

‘An Era Where Racism is Religion’

Race and Diplomacy in Zimbabwe: The Cold War and Decolonization, 1960-1984

By Timothy Lewis Scarnecchia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. Pp. xi + 345. \$120.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781316511794); \$96.00, e-book (ISBN: 9781009053860).

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In August 1978, Joshua Nkomo, the long-serving leader of the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU), spoke the words of this review’s title in reference to Zimbabwe’s ongoing liberation war at a solidarity conference in Addis Ababa to justify ZAPU’s controversial decision to shoot down a Rhodesian passenger jet. For historians today, when the importance (if not the meaning) of decolonising the academy is so obvious, Nkomo’s statement is important not just as historical rhetoric but because it calls us to re-evaluate how racism shaped the late twentieth-century global order. This is the stated aim of Timothy Scarnecchia’s *Race and Diplomacy*, an expansive diplomatic history of Zimbabwe’s ‘long’ liberation war, which sets out to show how racial ideological frameworks shaped the highest levels of diplomatic decision-making up to and after Zimbabwe’s independence.¹ To this end, however, *Race and Diplomacy* is actually a lot less about race than it is about diplomacy, and specifically US and UK diplomacy. As such, Scarnecchia provides a compelling new account of the American and British diplomatic efforts that shaped the end of Zimbabwe’s liberation war and its first years of independence, wherein race played an important but contingent role.

Based primarily on UK, US, and South African archives, the book is an impressive example of how to deal with an extraordinarily complex subject. As Scarnecchia shows, diplomacy was a multi-layered, constantly changing feature of this war, involving a mind-boggling number of actors: Zimbabwe’s two fractious nationalist movements, the governments of five frontline states² who hosted and supported these movements, the white minority Rhodesian regime, internal Black Rhodesian movements, apartheid South Africa, the UK, the US, and Soviet Union, and others, including Cuba and China. Scarnecchia foregrounds how diplomatic initiatives were shaped by these actors’ institutional politics, particularly those of the two nationalist movements, as well as key personalities such as Henry Kissinger, Joshua Nkomo, Robert Mugabe, Ian Smith, and Christopher Soames.

Chapters One and Two gallop through the period’s first fifteen years (1960–75), from the moment when Rhodesian decolonisation deviated from other British colonies to the pivotal events of the mid-1970s, when Southern Africa replaced Southeast Asia as a global centre of the Cold War. Rather than hone in on the 1960s diplomatic debates about Rhodesia’s illegal claim to sovereignty, Scarnecchia instead focuses on the diplomatic response to often opaque and deadly nationalist leadership struggles, particularly those within the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), whose chairman, Herbert Chitepo, was assassinated in 1975. The book becomes much more focused in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, which deal with the diplomatic events following the release of

¹The ‘long’ war in this instance refers to Scarnecchia’s decision to eschew the usual historiographical bookend of Zimbabwe’s independence in 1980 and incorporate a further four years to discuss the brutal events of *Gukurahundi*.

²These were Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Botswana, and Angola. Nigeria also played a critical role as discussed below.

nationalist leaderships from Rhodesian detention in 1974, specifically the initiatives of Kissinger who, fearing the emergence of a Soviet-backed regime in Zimbabwe, attempted to orchestrate a negotiated end to the conflict that culminated in the unsuccessful 1976 Geneva conference. These chapters bring together several threads: the shift in South Africa's strategy towards Rhodesia; Robert Mugabe's early attempt to establish his leadership over ZANU; and the creation of a shaky Patriotic Front (PF) agreement between ZANU and ZAPU under pressure from the frontline states. Notably, race does not really play a central role in Scarnecchia's analysis here.

Although unsuccessful, Geneva set off a train of diplomatic activity, covered in chapters Five, Six, and Seven, which culminated in the 1979 Lancaster House Agreement, ending the war and securing Zimbabwe's independence. Scarnecchia hits his stride laying out the diplomatic endgame, which coincided with the war's most intense phase. Anglo-American policymakers drove these diplomatic initiatives out of a fear that a protracted conflict would increase Soviet influence that could escalate into something like the Angolan Civil War, which would involve the nationalists developing much more formidable conventional military capabilities, such as airpower, provided by Cold War military actors such as the Cubans.³ Pressure on diplomats to keep the PF negotiating also came indirectly from Ian Smith who, after Geneva, began to set up an ersatz form of majority rule, known as the 'Internal Settlement', that entrenched many of the white community's existing privileges. ZAPU and ZANU vehemently opposed the Internal Settlement, which was supported by rival leaders Abel Muzorewa, Ndabaningi Sithole, and Jeremiah Chirau. Western policymakers surmised that the Internal Settlement increased the chances of 'a civil war between the internal government and the PF, rather than a race war' (181). Here again, race seems to play less of a role than the book's title suggests, as Anglo-American policymakers were committed to working with the PF in order to achieve diplomatic progress. Scarnecchia shows that Nkomo was a skilled negotiator who, with the backing of Nigeria's president Olusegun Obasanjo and Zambia's president Kenneth Kaunda, sought to engineer an agreement where he would become the chairman of a transitional executive committee prior to elections. Mugabe, who consolidated his control over ZANU in these years, was unhappy about Nkomo's proposal, however, and the plan was scuppered at the last minute by one of ZANU's key sponsors, Tanzania's president Julius Nyerere. Chapter Seven shows how diplomatic impasses were finally overcome in 1979, when, under pressure from frontline states, the UK took responsibility for the process and set up a Lancaster House conference between ZAPU, ZANU, and all parties of the Internal Settlement.

The last two chapters deal with Zimbabwe's first elections — which ZANU(PF) won through widespread voter intimidation — and the four years after independence during which the government conducted a brutal campaign of violence known as *Gukurahundi*, killing and torturing thousands of civilians in the ZAPU heartlands, allegedly to suppress 'dissidents'. Scarnecchia unravels why the UK and the US remained silent about these events. Here his 'race and diplomacy' framework is most relevant. Both governments believed that public criticism of ZANU and a thin-skinned Mugabe would have several downsides. It would diminish their influence and push Zimbabwe towards Moscow; it would scupper individual diplomats' desire to use Zimbabwe's perceived success to advance their careers or safeguard their funding (for the first three years Zimbabwe received \$1.95 billion in donor aid); and it would undermine a British strategic aim to make their flagship security sector reform programme, BMATT⁴, into a success. *Race and Diplomacy* rightly shows, though, that undergirding these factors was Western diplomats' ideological belief that Black-ruled states worked differently to white-ruled states. This, Scarnecchia argued, 'allowed [diplomats] to confidently shift their perspective [at independence]... [to one] where political violence, lack of rights for citizens, and autocracy was viewed as the norm' (314). At its most benign, this manifest as glib racist banter by figures such as British Foreign Secretary Anthony Crossland,

³Indeed, the use of MiG jets in Angola were part of ZAPU's strategy to militarily end the war using conventional forces.

⁴The British Military Advisory and Training Team.

who joked that Kissinger had visited ‘the worst places in cannibal-land’ (126). At its worst, this belief meant keeping silent about mass atrocities and going along with ZANU’s line, as British High Commissioner Robin Byatt did, that it was ‘a Biafra-type situation’, which meant an internal, ‘ethnic’ conflict that Britain could not intervene in no matter how bloody (284).

It is challenging to capture the sprawling, opaque messiness of Zimbabwe’s liberation war with its vast list of actors and multitude of rumours, and at times the book suffers for it. Unlike other similar works, which are respectively organised around a particular administration’s decision-making or the political intrigue of a city like Dar es Salaam, Scarnecchia’s book jumps across a dizzying number of institutions, locations, and personalities.⁵ At times it is hard to follow why diplomats and politicians thought in particular ways or made particular decisions. The book’s scope also leads to difficult choices. There were some notable omissions, including Third World diplomacy, particularly during the 1960s; ZAPU’s institutional and military history; and a clearer sense of how the diplomacy related to the war’s military events.⁶ Given the book’s source material is largely from US and UK archives, there’s also a limited engagement with frontline state perspectives — particularly Mozambique’s, which played the critical role in Mugabe’s rise to power and in hosting ZANU’s army-in-exile during the most intense period of the war. Ultimately, *Race and Diplomacy* provides an important contribution to the historiography of Zimbabwe’s liberation war as a history of Anglo-American diplomatic initiatives. In this regard, although the book’s central argument about race is more contingent than is claimed, by writing about race as an ideational construct Scarnecchia points the way to diplomatic historians of the late twentieth century for how histories of international relations during this era can be significantly enriched.

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Urbanism and Identity in East Africa

Making Identity on the Swahili Coast: Urban Life, Community, and Belonging in Bagamoyo

By Steven Fabian. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xxvi + 343. \$126.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781108492041); \$32.99, paperback (ISBN: 9781108710046); \$32.99, e-book (ISBN: 9781108581929).

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This intriguing and well-researched book offers a subtle, relatively new approach to Swahili Coast urban social history. Built from multinational archival research and ethnography in Bagamoyo that began in 2001, *Making Identity* tells the rich tale of urban life in the town on Tanzania’s northern coast. Although it is small, Bagamoyo has great historical significance as a longtime mainland

⁵G. Roberts, *Revolutionary State-Making in Dar es Salaam: African Liberation and the Global Cold War, 1961-74* (Cambridge, 2021); L. Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (Oxford, 2000).

⁶For military events, for instance, see M. Tendi, *The Army and Politics in Zimbabwe: Mujuru, the Liberation Fighter and Kingmaker* (Cambridge, 2020).