

2.4 Rinderpest, or the Cattle Plague

In Africa, in the 1890s, a fast-spreading disease of cattle plague or Rinderpest had a terrifying impact on people's livelihoods and the local economy. This is a good example of the widespread European imperial impact on colonised societies. It shows how in this era of conquest even a disease affecting cattle reshaped the lives and fortunes of thousands of people and their relations with the rest of the world. Historically, Africa had abundant land and a relatively small population. For centuries, land and livestock sustained African livelihoods and people rarely worked for a wage. In late-nineteenth-century Africa there were few consumer goods that wages could buy. If you had been an African possessing land and livestock – and there was plenty of both – you too would have seen little reason to work for a wage. In the late nineteenth century, Europeans were attracted to Africa due to its vast resources of land and minerals. Europeans came to Africa hoping to establish plantations and mines to produce crops and minerals for export to Europe. But there was an unexpected problem – a shortage of labour willing to work for wages. Employers used many methods to recruit and retain labour. Heavy taxes were imposed which could be paid only by working for wages on plantations and mines. Inheritance laws were changed so that The Graphic, 1887. Crossing the Wilge river was the quickest method of transport to the gold fields of Transvaal. After the discovery of gold in Witwatersrand, Europeans rushed to the region despite their fear of disease and death, and the difficulties of the journey. By the 1890s, South Africa contributed over 20 per cent of the world gold production. in the Transvaal gold fields in South Africa, The Graphic, 1875. The Making of a Global World peasants were displaced from land: only one member of a family was allowed to inherit land, as a result of which the others were pushed into the labour market. Mineworkers were also confined in compounds and not allowed to move about freely. Then came Rinderpest, a devastating cattle disease. Rinderpest arrived in Africa in the late 1880s. It was carried by infected cattle imported from British Asia to feed the Italian soldiers invading Eritrea in East Africa. Entering Africa in the east, rinderpest moved west 'like forest fire', reaching Africa's Atlantic coast in 1892. It reached the Cape (Africa's southernmost tip) five years later. Along the way rinderpest killed 90 per cent of the cattle. The loss of cattle destroyed African livelihoods. Planters, mine owners and colonial governments now successfully monopolised what scarce cattle resources remained, to strengthen their power and to force Africans into the labour market. Control over the scarce resource of cattle enabled European colonisers to conquer and subdue Africa. Similar stories can be told about the impact of Western conquest on other parts of the nineteenth-century world.