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The Arms Trade in the Western Indian Ocean

As the centre of the arms traffic in the Gulf, Muscat naturally bristles with rifle depots and stores. The Custom House quay is seldom unencumbered with cases of rifles and ammunition, while every other shop in the bazaar is a rifle-shop. There is a certain amount of humour in a situation in which a British cruiser is actually at anchor in the harbour, with a dhow loaded to the water-line with rifles and ammunition almost within a cable’s length of her, a Custom House quay fairly crowded with large wooden crates containing the same, and a bazaar simply bursting with arms and ammunition.

Arnold Keppel, 1911

By the closing decades of the long nineteenth century, the port-cities of Muscat and Zanzibar had achieved notoriety as principal gateways for arms traffic in the western Indian Ocean. Even as munitions made in Europe inundated their harbours and warehouses, there were European navies mounting surveillance and interdiction operations in nearby tropical waters. By 1880, it was estimated that firearms comprised more than one-third of Zanzibar’s total imports. Breech-loaders had begun to flow into East Africa within a year of their being superseded by repeaters in Europe, so that as early as 1886, numerous modern rifles were found in the arsenal of a Chagga chief. In 1889, when the Welsh journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley ‘rescued’ Emin Pasha in the Lake Albert area, he found a section of the latter’s native troops equipped with breech-loaders.
The nature of the problem facing colonial authorities at the periphery was elucidated in a consular report of 1888, from Colonel Charles Euan-Smith, the British Consul-General at Zanzibar, to the Earl of Rosebery, a leading Liberal Imperialist who was the first to conceive of the Empire as a ‘Commonwealth of Nations’:

The great question is that regarding the import of arms and ammunition into East Africa. This trade had now assumed proportions of which your Lordship may possibly be unaware. Formerly the arms so imported were cheap and worthless weapons manufactured to last for a maximum period of some two or three years and after that time becoming useless and worn out. Now, however, arms of precision and breech-loading rifles and ammunition are being imported in very large quantities and are rapidly taking the place of the flintlock and muzzle-loading cheap muskets. ...

Unless some steps are taken to check this immense import of arms into East Africa, the development and pacification of this great continent will have to be carried out in the face of an enormous population, the majority of whom will probably be armed with first-class breech-loading rifles.⁵

According to Euan-Smith’s calculations, between 80,000 and 100,000 firearms were entering Africa each year via the East African ports; and the returns of the Zanzibar Custom House tend to corroborate this figure.⁶

Euan-Smith’s alarm in the official sphere echoed the anxieties of Alexander Murdoch Mackay, a Scottish Presbyterian missionary from the Church Missionary Society (CMS), stationed much further inland in the East Central African kingdom of Buganda. In a private letter to Euan-Smith, Mackay had highlighted the arrival of a notorious gun-runner named Charles Henry Stokes. The gun-runner’s consignment of 100 breech-loaders had included some of the latest Winchester repeaters, introduced to Europe from the United States only the previous decade, plus 20,000 rounds of ammunition. Mackay remarked how ‘short-sighted’ it was ‘to place these arms into the hands of a vain young princelet’ such as Buganda’s 20-year-old Kabaka, Mwanga II:

[T]hese arms will be used in raids for women and slaves. The fact that almost all the European Powers being at present about to adopt magazine rifles, will not be without its effect on East Africa. Discarded Martini-Henry, Mauser, Gras and other breech-loaders will