

## A BLOODY AND BLOODLESS INDUSTRY

*Stones of Contention: A History of Africa's Diamonds.*

By Todd Cleveland.

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv + 225. \$26.95, paperback (ISBN 978-0-8214-2100-0).

doi:10.1017/S0021853715000468

**Key Words:** Capital, global, mining, teaching texts, technology.

No modern commodity has been associated more closely with structural violence than the diamond. Mined for millennia in South Asia, diamonds entered the vortex of a new era, when the exploitation and mining operations in Brazil (1725) and then Africa (1867) engaged with colonialism and the growth of the capitalist global economy. By the 1990s, large numbers of the stones were declared 'blood diamonds' and they became iconic testimony to the global network of forces propelling parts of the African continent towards a tragic and unprecedented unfurling of greed, exploitation, and violence.

Todd Cleveland has written a highly readable and accessible account of this descent, placing his narrative in the global contexts in which it unfolded. Its main arguments will be familiar territory to historians of Africa, but perhaps less well known to world historians. Since the late 1980s, scholars have acknowledged diamonds at the heart of social and political transformations in Southern Africa, from William H. Worger's *South African's City of Diamonds: Mine Workers and Monopoly Capitalism in Kimberley, 1867–1895* (Yale University Press, 1987) to Robert V. Turrell's *Capital and Labour on the Kimberley Diamond Fields, 1871–1890* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), both of which dealt with the first Kimberley diamonds and the immediate attraction of foreign interests. The globalization of labor, implementation of a pass system to control labor flows, and the placement of commodity controls situated outside the African continent were not strategies uniquely applied to the diamond industry. However, market manipulations led to cartels in the buying and selling of diamonds and simultaneously increased the myth of scarcity, while reaping obscene wealth for a few. Violence escalated within and around the mines, with early migrant workers in Southern Africa seeking temporary wages sufficient for the purchase of a firearm. Racist and demeaning treatment by colonial and company entities and collusion with traditional African authorities repeatedly led to labor's humiliation and the cycle of violence required to enforce, maintain, or resist the harsh system of exploitation.

As Cleveland demonstrates, the South African strategies that began in the late nineteenth century and matured under apartheid were replicated in other African colonies during the twentieth century, with varying results and complications. For example, indigenous rulers in Ghana retained mineral rights and rented access to foreigners. The lesser evils of exploitation and capitalist deformation of sustainable development in Botswana and Namibia prompt the author to clutch at these examples in order to contest and counter the inevitability of the Kimberley model.

This slim volume appears as part of the series *Africa in World History* edited by David Robinson and Joseph Miller. World historians may be disappointed with the relative absence of comparative material from other continents. The focus is Africa, producer of

the vast majority of stones, but this is not a simple transnational tale. Connections do not link individual states, but rather they ignore, exploit, and transcend their boundaries. This may be one explanation for the seemingly unstoppable persistence of exploitation in African diamond mining regions, unheeded even by civil wars. Mining sectors not only have flourished, they have perpetuated structural inequalities at every level of society. At the extremes of the spectrum of capitalist exploitation, diamonds are 'blood diamonds', while the diamond industry itself may as well be considered 'bloodless' (not the author's term) in its seemingly total lack of humanity.

Two areas of the story of diamonds offer particular potential for world historical treatment: firstly, the formation of the diamond cartel and monopoly capitalism, historically grounded in the South African De Beers story, but extended to other African sites, and, secondly, the environmental consequences of diamond mining landscapes. Both topics are woven throughout the book, but neither appears center stage. Nor does the transfer of technology (hydraulics, haulage, engineering, and managerial expertise) warrant much coverage as part of the global story. By attempting to maintain balance and letting the historical record speak to more contemporary issues of resource wars, Cleveland misses an opportunity to guide the discussion much beyond the obvious.

Nonetheless, students will make the connections between the global exploitation of race and class by a collaboration between government and individuals and the expanding violence of the past century. Cover to cover, readers will find historical lessons easily adapted for the classroom. The colonial and postcolonial continuities, the impact of the Cold War, and the Lebanese merchants in Sierra Leone using diamond profits to finance militants in their own country are examples of the wealth of global connections to be mined. Discussion questions and additional readings are suggested for each chapter. The historiography of topics and the use of oral interviews with Angolan miners provide depth and richness that exceed textbook treatment. In sum, this concise history of diamonds in Africa brings the world into sharper focus and will remind many readers why Africa matters.

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## EXAMINING AND RE-EXAMINING SOUTH AFRICA'S PAST

*The South Africa Reader: History, Culture, Politics.*

Edited By Clifton Crais and Thomas V. McClendon.

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. xvi + 606. \$99.95,

hardback (ISBN 978-0-8223-5514-4); \$29.95,

paperback (ISBN 978-0-8223-5529-8).

doi:10.1017/S002185371500047X

**Key Words:** South Africa, colonialism, culture, social movements, sources, teaching texts.