

Callum Holley

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“Rhodesians Never Die”: A Settler Colonial History in the Face of Misinformation

In many contemporary online circles, Rhodesia is mythologized as a martyr. Like other white supremacist fantasies, such as Hyperborea, Rhodesia was framed as a white paradise; a dying beacon of “freedom” facing the hordes of communism alone. One only needs to spend enough time on the wrong side of Instagram to find pro-Rhodesia shirts, tactical patches saying, “Make Rhodesia Great Again,” or the hordes of videos from the firearms influencers glorifying restored “Rhodie pattern” FALs or donning “bushstroke” camouflage. Unfortunately, for a troubled few, even the Rhodie “short shorts” have come back into fashion. Indeed, Rhodesian nostalgia proudly owns its colonial past yet oftentimes lies about the details. Dylan Evans in *The Eden of white supremacy: Rhodesia and the evolution of racist mythology* aptly summarizes that white minority rule is framed not as colonial domination, but “legitimate and heroic assertion of white self-rule.”. (Evans, 2025)

While nostalgists’ favorite era, the “bush war”, a conflict between the “bulwark” white government and native resistance coalitions, is often the center of dialogue around Rhodesia, its inception and pre-Second World War colonial past is often neglected or corrupted by misinformation. Contrary to the dying yet dogmatic Rhodesian nostalgia, Rhodesia was a settler colonial state. The application of Patrick Wolfe’s logic of elimination through the positive and negative dimensions of settler colonialism shows us how Rhodesia built its settler-colonial state. Furthermore, through its positive dimension, Rhodesia pursued an emerging policy of detail, which, outlined by Said, circumvented Rhodesia’s constitution through its Land Apportionment and Industrial Conciliation Acts.

Logic of Elimination: Positive and Negative Dimensions

To begin, one must first define what a settler colonial society is, which Patrick Wolfe outlines in *Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native*. Indeed, the goal of a settler colonial state is to replace indigenous peoples with a permanent new settler population, with its primary motivation, according to Wolfe, being the acquisition of land. (Wolfe, 388) Indeed, he deems this displacement the logic of elimination, which is constituted by two fundamental aspects of the settler society; Negatively, the state not only displaces, but actively works towards the dissolution of native societies, while positively, it builds a new society through structural institutions. (Wolfe, 388) Indeed, it is not a single event, but rather a system that progressively “destroys to replace” (Wolfe, 388), of which each dimension of the logic of elimination was clearly developed in Rhodesia.

Thompson in *A Critical History of Southern Rhodesia* describes mid-19th-century Africa as a competitive region. In the south, the Boer Dutch significantly outnumbered British South Africans; British South Africa company founder Cecil Rhodes saw a need to protect South Africa from German, Transvaaler, and Portuguese colonial encroachment. (Thompson, 11) Indeed, Rhodes had a vision to consolidate British power and connect the Cape to Cairo, and he proposed an expansion north into the “Zambezia” region to develop a new colony named after himself. (Thompson, 10) For his first step, in 1888, Rhodes’s partner Charles Rudd made a deal with the indigenous Mashona king of the region to acquire “complete and exclusive charge over all metals and minerals” in his kingdom, and “full power to do all things that they may deem necessary to win and procure the same”. (Thompson, 11) We notice that the Mashona did not give land rights to the Europeans, largely because, although strategically interested, the British were most enticed by the promise of material wealth (Thompson, 17). Still, in a previous treaty,

Britain was adamant that the Mashona promise not to give land rights to other foreign powers without first consulting the British. (Thompson, 11)

This first step laid the ideological and political framework for the negative dimension of the logic of elimination, which Patrick Wolfe labels as the “doctrine of discovery”: a term that defines native rights based upon the balance of power between Europeans. (Wolfe, 390) While native peoples were typically acknowledged as having a type of occupational sovereignty, dominion was always in the hands of the presiding European power that discovered them. (Wolfe, 391) For example, Wolfe states that because British dominion was largely unchallenged by other Europeans in Australia, it was labeled “terra nullius” and its indigenous peoples were thoroughly oppressed. (Wolfe, 391) To accomplish this, the doctrine utilizes “preeminence,” the “finders’ keepers” rule of he who “discovered” first acquired the sole right to buy land from natives; (Wolfe, 391) the European right to buy always overturned the “Indigenous freedom of choice.”, which, when combined with the doctrine, created a type of dominion that ultimately furthered the settler project’s goal of the elimination of the native society. (Wolfe, 391)

Indeed, Rudd’s deal with the Mashona was a classic example of the “preeminence” strategy, which ensured Rhodes could execute his dream of consolidation by legally removing any foreign European competition in the region. The consequences of this transaction created the “terra nullius,” which resulted in the more direct strategies of the logic of elimination. Indeed, after winning the charter from the British government, Rhodes’ British South Africa Company [BSAC] moved into the region and became the nominal government. (Thompson, 11) In 1893, it defeated the neighboring Ndebele people’s King Lobengula, and expeditionary settlers moved into their capital. Moyana states in *Land and Race in Rhodesia* that because of the 1893 conflict, Ndebele people were forced onto two reservations, which British land commissioners described

as “badly watered, sandy and unfit for settlement”. (Moyana, 18) Moyana claims these reservations were a reduction of about 7.5 million acres from the original 19 million the Ndebele used to occupy, with the rest being flooded by settlers and passed into the hands of private estates and commercial property. (Moyana, 19) We again see the negative dimension of the logic of elimination through the displacement of indigenous peoples. Seeing the impending doom, both the Mashona and local Ndebele revolted in 1896, which the BSAC used overwhelming firepower via machine guns and rifles to subdue its indigenous enemies. (Thompson, 19)

With local rebellion being quashed and new territory liquidated, the newly established Rhodesia could now build the colonial society in Wolfe’s positive aspect of elimination. Firstly, the new state had to maintain a balance between its two competing institutions: The settlers and the BSAC.

Koke in *Unfulfilled Promises and Desires: The British South Africa Company (BSAC), Settler Politics and the Development of Southern Rhodesia’s Fiscal System, 1890–1922* described the new settler class as being “...not men and women of sound financial standing.” (Koke, 1033) They were “mere storekeepers and small-time prospectors” (Koke, 1033) who were hoping to get rich on gold the BSAC secured through its mining rights. Moyana states that settlers were ultimately disappointed by the imagined abundance of gold in Rhodesia, and as a result, needed to build their fortune on agriculture through the seizure of Indigenous land. (Moyana, 20)

Rhodesia’s settler class exemplifies Wolfe’s concept of the “Frontier Rabble.”, who, like in America’s Trail of Tears, followed the government and seized indigenous lands. As Wolfe explains, the rabble came from Europe’s poor and landless classes to drive indigenous resources into private hands. (Wolfe, 392) In the logic of elimination’s positive aspect, the rabble was the colonial state’s primary means of expansion and the bedrock for the creation of the new society,

whose presence, following or spearheading government action, regularized the boundaries of the colonial state. (Wolfe, 392) Negatively, the rabble aided British imperial skirmishes through the displacement of indigenous peoples and their land. By 1911, Settlers occupied 20.7% of the territory, while native reserves encompassed 23.2%. (Moyana, 20) A further 56.1% was possessed by the BSAC, but unassigned. Interestingly, Wolfe reminds the reader that the rabble sometimes operated “lawlessly” either outside of or against the jurisdiction of the state. (Wolfe, 392) In Rhodesia, we can see this through the collapse of Rhodesia’s second institution, the BSAC.

Initially responsible for the development and administration of the colony, Koke states that the BSAC did not have the budget to maintain control. (Koke, 1032) In its inception, the BSAC couldn’t directly tax settlers for revenue (Koke, 1033), and as previously stated, did not find the material wealth it had first negotiated for. To recover from the supply chain losses of the First World War, the BSAC proposed a tax on all undeveloped holdings, including those owned by settlers, which ignited conflict between the two. Settlers petitioned the British government to intervene, which, in 1918, stripped the company of its landownership: its last source of income (Koke, 1040). Cutting their losses, the BSAC relinquished its control. (Thompson, 19) This victory for settlers was the true birth of the settler state, which the British government offered the choice of either merging with South Africa or becoming a separate self-governing colony of the British Empire. (Thompson, 19) Rhodesians chose the latter, in 1923, electing its first constitution (Mutiti, 260), but with the stipulation that for independence, it had to fulfill the conditions of being “financially fit” and able to “...demonstrate the capacity to reduce the disparity between the European and African populations.” (Koke, 1042)

This second stipulation would prove to be intrinsically impossible for Rhodesia. Rhodesian independence activist Ethel Tawse Jollie, in 1924, stated there were 2,263 indigenous persons to every white settler (Jollie, 243). Indeed, settlers feared Africans' higher population, with the 1932 Morris Carter Commission voicing the settler fear of an “inevitable racial conflict” if segregation were not established. (Moyana, 22) The vastly outnumbered settlers could only maintain power through indigenous repression, but through their constitution, they couldn't outright enforce it. To solve the dilemma, the Rhodesian government utilized a policy of detail through its Land Apportionment and Industrial Conciliation Acts to further the settler state's agenda.

Policy of Detail

Edward Said in *Zionism From The Standpoint of Its Victims* describes the Koenig Report, written by Israel Konig, an Israeli Commissioner of the Ministry, who faced a similar dilemma to Jollie. Koenig found that indigenous Arabs outnumbered Zionist settlers, and to remedy the problem, Koenig recommended that Zionists needed to not only reduce the Arab population through gentrification, but also economically neutralize them through the introduction of social engineering programs that promoted settlers and encouraged natives to leave. (Said, 45) Joseph Weitz had another solution. He created the Jewish National Fund; an entity whose tailored purpose was to purchase Palestinian and Syrian land to hold “in trust” for “the Jewish people”. (Said, 38) The obvious goal was to introduce settlers but also turn native Palestinians into second-class citizens. (Said, 38)

Both Koenig and Weitz advocated for a policy of detail, which Said outlines as not only a colonial vision for Israel, but rather a concrete Israeli territory that used specific policies to define the state and erase local Palestinians. (Said, 36) Through the analogy of an army, he

demonstrates how it was systematic: Policies of detail use a variety of institutions, such as “agriculture,” “commerce,” and “industry,” to establish the new society. (Said, 37) Its value came from its cohesion, and indeed, its ability to translate the vision into tools of development. (Said, 37)

To execute on its independent settler colonial vision, Rhodesia’s policy of detail first addressed the territory left in the wake of the BSAC’s demise. Like the Jewish National Fund, the 1930 Land Apportionment Act hoarded land for settlers, officially confining indigenous peoples to “Native Purchase Areas” near the, as previously stated, undesirable native reserves. (Moyana, 24) According to Thompson, 62% of the remaining land area was awarded to European settlers, while native areas would amount to only 37% (Thompson, 24); Moyana furthers the inequality by claiming that while only 50,000 settlers occupied most of the country, more than 1 million Africans were crammed onto reserves. This policy of detail was specifically designed to deprive natives of land and control the population. Moyana shows that African agricultural productivity suffered following the act’s implementation, with significant losses in grain yield and livestock. (Moyana, 27) Furthermore, the population continued to rise while the area of cultivation began to plateau (Moyana, 28), the result of which was consistently overpopulated reserves and famine. (Moyana, 30)

The Land Apportionment Act was an effective policy of detail settlers used to not only finalize the displacement of indigenous peoples, but through segregation, create what Moyana deems as an “artificial poverty” to ensure natives could not challenge settler society. It was the first step in turning indigenous Africans into second-class citizens, which, by separating them from their land, the vehicle of their subsistence, forced them into the settler’s capitalist system.

Returning to Jollie, while Rhodesia considered itself “...climatically a white man's country, it does not follow that the whole development of the country can be done by the white race.” (Jollie, 243) and indeed, since the first wave of plantation settlers, white landowners had been allowing natives to occupy their farms [originally indigenous land] as tenant labor. (Thompson, 23) Displacement increasingly created a cheap African migrant labor class that white mines and industry could exploit (Thompson, 23), which Moyana attributes to the impossible economic conditions of the reserves. Seemingly contradictory to the newly implemented segregation, the 1930s saw many young Africans move to the rapidly developing white urban centers. (Moyana, 34) While Jollie would frame the “availability” of the native peoples to perform “...all the tasks which, in European countries, fall to the least educated or least fortunate of the people.” (Jollie, 243), positively, settlers feared the competition. As previously stated, the frontier rabble were not high-skilled individuals, and according to Jollie, whites would have to transform into a superior “Sahib” class.

How the settler state facilitated this was through a new policy of detail that segregated the workforce, which Arrighi outlines in *The Political Economy of Rhodesia*. According to Arrighi, the 1934 Industrial Conciliation Act excluded African workers from the definition of employee, but with all the same wages and conditions of employment applicable to white workers. (Arrighi, 43) Arrighi argues that in practice, this debarred Africans from employment as no white employer would hire an African when obtaining a European cost, the same. (Arrighi, 43) Mutiti in *Rhodesia and Her 4 Discriminatory Constitutions* clarifies, though, by claiming the act didn't just wholly ban Africans, but rather, excluded them from skilled employment. (Mutiti, 263) Whites were allowed to work as skilled laborers, and when understaffed, the government relied on importing them from other nations. (Mutiti, 263) Africans were denied the right to

advancement, and with trade unions also being segregated under the act, they couldn't advocate for the same wages as whites. (Mutiti, 263)

This created a color bar, which, like Koenig's recommendations, economically repressed indigenous peoples in favor of settler preferential treatment; Africans consistently made less than whites, with wages a measly 3 pounds a month in this era (Mutiti, 263), but even worse, disenfranchised them from the vote. Indeed, the 1923 constitution defined suffrage as being over 21 years old and able to make over 100 pounds a year; this was an impossibility for African workers. (Mutiti, 263)

In this way, while the constitution did not specifically discriminate based on race, Rhodesia used its legislation to create institutions furthering segregation and supporting the advancement of white settlers. Using legal manipulation, both acts were designed to displace indigenous peoples physically and economically through land partition, labor rules, and suffrage. Through these institutions, Rhodesia's policy of detail cleared the space necessary to build its new settler society, which, like Zionism, only had room for the settler class.

Conclusion

By examining Rhodesia through a settler colonial lens, we construct a more accurate portrayal of a deeply unequal society that, while once an extension of the British colonial enterprise, morphed into a segregated settler colonial white supremacist society. Through Patrick Wolfe, it's apparent that the logic of elimination was expressed through the Doctrine of Discovery, which created the background politics required to construct the reservation system that deprived indigenous peoples of their land. While this displacement exemplified the negative dimension of settler colonialism, the indigenous reserves created the space for the positive

dimension via the “frontier rabble” class, which, following the BSAC’s collapse, pursued its objectives using a policy of detail. Through a policy of detail, Rhodesia utilized its Land Apportionment and Industrial Conciliation Acts to oppress indigenous peoples and reaffirm settler supremacy. Indeed, Rhodesia was not a “heroic” or “legitimate” assertion of white rule, but rather, a failed business venture whose ugly consequences oppressed Africans.

Citations

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