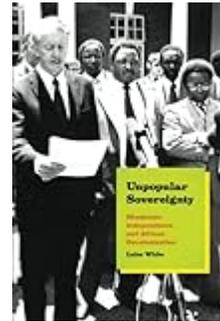


Luise White. *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 368 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-23505-9; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-23519-6.



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Published on H-Diplo (December, 2015)

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As Luise White points out at the start of her latest book *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization*, there are no archives for independent Rhodesia. Given that starting proviso, the author has done a remarkable job amassing and assessing the disparate material from the Southern Rhodesia/Rhodesian Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) era: oral history; parliamentary debates; newspaper archives; the National Archives in Kew, London; the presidential libraries of Lyndon Johnson and Gerald Ford; the Commonwealth Secretariat in London; the now closed material from the Rhodesian Army Association (formerly held at the now defunct museum of the British Empire and Commonwealth); and documents from Rhodesia's prime minister Ian Smith's office originally smuggled down to Rhodes University in 1978 in Operation Geraldine. (These boxes were packed into two Dakotas, flown down to Grahamstown where they landed on a school's playing field during the holidays and hurried into the Cory Library, which was ostensibly "closed for redecoration" at the time.) This energetic and in-depth research, together with her encyclopedic knowledge of secondary works on Rhodesia/Zimbabwe and deep understanding of the broader field of African decolonization, results in a work of dense scholarship

which offers a refreshingly different "take" on the complicated history of Zimbabwe's decolonization.

This book is best read with a sound prior knowledge of Rhodesian/Zimbabwean history, as it adds immense detail to the picture. The essential approach of this work is Rhodesian/Zimbabwean "exceptionalism," and White tracks with care the particular continuities and discontinuities of the country's unique path to black majority rule in 1979-80. With consistent rigor, she rejects sharp differentiation of before and after drawn by other researchers, as well as a heroic nation-building narrative (adopted, incidentally, by both "winners" and "losers" in the memoir literature on the Rhodesian civil war, and a considerable number of historians of either side). This is a detailed study in decolonization, with all the uneven, unforeseen, stop-start inputs; fears and preoccupations; convictions and hesitations; and processes that decolonization entailed.

At the outset, the author addresses the importance and input of ideas in the origins and maintenance of the Rhodesian state. White tackles the problematic concept of the political imagination of Rhodesia through its varied and multiple guises; a "myth-scape," which like all myths, was inherently unstable, and required con-

stant reinvention by the territory's power contestants to generate and sustain support from their identified constituencies. And again there was the rub: how were the occupants of the territorial space of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe to be categorized and valorized in the political arena? In contrast to a determined discourse in which politics in Africa was something that should be conducted without reference to race, in the case of Rhodesia race was a foundational element to this particular nation-state-building enterprise. But this was not simply as a state based on racial hegemony. White concentrates on the fissures and fractures in the political ideas that specific settlers used to rule. So, rather than a standard "white settler"-constructed narrative, this book argues that white settlers, white residents, and whites just passing through (as she repeats, Josiah Brownell's careful research highlights that between 1957 and 1979, 256,000 whites moved to Rhodesia and 246,000 left) "utilized a hodgepodge of institutions, law and practices ... to maintain what they refused to call white rule, but instead relabeled as responsible government by civilized people" (p. 4).^[1] White draws out the tangled and contradictory components of being "Rhodesian": not simply citizen, subject, resident. Nor was emotional connection and inhabitation enough. Being white was never in and of itself sufficient to rule.

Rhodesia in the UDI years was never therefore a racial state, bent on white minority hegemony "for 1000 years" — even as Smith declared these words, his civil servants standing at the back of the room in this news conference were laughing behind their hands at the absurdity of the claim.^[2] A central argument of this book is focused on who could and should vote, and the associated more nebulous concept of citizenship, with its expected and conferred rights and obligations to the state. Crucially, White concentrates on how this was deployed by whites who lived in the country. In doing so, she expands Frank Cooper's argument, that citizenship offered to Africans "was an imaginary in itself sometimes of rights and obligations but almost always of conditions of belonging and membership."^[3] A surprise of this book is how late the argument of universal franchise became accepted in African nationalist opinion — itself fluid, fractured, and contradictory. So, this is indeed an uneven story for African politics, too. In a neat turn of phrase, White reminds the reader that a great deal of African politics took place in Rhodesian jails.

The focus of the book is determinedly on the dynamics of discussion within the country itself. It rejects other historiographical "binaries" and provides the welcome

analysis in drawing parallels, contrasts, and connections between white political discourses and the narrative and range within African political nationalist opinion. In her examination of Rhodesian constitutional history, White consistently stresses that white and black politics often overlapped or were entangled. Rhodesia becoming Zimbabwe was a bundle of rhetorical and situational contradictions: the supposedly anti-establishment Rhodesian Front and its supporters in defiance of the British government in London, but supposedly not the queen, until 1969; and their determined emphasis on the maintenance of existing domestic structures and institutions thereafter. The chapters are devoted to detailed examination of changing official attitudes of voter eligibility and entitlement in the later days of the federation, and the reasoning behind the 1961 constitution.

White does a good job highlighting the debates on a universal franchise versus the advantages and requirements of a qualified franchise and the reasoning underpinning convictions: that voting was not an innate right, but "a skill" (p. 59). While this section is arcane, White underlines that it was the very idea of expanding the African franchise that caused white political parties to contract. This hardening of white extremist attitudes on the supposed impossibility of African self-rule predated the eruption of violence in the Congo. White carefully tracks the twists and turns of constitution making and breaking through the 1969 constitution, the Pearce Commission, the abortive Geneva conference, the Anglo-American proposals, and the Internal Settlement of 1978. Furthermore, White goes into detail on the "corrupt electoral practices" of elections of Zimbabwe/Rhodesia of April 1979, which provided a crucial backdrop to the two delegations of the Patriotic Front's negotiating stance at Lancaster House in the autumn of 1979. As White points out, none of these commissions or conferences had managed to make race irrelevant, but they progressively ushered in practices of constitution making and advancement of African rights, although each contained the means to limit Africans' ability to exercise their rights.

The detailed discussions of constitution making at Lancaster House are a welcome addition to the literature, and underline the unlikely success of this three-month-long negotiation marathon. She debunks the later claims of African nationalist leaders that they had "successfully" secured a universal franchise in the independence constitution, and deals firmly with the debates around the reserved seats for the white minority. I agree with White's emphasis on the input of "outer" diplomacy from the

Front Line States presidents (who were not, of course, present at the plenary sessions); the extent to which they were consulted; their prior approval sought; and the impact of their visits to London at critical junctures. The situation in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe by late 1979, indeed in the southern African region, by this point, had reached a hurting stalemate. Zambia and Mozambique needed a settlement as much as the battered rural population of Zimbabwe. I disagree with her assertion that the British foreign secretary, Lord Carrington, was relatively confident of success of these negotiations[4]; and strangely, White does not include more comment on British management and orchestration of the South African angle, which was a critical part of British diplomacy of decolonization. (The Pretoria government had decided views on what constituted appropriate citizen/subject in the Zimbabwe/Rhodesia context.) However, her emphasis on the importance of the transition period under Governor Christopher Soames is equally welcome,[5] as well as British awareness that violence and intimidation would undoubtedly continue, during the election campaign and potentially roil on into the post-independence period.

Throughout the book, White consistently maintains that there were just not enough whites, nor supporters among the Zimbabwean Africans (chiefs and disgruntled trade unionists) to sustain the state. Making up things as they went along meant that the anomalies and inconsistencies became irresistible. White denies there was a coherent ideology, in contrast to the bundle of -isms of Michael Evans[6], or the pervasive undertow of anti-Communism and situational factors of the Cold War influencing the outlook of the varied white community. When pressed on what they meant exactly by "European standards," interviewees on my oral history project, "Why Did You Fight?" Narratives of the Rhodesian War c.1970-1980, regularly fluffed the question.[7] As White stresses, the white community used stock phrases as a shorthand that defied exact elaboration.

Incoherent or not, throughout this period, the very fact that Rhodesia was the subject of mandatory United Nations economic, financial, and military sanctions gave the Rhodesian state a status of illegality which the entire world recognized (p. 126). In modern-day parlance, it was not a failed state, but a rogue state. By virtue of being an international pariah, other governments had to deal with it. Sanctions failed because enough coun-

tries did not heed them (indeed, they stimulated the small Rhodesian economy as an externally created import substitution strategy); Britain did not enforce them; and Rhodesians outsmarted its opponents, until South Africa put the squeeze on Salisbury. (Assistant Secretary of State Chet Crocker later claimed wrongly, in my view that the prime minister, B. J. Vorster, was the father of Zimbabwean independence. Documents in the South African and Smith archives underline that Vorster was the midwife.) Throughout, White repeatedly highlights the fluidity of names and political organizations, rapidity of their reconfiguration, and the multiplicity of actors, while confidently asserting the role and viewpoint of the individual. There are important echoes for today's fractured political landscape in Zimbabwe, as well as undertows of urban elite suspicion of the rural vote. But White is rightly careful to resist the temptation of comparisons of exact historical repetition. In conclusion, the historiography of relatively small, landlocked Rhodesia/Zimbabwe is already considerable, but this book is a valuable and innovative addition.

Notes

- [1]. Josiah Brownell, *The Collapse of Rhodesia: Population Demographics and the Politics of Race* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 73.
- [2]. Brian Oliver, interview by Sue Onslow, North Cerney, March 7, 2007.
- [3]. Frank Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39.
- [4]. See Robin Renwick, *A Journey with Margaret Thatcher: Foreign Policy under the Iron Lady* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2014).
- [5]. Sue Onslow, "The Man on the Spot: Christopher Soames and Decolonisation of Zimbabwe/Rhodesia," *Britain and the World* 6, no. 1 (March 2013): 68-100.
- [6]. Michael Evans, "The Role of Ideology in Rhodesian Front Rule 1965-1980" (PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 1993).
- [7]. "Why Did You Fight?" Narratives of the Rhodesian War c.1970-1980, 118 interview transcripts and written responses, held at the University of the West of England archives (www.uwe.ac.uk).

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Citation: Sue Onslow. Review of White, Luise, *Unpopular Sovereignty: Rhodesian Independence and African Decolonization*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2015.

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