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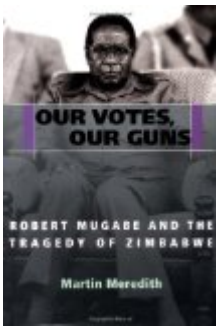
Martin Meredith. *Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe.* New York: Basic Books, 2002. 243 pp. $26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58648-128-5.



Reviewed by Gerald Horne

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Just recently, the United States announced that it plans to step up the pressure against the subject of this book--Robert Mugabe--and increase assistance to his opposition. This came in the wake of a lengthy article in *The New York Times*, written by a leader of Zimbabwe's opposition, David Coltar, comparing his nation's long-time leader to Pol Pot--the avatar of genocide in Cambodia of the 1970s, a man responsible for the death of millions of his compatriots.

With the ouster of many farmers of the European minority from their land in Zimbabwe, this nation of about 12 million bordering South Africa has captured headlines globally, but particularly in the United States. With the rhetoric rising and the passions flowing, we are desperately in need of contemplative and well-researched books that would shed light on the ongoing agony of the nation once known as "Rhodesia."

Martin Meredith, who is well-known for his books on South Africa, has stepped forward to fill the breach. He covers the period preceding independence in 1980 up to the present. Unfortunately, there are no footnotes and a thin bibliography which lessens the value of this work for scholars. Meredith's portrait of Mugabe is quite negative, however, and those seeking ammunition to use against this much reviled leader should turn to these pages. He discusses at some length Mugabe's marriages and personality and includes a searing indictment of the party he leads, ZANU-PF. Close students of Zimbabwe, however, will find few revelations in these pages.

Indeed, even the staunchest opponents of Mugabe may feel that a better designed and researched brief could have been developed against this man who has led his nation since independence in 1980. Meredith at one point notes with dismay that Mugabe's "photograph hung on the wall of every government office" (p. 95). He may be surprised to hear that in 2000 the United States--to cite one example--had a major disposal problem in ridding itself of portraits of outgoing President Bill Clinton, whose visage greeted staff and visitors in U.S. embassies abroad and federal buildings at home. The same now holds true for George W. Bush.

Others may be surprised to discover that the "dissident campaign" that wracked Zimbabwe after independence was "aided and abetted by South Africa on a minor scale" (p. 75). In fact, Meredith presents a rather insular study, virtually viewing Zimbabwe as a "thing in itself." Nobel Prize-winner in economics Joseph Stiglitz has caused a stir with his scorching critique of the policies of the U.S.-dominated International Monetary Fund and its relentlessly negative impact on developing nations. Other scholars have spoken similarly of Stiglitz's former employer, the World Bank, also based in Washington, D.C. The "terms of trade" dictate that developing nations like Zimbabwe, which produce raw commodities for export, are disadvantaged inherently as they seek to utilize their precious foreign exchange to purchase finished goods, e.g. tractors and building cranes--which are disproportionately manufactured in the developed world. The price of the latter has a tendency to rise, while the latter does not--at least not to the same degree. Zimbabwe adhered for years to a "Structural Adjustment Program" that represented the essence of the much vaunted "Washington consensus," which--according to critics--is designed to perpetuate this structural inequality ***ad infinitum***.

Readers in the United States, who are bombarded routinely with negative headlines about Zimbabwe, could have benefited from a book that took advantage of this fact and directed their attention to larger concerns that afflict all developing nations and, certainly, most of Africa.

There is also a debate in the United States on what might be called the "White Question" or the "construction of whiteness." Scholars such as David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev, Theodore Allen, Alexander Saxton, George Lipsitz, Karen Sacks--and a number of others--have posed a fundamental query that scholars of Zimbabwe should engage: how was it that those who warred on the shores of Europe--English vs. Irish, English vs. Scotch, Polish vs. Russian, the list goes on--are "constructed" as "white" upon arrival on distant shores (be it North America or, in this case, Zimbabwe) and how does anti-African or anti-"black" bias fit into this equation? Southern Africa, which has been the site of tensions between British and Portuguese, Afrikaner and British, and other combinations rarely found across the Atlantic provides a useful laboratory for scrutiny of "whiteness."

However, like many scholars who examine this region, Meredith simply assumes what may be at issue with his promiscuous and unadorned references to figures described as "white." He observes of this group that "as well as owning most commercial farmland, they dominated commerce, industry, and banking; possessed a virtual monopoly of high-level skills; and retained for the most part considerable property and personal wealth. In the economic boom that followed the end of the [liberation] war--growth of 24 percent in two years--the whites were major beneficiaries" (pp. 45-46). Yet, "within three years of independence," he writes later, "about half of the white population emigrated. What was left was a rump of 100,000 whites, who retreated into their own world of clubs, sporting activities, and comfortable living" (p. 55).

The author does not contemplate sufficiently if this racialized inequality is inherently unstable and even if, in the absence of Mugabe, it is bound to produce friction. Likewise, it would have been helpful if Meredith had discussed the question of the disproportionate number of European farmers in Zimbabwe who grow tobacco--a crop whose growth curve will be increasingly circumscribed given ever more successful anti-smoking campaigns--and why this factor often goes unmentioned when the current hunger gripping Zimbabwe is laid exclusively at the door of Mugabe's confiscatory policies.

Nor does the author dwell on the fact that those now in full-throated denunciation of Mugabe were not always of that opinion. Though it

was not so long ago, it has been largely forgotten that the major competitor of Mugabe and his party before liberation--Joshua Nkomo and ZAPU--were frowned upon by many because of their perceived closeness to the former Soviet Union. In his skimpy bibliography, Meredith does mention the writer, Michael Charlton. However, if he had turned to Charlton's book he would have found the striking words of Lord Carrington, a key British negotiator at the time of independence, who averred that "Mr. Mugabe's coming to power, the man without Soviet patronage, actually helps to secure [British] interest[s]."[1] Charlton reports further that the British Ambassador to Mozambique was astonished as he surveyed independence celebrations and detected the "conspicuous absence of the Eastern bloc.... No Russians, no Czechs, no Poles, no Eastern Germans, no Bulgarians."

Even today, with typical amnesia, the policies of the developed world that helped to lubricate the path for the now despised Mugabe have been largely forgotten--including by Meredith.

Of course, Mugabe is compared invidiously to the towering symbol of anti-apartheid resistance: "Whereas Nelson Mandela used his prison years to open a dialogue with South Africa's white rulers, Mugabe emerged from prison adamantly opposed to any idea of negotiation" (pp. 226-227). But the "white" population of South Africa has roots stretching back to the seventeenth century, while those of Zimbabwe are of comparatively recent vintage. Moreover, the melanin-deficient population of South Africa produced such giants as Joe Slovo, Ruth First, Dennis Goldberg and others who proved their mettle in the titanic battle against racism. Even given the difference in size of population, one strains to find comparable figures in the history of Zimbabwe.

On the point of "race," it would also be useful to dwell on the often obscured point that although London and Washington have been clamoring for Mugabe's scalp, this is less so for Asian nations. And even on that score, France--a major player on the continent, even in Southern Africa--has not been as hostile historically to Harare as some of its European Union counterparts.

Zimbabwe is a nation that understandably, perhaps deservedly, captures global headlines, not least because of its tortured "racial" history. Martin Meredith's book has been well-received in the United States, where it was published, though scholars of Zimbabwe and those who hold this nation dear continue to await a text that can better shed light on this nation's continuing agony.

Note

[1]. *Diplomacy and the Independence of Rhodesia* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 9, 119.

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