

## EFFECTS OF THE STATE'S LONG HAND ON STRUGGLE STORIES IN RURAL AREAS

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### ABSTRACT

*Civilians in Zimbabwe's rural areas suffered the wrath of the war more than other groups as rival combatants descended on them each exerting force. Their experience of wartime violence, coercion and repression has taught them to be less willing to share sensitive war time stories with anyone who is a stranger to their network. More often, they are prepared to say a lot in praise of guerrilla movements and the ZANU-PF party, but not much against it. Others are not even prepared to share any wartime stories out of fear that they might be sniffed out by the ears and eyes of the state. This is particularly so to blacks who fought the war on the side of the minority white regime. Their fears go a long way in highlighting that the reconciliation process did not extend to the grassroots and neither was the state fully committed to grassroots reconciliation. The lack of preparedness on the part of communities in rural areas to freely discuss their wartime experiences is an indication of the real or imagined power of the postcolonial state in Zimbabwe. The paper relies on information from Hurungwe district where nationalist guerrillas of the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) fought the liberation war between 1972 and 1980. These guerrillas were presented in Rhodesian propaganda as Ndebele invader out to re-colonise the Shona of Hurungwe because most of these guerrillas came from southern parts of the country which made them fluent in Ndebele. Prior to colonization, the Shona were in theory under Ndebele rule but in practice, only 30% were indeed dominated by them. This paper suggests various mechanisms which could be employed in order to extract as much information as possible from rural informants. It also brings to light other challenges associated with the study of Zimbabwe's liberation war which are independent of the state's long arm.*

**Key Words:** reconciliation, rural communities, Zimbabwe, liberation war.

### Introduction

From our interviews of rural communities in the 2 districts, it became clear that their experience of a violent liberation of the 1970s left a legacy of anxiety, fear and uncertainty pertaining to when the war might strike again and which victims it might claim. Such fears are exacerbated by election time threats by various candidates and their supporters of returning to the bush war if election results bring to power a candidate they dislike. Fears exhibited by some of our potential informants in giving us an ear and worse still, in being tape-recorded prompted us into finding more about the causes of that. Most of the fear was shown by those who were combatants on the side of the minority regime or any accused of selling out during the war. We therefore, set out to

investigate why those who supported the nationalist parties spoke freely about their experiences as opposed to supporters and combatants of the moderate nationalist Bishop Muzorewa, or former members of the Rhodesian Security Forces.

In light of the above, we found it necessary to re-visit the concept of oral history with the intention of establishing challenges associated with using it to uncover Zimbabwe's history in the last quarter of the millennium. The paper therefore looks at the problems of researching a politically sensitive topic such as Zimbabwe's war of liberation through the use of oral interviews as per our findings in Hurungwe district. The district under study experienced unprecedented levels of violence as Rhodesian

security forces and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) fought for military and political control. The Rhodesian Security Forces (RSFs) were assisted by a locally recruited militia, the Security Force Auxiliaries (SFAs) which was loyal to Muzorewa. As from mid-1979, a few parts of Hurungwe underwent even more violence as the peasants further switched their loyalty from ZIPRA to the few but politically effective combatants of the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), loyal to Robert Mugabe. Hurungwe did not produce many guerrillas because potential recruits faced the daunting task of crossing the Zambezi valley and river which were Rhodesians' first line of defense. ZIPRA guerrillas who fought in this area mainly came from the Midlands and Matebeleland provinces having found their way to Zambia via Botswana. Whatever memories of the liberation war is to be found in the mental faculties of former members of the SFAs, the Rhodesian security forces and those they interacted with during the liberation war. Such a history depends on how much of the war they still recall, and of that, their willingness to share with academics most of that. That way, it is hoped the nation of Zimbabwe can have a balanced history instead of having to listen and read only the victor's version.

### Defining Oral History

According to Tosh, oral history refers to first hand recollections of people interviewed by a historian.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, firsthand accounts of those who experienced the war of liberation falls in this category, but not that which was passed down to them by word of mouth from generation to generation. These are different from verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past better known as oral traditions.<sup>2</sup> In this study, we were not eliciting for reported statements, but personal experiences of this war by those who were grown up and resident in the district then. Therefore, the focus is to find out the extent to which people are prepared to share what they went through and to also locate the reasons for others to be less willing to accommodate historians. Oral history is that

<sup>1</sup> J Tosh with S Lang, *The Pursuit of History* (Edinburgh, Pearson Education Limited, 2006), 310.

<sup>2</sup> J Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2009), 19

statement by people about things of their own lifetimes.<sup>3</sup> Trying to get oral testimonies about the war from these people was very important because none of them has thought in terms of living behind private papers on the liberation war. Worse, others cannot write at all, yet these people know a lot about the badly sought after history required by the 21<sup>st</sup> century crop of historians. For a long time, such people we reached were not a subject of contemporary observation or enquiry and hardly thought they would have anything to do with the history of the nation. There is a real danger that participants and observers to the liberation war might pass on before attempts are made to record what they went through. We ventured into this study so as to enable the voice of ordinary people to be heard. Ultimately, such a project would afford ordinary citizens a critical role in the production of historical knowledge.

### Oral History and Zimbabwe's Second War of Liberation

Zimbabwe's Second War of liberation has been extensively researched on but largely from a victor's point of view. We cannot say that it was the responsibility of ZANU-PF and by extension the post colonial government to write or to collect the history of the liberation war on behalf of those who fought for the minority regime. The major problem with immediate post independence celebratory mood was to completely forget to interview the defeated so as to come up with a balanced picture of the war. Like politicians, historians of the day believed that interviewing the defeated was divisive in a country that badly needed unity as a starting point to reconstruction. Therefore, early historians, until the publication by Kriger in 1992 eluded the question of divisions in the liberation war. By advancing that peasants were coerced by guerrillas to support the liberation war, Kriger was referred to as a 'white South African reactionary, a sellout who had betrayed the revolution.'<sup>4</sup> Her problem was that she had failed to present accounts like those by Ranger, Martin and Johnson which purported the liberation war to be a heroic resistance in a sanitized form

<sup>3</sup> D N Beach, *A Zimbabwean Past* (Gweru, Mambo Press, 1995), 20

<sup>4</sup> S Robins, 'Heroes, Heretics and Historians of the Zimbabwe Revolution: A Review of Norma Kriger's Peasant Voices', in *ZAMBEZIA*, xviii (1), 1996, 77

which eluded reference to the killings of witches and 'sellouts'.<sup>5</sup> Such historians who came up with this celebratory history found no time to interview the defeated. Thus, in their 1981 publication, for example, Martin and Johnson relied heavily on interviewing ZANU-PF leading figures such as Emmerson Mnangagwa, Simbi Mubako, Josiah Tongogara, Chauke, Kadungure, Mayor Urimbo, Rex Nhongo and so on.<sup>6</sup> That spirit which led to the use of entirely ZANU-PF informants had the blessing of the then Prime Minister, Robert Mugabe who wrote in the Forward of the book that:

*In writing the history of our struggle, the authors are compelled by historical reality to trace the revolutionary process through ZANU's history. This is unavoidable because the armed pace of the revolution was set by ZANU and ZANLA, while credit must be given where it is merited to ZAPU and ZIPRA for their complimentary role. To record these true facts is not bias but objectivity.*<sup>7</sup>

Guided by that spirit, researchers of the day completely ignored alleged collaborators with the minority regime. Even Ranger fell into this trap as shown by his 1985 publication on the peasants of Makoni District.<sup>8</sup> The 1980s from our interviews saw many such collaborators hibernating sometimes in Zimbabwe's towns and not willing to be identified as those who had sold out. At least by now, a reasonable number was found to have returned to their peasant life in the rural areas. Enough time has lapsed for them to speak freely but, in some cases, the researchers still found a pathetic situation in which potential informants refused to speak.

On the side of Rhodesian white security forces, a lot of oral testimonies have been collected largely by white researchers. Others have also written their wartime experiences in the bush war. Such writers

<sup>5</sup> S J Gatsheni Ndlovu, *Do Zimbabweans Exist? Trajectories of Nationalism, National Identity Formation and Crisis in a Postcolonial State* (Oxford, Peter Lang, 2009), 8.

<sup>6</sup> D Martin and P Johnson, *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: The Chimurenga War* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1981)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, v

<sup>8</sup> T O Ranger, *Peasant Consciousness and Guerrilla Warfare* (Harare, Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1985)

include Stiff, Cauter, Ellert, Parker, Onslow and Berry.<sup>9</sup> Largely, these researchers wrote about the Second War of liberation as understood by people of the white race. We, therefore, disagree with the assertion by Onslow and Berry that interviews which they conducted in England were meant to construct the 'hidden voice of the black Rhodesian participants through former white ex-servicemen'<sup>10</sup> because none of the cited works interviewed perception blacks. It is impossible for white interviewees to represent the views of African since their belonging to different classes and races compelled them to see the history of the liberation war differently. For that white and black perceptions of the liberation war once more diverge for the later was to a larger extent a beneficiary of the land reform which started in 2000 while the former was a victim.

Above all, people of the white race had every justification to fight in defense of a country they had taken by the use of force. The complexities of interviewing former collaborators with the minority regime lies not only lie with fear of the state but, partly with the failure to justify joining that war in the first place. Hote, a black Kenyan who fought for the British in Burma before joining the struggle to liberate his own, was convinced that there was no justification in helping the British. A British soldier had explained to him saying:

*Look, I am fighting for England, to preserve my country, my culture, all those things which we Englishmen have built ---- it's really my 'national independence' that I am fighting to preserve.... Does it seem right to you that you should be fighting for the same things as I.... But I can't see why you*

<sup>9</sup> P Stiff, *Selous Scouts: Top Secret War*, (Alberton, Galago Publishing, 1983); D Cauter, *Under the Skin: The Death of White Rhodesia*, (London, Northwest University, 1983); H Ellert, *Rhodesian Front War: Counterinsurgency and Guerrilla Warfare, 1962-1980*; J Parker, *Assignment Selous Scout: Inside the History of a Rhodesian Special Branch Officer* (Alberton, Galago Publications, 2006), and S Onslow and A Berry, 'Why did you Fight? Narratives of Rhodesian Identity During the Insurgency 1972-1980: A History Project by the Arts and Humanities Research Council carried out by the University of the West of England, Bristol, October 2010.

<sup>10</sup> S Onslow and A Berry, 'Why did you Fight? *Ibid*, 4

*Africans should fight to preserve the empire instead of fighting to liberate yourselves.<sup>11</sup>*

He was similarly quizzed over the same issue by a black South American and last, an Indian family. Since he had fought for a noble cause and given an influential government post at independence, he had every reason to share his experiences freely. The same applies generally to all successful revolutionary movements. For these and other reasons we share the problems associated with recording history from quarters previously silenced by the state through its monopoly over violence and propaganda.

### **Effects of the State's Long Hand on Oral Testimonies in Hurungwe District**

Challenges which we encountered in many parts of Hurungwe included being discouraged from visiting some supposedly active members of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and going through a long chain of command before finally being allowed access to the interviewee. Some potential informants could not be drawn into speaking while two men separately chose to speak as they were accompanying us meaning that after the 'official' interview, the real one would begin. Out of our interviewees, none was critical of ZANU-PF during Focus Group Discussions as opposed to the MDC. When interviewed privately, others became critical of ZIPRA's conduct of the war and their negative encounter with independence. In the area of Mudzimu, former members of the SFAs came in large numbers to be interviewed individually. Despite repeatedly informing them that the research was entirely academic, they were quite convinced that by making a statement, the 'government' which seemed to have forgotten them, might process their wartime gratuities. They also revealed that it was the first time they had been offered a chance to speak to historians. In all our visits, we were greatly assisted by local guides who gave our interviewees confidence that sharing their liberation war stories was harmless.

When we went to Chundu, our mission was to undertake research on dimensions of selling out during the liberation war. We first reported our presence to the secondary school headmaster who was known to one of us from our days as teachers. As

if to give us maximum protection, he recommended that we see the ZANU-PF youth leader as demanded by the 'protocol' in order that our presence may be 'blessed' in case we might be mistaken for spies. When we eventually talked to the youth leader, he told us of the various workshops and training he had undergone with his party so as to enable him to monitor and report on political activities in his area. Therefore, he pointed to us that our coming to him was good and he was convinced that our presence would not threaten the peace and stability enjoyed by the people of Chundu. To start the collection of oral testimonies, he took us to his mother who spoke at length on how she had suffered during the liberation war. She described the ZIPRA war effort as justified because whites were intimidating them and blocking them from growing tobacco. She even boasted about how she was now making money through the golden leaf.<sup>12</sup> Whatever Mrs Kapuya presented, she made an effort to consistently prove that she has remained a loyal member of ZANU-PF. Her fears appeared to be that she might be mistaken for a member of the MDC. This, she did not want because she had served ZANU-PF loyally as evidenced by the position which her son now holds.

Dread, Mrs Kapuya's son, helped us to organize a Focus Group Discussion made up of those in their late 40s and above. We deliberately chose those who had been resident in any part of Hurungwe as long as they had oral testimonies on the war of liberation. Although Dread did not participate in the discussion itself, the fact that he had accompanied us made our oral informants uneasy. Apparently, there were even suspicions that we could be sellouts. This is in spite of the fact that our research looked innocent. Therefore, the discussion took an official stance with no one indicating that at times guerrillas killed civilians who were not guilty. From this discussion, we concluded that when it comes to politically sensitive issues, Focus Group Discussions are not effective. One of the problems was that there was one man who was trying to ensure that everyone took a line which was not critical of ZANU-PF. All interviewees talked of immense contributions they made during the war but complained that the political leadership had forgotten them. It is against such reservations that we proposed the use of the anthropological approach to history where spending

<sup>11</sup> W Hote (General China), *'Mau Mau' General*, (Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1967), 9

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Mrs Kapuya, Mocho Village, 19 May 2011.

more time with the civilians or any potential informants would unlock their misgivings and open up without fear of victimization.

Despite the existence of the Government of National Unity in Zimbabwe, there still persists a strong belief by supporters of ZANU-PF even though they might be highly educated, that it is only their party which is in power and therefore has the right to a 'true' story of the liberation. It was in this spirit that the secondary school head discouraged us from visiting a retired prison officer because he is a known member of the MDC. This is regardless of the former officer having stayed in Hurungwe for the entirety of the war. Therefore, the researcher into the oral history of Zimbabwe's liberation has to worry about the 'correct' people to talk to, a situation which, in the end, might produce a lopsided version of history. Those judged to be capable of recounting the war of liberation are not necessarily knowledgeable but politically 'correct'. Supporters of the MDC, therefore, are unfit to recount the war because their political affiliation now might compel them to criticize not only guerrillas, but also the political leadership of ZANU-PF. When we made a private decision to see the retired prison officer, he refused to say anything about his own experience of the violent liberation war. Surprisingly, he was free to talk of any other social issue but not 'politics'. This went a long way in explaining the success of the state in regulating what people might say to 'strangers'. The fear to speak emanates from the risk of being heard by spies. The retired officer could have been fearful about being heard criticizing the ruling party in Zimbabwe. He enjoyed the other advantage of the presence of his uncle who had witnessed him saying nothing 'political'. The uncle too refused to make a comment on his encounters in the liberation war.

One other component of challenges associated with collecting history of the liberation war lies in the fact that informants sometimes do not trust their immediate family members including their children. Such a line of thinking lies in the fact that sometimes guerrillas asked children or threatened wives with unspecified action so as to extract politically sensitive information about the parent. Three of our interviewees who had developed trust in us only divulged sensitive information when accompanying us as we left their home- a sign that they do not trust even their closest relatives. Such fears are not totally unfounded. In apartheid South Africa, discussing politics even among close friends became a high risk

activity. Informers were everywhere. Police had intelligence of all people going into exile, their families and political prisoners released from prison. Police informers were just everywhere.<sup>13</sup> That suspicion of a spy somewhere even in the home is not entirely a product of the war itself, but of the postcolonial violent political environment especially after the year 2000. Former Rhodesian black ex-servicemen know very well that the intelligence of Zimbabwe has records of their role during the country's war of liberation. Therefore, they are not at liberty to divulge sensitive incidences when for example they killed or captured guerrillas or their supporters during the war in the presence of their children. There is fear that their children might view them as evil. After all, they harbor a sense of guilty for having supported the minority regimes and are at the same time grateful to the government for extending a hand of reconciliation to them at independence. Their indifference to the government which was 'sincere' to them can only be effectively stated in private oral testimonies and to trusted visitors like us. They fear that failure to do so might lead the state to remind them of their tainted history. Their current commitment to ZANU-PF today can therefore be understood as compensatory to their wartime roles.

Election time violence as from 2000 has taught some former members of the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) to refuse talking to strangers. RAR was Ian Smith's entirely black regiment which usually confronted guerrillas deep in the rural areas. We tried to interview one such former member at Mlambo's village. He openly indicated that he had evidence of punishments which befell those who talked too much against ZANU-PF both during the war and afterwards. We failed to prove beyond doubt that we were not state agents out to sniff out possible MDC supporters who were compromising the hold of ZANU-PF in the constituencies of Hurungwe District. Despite having been led to him by his uncle, Madzura, who was himself a ZIPRA guerrilla in the war and a member of the Zimbabwe National Army until 1997, we could not get Mlambo to speak about the war. From what we later gathered, ZANU-PF vigilant committees had asked anyone who fought the bush war to present a comprehensive write-up of

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<sup>13</sup> K Tafara, *Who is and What are the Dimensions of a Sell-out*, (University of Witwatersrand, Department of Anthropology, 2011), 21.

their experiences. Just like his colleagues, they were being 'watched' in case they reverted to their old tendencies. On the other hand, Mlambo's mother spoke freely concerning her service to the nation during the liberation war alongside her daughters who included Mrs Madzura. She identified many sellouts during the war and gave chilling accounts not only of how they had sold out, but how they had been ruthlessly punished by guerrillas. That she was so free to speak emanated from the fact that for the last four years of the liberation war, her home was the main base for ZIPRA guerrillas. She is often singled out at ZANU-PF rallies and praised for her contribution during the war. In light of the above, she not only felt respected in being given a chance to chronicle what she went through, but also believed that unlike others who had sold out, she was the right person to give such oral testimonies since her history is clean. Our attempts at getting the oral testimonies of former black Rhodesians were compromised by their unwillingness to speak.

In the Mudzimu area of Hurungwe, we started by interviewing one Mr Gogo who migrated from Masvingo to Hurungwe in the late 1960s. He now serves as a kraal-head, a critical position which he can use to rally people behind ZANU-PF or otherwise. The party, the headman and the chief can threaten his position if he becomes rebellious by supporting MDC. He is also in the district party structures and during the June 2008 election, he was given an army uniform in order to 'remind' people that war was imminent should elections go against the wishes of ZANU-PF. Therefore, his memories of the war had nothing outside personal commitment to national liberation. Gogo, however, spent the last two years of the war as a member of Muzorewa's Security Force Auxiliaries in Mt Darwin. He claims that he was forcibly abducted and compelled to train and serve the militia. The story of being forced to join the SFAs was common among our informants. We, nonetheless, took it to mean that our informants wanted us to know that they had not been supporters of the minority regime and, therefore, they have never been enemies of black independence. Thus, Gogo could not be drawn in to giving details about his military service. He revealed this part to us because one of the researchers' brothers who is known to him. That failure to shed more light about his service in the SFA is worrisome because it leaves historians with half the story of the liberation. There is need by politicians to instill confidence in all who

participated in the war both positively and negatively to come forward and give oral testimonies.

Our investigations revealed that SFAs have been totally excluded as a people with a history worth telling. When we went to Chitiki area, we found them more than willing to speak. Of the fifteen we met, more than 75% were very grateful for being offered a chance to share their struggle stories. They were bitter that the post independence government had not rewarded them yet they had rescued civilians from ZIPRA guerrillas' excesses. On the other hand, they wanted us to take their struggle stories to the 'government' so that it could start looking into the possibility of compensating them. While historians were collecting struggle stories, informants in this particular case were also advancing their own story against the state using the tool of oral history. One of them a Mr Nyamande argued that, allegations against him for selling out during the liberation war were misplaced because he was compelled to join the SFA by the death of his father at the hands of ZIPRA guerrillas. He complained that despite having looked after them, his father died because one of his sons was now a member of the Rhodesian Security Forces. Nyamande joined the SFA because guerrillas intended to have him killed. That kind of local testimony is crucial to the deconstruction of a celebratory history to a new version which caters for all types of participants.

Evasiveness also punctuated one of the informants' attitudes towards researchers. This goes back to 2007 when one of the researchers, tracked a former ZIPRA guerrilla and commander who had fought in Hurungwe and Gokwe districts during the last five years of Zimbabwe's liberation war. The researcher had been given information about him by a former ZANLA guerrilla, Mutandwa Uchadei. However, the war veteran could not say anything until Mutandwa phoned to confirm that the researcher was just but a simple university lecturer known to him for many years. In the first interview session, he described how his military training in Zambia and Angola, his deployment to Hurungwe and later Gokwe, how he was injured during the war, his return to Zambia and the comeback after the war. These are very simple matters which any war veteran especially from the victorious side is free to share even with a stranger. Two days later, he began to divulge the history which makes him regret why he ever fought in this war. At independence, he had joined the Zimbabwe National Army but was soon frustrated. His worst woes came

with the sacking of Joshua Nkomo from the cabinet in 1982 and the beginning of the dissident menace. He described how, on coming for leave, at his parents' home in Chinhoyi, rivals in the location had phoned the police to report the presence of a 'dissident', and how violently he had been bundled by the police and thoroughly beaten then released some days later without any charge being leveled against him. On returning home, he found that his parents' only house had had all windows broken. His parents were being punished in that way for having given birth to a 'dissident'. From then, he was persecuted both at work and home until he was finally dismissed from the army in 1984. Whenever on leave, he had to report to the police weekly as a sign that he had not joined dissidents. When we asked why he was initially refusing to speak, he explained that even though it was then many years after the Unity Accord, he still felt worthless. His colleagues from the war were doing nothing to help him and the ZANU-PF war veterans held him with suspicion. Whenever there were political disturbances, he was monitored to ensure that he did not influence the goings on. This is unlike ZANU-PF who normally bubble with confidence.

The other sure sign of evasiveness was by Mr Chigara who was already a parent resident in Hurungwe in the war. He agreed to see us the following day in the afternoon. We also asked him if he wanted to be tape-recorded to which he agreed. At the agreed time the following day, we got back to him. His wife told us that he was having a bath in the 'change house' (bathroom). We waited for about one and a half hours but he could not come out of the bathroom until we left. When we enquired about this scenario from one of the Chakawa brothers, we were told that what he is most afraid of is discussing politically-related issues owing to his traumatic experiences of the war and the fear that his tormentors may come back for him. For us it became apparent that the hand of reconciliation from above did not trickle down to the ordinary villagers. He was not sure what the researchers were going to do with the information. He pointed that such historical information might be used to bring violence against him. This was evidence that the state's culture of violence is a threat to people's memories of the liberation war.

## **Conclusion**

The paper has shown a lot of problems associated with collecting struggle stories of the liberation war. Those who are aligned to ZANU-PF speak freely in praise of their party but usually exaggerate their experiences. This is so because their oral testimonies are in support of those in power hence less likely to lead to an onslaught by the state. On the other hand, those who at any one time worked against ZANU-PF are very cautious in what they say concerning their struggle stories. Therefore, any researcher collecting oral history of the liberation war has to be aware of these problems not necessarily because ZANU-PF is bad but because it has a legacy which is strongly established. Politically sensitive topics such as the liberation war cannot be carried out without the help of some ZANU PF leaders even if some of them have been perpetrators of violence both during and after the liberation war. The success of collecting oral testimonies is defined by political stability at the time of research. If we were out to find out more about political violence as from 2000, it could have been a very serious challenge if many quarters are still not free to discuss a war which ended 31 years ago. Therefore, the state itself has a critical role of creating an environment which enables people to share their memories of the liberation war with researchers.

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