authority on the Rand was forecasting that,

'owing to the poor crops in some of the Native Territories and losses suffered through the Epidemic, a considerable increase in the supply of labour~ may be anticipated in the near future.'

In spheres other than labour the epidemic left little permanent mark on the gold-mining industry. Comforted by the relatively low death-toll compared to Kimberley (where the far more virulent second wave of Spanish 'flu had decimated the workforce), senior medical men in the Rand mining establishment seem to have concluded that in their compounds conditions were not in need of significant reform.

Reconstructing the epidemic experience of the subjects of all this concern on the part of the mining industry, the Black mineworkers, is difficult, as sources are scanty. The close supervision exercised over them meant that few serious cases of 'flu went undetected and the recollections of 'flu survivors are dominated by memories of mine hospitals and hastily-converted dormitories filled with coughing men, running high fevers.

When the embargo on repatriation was finally lifted early in March 1919, matters seem to have proceeded smoothly if slowly, under the strict supervision of Government and recruiting officials who had feared an uncontrolled rush by the Mozambican workers concerned.

In short, the chief significance of the 'flu epidemic for the Rand gold mines lay in the way that it aggravated the already serious shortage of Black workers. As such, it

intensified the greater profitability crisis facing the mines, a crisis which was ultimately to lead to the Rand Revolt of 1922

TABLE 1: EFFECT OF SPANISH 'FLU EPIDEMIC ON SUPPLY OF BLACK LABOUR, ON OUTPUT AND ON PROFITS OF RAND GOLD MINES, AUGUST 1918 - JULY 1919

(A) LABOUR

		TOTAL NUMBER OF BLACK WORKERS EMPLOYED AT GOLD-MINING MEMBERS OF WNLA	BLACK WORKERS RECRUITED EACH MONTH BY WNLA AND NRC
1918	Aug.	179 390	21 257
	Sept.	179 399	20 995
	Oct.	173 153	15 753
	Nov.	160 279	5 940
	Dec.	152 060	7 705
1919	Jan.	160 599	21 102
	Feb.	172 359	23 706
	March	175 620	21 857
	April	175 267	19 865
	May	173 376	16 505
	June	172 505	15 234
	July	173 613	18 319

(B) OUTPUT

(C) PROFITS

		TONS HOISTED	WORKING PROFITS (E)
1918	Aug.	2 351 292	676 146
	Sept.	2 215 980	600 330
	Oct.	2 214 943	531 774
	Nov.	2 053 759	480 102
	Dec.	1 987 403	507 860
1919	Jan.	2 117 293	547 793
	Feb.	1 981 606	498 204
	March	2 241 859	573 582
	April	2 189 059	573 143
	May	2 282 184	608 715
	June	2 174 488	592 361
	July	2 333 353	611 118

(Source: Transvaal Chamber of Mines - Annual Reports, 1918 and 1919)