Introduction

Guerrilla wars are the primary form of armed conflict today. They are fought mostly in Africa and Asia and often involve regional and international powers. The far-reaching implications of guerrilla war attract the attention of scholars interested in military issues, international relations, and the relationship between wars and national development. Guerrilla wars have also caught the attention of scholars who work on peasant revolutions. Most anti-colonial and anti-imperial revolutionary wars this century have involved rural-based guerrilla armies. Peasants, widely held to be conservative and parochial, have been prominent in revolutionary guerrilla movements, both as the source of guerrillas’ logistical support and as war victims – about 80 per cent of those killed in contemporary guerrilla wars have been civilians. The prominence of peasants in revolutions surprised analysts who had anticipated proletarian revolutions and they turned their attention to trying to understand why peasants participated in these wars. This book is about peasant mobilization by a guerrilla army and internal struggles within the peasantry that motivated peasants to participate in Zimbabwe’s anti-colonial war.

Zimbabwe takes its name from the most spectacular of its many stone ruins that were built by indigenous people from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth century. Bounded by the Zambezi River in the north and the Limpopo River in the south, the country is some 391,000 square kilometres – slightly smaller than the state of California and 60 per cent greater than the United Kingdom. Zambia borders it in the north and northwest, Botswana in the southwest, Mozambique in the east and South Africa in the south (see map 1). In the early 1970s, on the eve of the guerrilla war, the country had about 275,000 whites, mostly from Britain and South Africa, and five million Africans. Africans are composed of two major ethnolinguistic groups: the Shona and Ndebele. Some 80 per cent of all the Africans are Shona, who are themselves made up of geographically concentrated groups who speak different dialects, including Zezuru, Ndua, Karanga, Manyika, and Korekore. Most whites lived in the urban areas, whereas about 80 per cent of Africans resided in the rural areas. From the
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time of white conquest and colonization in 1889 until Africans won their political independence in 1980, the white minority monopolized economic and political power to further its own interests.

Map 1: Zimbabwe and its neighbours


Zimbabwe has a distinctive constitutional history. From 1889 to 1923 the territory was ruled by the British South Africa Company on the basis of a British royal charter. It then became a British colony – named Southern Rhodesia after its imperialist conqueror, Cecil John Rhodes – and the tiny white minority was given the right to govern itself. Nowhere else in Africa, except South Africa, did Britain (or any other colonial power) give self-government to white settlers in its colonies. Consequently, when African nationalism became a powerful force most colonial overlords could
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decolonize and override white settler sentiments. But in Rhodesia, Britain had to contend with a strong white nationalistic home government whose fear of African political advancement grew as other colonies won their political independence. Fearing that Britain would eventually grant political independence to Africans, the white minority government declared independence unilaterally in 1965. This brought it international opprobrium, symbolized by the United Nations imposing first selective and then mandatory sanctions against it. In another unprecedented move in the history of decolonization in Africa, the white Rhodesian government introduced a constitution that provided for universal suffrage and an African majority in parliament in 1979, while executive and judicial power remained under white minority control. The hope was that the international community would recognize the legitimacy of a black majority government and lift sanctions. However, Britain and other countries (except South Africa) withheld recognition of the new African government because it excluded two exiled nationalist parties that had been fighting a guerrilla war beginning in 1966. In late 1979, Britain held a conference with the key military and political actors in the conflict and settled the constitutional impasse of the past fifteen years. The talks restored the legality of Rhodesia and it reverted to its former status as a British colony under a British governor. Ironically, in his four months of office, Lord Soames exercised more power than any British governor before him. A ceasefire was arranged, and Britain supervised elections in February 1980 in which the two exiled parties participated. The result was an overwhelming victory for an avowedly Marxist-Leninist nationalist party, ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union), and its leader Robert Mugabe became Prime Minister of the politically independent state of Zimbabwe.

This study examines ZANU’s efforts to mobilize political support in the countryside in the war of independence against the white settler minority. In the 1960s, ZANU’s rival, ZAPU (Zimbabwe African People’s Union), was in the forefront of the armed struggle against the white minority government. But from 1972 ZANU forces, called ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army), dominated the struggle for independence. At the end of the war, in December 1979, estimates were that 19,300 guerrillas out of a total of 28,000 inside Zimbabwe belonged to ZANU while the rest belonged to ZAPU. There was also an unknown number of guerrillas in training camps, mostly in Mozambique and Zambia. In January 1981 an estimated 37,000 guerrillas had returned; by 1989 this figure had grown to 50,000. ZANU forces passed through Mozambique and operated mostly in Shona-speaking parts of the country, while ZAPU’s army, called ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army), operated chiefly in Ndebele-speaking areas in the west and south-west, infiltrating through Zambia and Botswana. At the peak of the war the government could call on about 20,000–25,000 regular and conscripted armed forces, 36,000 police (regular and conscripted), and
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27,000 paramilitary forces, many of whom were Africans. When the war ended in 1979, official estimates of the war dead were 30,000 and almost the entire countryside had been affected. Today the estimated number of war dead stands at 40,000.2
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This is a study of political mobilization and organization in a rural-based war of national liberation. The book addresses standard questions raised by those interested in political mobilization in nationalist or Marxist revolutionary guerrilla wars that take place in the countryside. How do guerrillas try to mobilize peasants’ support and what accounts for their success or lack thereof? What are the peasants’ motives for participating? What linkages, if any, are there between the mobilization process and post-war outcomes for peasants? The distinctiveness of this study derives from its attempt to answer these questions by relying on the direct voices of peasants and other active participants. Ironically, the direct voices of villagers are missing in most accounts of the revolutionary events in which they play so central a role. What peasants themselves have to say about their experiences in a revolutionary guerrilla war highlights what goes on at the village level and raises questions about the language of revolutionary elites, scholars, and others who write about peasants and revolutions.

Direct peasant voices are usually absent in studies of revolution regardless of the theoretical approach they adopt. Studies that are based on the premise that human agency determines revolutions – so-called voluntarist assumptions – might be expected to depend on what actors say and do. In fact, such studies generally infer evidence about peasant ideas from peasant behaviour that is itself inferred from non-peasant sources. An alternative approach assumes that structures rather than human agency determine the causes, processes, and outcomes of revolutions. It is reasonable to expect scholars who accept the theoretical premises of structuralist studies not to seek out the direct voice of active participants. Theda Skocpol’s States and Social Revolutions contains an unusually explicit rationale for not listening to what individual actors say and do. Most importantly, she believes that revolutions are not made or begun by a revolutionary movement but arise when particular structures no longer relate to each other in a functionally compatible way and produce crises.1 Skocpol does not give a systematic analysis of her concept of structure, but one can make inferences based on what she says about structure, and how
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it functions in her account. Structures appear in her work as determinate relations – of states, of the landed upper class and the state, of peasants and landlords – that are objective and impersonal. They ‘condition’, ‘shape’, and ‘limit’ differently situated actors, but structures are not to be identified with people’s actions. In their intentional acts, people unintentionally reproduce and sometimes transform the structures governing their activities. Skocpol rejects a voluntarist approach, that emphasizes the values, beliefs, intentions, and goals of actors, chiefly on theoretical grounds: structures can best explain the causes, processes, and outcomes of revolutions. But she also offers empirical reasons for rejecting voluntarism. Actors in a revolution are not always clear about their motives and goals because they are often complex and poorly formulated. And even when revolutionary actors have clear aims, the outcomes of revolutions do not necessarily conform with them. The virtue of her structural approach, she claims, lies precisely in its ability to ‘rise above’ the viewpoints of the participants and avoid getting embroiled in their intentions and actions.

Skocpol’s observation that people’s stated aims and revolutionary outcomes frequently diverge constitutes a cogent reason for rejecting the voluntarist assumption that human agency determines outcomes, but it ought not to lead to eliminating people’s voices from accounts of revolutions. A revolution is unlikely to fulfil the aspirations of all its participants but this does not diminish the importance of understanding their hopes and how these may affect the revolutionary process. Indeed, Zimbabwean peasants actually help to shed light on how peasant structures affect their dreams of a better world. Skocpol raises valid concerns about the difficulties of establishing values, intentions, beliefs, and goals when the actors themselves might express confusion. Understanding people’s motives is inherently difficult and any such project confronts notoriously daunting pitfalls. How can one know that individuals actually believe what they say or say what they believe? What do you do when individuals give conflicting renditions of the same event or when an individual makes contradictory statements? How do you weight the intensity of people’s views? How do you understand the gaps between what people say and how they behave? What of the problem of people being unaware of their real interests because of false consciousness? Do you treat all individual viewpoints and actions as equally important? The slippery problems of unravelling the multiple, confused motives and actions of individuals are compounded when one tries to aggregate individual data to make statements about group behaviour and interests, as this analysis attempts to do. Still other difficulties that confront a researcher who attempts to elicit participants’ viewpoints are dealt with in the discussion of methodological issues affecting the Zimbabwe case study. But the difficulty of establishing people’s motives and interests is not a compelling reason to eliminate them from investigation. The premise of this study is that what people say and do matters.
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It must be acknowledged that even if one had an interest in obtaining peasants’ voices about their experiences in wars and revolutions, it is usually difficult. Even if researchers were willing to accept the risks of trying to interview peasants during such crises, they are generally denied access to peasants. Access is invariably contingent on demonstrable political allegiance to the incumbent regime or the revolutionary organization and these stints in the bush usually serve, as they are intended to, as propaganda for their respective sponsors. Failure to bolster their sponsors’ cause might affect future access with serious consequences for careers. In the aftermath of a revolutionary upheaval the newly established victorious government is often involved in external wars and is generally preoccupied with consolidating its power. Again, researchers are unlikely to obtain access to war-torn rural areas unless they have credentials as reliable friends of the ruling party. Consequently, since most peasants are illiterate and leave behind few documents, one is forced to rely on the documents of revolutionary organizations, private memoirs of ruling and revolutionary elites, and other participant observers. Journalists and scholars often supplement these sources with elite interviews. There are also official government records. But peasants appear in these insofar as they present a problem or are perceived as a threat to the state, or as anonymous figures in statistics on conscription, crop production, and taxes. As such, official records are unilluminating about how peasants see each other, elites, rulers, or guerrillas. To obtain the direct voices of peasants in revolutions, whether as civilians or rank-and-file in armies, is inherently difficult.

What difference does it make to theories of revolution to actually take into account peasant ideas and actions? Voluntarist studies that assume that individual actors’ attitudes and behaviour can determine revolutions maintain that revolutionary organizations must win popular support if they are to come to power. We learn from peasants in Zimbabwe’s war of independence that their participation in organizations set up to provide logistical support for the guerrillas was unpopular, yet this did not prevent the revolutionary movement from coming to power. Peasants reported on how they invented ways to avoid positions in the organizations because they perceived the work to be physically demanding and very risky – at any time, peasants working for the guerrillas could be caught by government forces. Peasants inform us of how much they suffered, not only from the abuses of government forces but also from guerrilla coercion. Even though they worked very hard and sacrificed their meagre resources to meet the guerrillas’ logistical needs, they were often beaten and threatened by the guerrillas. Voluntarists are wrong, therefore, to assume that revolutionary success requires popular support, although as I note later, they are correct to emphasize the importance of individual participants’ ideas and actions. On the other hand, this study’s finding that a revolution’s success is independent of whether or not it enjoys popular support is consistent with studies that assume that revolutionary success is determined by impersonal, objective structures (e.g. class
Zimbabwe’s Guerrilla War relations, state–class relations) and that popular support is an irrelevant issue. Also, Zimbabwean peasants’ descriptions of being squeezed by the demands of the government and guerrilla armies support the important role of structures on behaviour. But the findings of this study repudiate the structuralist assumption that individual attitudes and behaviour cannot have a determinative influence on revolutions. Although lack of peasants’ popular support for the guerrillas was not an obstacle to the eventual success of the Zimbabwean revolution, their attitudes and actions did influence the revolutionary process and outcomes in ways that are alluded to below.

Peasants can also enlighten us about why they participate in revolutions. Zimbabwean peasants participated in the guerrilla war of independence only partly because they wanted to remove the racially discriminatory policies of the white minority government. More importantly, oppressed peasants saw in the breakdown of law and order during the war an unprecedented opportunity to transform oppressive village structures. While the guerrillas were persuading and coercing peasants to sweat and toil on their behalf, oppressed peasants were forging alliances with the guerrillas to try to restructure village relations. Unmarried peasant children challenged their elders, women battled their husbands, subject clans sometimes tried to usurp power from ruling clans, and the least advantaged attacked the better-off. Theories of revolution, regardless of approach, locate the grievances that motivate peasants to join revolutionary movements outside their villages. Most studies of revolution account for peasant involvement in revolutions by dwelling on peasant resentments against the state, markets, capitalism, imperialism, other classes, or other external agents or forces. But these studies fail to capture the potentially powerful role that peasants’ dissatisfaction with internal peasant structures can play in motivating them to participate in revolutions. Voluntarists do not take into account how peasant ideas and actions are affected by peasant structures; structuralists focus on the influence of class, state, or other structures in determining peasant participation, but not on peasant structures.

Finally, listening to what peasants have to say may enhance our understanding of the linkages between revolutionary processes and outcomes. Zimbabwean peasants won some advantages after the war from the new party-state in return for having provided the guerrillas with logistical support. However, peasants continued to fear the party because of their experience of coercion from its guerrilla representatives during the war and because local party representatives often continued to coerce peasants after the war. Peasants were also at least as interested in how any benefits from the party-state were distributed within their communities as they were in their relationship with the party and the state. Many studies of revolution, both voluntarist and structuralist, claim that the success of a revolutionary organization in mobilizing peasants during a revolution
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results in a continuing close relationship between peasants and the party-state after the revolution and that it benefits not only the party-state but also peasants. But these studies, for different reasons, ignore the potential for coercive mobilization and hence do not consider its post-war influence on peasants. Nor do most works on revolution examine how conflicts internal to the peasantry may persist into the post-revolutionary period.

It should be apparent from the foregoing that this study rejects a determinative role for either human agency or structures. Instead, it seeks to show how an investigation that begins with peasant ideas and actions ends up highlighting how they are important and how structures influence them, thereby contributing to both theoretical approaches. Whereas the following chapters engage the existing literature on Zimbabwe’s war of independence, here I seek to show where my case study on Zimbabwe stands in relation to the wider literature on revolutions. The primary concern of this book is peasant mobilization in revolutions with Zimbabwe’s war of independence as a source of data. Consequently, much of the rest of this chapter elaborates on how my Zimbabwe case study findings, derived from direct peasant voices, compare and contrast with those in landmark studies of revolution that depend on inferred evidence from non-peasant sources. My review of the literature must be selective because an examination of the voluminous works on revolution is beyond the scope of this book. But I have sought to include studies that are structuralist, studies that are voluntarist and others that, as one would expect, do not fit unambiguously into either category. Skocpol’s study of revolution in France, Russia and China is, as I have noted, an exemplar of a structuralist approach. Less self-conscious and less ‘pure’ structuralist studies are represented by Barrington Moore’s work on China and Eric Wolf’s comparative study of Algeria, Cuba, Mexico, Vietnam, China and Russia. James Scott on south-east Asia and Chalmers Johnson on China represent studies that do not fit neatly structuralist or voluntarist labels: for example, both examine peasant and organizational behaviour within the context of peasant value structures. I use them sometimes to illustrate an aspect of a structuralist approach and other times to highlight a feature of a voluntarist approach. My exemplary voluntarist studies are Joel Migdal’s work on twentieth-century revolutions and Samuel Popkin’s study of the Vietnamese revolution against the French. These, as well as other studies, provide an entry point for my comparative analysis of studies of revolution. I try to reveal how studies of revolution, despite diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, converge in important ways. In particular, their failure to consult peasants directly about their participation and mobilization creates the potential to misread evidence and to neglect or omit issues that are important to peasants. Peasant voices can produce new insights. Instead of the centrality of popular support in understanding revolutionary successes, peasant voices direct us to the potential for guerrilla coercion against peasants to coexist with successful revolutions.
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Without repudiating a role for markets and states, imperialism and capitalism in their self-understandings of what has gone wrong with their world, peasants give more prominence to structural conflicts internal to the peasantry. Moreover, peasant voices in the Zimbabwe case study underscore how individual actions and ideas interact with structures, thereby challenging both structuralists and voluntarists. The chapter concludes with a fairly detailed examination of methodological issues such as why particular individuals were selected for interviewing and what kinds of questions they were asked. Other issues such as the mediating influences of the researcher, contemporary politics, and interpreters are also raised.

What peasant voices can contribute to theories of revolutions

Two questions arise: can one label Zimbabwe’s war of independence a revolution, and, if one can, does this justify a comparative analysis of revolutions that have been very different? Most definitions of revolution depend on the extent of violent political and social change – although the peaceful transformations in Eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990 may change that common understanding of a revolution. Certainly Zimbabwe’s war of liberation meets the criterion of violent change. But how much change is needed for a violent event to qualify as revolutionary? Some accept political changes in personnel as sufficient.\(^5\) Zimbabwe’s war of independence, which ushered in a new African political leadership to replace the former white rulers, meets this criterion too. Skocpol’s concept of revolution requires that a revolution bring about drastic structural changes in society: state–class relations, inter-class relations, and inter-state relations should all be revamped.\(^6\) Even though Skocpol directs us to particular structural relations, she gives us no measure of what constitutes fundamental change. Also race was not a factor in the revolutions that Skocpol studied but it was central in Zimbabwe’s war of liberation. The structure of race relations in Zimbabwe has been transformed radically at the political level. Race relations in society have changed too, but the extent of this change is less easy to assess. Whether one labels Zimbabwe’s war of independence a revolution depends then on whether one accepts change in personnel or fundamental structural changes as the criterion. If one adopts the latter criterion, one must consider what is ‘fundamental’ and what are relevant structures. To the extent that Zimbabwe’s war resulted in a change in the racial structure, I consider it a revolutionary outcome. But one might separate outcomes from process, as Charles Tilly does.\(^7\) Tilly defines a revolutionary situation as one in which revolutionary movements compete with the government for resources from the population and create a dual sovereignty. Definitions of revolution that focus exclusively on outcomes, he reasons, close off from purview such revolutionary periods and make it impossible to study why some revolutions succeed and others fail. Both movements that fought the war in Zimbabwe competed with the