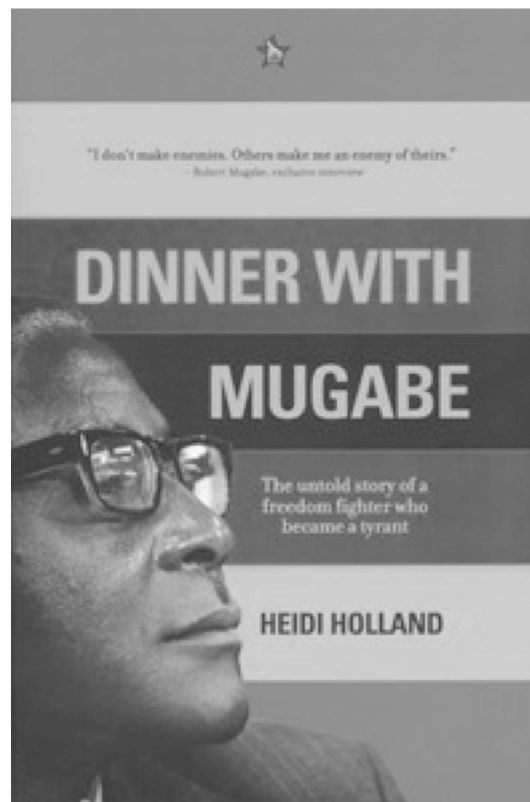
Review:
Heidi Holland’s *Dinner with Mugabe*

Sean Jacobs (University of Michigan)*

In 1957 Ghana became the first former European colony in Africa south of the Sahara to gain its political independence. Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s new Prime Minister, invited young Africans from countries still under colonial rule to move to Ghana and help built the new country. Among the new immigrants was a young schoolteacher from Rhodesia, Robert Mugabe. The young Mugabe quickly settled in Ghana. In 1960 during a visit home to see his mother, however, Mugabe was invited to join a march against the arrest of two nationalist leaders, in the Rhodesian capital Salisbury. Facing police, the marchers stopped to hold an impromptu political rally. Somehow Mugabe found himself hoisted onto the improvised stage alongside other leaders like Joshua Nkomo, who was heading the leading black opposition group, the National Democratic Party. Mugabe gave a rousing speech (“The nationalist movement will only succeed if it based on a blending of all classes of men”) and impressed nationalist leaders soon convinced him not to return to Ghana and instead become publicity secretary of the National Democratic Party that later morphed into the Zimbabwe African People’s Union or ZANU. Three years later Mugabe engineered a split within ZAPU to form the Zimbabwe African National Union. He would dominate that country’s politics from then on.



Nothing about Mugabe’s earlier life portended his swift rise, according to South African journalist, Heidi Holland, in her “psycho-biography,” *Dinner with Mugabe* (Penguin Group, 2008). Born in 1924, in Kutama, in the central part of the country, Mugabe was a shy, precocious child, prone to bullying by other boys. When Robert was ten years old, his father, Gabriel, a carpenter, moved away, started a second family and broke off all contact with Robert, his siblings and his mother. Mugabe’s mother clung devotedly to the Catholic Church and to Robert. She told him he was marked for greatness and sent him to Jesuits for an education (Mugabe is still a devoted Catholic). Mugabe would go to study in South Africa at Fort Hare University (the alma mater of Nelson Mandela and other regional nationalist leaders). On completing his studies, he started teaching and later made his way to Ghana.

The Rhodesia that Mugabe found on his return in 1960 was a tense, violent country, especially for its black population. Zimbabwe at the time was a former British colony governed by a small, tightly knit and mainly English-speaking, white settler population who had been granted “self-rule” by the British at the expense of the country’s black majority. Whites had first arrived in Zimbabwe in the nineteenth century as part of aggressive British colonial expansion north of South Africa in search of natural resources. The new arrivals, through a mixture of force and cunning, eventually dispossessed the locals of their land. In 1896 blacks rose up, in what would come to

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be known as the "First Chimurenga" or liberation war. Though they fought valiantly, they lost and colonization was formalized. By the 1950s, nearly 80% of the best agricultural land belonged to whites. Most blacks were condemned to life on rural reserves, burdened by heavy taxes that forced men to work on commercial farms and mines, or move for wage work to the ghettos of Salisbury or Rhodesia's second city, Bulawayo, in the west. The whites of Zimbabwe gradually developed a distinctive political identity and a reputation for unbending racism and prejudice.

In a 1960 speech in Cape Town, South Africa, the British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan told South Africa's white rulers that: "The wind of change is blowing through this continent, and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it." The South Africans rejected MacMillan's advice, digging in for another three decades of undemocratic rule. Five years later Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith announced a "Unilateral Declaration of Independence" from Britain vowing that blacks would never govern Rhodesia "in a thousand years."

By this point Mugabe's new movement, ZANU, had grown into the main opposition force largely because it exploited ethnic differences. ZANU was dominated by the majority Shona; Nkomo's ZAPU became associated with the minority Ndebele. In 1964, Mugabe was arrested. He would only be released from prison in 1974 following an agreement between the Rhodesian government and ZANU guerrillas, by now engaged in a full-scale civil war. While in prison, Mugabe's only son (only 3 years old at the time) passed away. Smith's government refused him permission to attend the buy's funeral. For Heidi Holland, the insensitivity of the Smith regime had a lasting effect on Mugabe.

Holland first met Mugabe in 1975 in Salisbury where she worked as magazine editor. She arranged for a lawyer friend to meet Mugabe secretly at her suburban home. Over dinner Mugabe said little, but impressed Holland nonetheless: Driving Mugabe to the train station after the meeting (his ride had failed to materialize), Holland left her small son asleep alone in the house. The next day, Mugabe called to check that the child was okay.

Over the next 30 years Holland had no further contact with Mugabe, who went on to lead a brutal guerrilla war with the Rhodesian state. This war eventually exhausted the Rhodesian state and the appetite of white Rhodesians for segregation at all costs. In the late 1970s, the Rhodesian regime—stripped of support from Britain and abandoned by South Africa's Apartheid rulers (and their backers in the US Republican Party)—initiated negotiations with the black opposition.

However, the war also bred elements of the political culture that independent Zimbabwe would later inherit: among these, the use of violence to settle political scores and to obliterate opponents, disregard for human rights, slavish reverence for authority, ideological rigidness, and corruption.

ZANU won a majority in the first democratic elections in 1980 and Mugabe was initially conciliatory to whites, guaranteeing seats for whites in the new Parliament (one went to Smith), and appointed a white man as agriculture minister (that man, Denis Norman, now living in the UK, and who does not blame Mugabe for everything that has gone wrong in Zimbabwe).

Barley two years into independence, Mugabe under the pretext of putting down a coup attempt by former guerrilla soldiers loyal to Nkomo (now opposition leader in Parliament), unleashed a murderous, North Korean-trained army special unit in the western Matabeleland province of the country (the ZAPU stronghold) indiscriminately killing civilians and guerrillas alike. In 1998, nearly a decade after this ethnic pogrom against the Ndebele, a report by Catholic Bishops Conference estimated the total number of murdered or disappeared at more than 20,000 people. Mugabe, though,

achieved his political aim: In 1987 Mugabe coerced a weak Nkomo into accepting a "Unity Accord," effectively swallowing ZAPU into the new ZANU-Patriotic Front. Not long after, Mugabe changed the Constitution to make himself executive president.

One of the legacies of that time and a testament of the power of the nationalist narrative that African independence leaders embodied, is that very few, and certainly not many of Mugabe's current Western critics, publicly objected to these murders or dared criticize him. Instead, during this time Mugabe received a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II (he still retains a fondness for the British royal family) and honorary degrees from a number of American universities. (The Knighthood and the degrees were only taken away earlier this year). On the home front, the Zimbabwean economy was growing steadily even in the hostile shadow of Apartheid South Africa and its people were experienced improvements in their lives (especially improved access to education and health services). As Lord Carrington, British foreign secretary during the independence negotiations told Holland in her book: "But other than the killing of the Ndebele, it went tolerably well under Mugabe at first, didn't it? He wasn't running a fascist state. He didn't appear to be a bad dictator."

In 1995, street riots erupted in the capital, now Harare, against rising prices and unemployment. A mineworker, Morgan Tsvangirai, who would later emerge as Mugabe's most formidable opponent, led the newly formed Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions. Academics, human rights activists, and lawyers would later join the trade unions. Their main political focus, alongside protesting economic hardship, would increasingly revolve around reforms to the country's Constitution. In 1999, these groups would form the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). Mugabe called their bluff and announced a referendum for 2000 to push through constitutional changes that would increase his powers and extend his tenure as President. Much to his surprise, Mugabe lost the referendum. He, and his party ZANU-PF, was clearly stung by the result.

With parliamentary elections looming and an opposition buoyed the referendum result, Mugabe and ZANU-PF embarked on a new strategy: They unleashed what Mugabe termed the "Third Chimurenga" (the guerrilla war was the "Second Chimurenga"). This involved focusing on "land redistribution," an obvious grievance. The British were blamed for abandoning promises to fund the state's acquisition of private, commercial farms to redistribute to black farmers. Whites, who still owned much of productive land and who had reluctantly come around to accept independence, also provided easy targets.

Squatters, egged on by the police and identified as "war veterans" (among them were 18 year olds who could not have fought in the guerrilla war that ended before they were born), soon invaded white-owned farms. But it soon became clear that redistribution was in the eye of the beholder: the best farms were parceled out among Mugabe's Cabinet ministers and senior army officers.

A few whites were brutally attacked and their plight predictably became front-page news in the West. In the British Parliament, members spoke once again of "the people of Rhodesia." Peter Godwin, a white journalist born in Zimbabwe, claimed that being white in post-independence Zimbabwe was "starting to feel a bit like being a Jew in Poland in 1939." What took a while to figure out was that the bulk of Mugabe's victims were black: murdered, tortured, or imprisoned. Journalists were harassed journalists, newspaper offices closed or bombed and people were starved or denied food if they failed to join ZANU. Once again, as it did under colonial and Rhodesian rule, the bulk of the victims of the Zimbabwean government's violence were black.

In 2000 ZANU-PF narrowly won parliamentary elections marred by fraud and violence. Not surprisingly Mugabe was re-elected to another six year term in an election also condemned as deeply flawed by both Zimbabwean and foreign observers.

Since then Zimbabwe's economy has crashed—there is large-scale poverty and its currency essentially worthless. Thousands have fled to neighboring South Africa (where, incidentally, the country's president, Thabo Mbeki, remains a loyal ally to Mugabe, but Mbeki's party as well as South Africa's trade union movement have backed the Zimbabwean opposition). During this period, Mugabe and his closest aids became more delusional and their government took on a siege mentality. Heidi Holland's account of Mugabe's political career is bookended with an account of her second meeting at the end of 2007 with Mugabe in his government office. She describes a banner in his office that proclaimed "Mugabe is Right" and hearing his insistence that Zimbabwe's economy is "hundred times better than the average African economy" and predicted that within two years the economy, particularly the agricultural sector, would recover.

On March 29 of this year, Zimbabweans went to the polls again in presidential elections. When two other candidates announced they would run for president (including Mugabe's former finance minister Simba Makoni), many observers felt the opposition vote would be split and Mugabe would emerge an easy victor. The opposition had also been subjected to intimidation and violence by ZANU para-militaries and its candidate Morgan Tsvangirai had been viciously assaulted by police. However, as the first results started trickling in late election night, however, it appeared Morgan Tsvangirai held a clear lead (the MDC had recorded results as they were posted outside polling stations). The next day the electoral commission, stuffed with government sympathizers, announced that it would delay the results. A month later, and following announcements from the army and police that it would refuse to serve an MDC government, a final result was announced: Tsvangirai had won, but not by enough. So an unprecedented second round was scheduled for three month later, and police and army intimidation and attacks on opposition candidates and supporters stepped up. Days before the rerun election, however, Tsvangirai—citing high levels of violence and intimidation—called off his participation, guaranteeing Mugabe a hollow victory. But Southern African governments, belatedly stepped in, forcing Mugabe to meet with Tsvangirai. For at least a month now, negotiators have been working to thrash out the details of a unity government. The best scenario under the circumstances is for Mugabe to retain a ceremonial presidential post and Tsvangirai as prime minister with a fair representation of MDC leaders in key Cabinet posts. But who occupies State House is not only the issue to resolve.

But larger questions remain about Mugabe's legacy for Zimbabwe's future. Why is he so is interesting? Mugabe turned the security and civil services into affiliates of the ruling party, rigged elections, encouraged paramilitaries and stifled public debate. Under the cover of "Third Worldism" he also mocked real political grievances—as varied as land hunger and unequal global relations—to forward his own selfish, violent agenda. In the West, he became an example of a supposed black, specifically African, political pathology. But those critics would have to come to terms with his regime is not an aberration as Holland suggests: it is byproduct of Zimbabwe's violent colonial and white minority pasts and of the duplicity of the post-Cold War world. Finally, Zimbabwe also points to the fact that nationalism as a political ideology is fundamentally flawed even though its struggles brought about political independence. Can the MDC and Tsvangirai break the cycle? The MDC clearly presents a rupture with the predatory regimes of Smith and Mugabe and it bodes well that the MDC was forged as a post-independent, non-violent political movement. But it remains to be seen whether it can forge its own path between neo-liberalism (which is the path its boosters in the West wants for it) and appeals for more substantive democracy, including addressing the land question, from its constituents inside Zimbabwe. But first there's the small matter of consigning Mugabe to history.