



THE COLLAPSE OF RHODESIA

POPULATION DEMOGRAPHICS
AND THE POLITICS OF RACE

JOSIAH BROWNELL

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Josiah Brownell received his Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2009, and has a J.D. from the University of Virginia School of Law. His research focuses on African history, comparative settler colonialism, and the end of the British Empire.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
CSO	Rhodesian Central Statistical Office
DTT	Demographic Transition Theory
FPAR	Family Planning Association of Rhodesia
GNP	Gross National Product
MP	Member of Parliament
PV	Protected Village
RF	Rhodesian Front
TTL	Tribal Trust Land
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
UN	United Nations
UNFPA	United Nations Family Planning Association
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army

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INTRODUCTION

The Hidden War of Numbers in Rhodesia¹

In the final decades of white rule in Rhodesia, the settler state fought and lost two parallel wars.² One of these wars was always more voluble and violent, visible, and bloody. This war would escalate into an increasingly deadly civil conflict, with guerrillas and counter-insurgency forces clashing inside and outside Rhodesia, and have far-reaching regional and international political significance. This was the better known of the two wars, and the one to attract the attention of most historians studying the last years of settler rule. This more conspicuous war was also the only one retrospectively acknowledged by the participants on both sides of the conflict, and the only one that has seeped into the shared memories of Rhodesians and Zimbabweans alike. The story of this war has been recounted many times.

But there was another war in Rhodesia being fought alongside this more visible war: a war of numbers. In some respects this was a hidden war, and instead of the settler state and African guerrillas fighting over hills and villages, isolated farms, and rural roads, this was a contest over racial birth rates and death rates, immigration and emigration patterns, racial boundaries and head counting. Victory in this war would be determined not by the number of combat deaths reported in newspapers nor captured territory on maps, but by trends and growth rates in statistical reports and censuses. This war of numbers was perhaps more important, and certainly no less political, than the louder and bloodier war, even as its political nature was somewhat obscured by an apolitical, coded language. Because of this coded language and the political incentives of the participants on both sides of this conflict to downplay this parallel war, historians have looked past the numbers war to the more striking images beyond, as though those more violent dramas

represented the entire story of Rhodesia's collapse. Yet it was the settler state's defeat in this war of numbers that sapped the morale of, and had profound psychological effects on, white society; heaped unbearable economic and ecological pressures on the state; further undermined the white regime's international and domestic legitimacy; and rendered the military conflict unwinnable. The role this parallel war played in the collapse of the regime was therefore pivotal, despite the historical silence.

The war of numbers was contested on many levels. Political decisions behind the war came from as far afield as Salisbury, Lusaka, London, the United Nations Headquarters in New York City, and from scattered guerrilla camps in Mozambique and Zambia. The sites of conflict were also diverse, and included border ports of entry and departure in Rhodesia and abroad; family planning clinics; newspapers, radios and television sets in Rhodesia; the parliament floors in London and Salisbury; the criminal courts of Britain and elsewhere; and, perhaps most importantly, relationships within both white and African families in Rhodesia. The geographical diversity of the decision centres and the variety of these sites of conflict reflect the geographical and conceptual breadth of this parallel struggle.

Although the war had great geographical and conceptual breadth, the trajectory of this struggle was primarily dictated by two simple demographic trends: the rapid growth of the African population, and the transience of the white population. By the late 1960s the highest policymakers of the settler state had begun to formulate a broad population strategy in an attempt to counter these trends, with the goal of increasing white numbers and decreasing African numbers. As envisioned by its proponents, this population strategy was to be comprehensive in scale, but in the context of white Rhodesia's fragile demography it was out of necessity pared down, and was even then only fitfully and unevenly implemented. As a consequence, these population policies were largely ineffective. Defensively, African nationalists inside and outside Rhodesia, and guerrillas in the field, also engaged in this demographic struggle, though mostly in the propaganda realm and in reaction to state initiatives. Despite the asymmetry of interest and initiative in demographic engineering, the population trends of decreasing white birth rates, continued white transience, and a growing African population were all moving in a direction that weakened the settler state. This left Rhodesia's white population, after the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965, as one of the most demographically fragile ruling ethnic castes in any polity anywhere in the world.

In waging the population war, the settler state faced conflicts and contradictions between its short-term and long-term policy goals which were

never reconciled, and which would ultimately prove fatal. While there was widespread agreement among whites in Rhodesia that the racial ratio 'imbalances' between whites and Africans needed to be addressed, there was no consensus within the white electorate on the scale and nature of the various population proposals designed to address them. Debates over population policy generated divisions between long-time residents and newer arrivals, older and younger citizens, and rural and urban dwellers. These debates also created conflicts among the different ministries of the settler state, which at various times translated into heated fights within the ruling right-wing Rhodesian Front party, and often divided the Rhodesian Cabinet. One inherent problem was that all such proposals to radically alter or reverse Rhodesia's racial ratios required significant sacrifices on the part of the settler community, and the bulk of Rhodesia's whites were unwilling to make any sacrifice that adversely affected their standards of living. Whenever such sacrifices were demanded, whites fled the country. As a consequence of its peculiar demography, the state had to reverse, slow down, or mitigate the problem of widening racial ratios or else the white settler state would die, and yet the solutions to these problems were also fatal to the white settler state as it then existed. Rhodesia's population problems were like those of a patient whose condition was such that both the underlying problem and the procedures to cure the problem were likely to kill the patient.³

At no time in its ninety-year history could the settler state ever attain a sizable or stable white population, despite its sometimes aggressive efforts to secure these demographic goals. As it was, whites in the territory never accounted for more than 5 per cent of the total population, and hovered over 5 per cent for only the nine years from 1955 to 1964, peaking in 1961 at 5.7 per cent, and falling thereafter until the end of white rule in 1980, when their actual numbers were most likely less than 3 per cent of the total population.⁴ In absolute terms, the white population of Rhodesia peaked at only 277,000:⁵ a number that is interestingly well under one half of the total number of black Africans living in England today.⁶ Moreover, consistently high levels of population turnover through immigration and emigration throughout its short history reveal a white Rhodesia that always relied upon a perilous demographic juggling act,⁷ and exposes a transient white population with only shallow national loyalties. In this context, the political, economic, psychological, and military effects of the rapidly expanding African population were doubly compounded.⁸ If he could have been roused from his grave and made to witness the limited extent of white settlement of his colony seventy years after its founding, Rhodesia's eponymous founder, Cecil Rhodes, would no doubt have repeated his famous meditation: 'So

little done, so much to do'. In the event, there was little time with which to do it.

As it was, the state's definitions of victory in the war of numbers evolved over time towards progressively more humble demographic goals. Chronologically, what constituted a victory evolved from a goal of a white majority in Rhodesia along the lines of Australia, to that of a racial composition closer to that of South Africa, to stabilising then-current ratios, and finally to merely slowing the widening of the racial population numbers. Under each of these definitions of victory, white Rhodesia lost the war of numbers.

In contrast to the prevailing orthodoxies on the subject of the fall of white Rhodesia, this book argues that it was the Rhodesian state's defeat in the war of numbers, and the numerous and surprisingly varied consequences which flowed from this failure, that were directly responsible for the settler state's political downfall. More than any battle, bombing, election result, coup, or diplomatic manoeuvre, it was this defeat that was dispositive. None the less, it would be misleading to regard the more conspicuous war of liberation and the hidden war of population numbers as being wholly distinct from one another, as they were inseparably commingled. These two complementary wars interacted and overlapped with each other in complex ways, and neither can be understood in isolation of the other. Nor can the full story behind Rhodesia's collapse be relayed without an understanding of both.

The Course of the Visible War

Some parts of the story of the collapse of the breakaway Rhodesian regime are well known, even to those with only a casual interest in the subject. The settlement negotiations, international political manoeuvrings, and the diplomatic implications of the Rhodesian rebellion have been described by many authors in both academic studies and in more accessible narratives.⁹ In addition, the military aspects of the Rhodesian conflict have been examined in detail by a variety of authors, both participants and analysts.¹⁰ Neither well-known narrative will be recounted here in detail, though a broad overview is presented below to provide a skeletal context to the war of numbers that ran alongside these more eye-catching events.

The colony of Rhodesia, with its small but politically strident settler population, had presented an impossible political and diplomatic dilemma for imperial Britain for many years. With the unravelling of the Central African Federation, of which Rhodesia was the dominant member territory, Britain and her colony of Rhodesia began a contentious series of on-again, off-again constitutional negotiations with the aim of bringing about the settler state's legal independence. For reasons that will be detailed in another section, no

agreement could be reached. On 11 November, 1965, Ian Smith's white-dominated settler government declared Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain, ending the stalemate. Immediately following this illegal declaration, Britain's Labour government under Harold Wilson began to implement what would become a gradually escalating series of sanctions intended to end the rebellion. In 1966 the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed selective mandatory sanctions, and in 1968 the UNSC passed comprehensive mandatory sanctions against Rhodesia, both on Britain's prompting. More extensive measures, including the use of force, were repeatedly called for by many members of the United Nations, but all such calls were rejected by Britain. Even those sanctions that were put in place were openly and notoriously violated by Rhodesia's allies, South Africa and Portugal, and the regime was able, at least in the short and medium term, to circumvent the effective enforcement of these economic sanctions and remain afloat economically. In the long term, the more damaging and effective of these efforts to isolate the regime internationally was the unanimous rejection of any formal or de facto recognition of the illegal regime, even on the part of Portugal and South Africa.

On the settlement front, Wilson initially refused to 'legalise the swag of an illegal action' by negotiating with the rebel regime.¹¹ His government's policy soon changed, and the British subsequently hosted two high profile settlement talks on Royal Navy ships – the HMS *Tiger* talks in 1966 and the HMS *Fearless* talks in 1968 – neither of which ended the rebellion. There was then no movement on independence negotiations until the election of Edward Heath's Conservative government in Britain in 1970. Shortly thereafter there was an Anglo-Rhodesian agreement on independence terms in 1971, which was very favourable to white settlers. This settlement ultimately foundered in May 1972 when the proposed independence constitution failed to pass the test of acceptability to Rhodesia's African population as was required by Britain in the agreement.

In the winter of 1972 African guerrillas attacked a white farm in the Centenary district of north-eastern Rhodesia, marking the beginning of the military war.¹² This first phase of the guerrilla war soon took on the form of similar hit-and-run attacks on isolated white farms or state installations in the rural areas. Initially, these attacks were confined to the northern border regions and were rather easily contained by the regime. This all changed with the Lisbon coup in 1974 and the rise to power of FRELIMO in Portugal's former colony of Mozambique in 1975, which turned Rhodesia's containable police action into a full scale guerrilla war. Afterwards, the Rhodesian regime was bordered on three sides by hostile countries, with only a

small swathe of land along the Limpopo River in the south of the country touching its lone ally, South Africa.

With the fall of Portuguese Africa, South Africa became convinced that the war in Rhodesia was hopeless and would inevitably result, were it to continue, in a victory for African guerrillas hostile to South Africa. For different reasons, Zambia was also anxious for an end to the fighting. Together this unlikely pairing applied pressure on their respective allies to return to the settlement table. The resulting talks between Rhodesian officials and African nationalists occurred on a railway car in the middle of the Victoria Falls Bridge in 1975, but a mutually agreed upon settlement could still not be obtained.

The United States' Cold War interests in the region were activated after the Soviet-backed Cuban intervention in the former Portuguese colony of Angola, and the Rhodesian conflict then took on a broader significance. In 1976, on the initiative of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, the United States and South Africa jointly pressured Rhodesia back to the negotiating table, bluntly informing Ian Smith that Rhodesia was going to soon lose the war, and could expect no outside support in his continuance of it. As part of this process, Smith was persuaded to deliver a speech to Rhodesians in September 1976 conceding that under this new settlement plan Rhodesia would be headed for majority rule. Even so, in the resulting Geneva talks of 1976 no agreement was reached. Following this, further Anglo-American initiatives likewise ended with no progress towards legal independence.

All the while, the war continued. Militating against what could have been a more comprehensive guerrilla military victory in the war, the two nationalist groups, ZANU and ZAPU, and their respective guerrilla armies, ZANLA and ZIPRA, remained as hostile to each other as each was to the Rhodesian Security Forces. Assassinations of high ranking nationalists and top guerrilla leaders and violent reprisals between the groups prevented any meaningful cooperation, despite periodic attempts to unite. These divisions between the nationalist groups provided much needed breathing space for the white regime.

After the failure of the Geneva talks, the settler regime began negotiating with African moderates inside Rhodesia in an effort to pursue an 'internal settlement'. These protracted negotiations finally resulted in the new Zimbabwe-Rhodesia constitution which purportedly established African majority rule in 1979. In spite of its outward appearance, all significant reins of power remained in white hands even with the ascendance to the premiership of Bishop Abel Muzorewa, an African. Even with this window dressing, the new Zimbabwe-Rhodesia constitution did not bring international