

Reverberations of Rhodesian Propaganda in Narratives of Zimbabwe's Liberation War

by

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Abstract

Some insinuations which have become part of the historiography of Zimbabwe's liberation war are reverberations of the propaganda of the colonial government. This study examines such intimations that have been products of Rhodesian propaganda. It challenges the convictions that liberation fighters executed innocent people, that the guerrilla fighters avoided set battles against the Rhodesian security forces because of cowardice and also that the nationalist guerrilla fighters committed wanton atrocities against the civilian population. These convictions have been products of propaganda peddled by the settler government of Rhodesia. The propaganda became pervasive to the point that it has permeated the different versions of Zimbabwe's decolonization process. The material used here was collected when the author was doing fieldwork for his doctoral study between September 2008 and August 2009. This material was sourced from interviews held with Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) ex-guerrilla fighters who during the war operated in different war zones in the then Rhodesia. Interviews were also held with villagers from part of Masvingo District (which is in Zimbabwe) in Chiefs Charumbira, Mugabe, Shumba, Murinye and Nyajena areas. During the same period the author collected data from ZANLA field reports housed at the Zimbabwe African National Union/Patriotic Front Headquarters in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe.

Key words: propaganda, ZANLA guerrilla fighters, Rhodesian security forces, Selous Scouts, sellouts

Introduction

The documentation and study of the Zimbabwean war of independence have been enormously extensive.¹ This has included doctoral studies, general texts and autobiographies of members of the Rhodesian army units. In spite of all this documentation and study, many issues concerning the war have remained contentious. The majority of this war literature has drawn from the massive and pervasive propaganda that was deployed by the Rhodesian government during the war. The result has been distortions and misrepresentations of happenings that took place then. This article argues that the distortions and misrepresentations have found their way into narratives of the Zimbabwean war of liberation.

The massive propaganda system marshalled by the Rhodesian government became very insidious.² In an attempt to alienate the freedom fighters the colonial government painted a very black picture of the liberation fighters. The Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) constituted the liberation forces. This paper focuses on the ZANLA forces. The liberation fighters were, through the print media and radio, blamed by the Rhodesian authorities for killing innocent people when they murdered those civilians they adjudged to be traitors or sellouts and were referred to as *vatenges* in Shona parlance. The majority of peasants who reported guerrilla activities to the Rhodesian security forces and were viewed as traitors faced the wrath of the liberation fighters. Rhodesian propaganda asserted that the villagers who were murdered by ZANLA forces for being sellouts (one who betrays a cause for personal advancement) were innocent.

Rhodesian propaganda also peddled that the ZANLA forces were spineless and avoided direct confrontation with the Rhodesian security forces. It was intimated that the nationalist guerrilla fighters were bent on terrorising civilians rather than face the colonial forces in battle. Following from this, it has been asserted that the liberation forces never won a single battle against the Rhodesian security forces.³

There were many atrocities committed during Zimbabwe's war of independence for which the liberation fighters were fingered and it was the work of Rhodesian propaganda that apportioned the guilty tag on the ZANLA forces. These atrocities included the murder of white missionaries, rural businessmen and the cutting off of limbs of civilians in the rural areas. These atrocities were reported in the government newspapers like *The Rhodesian Herald*, the *Bulawayo Chronicle*, the *Sunday Mail* and the *African Times* as well as in war communiqués and news on the radio. Narratives of Zimbabwe's liberation war which have drawn from these sources are now awash with this information which is perhaps a misrepresentation of what really took place. This paper challenges these insinuations and demonstrates that their currency resulted from Rhodesian wartime propaganda.

Liberation Fighters Killed Innocent Civilians

During the war Rhodesian propaganda was spread through newspapers, pamphlets, flyers, posters, booklets and the Rhodesian Broadcasting Corporation (RBC). Drawing from this Rhodesian propaganda, literature of the war written by especially ex-Rhodesian operatives emphasises that the ZANLA guerrilla fighters murdered innocent villagers who were reported out of jealous by their neighbors to be *vatengesi*. It should be noted that the guerrilla fighters warned members of the rural population against thwarting their efforts of fighting for independence by exposing them to the Rhodesian security forces. The guerrilla fighters felt justified to warn the rural populace against informing the Rhodesian security forces about their activities. They required the co-operation of the rural people because they were fighting to free themselves and the rural populace from colonial injustices. It should be noted that contrary to intimations of colonial propaganda the guerrilla fighters verified the allegations levelled against the so-called sell outs because they feared to needlessly kill when there was no wrong doing. The rural population provided them not only with food but with information that guaranteed them survival in the war. It was necessary to avoid alienating their benefactors. Reports that appeared in newspapers and on the radio that the peasants who were accused by the ZANLA fighters of being sell outs (*vatengesi*) were innocent were not backed by evidence and seemed to be baseless. These were the rumblings of Rhodesian propaganda. Rhodesian propaganda offers no evidence to show that these people were innocent. Sell outs would not come out in the open and obviously carried out their traitorous activities overtly. It is important to point out that the ZANLA forces where obliged to engage in a process of verifying whether one had given out information to the Rhodesian soldiers Members of the rural population were not simply labelled traitors and then the ZANLA forces went on to execute them. Due process of authentication had to take place. This process involved some semblance of 'court sessions' where it had to be proved beyond doubt that someone had sold out information to the Rhodesian authorities or security forces. These were what were referred to as wartime kangaroo courts in publications by ex-Rhodesian soldiers. The liberation fighters were awake to the fact that the villagers might use them to settle their own scores.⁴ This might not have totally ruled out the possibility that some innocent persons were killed when they were not sell outs but such occurrences were minimized.

The Rhodesian Ministry of Information, Immigration and Tourism disseminated propaganda in a booklet *Anatomy of Terror* which catalogued the several incidents that African peasants in the rural areas were allegedly murdered by the ZANLA fighters. The documentation was titled 'A chronological sequence of terror' which listed alleged terrorist atrocities on a day to day basis. In this same booklet grisly pictures of villagers who were victims of ZANLA's alleged terror activities are shown. For example in Centenary on 28 March 1974 it was recorded that terrorists raped three women, burnt huts and shot and bayoneted a tribesman.⁵ If there were such guerrilla atrocities this would have pointed to a degenerate liberation army that would never have wanted to foster amicable relations with the rural population. In the booklet, *Anatomy of Terror*, the impression that was given was that ZANLA guerrilla fighters killed sell outs by shooting them using guns.

This was adopted by Parker, writing in 2006, who stressed that several bullets were pumped into all those people that the ZANLA forces killed for being someone who would betray the goal of liberation for personal advancement.⁶ Oral testimonies of former guerrilla fighters and villagers have emphasised that the liberation fighters avoided shooting at those people they had to kill. They did not want to waste bullets and again shooting was likely to dangerously lead to the inadvertent revelation of the guerrilla fighters' whereabouts to the Rhodesian soldiers.⁷ The guerrillas used other means of killing which were 'silent' such as thorough beatings using logs or covering someone in a smoldering plastic paper and sometimes bayoneting to death.

The ZANLA forces avoided misdemeanors such as sexual abuse of the rural women. This would have alienated them from the rural populace who provided them with food, clothing and information about Rhodesian security forces. Oral accounts of the war by some villagers do not indicate the sexual abuse of women by the liberation fighters as a frequent occurrence.⁸ The grisly pictures of villagers who were allegedly killed by ZANLA fighters were meant to drive people away from supporting the liberation fighters. These pictures were shown in newspapers like the *African Times* which was freely distributed in the rural areas. There were also flyers and posters with the horrifying pictures that were also distributed in the countryside. The pictures were so horrifying that they seemed not to be real.

The Rhodesian Selous Scouts, a pseudo-guerrilla unit was constituted to meet the intelligence-gathering deficiency of the Rhodesian security forces.⁹ Its major task among others was to commit atrocities which would be blamed on the ZANLA fighters. The nature of injuries that was committed on African civilians was meant to serve as propaganda. Cutting off of lips, jaws, ears and goring out eyes were some of the atrocities that visited members of the rural populace.¹⁰ The media that was used to disseminate Rhodesian propaganda quickly reported such atrocities and also hastily blamed the ZANLA forces.¹¹ The horrendous pictures that appeared in the Rhodesian Ministry of Information booklet *Anatomy of Terror* were reported on the radio, television and in newspapers in Rhodesia. These instruments of propaganda which were controlled by the Rhodesian government blamed the liberation fighters. Oral accounts of the war by villagers who participated in the war have made references to guerrilla violence that included killing of those who would betray the goal of liberation for personal advancement as well as captured African members of the Rhodesian security forces and also thorough flogging of civilians who breached regulations. No mention has been made of the kind of maiming that appeared in the Rhodesian 'propaganda' booklets. The author himself attended *pungwe* gatherings where ZANLA guerrilla fighters interacted with the rural folk but never witnessed situations where the cutting off of body parts of civilians ever took place.¹² Writing in 2006, Parker says that the attempt to influence the African people against ZANLA by publishing *Anatomy of Terror* in May 1974 and *Harvest of Fear: A Diary of Terrorist Atrocities in Rhodesia* in October 1976 rebounded.

He indicated that these grisly pictures of atrocities graphically demonstrated to what he called the 'unsophisticated villagers' what was likely to happen to them if they failed to cooperate with the guerrillas.¹³ Parker perhaps may have failed to realise that the villagers were not influenced against the guerrilla fighters by the incredible Rhodesian propaganda and thus continued to render their support to them. He strongly and fanatically believed that the ZANLA fighters committed these atrocities.

The Murder of White Missionaries

The murder of white missionaries during the liberation war has remained a contentious issue with regards to the perpetrators. There has not been any publication to date which has clearly identified and pinpointed the culprits of the wartime murder of white missionaries or African missionaries for that matter. Rhodesian propaganda was always quick to point a finger at the ZANLA forces whenever missionaries were murdered. Long after the end of the liberation war Rhodesian propaganda appears to have won the day. Loud voices, in an attempt to indicate that during the war ZANLA forces were not saints, record the murder of missionaries in rural outposts and missions among the atrocities they perpetrated.¹⁴ There are however, sublimated voices that blame the Rhodesian Selous Scouts, who disguised themselves as the guerrilla fighters.¹⁵

In order to get the context in which missionaries, especially the white missionary, met their deaths, it is important to give a brief of the nature of their relations with the Rhodesian authorities on one hand and the ZANLA forces on the other. When the hostilities between the Rhodesian security forces and the ZANLA fighters broke out, white missionaries were faced with a dilemma. The Rhodesian authorities ordered that the missionaries to inform them of guerrilla activities whilst the ZANLA fighters demanded that the clergy refrained from revealing ZANLA activities to the Rhodesian security forces. The Rhodesian authorities even suggested that Rhodesian soldiers be stationed at rural mission posts or stations to protect the missionaries against the ZANLA 'terrorists.' The missionaries declined and indicated that they were safe and did not require protection. In the long run it became clear to the Rhodesian authorities that the white missionaries were cooperating and working hand in hand with liberation fighters whom they labelled terrorists. The Rhodesian authorities also offered to provide guns to the white missionaries who turned this down on the grounds that they were not at war. This created suspicions if not animosity between the white missionaries and the Rhodesian authorities and security forces.

Meanwhile, the ZANLA forces assured the missionaries that they would not harm them if they desisted from reporting ZANLA activities to the Rhodesian authorities and security forces.¹⁶ The missionaries were apprised of the mission and goal of the nationalist guerrilla fighters and this seemed to converge with their thinking on liberty and freedom. The missionaries then felt duty bound to provide material support to the fighters and the ZANLA forces did not find reason to murder missionaries who in most cases cooperated with them.

The Rhodesian authorities through the Ministry of Information catalogued the killing of missionaries by guerrilla fighters in the booklet *The Murder of Missionaries in Rhodesia* published in July 1978. In this booklet the authors highlighted what they saw as evidence of the guerrilla fighters' anti-religious views. It is pointed out that 'a terrorist told missionaries not to mention Christ in their preaching'. It was also averred that one terrorist had told missionaries that 'if the Jews had not killed Christ I would have done it myself'.¹⁷ This appears to be spurious evidence offered by the Rhodesian authorities to justify apportioning blame on ZANLA or rather the liberation fighters for the murder of white missionaries at rural missions.

The 7 February 1977 murder of seven white Roman Catholic missionaries at St. Paul's Musami has been cited as a massacre perpetrated by ZANLA forces. A white priest, Father Dunstan Myerscough, who survived the so called massacre by throwing himself to the ground as a terrorist shot at him from five yards away, gave sworn evidence that the ZANLA forces were responsible. The Rhodesian authorities also provided ballistic evidence to back up the sworn evidence of the one survivor. A written testimony of a well-known terrorist was in the course of the war found and it testified that ZANLA forces had killed the missionaries at St. Paul's Musami.¹⁸ The circumstances that led to the survival of the one priest seem not credible. He is said to have been shot on the leg and left for dead. Rhodesian security forces sometimes captured weapons which included guns and ammunition from the liberation fighters. In fact the Rhodesian Selous Scouts who disguised themselves as ZANLA forces carried the same weapons thus making nonsense and challenging the issue of the much publicised ballistic evidence.

Earlier, on 5 December 1976 a Bulawayo-based Roman Catholic missionary, Bishop Schmitt and two other missionaries were murdered when they failed to give guerrilla fighters money which they had asked for. A nun, Sister Ermanfried Knauer sought shelter under the Bishop's car and was shot in the leg and escaped death by a whisker. She gave sworn evidence that Bishop Schmitt and the others were murdered by nationalist guerrilla fighters. The two incidents, St. Paul's Musami murder and the murder of Bishop Schmitt and his two colleagues were almost choreographed. In both cases one missionary survived in incredible circumstances and would give sworn evidence that the 'terrorists' were responsible. The probability is that the murders were committed by some units of the Rhodesian army especially the Rhodesian Selous Scouts for propaganda purposes.

Firstly this would buttress the white Rhodesians' allegations that the so-called freedom fighters were terrorists and committed wanton murder. Secondly, this was meant to turn away missionaries from supporting the guerrilla fighters who were fingered for killing their colleagues. Despite these murders of white missionaries, most 'men and women of cloth' especially the Roman Catholic, remained at the rural missions and continued to provide resources to the guerrilla fighters.¹⁹ Their continued stay at rural missions spoke volumes of their relationship with the liberation fighters, which was largely amicable.

Current narratives of the war continue to echo Rhodesian propaganda by fingering the nationalist guerrilla fighters for the murder of white missionaries during the war. Such articles like the *Zimeye* one of 17 January 2013 titled 'Zimbabwe Freedom Fighters also committed Evil Atrocities'. The author of the *Zimeye* article quotes from *Anatomy of Terror*, a booklet whose motive was propaganda. Any literature on the liberation war that attempts to show that the liberation fighters were responsible for the murder of missionaries mostly draws and quotes from the Rhodesian Ministry of Information booklet, *The Murder of Missionaries in Rhodesia*. Cauter, in his 1983 publication, echoed the booklet in describing the killing of missionaries at Elim Mission in June 1978.²⁰ The same is true of Ron Reid-Daly in his book published in 1999.²¹

The Killing of African Rural Businessmen

The African rural businessmen provided the freedom fighters with food and clothing from their business enterprises. In most cases relations between the guerrilla fighters and the shop owners were cordial. The rural businessman just like everyone else in the rural areas understood the need to contribute to the war effort by supporting the liberation fighters. The Rhodesian authorities were aware that most rural businessmen provided the guerrillas with resources in the form of food and clothing. There are instances where these owners of businesses were secretly murdered and the ZANLA forces were accused of being the perpetrators. Logically it was unwise for the ZANLA forces to kill people who provided for them. Rhodesian propaganda was quick to point out that some members of the rural population motivated by jealousy reported to the liberation fighters that the businessmen had 'sold out'. Guerrillas never killed those who would betray the goal of liberation for personal advancement secretly but always made it known to everyone in the community. In most cases the execution or killing of villagers or businessmen who were found guilty of reporting guerrilla activities to the Rhodesian security forces took place in the full view of members of the rural community.²² The discovery of dead bodies of the businessmen who were murdered secretly smacked of the work of Rhodesian security forces. It was clear that the Rhodesian authorities hated the rural entrepreneurs because they supported the 'terrorists'. Current narratives of the war, which have imbibed from Rhodesian propaganda, indicate that the liberation fighters were responsible for killing the rural businessmen. It is highly likely that the Rhodesian Selous Scouts were responsible for these murders which happened clandestinely.

ZANLA Forces as Spineless Forces Bent on Attacking Soft Targets

During the war Rhodesian propaganda made a field day by making insinuations that the liberation fighters were 'yellow' and avoided confronting the Rhodesian army forces and targeted soft spots in the form of civilians. Such intimations have found their way in today's oral and written narratives of Zimbabwe's war of liberation. Publications by Reid-Daly, Cocks, Parker, and Wood are wont to say that the ZANLA forces were cowards and avoided confronting the Rhodesian army forces in set battles. Writing in 1999 Reid-Daly, who was the commander of the Rhodesian Selous Scouts, noted that the guerrilla fighters did not confront the Rhodesian security forces in battle. He attributed this to what he called the tendency by Africans to crumble if suddenly confronted by the totally unexpected and have difficulty in quickly adjusting to changing situations. Reid-Daly continued to point out that this inclines them to break in panic and run if suddenly engaged in combat. According to Reid-Daly the other major weakness which appears to be general among Africans was an abysmally poor standard of shooting.²³ Such thinking from a commander of one of the units of the Rhodesian army forces was a result of bigotry and a product of Rhodesian propaganda. This raises the question of the value of the many Africans who joined different units of the Rhodesian army. If poor marksmanship and the other weaknesses of Africans cited by Reid-Daly were true then the many African members of the Rhodesian army units were worthless in the war.

Ken Flower, who headed the Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organisation (RCIO) during the war, wrote in 1987 that guerrillas avoided contact with the Rhodesian security forces striking instead at soft targets that are unprotected men, women and children.²⁴ Such insinuations which found their way into documented narratives of the Zimbabwean war of liberation are creations of the invasive Rhodesian wartime propaganda. It is important to observe that the Rhodesian authorities and security forces did not understand the guerrilla warfare nature that the ZANLA guerrilla fighters had adopted. Guerrilla warfare entailed avoidance of frontal warfare. The liberation fighters relied on hit and run tactics which suited them most. The Rhodesian forces were superior in terms of weaponry and numbers and it would have been foolhardy for the liberation fighters to confront such an adversary in direct battle. Statements that suggested that ZANLA forces avoided direct confrontation against the Rhodesian forces because of cowardice showed lack of understanding of the tenets of guerrilla warfare.

The ZANLA forces employed tactics that guaranteed them survival in this war of attrition. Guerrilla forces roamed the countryside in groups of seven to twelve in what were called sections.²⁵ These were their standard fighting units and were the basis of most of their military operations. It was for this reason that they avoided direct confrontation against the Rhodesian security forces that were always numerically superior. The ZANLA forces employed hit and run tactics when they conducted their military operations against the Rhodesian security forces. The ambushes, surprise attacks, sabotage campaigns and mine warfare by the liberation fighters were not meant to pit them against the Rhodesian army in set battles.

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Endnotes

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² See Chapter 5 of J. A. Dzimbanhete, *Zimbabwe's Fight for Independence: Aspects of ZANLA's Guerrilla War* (Gweru: Booklove, 2014).

³ P. Moorcraft, *African nemesis: War and Revolution in Southern Africa*, (London: Brassey's, 1990), p. 151.

⁴ Interview with ex-combatant, Last Ndega, ZANU/PF Headquarters, Harare, 19 January 2009.

⁵ Ministry Of Information and Immigration 'The Murder of Missionaries in Rhodesia' July 1978.

⁶ J. Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts: Inside Story of a Special Branch Officer* (Alberton: Galago, 2006), pp. 50, 61, 79, 86, 89, 162,

⁷ This was revealed in interviews conducted by the author with ex-combatants in 2009.

⁸ Interviews with ex-*chimbwido*, Gomana Sarah and adult members, Mutanha Maria and Muzembi Felicitas.

⁹ A. Binda, *The Saints: The Rhodesian Light Infantry* (Johannesburg: 30^o South Publishers, (2007), p. 140.

¹⁰ Ministry of Information and Immigration, '*Anatomy of Terror*'

¹¹ The media used to spread the propaganda were the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, Zimbabwe Television Services and newspapers such as *The Herald*, *The Chronicle*, *The African Times*.

¹² The author attended *pungwe* gatherings in his rural home during the school holidays in 1978 and 1979 and never witnessed incidents during which parts of the bodies of sell outs were cut off by guerrilla fighters.

¹³ Parker, *Assignment Selous Scouts*, p. 25.

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¹⁶ Interview with ex-guerrilla fighter, Ackim Hunda, ZANU/PF Headquarters, Harare, 17 March 2009.

¹⁷ Ministry of Information and Immigrations, 'The Murder of Missionaries in Rhodesia' July 1978.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The author recalls the escapades he made to Bondolfi Mission, A Roman Catholic mission to collect 'goodies' for the guerrilla fighters from the nuns. These goodies included fruits, cakes, biscuits and sweets.

²⁰ D. Caute, *Under the Skin: The Death of White Rhodesia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1983), p. 93.

²¹ R. Reid-Daly,

²² Interviews with ex-guerrilla fighters in 2009.

²³ Reid-Daly, *Pamwe Chete*, p. 62.

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