

**GLOBAL WAR AND LOCAL ECONOMY: A STUDY OF THE IMPACT
OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR ON SOUTHERN RHODESIAN
TOBACCO INDUSTRY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
MARKETING, 1939-1965.**

By

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Abstract

The global war that broke out in 1939 was a blessing in disguise for Southern Rhodesia's tobacco industry that had been suffering from various constrains. The Second World War boosted the tobacco industry in the country because it was from then onwards that it claimed its rightful place in the country's agricultural-driven economy. It is argued that government legislation introduced in the tobacco industry in the 1930s against the backdrop of the devastating Great Depression laid the foundation for the future success of the industry from the time of the war onwards. The war situation resulted in a tremendous increase in smoking in Britain, which increased the demand for flue-cured tobacco. This development was unfolding at a time when the country was facing critical dollar reserves shortages to enable her to continue purchasing tobacco from her traditional supplier, the United States of America (USA). It was under these circumstances that Britain turned to the Empire, and Southern Rhodesia in particular which had already shown great potential to produce large quantities of good quality tobacco. This paper therefore explores the tobacco industry in the context of the war with a view to unravel the circumstances in which the industry was able to overcome its problems.

Introduction

The outbreak of the Second World War and subsequent events tremendously transformed the tobacco industry of Southern Rhodesia. The major obstacle facing the industry since 1910 was marketing¹. External and reliable markets were crucial to the success of the industry since domestic consumption for the crop was still very negligible to be of any help. In the light of this, the war was a blessing in disguise and a turning point for Southern Rhodesia's tobacco industry. Conditions of the war made it possible for the country to enter into foreign markets especially the United Kingdom (UK)² that came to be the country's major tobacco market during and after the war.

As the prospects of peace returning to the world became brighter most stakeholders in the tobacco industry of Southern Rhodesia became anxious as they expected the UK to drastically reduce her purchases from the country for American tobacco, which she had relied on before the war. Surprisingly to them, this was not to be. In fact, the industry expanded by leaps and

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bounds between the end of the war and 1965. The dollar crisis that had started during the war intensified³. This development culminated in the signing of the London Agreement between the two countries. While the Agreement assured the UK of a sufficiently large and steady supply of tobacco, it guaranteed Southern Rhodesian growers a large, secure and reliable market for their tobacco over a long period of time. This gave rise to a great measure of security in the industry resulting in a “stampede” to grow the “leaf of gold”⁴

Production rose tremendously making it imperative to find other markets for a growing proportion of the crop. The Tobacco Marketing Board (TMB), through its marketing agents, the Tobacco Export Promotion Council of Southern Rhodesia, vigorously took up the challenge resulting in the penetration of more new markets. This caused “trade wars” between Southern Rhodesia and other players in the industry particularly the USA.⁵

Development of the Southern Rhodesia Tobacco Industry 1910-1930’s

From 1903, the British South African Company (BSAC), which had spearheaded the occupation of the land north of the Limpopo, Southern Rhodesia, began to take a keen interest in agriculture. The Second Rand, which Rhodes had hoped to discover, had not materialized and the country was in the midst of an economic crisis.⁶ Consequently, the company began to experiment with various crops as well as in animal husbandry in a bid to attract settlers who would pay for the land and make profit for the company. It was within this multi-pronged approach to the company’s search for an alternative to the elusive gold that the soils of most parts of Mashonaland were discovered to be suitable for the production of Virginia tobacco. However, from the very early years of the industry, the aspect of marketing the crop proved very difficult, disappointing and at times demotivating to the growers.⁷ The difficulties experienced in tobacco marketing up to 1936 could be summarized as emanating from the lack of a strong organization to centralize marketing and coordinate the various branches of the industry, lack of consistency in quality, type and quantity of the tobacco produced, unregulated production and the domination of the world tobacco trade by the USA.⁸

During this period the industry greatly relied on the South African market. This was facilitated by Southern Rhodesia’s 1902 decision to join the South African Customs Union. Under the terms of the 1903 Customs Agreement, Southern Rhodesian leaf enjoyed a duty – free entry into the South African market.⁹ The agreement stimulated production in Southern Rhodesia, as the prices offered in the Union market were very competitive. However, by the late 1920s this market had been severely curtailed by the post World War One economic recession, as well as the Great Depression. Despite this, South Africa’s role in the early development of the Southern Rhodesian tobacco industry remained crucial. She provided Southern Rhodesia with an external market, which she desperately needed for the take off of the industry

Government legislation in the 1930s

The 1930s were a crucial era in the subsequent success made in marketing Southern Rhodesian tobacco during and after the war until the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). The legal framework governing the marketing of tobacco, which had been lacking since the

birth of the industry was finally laid down guaranteeing the much-needed orderliness. This process largely hinged upon the government adapting its thinking to the needs of the industry. This took place within the broader government policy of intervention into agriculture and other sectors of the economy to rescue white settlers who were on the brink of collapse owing to the depression.¹⁰

In the case of tobacco three important pieces of legislation passed were, firstly, the Tobacco Levy Act (1933). This Act made it compulsory for all growers who were members of the Southern Rhodesia Tobacco Association (RTA) to pay 1 /20 of a penny per pound on the weight of their tobacco exported by the Association. The funds accumulated were used for the general development of the industry. Second was the Tobacco Reserve Pool Act (1934). This was enacted in the wake of yet another overproduction in the industry. It empowered the RTA to remove from the open market of the Union, Britain and the local market, 20 percent of each grower's crop into a reserve pool to avoid a fall in price by glutting the market. Tobacco so accumulated was disposed of later, usually at lower prices in various overseas markets.¹¹

Lastly was the Tobacco Marketing Act (1935) which led to the formation of the Tobacco Marketing Board (TMB) in 1936. Among its major functions were, to fix delivery quotas to the growers in order to prevent congestion on the auction floors, i.e. the Tobacco Producers Auction Floor and the Tobacco Auction Ltd, to encourage the better handling of tobacco by growers, graders and auctions, to determine surplus tobacco and regulate its disposal, supervise the provision of adequate facilities for handling the crop at various stages of production and sale, assess the Union's duty – free purchases and to encourage a more efficient freight.¹² The orderliness, which prevailed in the country's tobacco marketing system as a result of these pieces of legislation, attracted buyers from all over the world opening up a period of stable expansion for the industry. Both acreage and prices began to expand steadily. Prices rose by over 100% from an average of 7.13d/lb in 1936 to 15.03d/lb by April 1939¹³. By the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, all the groundwork necessary for the success recorded by the industry between 1939 and 1965 had been set.

The war period: 1939 – 1945.

The outbreak of the Second World War brought major changes to smoking habits in most parts of the world, particularly Europe. This expanded the demand for tobacco. This demand in turn forced major tobacco consumers, such as the UK, to look for alternative supplies other than the USA. Prior to the outbreak of the war, the most popular type of smoke was the pipe, which extensively relied on Turkish tobacco. This greatly limited the demand for Virginia tobacco used mostly in cigarette manufacture, which was widely grown in Southern Rhodesia and the USA. War conditions completely changed this established order.

Firstly, under the rigours of the war, the level of cigarette consumption increased sharply.¹⁴ The very nature of the cigarette meant that it was comparatively easier to keep and smoke in the war zone than a pipe. Consequently, the demand for flue cured Virginia tobacco increased tremendously worldwide. This was also partly due to the fact that smoking among women

was on the increase as they entered the job market in great numbers than before. Further, smoking generally began to be increasingly seen as a form of consolation for the various deprivations brought by the war on various sections of the populace.¹⁵ These developments paved the way for the entry of Southern Rhodesian tobacco into the UK and other overseas markets. During the war, the UK's dollar (\$) reserves deteriorated badly and in a bid to improve and halt the worsening of this problem, she began to limit her purchases of tobacco and other commodities from the dollar world, the USA in particular.¹⁶ This was taking place at a time when the demand and consumption of tobacco was on the increase in the UK and other overseas markets.

Southern Rhodesia became one of the UK's largest sources of tobacco supply within the Empire. The Imperial Preference first conceded for Empire tobacco in 1919, increased in 1925 and guaranteed for ten years in 1932 had also encouraged manufacturers in the UK to purchase tobacco from Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. By 1939, UK manufacturers were already making huge purchases from Southern Rhodesia's auction floors. In addition, there was also the 1928 tobacco crisis. This resulted in large stocks of Southern Rhodesian tobacco accumulating in the UK. This unfortunate event helped to convince the manufacturers in London of Southern Rhodesia's capability to supply a large regular quantity of tobacco¹⁷. In the past, manufacturers in the UK had been hesitant to use large proportions of Southern Rhodesian tobacco in their cigarettes because of inconsistency in both quantity and quality.¹⁸ This was, in addition to the fact that manufacturers would not easily change the already established "American Taste" without doing great harm to their business.

During the war period, the UK encouraged manufacturers to turn to Southern Rhodesian tobacco to save the outflow of the much needed and rapidly dwindling American dollars. Customs duty on tobacco from the dollar area into the UK was thereby raised to discourage manufacturers from using American tobacco. On the other hand, the British Board of Trade encouraged the purchase of Southern Rhodesian tobacco by giving her priority shipping quotas. She also conceded a 3d/lb increase in price as a way of stimulating production in Southern Rhodesia to meet the UK manufacturers' needs.¹⁹

Production and marketing arrangements.

In response to the above incentives, tobacco production and prices shot up between 1939 and 1945. The crop changed from its previous status of being a "crop of headache" to one of "gold". The average price for Virginia flue – cured tobacco rose from 10.11d/lb in 1939/40, 18.05d in 1942/3 to 21.78d/lb in 1945/6.²⁰

Compared to the pre-war period, this rate of growth was quite phenomenal when it is taken into account that the country was facing a critical shortage of labour during the war period. Tobacco farming, being very labour intensive, was hard hit. It also offered lower wages and poor working conditions as compared to the booming manufacturing industry that was just "taking off" in the country under the import substitution industrialization scheme during this period. Nevertheless, the industry was expanding so fast that the government took deliberate steps to limit this growth as by 1942 it had become clear that the country risked facing serious

food shortages if tobacco production continued unregulated. As tobacco prices seemed to continue to surge, many farmers diverted their land and other inputs from food crops towards tobacco.²¹ This caused a huge drop in food production. Alarmed by this, the colonial government made efforts starting from 1942 to divert inputs, particularly fertilizer, from tobacco towards food production. Priority of fertilizer supplies was given to food crop farmers. This was reflected by the decrease in the number of growers and production between the season 1941/42 and 1943/44.²²

As the world seemed to be waiting to purchase Southern Rhodesian tobacco, the question of quality became a secondary issue as the Tobacco Marketing Board frankly admitted;

Owing to scarcity of and keen demand for tobacco, the buyers were not as insistent as formerly on turning down bales, which were mixed graded or faulty in some other way.²³

Thus, some farmers became very reluctant to spend their resources and energy on improving quality when, “every leaf of tobacco could be readily sold irrespective of its quality”.²⁴ Whilst buyers were doubtlessly critical of the poor quality crop offered, they indirectly perpetuated the problem throughout the war period. By offering good prices for low-grade tobacco, they promoted quantity rather than quality. This was, however, against a background of very limited choices.

The increase that took place in production necessitated changes in the marketing of the crop between delivery from the farmers to the auction floors and its export. The two auction floors then, the Tobacco Producers Floor and Tobacco Auctions Ltd, failed to handle the large volumes of tobacco from the growers. Transport facilities from both the growers to the auctions and to the sea were also failing to cope with the volume of tobacco. Congestion on the auction floors was further exacerbated by the reduction of the selling duration per day consequently affecting weekly sales. This was in direct response to labour shortages of managerial staff on the auction floors.²⁵ A considerable percentage of their labour force that comprised mostly the whites had been recruited to serve in the war.

When it became apparent for the first time in 1939 that auction floors would not be able to cope with large volumes of tobacco, the Tobacco Marketing Board introduced ad-hoc measures to deal with the crisis. It increased the bale weight until it reached 224 pounds in 1945 from 150 pounds in 1939.²⁶ To ensure conformity by growers, the Board imposed a minimum bale weight of 180lbs. Any grower who supplied a bale below this minimum was charged a heavy fine. Further, the rate of sale on the floors increased from 391 bales a day in 1939 to 482 in 1940 and 500 by 1945 respectively.²⁷ However, these were measures still inadequate to resolve the crisis and new measures were sought. Most outstanding among these were delivery quotas introduced in 1941. As soon as the warehouses had approximately 800 bales of tobacco each on hand, quotas were put in force. These were worked out for each grower according to his tobacco acreage during that season and on his average yield per acre for the previous two seasons.²⁸ Any bales that were sent in excess of the quota were immediately returned to the farmer at his own cost.

Although the quota system doubtlessly, faced much criticism from those farmers who wanted to dispose of their entire crop at once when prices were “very good”, the Board had done its

homework to the best of its capacity. The system of delivery quotas enabled all the growers to obtain an equitable share of the market price at all times. This was achieved by spreading their quota sales throughout the season to allow each grower to obtain for his produce the average seasonal market values. These quotas were only lifted each season when deliveries to the floors and tobacco in stock were within the handling capacity of the auction warehouses and transport capacity.²⁹

The Auction System: Laws and regulations

Since parties to buying and selling of tobacco were aimed at obtaining the best possible bargain, it meant that conflict was inevitable at one time or another. The grower on his part was concerned at getting the highest possible price for his crop while the buyer also looked forward to obtaining the best grades of tobacco at the lowest possible price. In an endeavor to minimize conflicts that could arise in the selling process, the TMB laid down some rules and codes of conduct to be followed in the event of one party being unsatisfied with the sale.³⁰ It represented a neutral body that could be approached freely for arbitration by any discontented party. An independent businessman or a senior civil servant conversant with both sides of the industry chaired the Board. One such regulation passed was that, no complaint could be entertained from either party when selling was still in progress. The grower could not dispute the price offered for his crop while the auction was still in progress. This same rule applied to the buyer who could also not inspect his purchase and lodge a complaint if not satisfied while the auction was still in progress.³¹ Complaints and arbitrations were only allowed after the auction. This was essential for maintaining order on the floors, which was crucial for attracting buyers.

When the auction sale was completed for the day, both buyers and growers could then inspect their tobacco and prices respectively. The grower or the auction floor representatives examined the bales individually to decide whether the price offered was fair. Should the grower decide that the price was not fair, he/she was free to reject the price by “crossing” the ticket of sale. In such an event, the bale was removed to the storage area and re-booked for sale at a future date. The same procedure also applied to the representatives of tobacco merchants. They inspected their purchases and if they found a bale deficient in any respect, they could appeal to a TMB arbitrator to cancel the sale.³²

Nesting³³ was the major problem that buyers encountered. To stem the problem, the Tobacco Amendment Act 1955, section 17, imposed a heavy penalty for a grower who so packed his tobacco. For the first offence the fine was £10 and £20 for each subsequent offence.³⁴ A similarly heavy penalty was imposed on buyers who made false reports of purchasing nested tobacco. According to sub rule 1 of the 1955 Tobacco Marketing Amendment Act,

Any buyer who makes a report, which in the opinion of the Board is frivolous or vexatious, the buyer making such a report, shall be liable to a fine payable to the Board.³⁵

When all parties were satisfied, the merchants were obliged to settle their accounts not later than half an hour before the closing of banking hours on the day following the sale. As a result

of these laws and regulations the process of tobacco selling on the auction floors went smoothly with minor disruptions.

The post war period to 1965

The end of the Second World War signaled the beginning of an even much brighter period for the industry. The U.K dollar shortage crisis which had started during the war, got worse. The effect was a rush for Southern Rhodesian tobacco, which increased competition on the auction floors. Throughout the post-war period to 1965, the average price for tobacco on the auction floors was 30.0d/lb.³⁶ This was in stark contrast to the war period during which the average price received by growers was about 19.0d/lb. For the first time in the history of Southern Rhodesia, the value of tobacco exceeded that of gold in 1946. Until then, gold had been the major foreign currency earner for the country.³⁷

Owing to the good prices obtained in the post-war period, there was a rush to grow tobacco. Farmers who had been producing other crops or were engaged in other branches of farming such as ranching were switching to join the tobacco bandwagon. Immigrants also came from other parts of the continent and overseas for the specific purpose of growing tobacco. The returning ex-servicemen who took up land under various settlement schemes also went for the “leaf of gold”. Thus, tobacco growing extended its operations well beyond the recognized tobacco areas (mostly areas surrounding Salisbury). Areas like Karoi, Kwekwe, Mvuma, Chaka Block and Umguse among others started to produce tobacco.³⁸

The number of immigrants settling in the country increased quite considerably between 1946 and 1950 from 9120 to 16 179.³⁹ Although quite a sizeable percentage of these immigrants, doubtlessly, settled in the country's urban areas where they were readily absorbed into various sectors of the fledging economy, a fairly large proportion of them went into tobacco farming. It is no surprise therefore that the number of tobacco growers surged from about 800 in 1945 to 1160 in 1946, 1778 in 1948 and over 3000 by 1965.⁴⁰ Production figures also firmed in direct response to this increase in the number of growers. During the growing season 1945/6, about 41 740 520 lbs of flue-cured tobacco were produced in the country. The next season it jumped to over 57 440 740 lbs.⁴¹

The London Agreement

The above development was only possible because of the UK dollar crisis. Its persistence and intensification in the season 1946/7 prepared the ground for talks between the representatives of the RTA and the British manufacturers. The talks culminated in the signing of the London Agreement in 1948.⁴² For the sake of obtaining tobacco from Southern Rhodesia, the UK manufacturers represented by the TAC (Tobacco Advisory Committee), committed themselves to purchase from Southern Rhodesia large quantities of tobacco over a long period. The UK Committed itself to these long period agreements in order to dispel any doubts among the RTA that it was temporarily interested in Southern Rhodesian tobacco. This won it the confidence of the RTA, which gave them priority supply.

In the agreement, the UK agreed, firstly to purchase each year over the next five years, two – thirds of Southern Rhodesia’s flue-cured tobacco. Secondly, to purchase 40 million pounds of the Southern Rhodesian crop should there be a drop in the UK consumption. Lastly, it gave an assurance that the crop would fetch not less than 29d/lb (100 percent profit for growers).⁴³ On its part, the TMB also endeavored to comply with the spirit of the agreement. Pressure was put on the government to increase its budget on settler agriculture, a large chunk of which went towards tobacco, especially research.⁴⁴ According to Palmer, during the period 1945 to 1965 over £12 million was spent on settler agriculture each year compared to only £2 million made available to African agriculture.⁴⁵ A further testimony to the TMB’s commitment to the agreement was the introduction of export controls from 1948 to 1952. These export controls limited the quantity of tobacco which other buyers could export. This measure, however, had the detrimental consequences of limiting competition on the auction floors, which in turn suppressed prices. It also prevented the ‘active’ pursuit of new Tobacco markets since the UK and other priority markets swallowed up almost the whole of the Southern Rhodesian crop.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the London Agreement was a big flip to the development of the Southern Rhodesian tobacco industry as F. Clements and E Harben observe,

The agreement gave them (Southern Rhodesian growers) a long corridor of time down, which the industry could look to its future. It removed the doubts that British manufacturers had merely a short-term interest in the Southern Rhodesian tobacco industry.⁴⁷

Other markets

The UK was, however, not the only market for Southern Rhodesian tobacco. Despite being the most important one, Southern Rhodesia also sold her tobacco to other markets all over the world. For instance, the European Common Market (ECM) was its second most important market after the UK. This partly explains why the Federation (1953 – 63) was so vociferous when the USA supported an ECM duty proposal, which would have prejudiced Federal tobacco into that market. In 1959, the market (ECM) absorbed over 32 million lbs of the Federation’s Flue – cured tobacco.⁴⁸

By the 1960’s it was estimated that the Federation was exporting tobacco to more than 50 countries scattered all over the world. Among them were Canada, Singapore, Hong Kong, Nigeria, the British West Indies, Austria, Belgium Congo, Denmark, Algeria, Angola, Norway, Mozambique, and Switzerland.⁴⁹

This spectacular expansion of the Southern Rhodesian tobacco market was however, not achieved harmoniously. There were conflicts as Southern Rhodesia penetrated some of these markets hitherto dominated by these old players. The USA became the Federation’s major ‘enemy’ in this regard. As Southern Rhodesia and other members of the Federation mastered the art of producing the “leaf of gold“, export markets, particularly overseas, were increasingly and successfully penetrated. Most of these markets were initially dominated by the USA but as production surged in Southern Rhodesia, significant portions of them were progressively entered as well. This became the major bone of contention between the federation and the USA. America could not simply watch while these markets shrank.

Between 1947 and 1961, the USA lost about 15 percent of her share in the UK market. Conversely, the Federation recorded approximately an equal percent share gain in the same market.⁵⁰ This was not surprising in the context of the war and post war British dollar crisis that forced the British to pursue a “policy” of limiting purchases from the dollar world. This policy shifted the UK’s tobacco supplies to the sterling area hence the increase of empire countries’ tobacco exports to the U.K.

The imperial preference was another contributory factor to the conflict. This was demonstrated by the USA’s call for Britain to abolish the preference as her share of exports to the UK fell while that of her rivals from the sterling area firmed through the 1950’s to the early 1960’s. However, the imperial preference did not end except for Southern Rhodesia when Ian Smith declared UDI in 1965. There was also a protracted war between the federation and the USA over the ECM in the early 1960’s. By then, the ECM had become the Federation’s second most important tobacco market after the UK. It was absorbing over 40 million lbs of all types of tobacco produced within the federation and over 30lbs million of flue – cured Virginia tobacco. It was therefore within the context of this achievement that the federation tried to resist anything which could negatively affect it in this market. The Federal Ministry of Commerce and Industry expressed the sentiments of everybody involved in the industry when it noted that:

Since countries of Western Europe already form an important export market for Federal tobacco, alteration in terms of access to the market is of considerable importance both in the present and the future, especially having regard to the expansion taking place in the industry.⁵¹

The above statement was made after the ECM had issued a new import duty proposal. If it had been implemented, the proposed duty would have greatly prejudiced the entry of Federal tobacco into ECM while at the same time giving great advantage to US tobacco. The proposal was to have a common tariff wall against all tobacco not produced within the countries of the ECM and their associated overseas territories.⁵² As a result of disadvantages in the proposed system, the federation resisted its implementation.

In addition to these conflicts with the USA, there were also occasional but minor conflicts with the Union of South Africa. These conflicts had their roots in the 1930 Customs Agreement in which the union could determine the quantity of Southern Rhodesian duty free leaf to enter the Union. This caused a lot of problems and complications in Southern Rhodesia’s trade relations with the UK in the 1940’s. Whenever there was a drop in tobacco production in the Union, she easily made up for the deficit by raising the quantity of duty-free tobacco to allow more tobacco into the country. This adversely affected other buyers on the auction floors. Because of the duty-free privilege, the union buyers afforded to pay considerably higher prices than other competitors thereby creaming off the crop to the detriment of others.⁵³

In 1944 when union buyers again took the cream of tobacco out of the market, the UK tobacco interests made it clear to the TMB that “if the same position occurs again the UK would lose interest in Southern Rhodesian tobacco”.⁵⁴ In the light of the dollar shortage already discussed, this was purely an empty threat, which was shortly confirmed by subsequent

events. During the 1946/7 season, the Union again declared a duty-free quota of over 3 million lbs considered by southern Rhodesia to be very capable of disrupting trade relations with the UK. The UK did not abandon Southern Rhodesia even though the Union refused to lower its quota. A satisfactory compromise was only reached in 1947 under a new convention signed between the Union and southern Rhodesia. Under its provisions southern Rhodesia had the right to limit the quantity of the Union `s duty-free quota.⁵⁵

Conclusion.

This article has demonstrated how conditions of the Second World War made it possible for Southern Rhodesian tobacco to enter foreign markets, especially the United Kingdom (UK) which came to be the country's major tobacco market during and after the war. With the end of the war many in the industry expected the UK to drastically reduce purchases from Southern Rhodesia in favour of American tobacco, which she had greatly relied on before the war. This did not happen. Instead, the industry expanded by leaps and bounds between the end of the war and 1965 creating a firm foundation for the country's economy.

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