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Race and Diplomacy in Zimbabwe

Written by one of the leading scholars of Zimbabwean history, *Race and Diplomacy in Zimbabwe* is an insightful scholarly contribution to Zimbabwean historiography. It focuses on the role of race/racial thinking and the Cold War mind-set in informing the views, attitudes and interactions of the key international and local diplomats, policymakers, and political figures who played a critical role in shaping the trajectory of Zimbabwe's march toward independence. The year 1960 is a good entry point as it marks the beginning of Africa's independence decade. Scarnecchia ends his study in 1984 to enable him to discuss the consequences of the influences of race/racial thinking and the Cold War in the Gukurahundi massacres in Matabeleland in shaping the West's apparent indifference to Robert Mugabe's atrocities in Zimbabwe. The civil strife in Matabeleland ended with the Unity Agreement between Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe's two political parties in 1987, of course, but the analysis could not be carried beyond 1984 because they are no archival sources for the latter period yet to enable an informed study beyond that date.

The story of Zimbabwe's struggle for independence from white minority rule under the then Rhodesian government of Ian Smith has been well told and analyzed by scholars. There are also several autobiographies that recount the role of individuals in the struggle for independence and the various international conferences convened by Britain and the United States in efforts to resolve the Rhodesian conundrum. However, for the benefit of the uninitiated, a brief outline of Zimbabwe's turbulent colonial history may be necessary. The political problems which the diplomats, African heads of state, and Zimbabwean politicians were trying to resolve in the period covered by *Race and Diplomacy* had a long pedigree, dating back to the occupation of the country in 1890 by a group of adventurers sponsored by Cecil John Rhodes who called themselves the Pioneer Column. This was followed by ninety years of white minority domination that marginalized the African majority politically, economically, socially, and otherwise. Not surprisingly, African resentment against colonial rule grew over the years and eventually led to demands for self-rule from the 1950s onward, in line with similar demands across the African continent at the time. Rhodesian colonial authorities, on the contrary, resisted the tide of African nationalism and consistently frustrated African demands for rights and freedom by banning African nationalist parties and imprisoning or detaining African polit-
ical leaders. Thus, while most of the continent had attained majority rule and independence by the end of the 1960s, the white-ruled states of southern Africa, namely, Southern Rhodesia, Angola, Mozambique, South West Africa, and South Africa clung to white rule, fueling further African resentment. In Rhodesia, whites were, in fact, demanding independence under their rule and when Britain refused to grant Southern Rhodesia independence before majority rule, the Rhodesian government grabbed independence unlawfully through the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965. This precipitated an armed confrontation with the two leading nationalist parties, the Zimbabwean African Peoples Union (ZAPU), led by Joshua Nkomo, and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), led first by Ndabaningi Sithole and subsequently by Robert Gabriel Mugabe. In 1966, ZANU’s armed wing, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) engaged the Rhodesian Defence Forces (RDF) at Chinhoyi, north of the capital city, Salisbury (now Harare), while a joint force of ZAPU’s military arm, the Zimbabwe Independent People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa, clashed with the Rhodesia Defence Forces (RDF) in Hwange in 1967. Armed conflict was to intensify until 1979 when a negotiated settlement at Lancaster House in London brought about a ceasefire and then ushered in Zimbabwe’s independence in the following year. This is the historical background of Scarnecchia’s book, but not its focus.

*Race and Diplomacy in Zimbabwe* focuses more on the role race and racial thinking, especially the concept of “race states,” and the Cold War in shaping Western thinking about strategies to address the Rhodesian political conundrum in the 1970s. The obsession with race was evident in the Western conceptions of southern African political landscapes in terms of white and black states (with the former regarded as superior to the latter). With the pervasive fear of a possible race war in Rhodesia, the need arose to prevent whites from leaving the country at independence by guaranteeing their economic interests, lest the postcolonial state collapse under a black government. The dominant sensibility that the British and the Americans brought to the strategies and policies deployed to address the Rhodesian problem, therefore, was steeped in a racially grounded view of the world in general and of southern Africa, in particular.

The book also explores the centrality of the Cold War mentality that shaped the way in which diplomacy developed and was deployed in Rhodesia, especially in the wake of the US debacle in Vietnam and the fear of another Cuban and Soviet Union intervention in the region on the side of Africans should the political problems in Rhodesia remain unsolved. Cuban/Soviet intervention proved to be little more than a bogeyman, as the two countries showed little interest in deploying their forces in the fight against Rhodesia, while the Soviet Union gave minimal military support to ZAPU and none to ZANU throughout the period. For the United States and Britain, however, the specter of Cuban/Soviet intervention in the Rhodesian contest remained real, especially given their involvement in the Angolan Civil War. The Western fear of possible communist intervention, albeit unjustified, however, gave the African leaders of the liberation movements, Nkomo and Mugabe, room for maneuver to increase their bargaining position at international peace conferences and in their direct dealings with political leaders of the West.

Scarnecchia also successfully explores how diplomacy was used by the various players, including Britain and the United States and the Front Line States (Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere, and Seretse Khama, among others), to place their favorite candidate in a favorable position for the leadership of future independent Zimbabwe. Throughout the period under review Joshua Nkomo remained the favorite for future leader-
ship in independent Zimbabwe for Britain and the United States, but also for President Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia. President Julius Nyerere, on the other hand, supported Robert Mugabe, although initially he had backed other leaders. In addition, Race and Diplomacy goes further than most studies to date in exploring the roots of the rivalry between Nkomo and Mugabe, which was both long-standing and more complex than the often touted differences between Mugabe as the radical “real revolutionary” and Nkomo as the unprincipled would-be “sell out.” The tension between them stemmed from competition for national leadership, mutual suspicions, and ZANU charges that ZAPU was not carrying its full weight of the armed struggle, among other factors. The relationship was clearly more complex than it was portrayed by commentators at the time, especially Western diplomats and policymakers, who attributed the rivalry, simplistically, to “tribalism,” consistent with the “race states” thinking that imbued their worldview at the time.

Race and Diplomacy in Zimbabwe is organized in three sections as follows: section 1 covers the period from 1960 to 1975, a period when “the British and the international community [failed] to deliver majority rule and decolonization in Rhodesia” (p. 7). The second section focuses on international efforts to promote the creation of a black African state to forestall Cuban and Soviet intervention. These efforts culminated in the Geneva conference, which failed to deliver the goods. The section also examines the several efforts made by the South Africans and the Anglo-Americans to “shape the future ‘black state’ in ways they thought would be to their benefit” (p. 7). Meanwhile the leaders of the Front Line States and Nigeria also participated in the efforts to find a solution to the Rhodesian problem in ways that sought to bolster their chosen leader’s ambitions for leadership in the postcolony. The third section focuses on the 1980 elections and their aftermath in the form of the Gukurahundi massacres when Mugabe was allowed by the Western powers to, literally, get away with wanton murder in Matabeleland, partly because they wanted to keep him onside in a world of Cold War tensions, and also because of the race state/ethnic thinking that rationalized the atrocities of the time as expected in a “black African state.”

Based on a rich and wide array of archival sources in South Africa and UK, some of which have only recently been opened to researchers, the book is a welcome contribution to scholarship on the history of Zimbabwe. It provides useful insights into the thinking of Western diplomats and policymakers and how their worldview intersected and interacted with the African leaders’ own understandings, interests, and approaches to produce particular outcomes at different stages of Zimbabwe’s road to independence in the final decade of colonial rule. What scholarship awaits now is a similar study based on Soviet Union and Eastern European archives to provide us with a comprehensive understanding of how the thinking in this very influential part of the world during the Cold War impacted diplomacy and policymaking. The Soviet Union, Romania, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany were some of the countries that supported the struggle for independence in southern Africa at this time. It would be very useful to learn what drove their support and what their visions of a postindependence Rhodesia were. Until the story can also be told from the Soviet Union/Eastern Europe perspectives, it will, sadly, remain incomplete. This is by no means a criticism of Scarnecchia’s laudable and impressive study. Race and Diplomacy is, without doubt, a must-read for anyone who wishes to understand the forces that shaped the trajectory of historical developments which ushered in Zimbabwean independence in 1980.
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