

Britain's Guardian: An apologia for imperialist intervention in Zimbabwe

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On March 14, in the immediate aftermath President Robert Mugabe's election victory in Zimbabwe, the *Guardian* newspaper published an editorial pronouncing its verdict on the result.

The *Guardian* has, along with its predecessor the *Manchester Guardian*, been the voice of English liberalism for almost two centuries, priding itself on its encouragement of critical debate. As such it has a very definite constituency amongst the educated middle class. Undoubtedly therefore, some of its readers will have been concerned about the open colonial character of the recent British intervention in Zimbabwean affairs. The country's opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) received financial and political support from Britain and even before the election had taken place, Prime Minister Tony Blair demanded an MDC victory and stated openly that no other result would be acceptable.

The purpose of the March 14 editorial was to answer a priori whatever objections might be stirring in the minds of *Guardian* readers and to further British efforts to destabilise Zimbabwe. The editorial railed against the "mealy-mouthed prevarications of the South Africans and Nigerians", the "arrogant party hacks of Zanu-PF and their violent rent-a-mob thugs... corrupt police and military, a castrated judiciary and muzzled press... and all those heads of state and politicians in southern Africa who connived, finessed, double-dealed and conspired to look the other way."

Instead of addressing the historical circumstances that had given rise to the situation in Zimbabwe, the editorial posed a series of objections only to dismiss them as utterly irrelevant.

"It is true, but no defence, to say that worse abuses occur elsewhere in the world and go uncondemned," it said. Having admitted that worse electoral abuses and attacks on democratic rights take place regularly all over the world, the *Guardian* clearly does not see any responsibility to explain why is it that Mugabe has been selected for demonisation out of the many African presidents who have been returned to office by even more fraudulent and violent elections. Instead the editorial continued, "It is true, but no excuse, that the west is often guilty of double standards." Again, this is crucial political issue is not questioned. The West's double standards, which have resulted in close collaboration with dictatorial regimes all over the

world, are simply presented as being of no consequence.

Finally, and most astonishingly, the editorial claims, "It is a fact, but barely relevant, that Britain's colonialists bear much historical guilt." Thus the role of British imperialism, the crimes committed in its name and its enduring legacy, are written off as "barely relevant". But how is it possible to understand present events in Zimbabwe or anywhere else without a knowledge of history—and of the impact of British imperialism's oppression of the African masses?

The former name of Zimbabwe—Southern Rhodesia—reminds us that from 1889 to 1922 the country was run as a British mandate by a commercial company set up by royal charter—Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company (BSA). All the wealth of the country passed into the hands of the British invaders. On 12 September 1890 Rhodes raised the British flag and formally "took possession" of Mashonaland and all it contained. When he conquered the Ndebele region by military invasion, the opposition of the indigenous people was declared "a rebellion" and virtually all their land and cattle passed into white hands.

When Matabeleland was subjugated, villages were burnt down to make room for the white settlers and for mining camps. Labour was made available for the mines and the land through the imposition of a labour-tax law. In 1896 the Ndebele uprising against BSA rule was brutally crushed. Landless peasants were forced to live in "locations" in areas of the country devoid of fertile soil, water and wild game. The *Saturday Review* of August 26, 1896 wrote, "Permanent peace there cannot be in countries like Mashona and Matabeleland until the blacks are either exterminated or driven into the centre of Africa." That was the spirit of the rule of the BSA on behalf of the British colonial power.

This was the way that British rule began in Southern Rhodesia. It is but a small part of Britain's colonial history, which the *Guardian* editorial insists is "barely relevant".

The legacy of Rhodes continued in the twentieth century. From 1923 Southern Rhodesia, though still part of the British Empire, became a self-governing colony, ruled by the white minority. Seven years later the Land Apportionment Act made it illegal for Africans to own or rent property in towns in the greater part of the country. A formal colour bar in employment

was introduced in 1934, under the Industrial Conciliation Act, which excluded “natives” from the definition of “employees”.

After the Second World War tens of thousands of British immigrants arrived in Southern Rhodesia and settled on land that had been designated as “white” areas by driving Africans from their homes. The Rhodesian authorities attempted to crush the rising nationalist challenge. In 1959 the African National Congress (ANC) was banned and hundreds of activists were imprisoned.

In 1965 the Ian Smith government signed a proclamation declaring its independence from Britain. The limited rights that Africans had achieved in the previous period were withdrawn. The Zanu and Zapu national movements were banned and their supporters incarcerated.

As the liberation struggle developed, thousands of Africans were uprooted from their homes and herded into “new villages” to cut off food and information from the guerrilla forces. New pass laws were introduced that limited the right of Africans to enter the towns. During the whole period of the Smith regime, the country was covertly supported by British capitalism, animated by the knowledge that its interests were being protected.

In 1980 Mugabe came to power, having led the bitter liberation struggle against the white rulers and being imprisoned by the Smith regime for 10 years. He was elected as president of Zimbabwe after the Lancaster House agreement of 1979, which was designed to safeguard British interests and the white farmers in the face of massive social and political resistance. Two years later the British turned a blind eye to his brutal suppression of the political opposition in Matabeleland. This was no doubt an example of the West’s “double standards” that the *Guardian* is so eager to dismiss.

For years Mugabe has functioned as a trusted defender of international capital. But from 1998 he fell out of favour with the West because he was felt unable to carry out IMF policies with the necessary vigour, without provoking a social explosion. Thus the British establishment turned to the MDC.

In seeking to assuage the genuine concerns that Britain’s backing of the MDC is aimed at installing a pro-Western regime, the *Guardian* editorial endeavours to whip up moral fervour amongst the more disoriented layers of the middle class. Hence the extraordinary epithets, “the mealy-mouthed prevarications”, the “massive fraud” the “intimidation and skulduggery of every kind”, and so on.

It continued, “In Zimbabwe, here and now, before our very eyes, in broad daylight, a new class of criminals has been caught red-handed in the act of committing grand larceny, and they and only they are responsible. In defying common sense and decency, justice and the law, in ignoring international opinion and their own international obligations, they decisively broke with the past. In Zimbabwe, today is the beginning of history.”

Like a priest preparing a sermon damning the heathen sinners,

one can almost see the expression of pious self-satisfaction on the author’s face as he pens his purple prose. But in reality Mugabe’s undoubtedly oppressive methods are being used to excuse the far greater crimes being prepared by Number 10, the Foreign Office and MI6.

The *Guardian* is a past master at this type of political chicanery. Although it publishes dissenting articles from time to time, the general thrust of its editorials is to support British imperialism’s military and colonial adventures overseas by portraying them as great moral causes. It justified Western intervention in the Balkans by whipping up hysteria over the treatment of Kosovo Albanians. It supported British intervention in Sierra Leone that has made the country an effective British protectorate on the basis of the atrocities carried out by the anti-government forces. Now it demands its readers support whatever actions Britain takes in Zimbabwe on the basis of Mugabe’s election fraud.

In recent weeks, the *Guardian* has strenuously opposed the British government renewing its military intervention in Iraq, calling on Blair to “climb out of President Bush’s pocket”. But at all times its position is calculated on what it sees as best serving the interests of British imperialism, not those of the oppressed masses. It objects to Blair’s militarism only when he endangers the strategic interests of British business in the Middle East due to his desire to cultivate close relations with Washington. Then, and only then, does the tone of the *Guardian* shift to appeals for balanced judgments based on a consideration of the type of historical and political complexities it dismisses as irrelevant when determining policy in Zimbabwe. Africa, after all, is the traditional stomping ground of British imperialism. The *Guardian* clearly hopes it will be an arena in which Blair can establish a measure of independence from US foreign policy and secure Britain’s own place in a renewed struggle to carve up the world.

The depths to which it will stoop to achieve this end is encapsulated in the editorial’s summary statement of its diatribe, insisting that “today is the beginning of history.” In other words the *Guardian* wishes to wipe the historical slate clean and thus give British imperialism carte blanche for whatever combination of punitive economic sanctions, dirty tricks operations by the secret services and/or military interventions might be necessary in order to ensure that the Zimbabwean masses are once again ruled according to British diktat. That is the real impulse behind the newspaper’s howls of righteous indignation directed against the Mugabe regime.



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