

# **Silence Upon the Southwest: A Historiographical Interrogation of Literature and Discourse on the Gukurahundi Massacres (1982- 1987)**

by

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this historiographical study is to investigate the existent and non-existent literature and discourse on the Gukurahundi Massacres wherein, between 1982 and 1987, the Matabeleland and Midlands regions of newly independent Zimbabwe were engulfed in politicized massacres of the rural populace. Despite a death toll estimated in the tens of thousands, very little has been written on these atrocities. This dearth of literature not only impedes the critical processes of national healing and restorative justice, but it also leaves alive the threat of such a tragedy reoccurring. Thus, this study works to contribute to the overdue process of national restoration and justice, and provide a platform so that preventative mechanisms can be created concerning this national history of Zimbabwe, and looks to find utility beyond Zimbabwe, but within the Pan-African community as a whole.

## **Introduction**

On April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1980, Zimbabwe obtained its independence, marking the end of the brutal guerrilla war for liberation that began in the 1960s. This rebirth of a nation came with proclamations of national reconciliation and unity, famously articulated in new Prime Minister Robert Mugabe's inaugural speech. Given the tumultuous history of the Southern African country, the task of reconciliation was always going to be a challenge. Not only had Blacks fought against White colonial rule, there had been rival factions in the Black community, whether politician, militant, or civilian.

One of the pillars of this reconciliation was the consolidation of Rhodesian Armed Forces (the military of the colonial government) with Zimbabwean People' Liberation Army (ZIPRA) and Zimbabwean National Liberation Army (ZANLA), the armed wings of the two main Black nationalist organizations Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) and Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) respectively, into the Zimbabwean National Army (ZNA). Unconvinced by the hasty attempt to unify with parties they had long warred with, several ZIPRA fighters either refused to join or deserted the ZNA, and set out to be heard by launching a dissident reign of terror across the Matabeleland region in the south-western part of the country. In response, and in fear that the hopeful national project of unity was unraveling early, Mugabe unleashed a group of North Korean trained soldiers, the Fifth Brigade, to quell the dissidents. Although the dissidents numbered in the hundreds, what followed was slaughter of thousands of people in the Matabeleland and Midlands regions- dissident and civilian alike. While estimates vary, some sources have suggested that up 30,000 died from the onslaught from 1983 until the Unity Accord was signed in 1987 (Moyo 111).

Despite an unfathomable amount of carnage and destruction, little has been written about the 1980s terror, locally known as *Gukurahundi*, after the president-ordained nickname of the Fifth Brigade. What has been written varies drastically in detail, begging for further study. For example, *Afro-Marxist Regimes* estimates the death toll at 3,000 while higher end estimates say 30,000 and other literature is scattered within that range. Most importantly, however, might be the fact that nobody has been brought to book for the atrocities, and there has been little redress for the victims and their families.

This historiographical interrogation aspires to discuss the existent and, crucially, non-existent discourse on the atrocities. How could the massacre of a possible 30,000 people in a country of under nine million people go not only unnoticed, but even coexist with narratives of a "Zimbabwe success story" (Darborn 1) during its first ten years? This study aims to contribute towards national restoration and justice, as well as provide a scholarly framework through which such phenomena can be anticipated and avoided in the future.

## Literature Review

*"...Ironically, most historians complain that the general public is ignorant about the past- especially Africa's past. How can it be otherwise, when all that intellectual labor ends up under bushels rather than invitations to informed and engaged public discourse?"* (Charumbira 17).

Amidst the scarcity for literature on Gukurahundi, the 1997 report by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ) in partnership with the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF) originally titled *Breaking the Silence: Building True Peace* (republished in 2007 as *Gukurahundi in Zimbabwe*- the edition that is referenced in this project) is the most comprehensive and widely cited publication currently available. Throughout my research, I found that all publications on Gukurahundi to come out after the report was published cite it. The report makes use of a combination of several sources: data compiled by CCJPZ during 1980s when the atrocities were occurring (they were the first and most vocal voice to confront the government on their misdeeds in this situation) which included 17 sworn statements from victims as well as several other testimonies drawn from a database of 1000 victims; the *Chronicle*, a provincial Matabeleland newspaper that reported disproportionately more on the attacks by the dissidents than on the retribution by the government sanctioned forces; human rights and legal documents; medical reports; and the few attempts at academic writing on the subject that are in existence. By the admission of the CCJPZ and LRF, their albeit comprehensive report has several shortcomings. For fear of further victimization, reports frequently did not include the names of the victims or informants. 'Missing Persons' were never followed up on, and thus there is no record if they ever returned. Rape, in particular, is often underreported because of its vulgar, taboo connotation. Victims and parents of victims would often describe girls being taken into the bush and 'beaten,' and, while the implication is that of a rape, it can only be recorded as a beating based on the victim's statement (The Catholic Commission 21).

Earlier, allusions to Gukurahundi would appear in edited volumes in which discussion on the matter would be limited to a few pages and often lost in the hopeful narrative of a young nation that had an otherwise upward socio-economic trajectory. For example, in *Zimbabwe's Prospects: Issues of Race, State and Capital in Southern Africa*, a collection of essays edited by Collin Stoneman and published in 1988, discussions surrounding the matter account for only five of the book's almost 400 pages, and even that conversation deals particularly with South Africa's role in attempting to destabilize their fledgling neighbor. Similar space is devoted to the subject in Simon Baynham's 1992 volume *Zimbabwe in Transition*, although contributor James Macbruce does more diligence in situating Gukurahundi as a possible product of dissident upheaval, governmental overreaction, ethnic tensions and the influence of external influences- no small feat for only eight or so pages. Even the 1987 canonical African political theory text, *Afro-Marxist Regimes* edited by Edmond J. Keller and Donald Rothchild and focusing on only four countries including Zimbabwe, devotes just one paragraph to Gukurahundi. By no coincidence, edited volumes and articles that have been published after the CCPJZ report came out have been more nuanced in their engagement of Gukurahundi. This may also have to do with the incidental revelation of more information as time has passed, as well as the benefit of more pronounced hindsight.

Although most of the Gukurahundi atrocities occurred between 1983 and 1987, it has some roots in distrust and tensions that date back to pre-colonial days. It is thus necessary to discuss, albeit briefly, the interaction of the different ethnic groups before colonialism, the advent of colonialism, the formation of revolutionary political parties and their military wings, and the subsequent war of liberation that led to independence. Terrence Ranger's *Voices from the Rocks* discusses the history of Zimbabwe specifically from the Matabeleland viewpoint; the 'rocks' mentioned being those at Matopos, a mystical site in Ndebele culture and where imperialist Cecil John Rhodes' grave lays. The text makes a fundamental contribution often taken for granted in discussing ethnicity: Ranger explains how the Ndebele, as we know them now, were not a homogenous unit until a deliberate project by the colonialists to make them that way for administrative ease. The focus on Matabeleland is crucial for two reasons: as a minority group (albeit an influential one,) the Ndebele- the people of Matabeleland- are often overlooked or swallowed under a monolithic Zimbabwean tag in historiographies of the country; and the Ndebele were the first point of contact with the locals for the British, and thus are essentially an indispensable story of the country in its modern state. The latter point is emphasized as well in *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the 'Dark Forests' of Matabeleland*, co-authored by Ranger, Jocelyn Alexander and Joan McGregor. The book begins by stating, "We wanted to write about Matabeleland in part because silence has surrounded the history of this region of Zimbabwe" (Alexander et al. 1). The book successfully elevates the voices of the much-maligned dissidents through interviews, as well as emphasize how, while the dominant narrative barely demarcates between the political parties and their military wings, oftentimes there were distinct schisms between the two.

Norma Kriger's *Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War* reads as the type of text for which Ranger and Alexander et al set out to compensate. Despite a solid literature review (which, interestingly, pays homage to the likes of Ranger) and a good description of the rise of the revolutionary Zimbabwean movements, Kriger falls into the paradigmatic trap of making the narrative overwhelmingly about the Shona by an almost exclusive focus on ZANU (the political party largely populated by the Shona) and ZANLA, ZANU's military wing towards the end of the book- the time period in which we are most interested in our analysis of Gukurahundi. She also uses the terms ZANU and ZANLA interchangeably which, at face value, may seem to be of no consequence seeing as the two were closely aligned; but the distinction between political parties and their military wings is of the essence in our discussion, as not all actions of one were endorsed by the other. To her credit, Kriger's subsequent book, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-war Zimbabwe: Symbolic and Violent Politics, 1980 – 1987*, does account for the disparities between the political parties and military wings, as well as devote more space to dissident grievances

Zvakanyorwa Wilbert Sadomba's *War Veterans in Zimbabwe's Revolution* is a crucial addition to the literature of the war and the aftermath thereof, primarily because the author is not only a sociologist, but was a guerrilla fighter with ZANLA. He infuses personal anecdotes with larger sociological analysis. His biases for ZANLA and ZANU and against ZIPRA and ZAPU are, however, hard to miss, with such definitive declarations as "ZIPRA's strategy lacked a grasp of the basic principles of a guerrilla strategy which the civilian Mugabe seems to have understood much better" (Sadomba 30). To the book's credit, it does not hold back in implicating Mugabe's leading role in ordering the Gukurahundi attacks. *The Zimbabwe African People's Union 1961-1967* by Eliakim Sibanda provides the most detailed account of Gukurahundi outside of CCJPZ's *Breaking the Silence*. However, if Sadomba's ZANLA biases were evident in his writing, then Sibanda's ZIPRA inclinations are also impossible to miss. Without compromising the objective truth, the book deliberates on the inefficiencies of the Fifth Brigade, the nobility of the ZAPU leadership, and how it was a "genuinely national party" in comparison to ZANU (Sibanda 265). Masipula Sithole's *Zimbabwe: Struggles-Within-the-Struggles (1957- 1980)* provides first-hand insights on the doctrinal, personality, and ethnic impulses that fuelled schisms in the Black Nationalist movements up until independence. As the brother of Ndabaningi Sithole, ZANU's first president, Masipula has unmatched access to the accounts of those involved in the liberation struggle. His biases, born of familiarity and uneven access, are however obvious throughout the text- a dynamic he admits himself.

*A History of Zimbabwe* by Chengetai J. M Zvobgo is, in scope and chronology, the most holistic text referenced in this project for an overall history of the country since imperial contact. There are however no illusions that this book has been written for history specialists, as on more than one occasion, he makes geographical and chronological errors as well as such blunders as attributing the wrong title to certain officials. True to the trend of writing about Zimbabwe that we have since established, only about ten pages in the 351-page text are devoted to the Gukurahundi period, with information drawn almost exclusively from the *Chronicle* and the CCJPZ findings. Throughout the section, Zvobgo phrases the government's reaction as a warranted one in the interest of national security, before conceding that Mugabe had essentially sanctioned the slaughter of civilians when, on April 8 1983, he declared before cheering crowds that "When men and women give food to dissidents, our soldiers will come and eradicate them" (C. Zvobgo 264). Similar to the Sadomba's text, this is no small declaration, given that the author hails from a family much allied to Mugabe- and the book is dedicated to Eddison Zvobgo, one of Mugabe's longest serving lieutenants (E. Zvobgo).

I have taken pains to show how little is written on Gukurahundi in publications on either historical or contemporary 1980s Zimbabwe, so some context here may illuminate how incredibly glaring that deficiency of information is. The guerrilla-led Zimbabwean war for independence that took place between 1964 and 1979 is largely touted as one of the bloodiest war against African colonialism, with official post-war estimates numbering the deceased at 30,000 and more recent ones placing the number of 40 000. The Kenyan Mau Mau rebellions, often spoken about in the same vein as the Zimbabwean liberation war in terms of violence and carnage, are estimated to have killed 25, 000. If, as shown in the introduction, some sources place the casualties of Gukurahundi at 30,000, on par with, if not more than, the bloodiest anti-colonial wars south of the Sahara, should not much more scholarly attention be dedicated to the matter?

While on one level, Gukurahundi was about dissidents wreaking havoc in the countryside and the government sending troops to stop them, it evokes a history of ethnic conflict among Zimbabwean- primarily the majority Shona (70%) and largest minority Ndebele (16%)- groups. This narrative is relevant because the dissidents came from ZIPRA, the military wing for ZAPU, both of which had a dominant Ndebele membership. On the other hand, the Fifth Brigade were all recruited from ZANLA, the military wing for the predominantly Shona ZANU, the then-ruling party led by Mugabe. The ethnic tension theory goes back to failed allegiances during the war, right through to the apparent 'colonialism' of Shona territory when the Ndebeles first came north of the Limpopo in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's *Do 'Zimbabweans' Exist?* complicates the Zimbabwean identity by positing that perhaps the assumed notion of Shona and Ndebele as one people is a creation of colonialism, and the unraveling of that romanticized nationhood is what caused Gukurahundi. Although the book is unmistakably a reaction to the political marginalization and Gukurahundi persecution of Ndebele (Ndlovu-Gatsheni himself is Ndebele- and his sympathies thinly-if at all-veiled,) it does challenge the assumption that Zimbabwe's national project took for granted: that the different communities in the geographical area laid the same claim to it as they did to each other. This is a concept theoretically explored in Benedict Anderson's seminal text, *Imagined Communities*. Anderson argues that nationalism as assumed by the current international system is a culmination of imagined camaraderie and identities. He argues, among other things, nations are imagined "because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7). It is to this theoretic base that Ndlovu-Gatsheni latches in suggesting that the comradeship never fully transcended the Shona/Ndebele line.

Ruramisai Charumbira's *Imagining a Nation* is cut from the same theoretic cloth as Anderson, although it goes a step further and differentiates between imagination, which "places a premium on remembering things past, however distorted," while "invention places a premium on the totally made up, however plausible" (29). Mahmood Mamdani's seminal text, *Citizen and Subject*, provides a critical wider context to the post-colonial factionalism that manifests across the continent between members of different ethnic groups, as well as the rural and urban communities. In so doing, he places Gukurahundi as part of a larger legacy of deliberate colonial segregationist control, which he coins "decentralized despotism" (37). These frameworks allow us to not only investigate the tragedy of Gukurahundi, but to evaluate its inevitability and the nation's capacity to prevent its recurrence.

The few years in post-independence Zimbabwe during which Gukurahundi occurred are nowhere near sufficient in explaining its occurrence. To develop a more nuanced understanding of Zimbabwe during Gukurahundi, it is essential to dedicate sometime to drawing up a brief history of the country.

## **A Pertinent History of Zimbabwe**

The Shona people have lived on the area constituting contemporary Zimbabwe for almost 2000 years, having initially migrated from the Lake Tanganyika region. Their storied past arguably peaked between 1000 and 1400 AD, during which they built the Great Zimbabwe, a colossal monument from whence a powerful ruler of South-Eastern Africa reigned. As the kingdom declined toward the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, some of the rulers moved north towards the Zambezi River and established the Mutapa Empire, one of Africa's most distinct empires. At its peak, the empire included modern day Zimbabwe, Angola and Zambia (Kemezis). The Empire's prime was short-lived, and it began to decline by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It had grown too big too fast, and fragmentation of power and frequent wars wore its economic and political might down. That, combined with the advent of the Portuguese on the East Coast severely weakened the empire. Thereafter arose yet another Shona kingdom, the Rozwi, which reigned over modern day Zimbabwe until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Meanwhile, south of the Limpopo, Shaka and his Zulu army were marauding surrounding areas, forcing several Nguni to flee. Some of them, particularly the Ngoni, ended up north of the Limpopo by 1827, and began warring with the Rozwi.

When the Ndebele arrived in 1841 under Mzilikazi, also fleeing Shaka in the south, they found a severely weakened Rozwi kingdom and, immediately settling near and around the Matopos plateau largely populated by the Banyubi and, merging with the Ngoni people, began their rule over the formerly Shona territory (Pikirayi).

While some Shona groups suffered the Ndebele raids, it is also worth noting “others remained in harmonious relations with their warlike neighbours, though usually at a subordinate level. More distant Shona states had no contact with the Ndebele” (Warhurst 16). It is critical that we challenge this colonial era perpetuation of a homogenous “war-like” Ndebele nation by explaining its development as a colonial construct. While these different communities lived among each other to different alliances and hostilities, it was not until 1896 that British commissioners set out to create a “Ndebele ethnicity” out of those who lived in the plateau, using the Natal Code of 1891 that had been used by the South Africans in defining the Zulu. Thus, what became to be known as “Ndebele” thereafter consisted of 60% Shona people and other ethnic groups that were essentially “taught how to be Ndebele” by the native commissioners (Ranger 101). The purpose of this “White invention” of the Ndebele ethnic group was to define boundaries through which the racialized, tribalized colonial state could be made sense of. This is important to remember when, later, some pundits argue that Gukurahundi was an inevitable culmination of innate tensions between the two groups: not only were there no “two” groups until the deliberate efforts of the colonialists, interactions between the communities were varied in nature.

In the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Britain, Germany, South African Republic (Transvaal), and Portugal were embroiled in a struggle for control in the region. In 1887, a representative of the Transvaal signed a treaty of friendship with the Ndebele king, Lobengula (Mzilikazi’s son). This alarmed the British, led by Cecil John Rhodes, into action. While the other colonial powers were interested in mining concessions, Rhodes planned to establish a settler community between Limpopo and Zambezi. With cunning, he convinced the British High Commissioner to South Africa to act accordingly to secure the British interests. The result was a series of treaties and commissions culminating in the Rudd Concession of 30 October, 1888, in which an unwitting Lobengula signed off to grant the British “the complete and exclusive charge over all metals and minerals situated and contained in his kingdom,” in return for a monthly payment of money and weaponry (C. Zvobgo 13). When he realized the deception and extent of his concessions, Lobengula tried to dispute the agreement, but he had already set in motion what would be a tumultuous nine decades of colonialism. The country became known as South Rhodesia, named after Rhodes.

In 1896, the British experienced the first wave of military resistance to colonialism in the form of the Shona and Ndebele Risings (C. Zvobgo 23). The Ndebele were retaliating against losing their kingdom and the Shona to losing their freedoms without actually having been conquered by the British. Although the two were distinct movements, there was also “a limited degree of coordination” in the insurgencies, thereby marking the earliest known instance of Ndebele-Shona alliance in the colonial struggle. In the end, the British were able to suppress the uprising through a mixture of dynamiting strongholds, burning crops, and ultimately capturing and executing the community and struggle leaders.



The most notable casualties of the uprisings were Kaguvi and Nehanda, revered spirit mediums and forebears of what has come to be known as the First *Chimurenga*: the first war for liberation. The second and decisive Chimurenga would not be for another six decades.

After the Second World War, the British intensified their colonial might in the African territories. The huge losses acquired during the war, and especially the loss of India, elevated Africa's importance in their imperial project. Between 1953 and 1963, they established the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, a semi-independent federation of South Rhodesia, North Rhodesia and Nyasaland. I have used "semi-independent" here to emphasize that the federation was still under White rule although not under the direct mandate of the British crown, and to differentiate that from the independence from colonial rule that many African countries were beginning to attain at the time. It was during this era that Southern Rhodesia's first mass African nationalist movement came into being. Founded in September 1957, the South Rhodesian African National Congress (SRANC) "demanded universal suffrage and parliamentary democracy, the repeal of all racial legislation, and a society based on individual freedom and equal opportunity for all" (Kriger 83). The SRANC was nowhere near radical, still pledging allegiance to the Queen and not advocating for independence. Despite its moderacy, the organization was banned within three years, and was immediately succeeded by the National Democratic Party (NDP.) The group was more radical in calling for self-rule, and was led by iconic Ndebele leader Joshua Nkomo. Although NDP was short-lived, it set in place the controversies that would lead to the eventual split of the nationalist movements. First, Nkomo was deemed to be indecisive and spending a lot of time abroad in international diplomatic endeavors. Early in 1961, the British and Southern Rhodesian governments broke decorum and, for the first time, invited the African nationalists to constitutional negotiations. There, Nkomo and other delegates settled for a constitution that removed Britain's reserve powers and did not allow parliamentary majority rule for another 15 years- both of which were at odds with the platform of the NDP, thus several members felt betrayed by Nkomo. The NDP membership then did its own referendum on the matter, and the new constitution was rejected. When they protested to the government, however, their appeals were rejected on the basis that their representatives had already agreed to the new constitution and the group was immediately banned in 1961.

Days thereafter, the NDP rebranded as the Zimbabwe Africa People's Union (ZAPU). Attributed to former NDP president (and future ZANU founding member) Michael Mawema, the name Zimbabwe- derived from the Shona phrase Dzimba Dzamabwe, which translates into "Houses of Stone" after the rock structures of the great Mutapa empire- had taken hold among Black Nationalists, and was soon integrated into all Black nationalistic discourse. ZAPU petitioned the UN to intervene in the constitutional dispute, intensified international diplomatic campaigns, and began sabotaging government property.

Many leaders were arrested, which led to change in their tactics. Their initial goal was to appeal to the White government diplomatically, and not alienate them. Dissatisfied by the inconsistencies and moderate strategy under Nkomo, several leading members of the organization split and started another party, Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) in 1963. Among its founding members were Robert Mugabe, Ndabaningi Sithole, and Enos Nkala. While the two parties would later become colloquially synonymous by dominant ethnic group (ZAPU with the Ndebele, ZANU with the Shona,) it is important to note two realities at the inception. First, the fall-out that led to the split was ideological, not ethnic. Instead of working together with the White government and gradual change, ZANU was disillusioned by ZAPU's moderate approach and sought a democratic socialist, Pan-African state and to rid Africa of all forms of imperialism. ZAPU, on the other hand, castigated the ZANU leadership of being "imperialist stooges" due to their substantial financial reliance from the USA, and for betraying the nationalist movement by splitting the group (Scarnecchia 105.) Secondly, there were leaders of both ethnicities instrumental in the founding of both parties: Joshua Nkomo (Ndebele), George Nyadoroh James Chikerema (Shona) were all pivotal to the foundation of ZAPU, while the predominantly Shona ZANU was actually founded in the house of Enos Nkala, an Ndebele official ("RHODESIA SEIZES A FOE OF REGIME").

The immediate aftermath of the split saw an upsurge in political violence, with ZAPU being the overwhelming aggressor on their newly formed rivals. Maurice Nyagumbo, now-deceased ZANU politician, described how "throughout 1963, the destruction of houses and property and the molestation of ZANU members were systematically carried out..." (Scarnecchia 136). The violence was backed by violent rhetoric from Nkomo, who called for the elimination of ZANU leaders from the African society and that ZAPU sought to "destroy the (ZANU) snake in the house" before fighting the Rhodesian government (Scarnecchia). It is worth noting the parallel between the actions and rhetoric of ZAPU towards ZANU at this time, and how the inverse would be the essential backbone of Gukurahundi two decades later.

Although the organizations split due to ZAPU's apparent moderacy and reticence towards militancy, evidence paints the party in a different light. As early as 1962, before the split, ZAPU fighters were returning from training in Ghana and China. ZANU sent its own group into military training in 1963, merely a month after it was formed. Sadomba, himself a former ZANU militant, confirms "both ZAPU and ZANU started to organize for war as soon as they were formed" (63), while Kriger argues, "the major difference between the two rival nationalist organizations at this stage was ZANU's more radical rhetoric rather than its strategy" (83). The difference seems to have been that ZAPU was keener on fighting a war of sabotage, while ZANU was looking to engage more militarily.

In 1964, both ZAPU and ZANU were banned and began operating in exile from Zambia. In June, just before its ban, ZANU deployed five fighters calling themselves the 'Crocodile Gang.' After a few attempts at sabotage, they stabbed and killed Johannes Andries Oberholzer, a White foreman at a farm in the Eastern part of the country. Near the site the gang left a few notes, one declaring "Crocodile Group in Action. We shall kill all whites if they don't want to give back our country. Confrontation" (Ranger).

In 1965, fearing that Southern Rhodesia was on the brink of Black majority rule like former confederation members Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Prime Minister Ian Smith unilaterally declared independence from the British Empire, which resulted in not only being annexed from the British Commonwealth, but economic sanctions as well. Meanwhile, both ZAPU and ZANU advanced their military activities. That year, ZANU's military wing, Zimbabwean African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) was founded under the leadership of Herbert Chitepo in Tanzania. Although the exact date is unknown, ZAPU's military wing, the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), was formed around the same time. On 28 April 1966, ZANLA militants clashed with Security forces in Sinoia, in hopes of seizing the town. Many declare this to be the beginning of the Second Chimurenga, while a smaller community traces the insurrection back to the the Crocodile Gang. Despite the elevation of the ZANU narrative, at this stage, most of the militants being deployed to Zimbabwe were from ZAPU's armed wing, ZIPRA.

The parties and their combatants immediately found that fighting a well-regulated and armed Rhodesian Security Forces in conventional war was impossible: by 1968, they had lost more than 160 guerrillas as opposed to just 12 Security Forces (Kriger). It was thereafter that both groups reevaluated and changed tactics from conventional combat towards a more clandestine, underground insurgency within which they would infiltrate into the community, organize and recruit for underground battles. In 1971, tensions within the ZAPU camps- still based in Zambia- led to mutiny in their ranks and the Zambian military had to step in and even deported of the fighters back to Zimbabwe, where they were hanged on arrival (Kriger). Dissident members of ZAPU who were not deported joined ranks with dissident ZANU members to form the short-lived Front for the Liberation of Zimbabwe (FROLIZI). This particular development is of the utmost importance to Gukurahundi discourse, as it marks the pivotal moment in which ZAPU became a party synonymous with the Ndebele identity. Prominent Shona leaders in ZAPU, including James Chikerema and George Nyandoro, were among those who left and took up leadership in FROLIZI, thereby destroying any resonance ZAPU among the Shona. The ethnic dimension was heightened by Nyandoro's comments that FROLIZI leadership should be drawn upon "proper lines" in which "senior leaders would be of the Mashona tribe" (Sithole 54). The split not only left ZAPU's identity compromised, but created an overall administrative void that restricted their activity.

Meanwhile under the leadership of Chitepo, ZANU thrived and, between 1971 and 1976, ZANLA was by far the most important insurrection wing in the Chimurenga. They took advantage of an offer for a Mozambican base extended by Mozambique's insurgency group FRELIMO, an offer that had been earlier made to ZAPU but had fallen through because of their leadership conflicts and a general fear that their predominantly Ndebele army would now have to operate in the largely Shona areas closer to Mozambique. In Mozambique, the ZANLA troops developed a Maoist fighting strategy, itself adopted successfully by FRELIMO under Chinese guidance, which placed at the center the revolutionary political education of peasants.

This phase of ZANU's uncontested dominance among the nationalist movements came to an end beginning in 1974, when several ZANLA cadres mutinied (much in the same way that ZIPRA cadres had in 1971,) complaining that the command was out of touch with the combatants and thus did not provide adequate food and resources, as well as accusations of corruption and tribalism in their ranks (Sadomba). The mutiny is also significant here for two other reasons: many have claimed that those schisms were along sub-ethnic lines within the Shona ethnic group: the Manyikas and the Karangas. Secondly, the mutiny was foiled by a ZANLA force nicknamed *Gukurahundi*, which in Shona means "the first rains that wash away the chaff to prepare for farming season." The implication, then, is to remove the obstructive elements within the movement before any further progress can be made. Although this particular group was not directly linked to the post-independence Gukurahundi, both its purpose for existence and the ethnic debate surrounding it foreshadow the 1980s atrocities.

Soon thereafter, Herbert Chitepo was assassinated by car bomb. Many saw this as a continuation of Manyika purge among the ZANU ranks. Further disillusionment with the political leadership forced the unlikely to happen: ZIPRA and ZANLA decided to establish a unified fighting force divorced from the political parties. This declaration received the blessing of the Organization of African Unity, and the Frontline States (a group of Southern African countries that stood together to bring liberation to Zimbabwe and South Africa.) Sadomba argues that the unity had such potential influence that "had it lasted- (it could) have pre-empted the post-independence conflict between them (ZANLA and ZIPRA) and prevented the Gukurahundi" (20). This unified army, Zimbabwe People's Army (ZIPA), was more than just a fighting unit, and endeavored to develop a curriculum of Marxist-Leninist and Maoist teachings for use in all its training camps. ZIPA was however short-lived, falling victim to the very manipulation of the civil political leaders that it had been created to circumvent. The ZAPU and ZANU leaders are accused of fostering partisan loyalties within the army, leading to its collapse after only two years.

In addition, the distrust between the two forces never entirely went away, as evidenced by Sadomba's bold claim that ZIPRA's plan all-along was "to attack ZANLA at the point of whiter surrender to power, as the MPLA of Angola did to UNITA" (29). This distrust is vital, as it ultimately placed in motion the dissident activity that led to the Gukurahundi response.

In October 1976, Mugabe, now president of ZANU, and Nkomo announced, at the unrelenting encouragement of the Frontline States, that they had formed a patriotic front, which would help them coordinate their platform at the Geneva Conference during the same month to discuss the country's independence prospects with an unwilling Smith government. The conference ended in a deadlock, and the stakeholders returned to the drawing board. Meanwhile, guerrilla violence was escalating, and although the fighting went on over a 15-year period, 33 percent of the deaths occurred in 1979 alone (Sadomba). With the Patriotic Front (PF) and the Smith government at seemingly nonnegotiable loggerheads, Smith went ahead with internal talks and, working with the largely ceremonial African politician, Bishop Abel Muzorewa, they agreed to a compromise government to be voted on and established as an internal settlement in 1979. PF was not invited to the talks, and their subsequent appeals to the West meant neither Britain nor the USA supported the compromise. Furthermore, Muzorewa enjoyed no support among the guerrillas and the Frontline State leaders had put all their support behind PF. The token internal settlement, conveniently called Zimbabwe Rhodesia, did nothing to placate either the nationalist movements or their military wings. In response, guerrilla violence raged across the country. Attempts to pacify the fighters by offering them amnesty were of no use, as they gained even more ground across Zimbabwe.

In a bid to end hostilities, the British stepped in and invited Bishop Muzorewa (representing his party, the United African National Council), the PF leadership represented by Mugabe and Nkomo, and the Ian Smith between August 1-7, 1979 in London. This became known as the Lancaster House Conference, from whence modern Zimbabwe was essentially born. Out of the conference, the first fully democratic elections were set for February 1980.

Immediately thereafter, it became clear that Mugabe did not intend to contest the election as the unified front that had negotiated its way to the election, despite Nkomo's seeming willingness to do so. It had been a convenient partnership, but Mugabe recognized that, at this stage, ZANU could win the election without ZAPU's assistance. Tensions resurfaced and the divide widened with reports of intimidation of ZAPU supporters by ZANU adherents. Ultimately, Mugabe's ZANU had won, securing 57 of the 80 seats, with Nkomo securing 20 and Muzorewa just three.

## From Independence to Gukurahundi

*“No nationalist government was content to reproduce the colonial legacy uncritically. Each sought to reform the bifurcated state that institutionally crystallized a state-enforced separation, of the rural from the Urban and one ethnicity from another. But in so doing each reproduced a part of the legacy, thereby creating its own variety of despotism” (Mamdani 8).*

With his inauguration speech on April 17 1980, Mugabe declared a national project of national unity and reconciliation, imagining the nation marching “together in perfect unison from year to year and decade to decade towards its destiny” (Mugabe). Nothing would have been more symbolic of this harmonious new outlook than the ceasefire, demobilization, disarmament and integration of the different fighting forces. The plan was to integrate the ZIPRA and ZANLA fighters with the Rhodesian Army they had fought against for the past 15 years into a Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA.) As one may expect, the militants were skeptical of the idea: not only had they fought the Rhodesians for over a decade, relationships between ZIPRA and ZANLA had hardly been rosy either.

There is some discrepancy in the literature about the effectiveness of the disarmament. Sadomba (from the vantage point of having taken part in it, albeit as a ZANLA militant) claims that the process was “quick and effective” (68) while Alexander et al argue, “many guerrillas refused to come to the (assembly points)...and regularly cached arms and ammunition” (181). Based on the skepticism of the combatants and the events that would follow, I am more inclined to believe the latter. In addition, their frustrations with the disconnect between the political decision and them made it appear that their emancipatory contribution was being cast aside. Nicholas Nkomo (no relation to Joshua), a ZIPRA commander, explained “myself and my men felt that, had the leaders had the fighting men at heart, they would have consulted with the ceasefire when the question of the ceasefire arose” (Kriger 250). Paranoia was further heightened by the fact that while the militants had been disarmed, the Rhodesian forces had not been. If anything, they would drive around the rural areas flaunting their jeeps and guns. How could their enemy of two decades and, by fatalities, the party responsible for most of the destruction, remain armed?

In September 1980, fighting broke out at an Assembly Point (AP) between ZANLA and ZIPRA elements. While elements from both groups were distrustful and even engaged in criminal activity during the early years, it was the ZIPRA militants, especially aggravated and disempowered because their party was marginally represented in government, who grew most cynical. A group numbering between 200 and 40 began “engaging in robbery or behaving as if the war was still going on by shutting down schools” (Alexander et al. 185).

ZAPU’s leadership unequivocally condemned these dissident activities. Both PF ZAPU and ZANU PF (the names adopted by the respective parties going into the 1980 election) made it clear that these elements were ‘outlaws.’ Seeing an opportunity at political leverage, ZANU PF politicians turned a blind eye to the ZANLA renegade activity, and castigated ZAPU for allowing its “organized bands of ZIPRA followers” to disrupt the nation’s peaceful infancy. Most incendiary among the ZANU politicians was party founder- himself Ndebele- Enos Nkala, who called the dissidents “Ndebeles who were calling for a second war of liberation” (Alexander et al. 186).

In late 1980, an ill-devised plan to move all the militants in rural APs to urban areas of Chitungwiza and Entumbane near Harare and Bulawayo respectively led to intensified clashes between ZIPRA and ZANLA fighters. Confined to close proximity, and feeling left out of the decision-making process for the land they had fought for, wartime agitations began to rise again amongst the combatants. It was in Bulawayo, however, that things took a most ugly turn. At a rally there, Enos Nkala declared that “ZAPU had declared itself an enemy of ZANU PF” and that the ZIPRA militants should be dealt “a few blows.” This rhetoric came despite the fact that Nkomo and ZAPU had categorically denounced dissident activity.

Things worsened when, in March 1981, ZIPRA cadres “mutinied and seized the armoury at Entumbane” (Macbruce 213). The breaking point, however, was in February 1982 when ZANU PF announced a discovery vast arms caches on ZAPU property in Matabeleland and around ZIPRA APs. This led to confiscation of ZAPU properties, Joshua Nkomo’s firing and the arrest of high-ranking ZAPU officials, Lookout Masuku and Dumiso Dabengwa. More importantly, it marked the death of any trust between ZANU PF and ZAPU. Later that year, six tourists were kidnapped and murdered, with the captors demanding the release of arrested ZAPU and ZIPRA leaders. All this was in addition to ongoing dissident activity that, by end of 1982, had resulted in at least 49 murders and destruction of property (The Catholic Commission). This only gave Mugabe and ZANU a more solid platform upon which to launch their retributive attacks.

Between 1980 and 1982, Mugabe invited ZANU's wartime allies, North Korea, to train a specialized military force, known as the Fifth Brigade. Unlike other defense elements, the Fifth Brigade was exclusively drawn from former ZANLA fighters who were Shona, and answered only to Mugabe. At their passing-out parade in December 1982, Mugabe dubbed them 'Gukurahundi' in anticipation of the 'chaff-clearing' responsibility that was to begin in January 1983. Between then and its withdrawal at the end of 1984, the Fifth Brigade instituted a reign of terror across Matabeleland North and South. Although the dissidents being sought numbered at no more than 400, the entire rural Matabeleland community was deemed party to their activities by virtue of supporting them. Despite the fact that "in direct contrast to the war for liberation, they (dissidents) had very little popular support in the 1980s" (The Catholic Commission), the rhetoric coming from Mugabe, Nkala, and the Fifth Brigade could be argued to have been genocidal toward the Ndebeles:

"Where men and woman provide food for dissidents, when we get there we eradicate them. We don't differentiate when we fight, because we can't tell who is a dissident and who is not..."- President Mugabe, April 1983 (The Catholic Commission 71).

Throughout the retaliation, the dissidents were unrelenting. For example, on November 9 1984, three dissidents killed a ZANU PF Member of Parliament outside his home. Although the Fifth Brigade had been withdrawn, police and soldiers still maintained a presence in Matabeleland in search of dissidents and arms as late as 1985. The fragmentation had seeped out to more than just Matabeleland and, after the July 1985 elections, as many as 600 homes belonging to ZAPU supporters were ransacked in Harare, while two officials were killed in the same period (C. Zvobgo). It was only in October of 1985 that Mugabe and Nkomo began the serious reconciliatory talks that led to the signing of the Unity Accord in December 1987, in which ZANU and ZAPU were again merged, putting an end to all hostilities. Ultimately the crackdown on the 400 or dissidents marauding in rural Matabeleland resulted in civilian deaths numbering, by many estimates, over 30,000 (Moyo 111).

How are we to make sense of these atrocities? How could this country, having fought so feverishly and long for independence, find itself in such a tragic place immediately thereafter? The next section puts forth different theories for both the dissident uprisings and the disproportionate retaliation by Mugabe's Fifth Brigade.



## Explaining the Impetus Behind Dissident and Government Actions

*“Generally emancipated from racism with the end of colonialism, did not Africa once again come to be in the grip of a specifically African particularism: tribalism, ethnic conflict, and primordial combat?” (Mamdani 285)*

There is a recurrent colloquial understanding that Gukurahundi rose from primordial animosity between the Ndebele and the Shona. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, argues, “the violence was in reality an indication of how Ndebele particularism could not easily blend with Shona imagined nation and Shona triumphalism” (181). This school of thought given credence by the incendiary anti-Ndebele rhetoric put forth by the likes of Enos Nkala and the Fifth Brigade. After all, the latter was exclusively drawn from the Shona, and the vast majority of the atrocities were performed in Ndebele areas.

However, this narrative oversimplifies Shona-Ndebele relations both historically and contemporarily. While the Ndebele arrived north of the Limpopo in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was so much flux between the two ethnic groups that several Shona people joined the Ndebele community and vice versa- a phenomenon Ndlovu-Gatsheni himself explains in the book. . We also explained earlier how the “Ndebele” ethnic identity as it exists today was deliberately constructed and enforced by Rhodesian native commissioners based on the Natal code of 1891 (Ranger). The Ndebele-Shona uprisings of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century would at times involve coordinated resistance between the two ethnic groups. Even during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century- before the birth of the nationalist political organizations, the likes of Nkomo and trade union leader Charles Mzingeli had traveled from Bulawayo to Shona-speaking regions and found a devoted following for their messages of anti-colonial resistance. There is no record of their rejection by the Shona on the basis of their ethnicity. Consider as well that the vast majority of the Shona people (outside of the Fifth Brigade and politicians) either had no knowledge or harbored any animosity during the Gukurahundi phase. Similar, the dissidents are repeatedly numbered around 400: if their revolt was in the name of a widely- held belief in a Ndebele nation, then one would expect to see more fighters and civilians for the cause. The dissidents were receiving no support from the Ndebele community. And if the two ethnic groups were natural foes, would conflict not have been happening in general society outside the realm of politics too? Michael Bratton and Stephen Burgess, writing in the 1980s, modestly described Gukurahundi as a “major tactical error” by the Mugabe government that “reinforced, if not actually created, a legacy of distrust between the citizens of Matabeleland and the central government” (219). The theory of innate enmity between the Ndebele and Shona resulting in Gukurahundi has been, beyond reason, disproved.

Another school of thought attributes the tragedy to the manipulation of external entities, chiefly South Africa. As non-democratic, segregationist white settler communities, both South Africa and Ian Smith's Rhodesia had come under severe sanctions from the rest of the world, and South Africa was seeking to preserve its relationship with its last remaining regional ally. Both ZANU and ZAPU had developed camaraderie with revolutionary South African parties, PAC and ANC respectively, and the South African government was undoubtedly worried about having allies of their 'dissidents' in power across the border. As such, they sought to destabilize the fledgling democracy to the north. Several former members of the Rhodesian Army, CIO and police left the country at independence and were integrated into the South African armed forces. These forces would routinely make forays into Zimbabwe and, on one occasion in 1981, destroyed a large arsenal at Inkomo Barracks in an attempt to assassinate Mugabe. In another raid at the Eastern border, three South African Defense Forces members were killed on their way to sabotage a railway line from Mozambique to Zimbabwe. Two of the deceased were former members of the Rhodesian Armed Forces (The Catholic Commission).

It has also since been revealed that the arms cache that ultimately led to the deployment of the Fifth Brigade was facilitated by Matt Calloway, former Central Intelligence Organization head in Hwange who later defected to South Africa. In South Africa, Calloway stepped up his efforts to destabilize Zimbabwe therefrom. First he approached ZIPRA, but because of their close ties to the anti-Apartheid movement, they were not interested in partnering with the South African government (Hanlon). Thus, with Calloway taking a lead, the South Africans recruited mercenary Zimbabweans from refugee camps in Botswana, trained them, and sent them to Zimbabwe. This well-armed and trained group, nicknamed 'Super ZAPU', would act in the name of the dissidents (often without their knowing,) further provoking the ire of the Zimbabwean government, who placed all blame on ZIPRA dissidents and retaliated accordingly. The clandestine support for Super ZAPU is consistent with the Apartheid government's *modus operandi* in sabotaging Black rule in the region, as seen by their support of RENAMO forces against the FRELIMO government in Mozambique and the provision of weaponry and training to the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in the run-up to South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994 (Walshe).

Despite the incendiary presence of Super ZAPU and the likelihood that some of them would have been driven by Ndebele nationalism, the dissidents appear to have been motivated by legitimate distrust born out their years fighting in the bush and now being required to unify with their fully-armed nemeses. They were also disillusioned by their apparent marginalization by the political leadership in the decision-making process of the new nation for which they had fought (Alexander et al.) Similarly, the dissidents were disillusioned by the seeming emptiness of the freedom to which they had dedicated their lives.

What is harder to qualify, however, is why Mugabe and the government reacted in the way they did. It is hard, despite the inconsistencies described earlier in the section, to see the targeting of tens of thousands of rural Ndebele citizens by a Shona government as anything but ethnically- based. While the dissidents were indeed a perceivable menace, there is no justifying how the misdeeds of a renegade group of 400 would warrant the slaughter of an estimated 30 000 people over three or four years. While the motivation may never be fully understood, it appears as if Mugabe overreacted to a legitimate terror threat. In the infancy of the national project and having come out of decades in which their attempts at independence had been sabotaged, there is no doubt that his paranoid defenses would be up. That narrative, too, is not beyond reproach, as ZANU PF has reacted similarly on other occasions: first with the purging of the Manyika politicians such as Herbet Chitepo during the war, and more recently, running a campaign on intimidation against supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in the 2000s (Ndlovu- Gatsheni).

## **Conclusion**

More than 30 years after Gukurahundi, very little has been written on the horrific stain in Zimbabwe's young existence. Equally as, if not more importantly, the full story of the tragedies have never been told, and justice has never pursued for the victims. The death toll is still unverified. There is a generation of adults who are scarred from the memories of the childhood. There are segments of the rural Ndebele population whose only interaction with the Shona was when Gukurahundi fell upon them. The irony of it all seems to be that the atrocities were performed in the interest of furthering a nationalistic agenda, yet that very 'weapon' created a greater schism between the Zimbabwean people than would have previously existed.

There are several reasons as to why the story of Gukurahundi has still not been told in full. Because the massacres occurred almost exclusively in the rural areas, the victims and survivors had limited access to media avenues, thus their ability to communicate their plight, to this day, remains a challenge and is dependent on deliberate outreach efforts by scholars and others with access to discourse outlets. Additionally, Robert Mugabe, together with several people involved in the Gukurahundi, is still in office. With that power, the ZANU PF government also controls the major media outlets, so the horrors of Gukurahundi are neither taught in schools nor discussed in the news or the public. Sadomba describes watching a documentary film on Gukurahundi made by one of the former combatants in which she interviews both dissidents and former Fifth brigade members. The film, where fighters on both sides apologize and then challenge the leaders to do the same in order to heal the wounds, was only shown in Sweden, the director having been threatened into not showing it in Zimbabwe.

In addition to the politics thereof, Alexander et al note that Zimbabwe “operates with a thirty-year rule for access to its state archives,” (113) and since we have only recently come upon the thirty-year mark of the beginning of the atrocities, we hope more information will be made available soon.

The import of increased nuanced scholarly discourse around Gukurahundi is multifaceted. A mere three decades removed from the atrocities, both the aggressors and victims remain part of the current citizenry. A reinvigorated conversation is vital for national restoration and opens the door for justice to be enacted. There continues to be a lingering sentiment of governmental ethnocentrism, and the failure of authorities and scholars alike to comprehensively tackle Gukurahundi discourse has done little to alleviate the cynicism. Creating deliberate spaces within which scholarly and societal discourse can occur has proven, in modern history, to be both a force for restorative justice as well as a preventative measure against future recurrences of similar phenomena. The elaborate gathering of information and the subsequent Nuremberg, Eichmann and other post-Holocaust trials played an invaluable role in the reestablishment of peace and order in Germany and the affected world at large, as well as “restored the voices of Jewish victims” (Bryant 339). Post-Apartheid South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) also encouraged open multi-layered discourse on the horrors of the Apartheid era, and have been heralded as central to the establishment of a functional multi-racial society in the contemporary era. Rwanda’s remarkable national turnaround in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, in which 800 000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered, has been attributed, in large part, to the elaborate process of redress, scholarship, and the preservation of collective memory. For example, the Gacaca Law, passed in 2001, aims to “promote healing and reconciliation by providing a platform for victims to express themselves, encouraging acknowledgements and apologies from the perpetrators, and facilitating the coming together of victims and perpetrators” (Zorbas 36). There has also been a concerted effort to create “institutional embodiments of collective memory,” such as museums and national monuments (Zorbas 39). Such initiatives, priceless to national restoration, are both birthed by, and contribute to, the development of comprehensive scholarship on catastrophes such as Gukurahundi. It is thus of the essence that scholars are relentless in their pursuit to find and tell the story, regardless of how shameful and uncomfortable it may be.

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