

## **Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization**

Historians of Africa and historians of decolonization have tended to avoid writing about Rhodesia's renegade independence (1965-80). Whether the white minority's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) from Britain is described as a last stand of empire or as a pale imitation of South Africa's apartheid, Rhodesia (until 1964 Southern Rhodesia, after 1980 Zimbabwe) is invariably seen as such a great exception to the orderly processes of decolonization that it is beyond explanation. While there have been two fine studies of US policy toward independent Rhodesia published in the last decade, the most recent of the two academic studies of white politics in Rhodesia was published in 1973. There has never been a study of Rhodesia's independence as part of African history.

There are two reasons for this. First, African historians have been reluctant to write the histories of rogue and reactionary regimes, especially when they were led by white minorities. White settlers have never been part of the canon of African history topics, however fashionable settlers might have become in imperial histories. For African historians, racist and reactionary regimes were interchangeable; thus it has been commonplace to explain Rhodesian racial policies by referencing South Africa's. Second, there are no national archives for independent Rhodesia. For reasons more to do with staffing than politics, nothing has been accessioned in the National Archives of Zimbabwe since 1984: while there are a few manuscript collections available for the years of UDI, ministerial files are only open up to 1958. For this reason, the research I have done has been triangulated on three continents. I have used the large collection of oral interviews with Rhodesian politicians, conducted in the 1970s, in the Zimbabwe National Archives, and Rhodesian cabinet materials from 1960-78 taken from Zimbabwe and deposited in the Cory Library of Rhodes University in South Africa, British government files in the British National Archives and recently accessioned election monitor files from the Commonwealth Secretariat Archives in London, private papers deposited in Rhodes House, Oxford, the papers of Rhodesian moderate, multi-racial organizations now housed in the Borthwick Historical Institute in York, the boxes of papers from the Rhodesian Army that were briefly available in a now-defunct private museum in Bristol, files on

refugees from Rhodesia in the Botswana National Archives, and the collection of Rhodesian ephemera at Yale. I have also relied on the extraordinary amount of white writing, mainly novels and memoirs, produced in Rhodesia at this time, and formal and informal interviews I have conducted in Africa and Britain. The refractory nature of this research has encouraged me to write a political history that shows the fractures and fissures of Rhodesian independence.

I came to this project after thirty years of writing and researching African social history. Writing about the lives of Africans under colonial rule taught me how much of what appeared in archives was never practiced on the ground, and that while colonial power was anything but a fantasy, it made many fantastic claims -- claims at which Rhodesians were to excel in the 1960s and '70s -- that alluded to broader issues and concerns. My use of oral materials for two previous monographs has made me a careful reader of assertions and their intended audiences. In this project, I make much of the rhetoric of Rhodesia's intense self-promotion as evidence of its relationship to decolonization, and its fiction of unique and uncompromising rights based on standards and history. Announcing UDI to the nation, the prime minister concluded "We may be a small country, but we are a determined people and we have been called upon to a role of worldwide significance." Rhodesian independence was held to be the equivalent of Thermopylae or Lepanto, battles for "civilization" against the hordes of the east and, in 1965, the multi-lateral organizations in which they now had voice. UDI was white men saying 'so far and no further,' standing firm against "the black flood," and creating a government that would forever be in "responsible hands." Rhodesian politicians' rhetoric of redemption was that of self-congratulatory paternalism and racial domination, deployed in a vocabulary of universal civilization that had long ago vanished from the imperial heartland but could now be peppered with Cold War, or World War II, allusions. Rhodesia's right to independence was framed in terms of Spartans and the "Afro-Asian bloc," while every criticism of Rhodesia could be traced back to "appeasement" and to Moscow. Party hacks likened Rhodesia to Britain at its best, or Britain in the 1940s: if Winston Churchill were alive he would immigrate to Rhodesia tomorrow, they said.

Rhodesian independence was a transcendent project: the state was to reverse the course of world events, preserving Christian civilization against the trend of the late colonial world, political independence through universal suffrage and majority rule. In the period I cover, Rhodesia had five different constitutions, each with a different idea about which groups had a right to be represented in a government, and each with a different idea about how that government was to be chosen. Because of the number of constitutions and the dizzying detail of voter qualifications in each one – the voter registration form required by the 1965 constitution was seven pages long – this book is organized around a history of the franchise. That history will allow me to address two key questions in the history of decolonization, first, how one-man, one-vote became the natural logic of the end of empire, and second, how citizenship in African nations was imagined and animated. The citizenship question was one of how to valorize birthright in a settler society that never achieved a stable white population of more than a quarter million, and the extent to which residency might substitute for birthright – questions that have troubled Zimbabwe's elections for the last twenty-five years. I have chosen six episodes in Rhodesian history; most have debates about voting and citizenship at their core. The three that do not – the introduction, the chapter on sanctions and recognition, and the one on debates about conscription -- examine Rhodesia's international and domestic relations, respectively.

The chapters are: 1) Introduction, the place of race in decolonization. Rhodesian officials compared their independence to those of Biafra and Katanga, the two secessionist states of the mid-1960s, ignoring how critical race was to ideas about self-determination. At the same time, Rhodesia became a racialized utopia for its supporters around the globe in a process that eventually obscured any local notions of what constituted race and belonging in the country. 2) The 1961 constitution and its afterlives. The 1961 constitution was heralded as promising majority rule soon. (It did not: the earliest majority rule could be achieved under it was 2015). African political parties boycotted the referendum on it, setting in motion a narrative that Africans rejected moderation. The 1961 constitution became synonymous with the orderly progression toward majority rule: getting rid of it was one of the motives behind UDI, and well into the 1970s Britain insisted that for Rhodesia to be brought back into the fold of

the community of nations it would have to return to the 1961 constitution. 3) Recognition and sanctions: the Rhodesian Front government had assumed that the renegade state would be recognized by South Africa and Portugal, out of self-interest, and France, to establish a precedent for Quebec. No other country recognized it, however, but however much Rhodesians complained, the fact of non-recognition gave Rhodesia an extra-legal status that allowed it to violate the mandatory sanctions imposed first by Britain and then by the UN. Violating sanctions, illicit trade with everyone via Gabon, and intensified domestic investment gave Rhodesia an annual rate of growth of 9.4% from 1966-74. "Sanctions-busting" was heroic; it appeared in almost all UDI-era fiction, wresting the project of nation building away from the prattle about Thermopylae and replacing it with that of James Bond. 4) The 1969 constitution, perhaps the most remarkable document produced anywhere in the world in the late 1960s. It was based on the fiction that all Africans politics took place in their tribes, nowhere else, and thus Africans had no reason to vote for the institutions of representative government. The governance Africans required would be conducted by chiefs elected to the senate by a council of other chiefs. The few Africans who were urban or well-off enough to be considered detribalized were allowed to vote on a separate roll for separate candidates; everyone else – white, South Asian, or mixed race – voted on a single, common roll, an electoral convenience that created a split from which white Rhodesian politics never fully recovered. 5) The Pearce Commission. In 1972 the Conservative government in Britain made a final attempt to settle Rhodesia's rebellion, offering recognition and the withdrawal of sanctions in exchange for a return to the 1961 constitution. Africans rejected this in riots and contentious public meetings; the visit of the Pearce Commission has been seen as the first step in the mass demand for majority rule. This chapter looks at Rhodesian and African politics in the country at the time. By the early 1970s African and white Rhodesian politics were entangled, as both banned and exiled African political parties and the Rhodesian government founded and funded African political parties while white moderate and multi-racial groups moved to the right of the government, rejecting African opinion. 6) Conscription: from the late 1960s on Rhodesia faced a guerrilla war from two armies in exile; by the early 1970s the war effort required intensive conscription and reserve duties by Rhodesia's white youths. Between 1974 and 1979 it is

possible to see the government in daily struggle with the military over who should be conscripted (which age groups, residents or citizens, and should Africans ever be required to serve), for how long, and at what pay. The material in this chapter is based on the Rhodesian Army papers and the Rhodesian cabinet papers. In the absence of local government records, chapter 6 allows me to see the conflicts between the central government and one of its branches. This chapter relies on Rhodesian writing as conscription is a major trope in memoir and fiction. 7) The 1980 election. In late 1979 a constitutional conference in London negotiated an end of the war and the transition from Rhodesia to Zimbabwe. Although popular politics sees this conference (“Lancaster House”) as the founding moment of the new African-ruled nation, the final constitution was a politically expedient one-man, one-vote election for Africans, based on residence in the country, and reserved seats for whites elected by a European roll, that had been drafted by the Commonwealth and the British before the conference. The actual mechanics of the transition, however, required a cease-fire and closely monitored elections. While bases were created for guerrillas, there was nothing like a cease-fire. This chapter is based on files in the British National Archives and the Commonwealth Secretariat, which monitored the election, and interviews with participants. Chapters 5 and 7 allow me to discuss political violence in Africa before and after political independence. 8) Conclusions. This chapter links the end of Rhodesia’s independence with broader concerns about the decolonization of African states. It troubles the idea that new sovereign states – majority ruled, decolonized, or post-conflict -- emerge seamlessly from the remnants of their predecessors and traces how the Zimbabwean state established itself through the repression of the mutinies in the newly minted Zimbabwe National Army in 1981.

The research for this book is done, and the chapters that have not been drafted are blocked out. I have discovered how difficult it is to revise four-year-old drafts and two-year-old articles into a book length manuscript while teaching. If I were to be awarded an ACLS Fellowship, I have no doubts that I could finish the manuscript and submit it to a publisher in a year, and produce a book that would fill a gap in the history of Africa in the late twentieth century.

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