1 Introduction The Loyalties of Colonial Soldiers

From 1964 through to the 1979 ceasefire, Zimbabwean nationalists fought a war of liberation against the white-minority Rhodesian government. It was, in the main, a counter-insurgency (COIN) war with few large battles. The Rhodesian Army was one of the most prominent actors throughout the war. Its regular forces were dominated by black soldiers, a fact that many have found paradoxical.

Zimbabwe's independence settlement left three undefeated armies in situ in 1980, two from the liberation forces – the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) – and their antagonist, the Rhodesian Army. Robert Mugabe's new government commenced a tense process of integrating these former antagonists into one Zimbabwe National Army (ZNA).

In November 1980, serious inter-factional fighting, including the use of heavy weapons, broke out between members of ZANLA and ZIPRA, who had been housed in nearby camps in the suburbs of Bulawayo pending integration. In February 1981, the fighting reignited in fiercer form, and was widely perceived at the time as posing the danger of civil war.¹ Although the death toll was suppressed by the government, it was widely claimed that hundreds were killed.²

During both incidents, Prime Minister Robert Mugabe ordered the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR), a colonial regiment in which all soldiers were black and almost all officers were white, to stop the fighting, suppress mutinous forces, and restore order. The RAR had spent the previous fifteen years fighting the liberation forces, during which time Mugabe's party had labelled them as sell-outs. Mugabe himself had repeatedly threatened them with post-war reprisals (see Figure 1.1).

To utilise the RAR was thus seemingly a strange choice for the new government, and a dramatic intervention. As one newspaper headline summed up the situation: 'Mugabe sets old enemy on rebels.'³ It was

² White, 'Battle of Bulawayo'. ³ Borrell, 'Mugabe Sets Old Enemy on Rebels', p. 1.

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¹ See, for instance, Lelyveld, 'Zimbabwe Quells Mutiny', p. 3; Borrell, 'Civil War Averted', p. 6.

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Figure 1.1 RAR troops post-Entumbane clearing captured weapons (Photograph courtesy of John Wynne Hopkins)

striking too that these ex-colonial soldiers agreed to fight for a government led by their wartime enemy. Luise White has argued that their intervention 'saved the new state'.⁴

Yet the 'old enemies' of the RAR did not perceive their loyalty to Mugabe's new government as strange. In explaining their actions to me, they held that they had long conceived of themselves as 'professional' soldiers. In their view, this conception of professionalism mandated that they act in an 'apolitical' manner, and so they were duty-bound to fight loyally for the 'government of the day'. Drawing upon oral history interviews with black Rhodesian veterans, I argue that these concepts are fundamental to understanding why these soldiers fought loyally for the Rhodesian Army during Zimbabwe's liberation war.

Book Outline

This book is a history of RAR veterans as well as black soldiers who served in other Rhodesian units. Although most of my interviewees were combat troops, I also interviewed veterans who had roles in the support services as

⁴ White, 'Battle of Bulawayo', p. 631.

Book Outline

clerks, drivers, teachers, and signallers. However, the RAR features prominently in this book as it was the regiment in which most black soldiers served and was one of the most important Rhodesian units of the war. Although the RAR is little known today, during the colonial era, it was a famous, prestigious infantry unit with an enviable reputation earned during service overseas in Burma during World War II and, later, the Malayan Emergency.

A detailed history of the RAR is provided in Chapter 2; however, a brief historical sketch is provided here for context. The RAR was raised in 1940 as an *askari* ('soldier' in Swahili) regiment (black soldiers commanded by white officers); such units had existed in colonial Africa from the late nineteenth century and were commonplace in British colonies. During World War II, colonial regiments in British Africa ballooned in size and played important roles, notably in the Burma campaign. After the war, these units, much reduced in size, provided internal security and external 'imperial policing'.

All other *askari* regiments – perhaps the most famous being the King's African Rifles (KAR) which raised battalions in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda – were disbanded, merged, or amalgamated into the national armies of newly independent African nations as decolonisation occurred in the early-to-mid 1960s. The RAR was exceptional in this regard, disbanding only in 1981. Its soldiers were the last *askaris*.

The RAR's longevity was on account of the war fought by the Rhodesian government against Zimbabwean nationalists. Unlike most other *askari* regiments, the RAR played a major role during a war of decolonisation.⁵ The scope of this book spans the RAR's last imperial involvement, when it fought in the British COIN war in Malaya as part of the East Africa Command, returning in 1958, through to its role in post-independence Zimbabwe, culminating in its amalgamation into the new ZNA in late 1981. This focus allows an exploration of how the loyalties of black soldiers were honed during an era of decolonisation, alongside why these loyalties remained resilient, and were indeed strengthened, during the liberation war, in which they played a prominent role in fighting against their nationalist kin.

For these soldiers, 'professionalism' not only incorporated technical military proficiencies, but also emphasised loyalty to their comrades and unit. Instilled through elaborate processes of military socialisation and

⁵ The obvious exception is Kenya's Mau Mau conflict, in which units of the KAR fought. Kenya was also a settler colony; that it and Rhodesia (the only British settler colonies in Africa) saw protracted and bloody wars of decolonisation was no coincidence, as discussed later in this chapter.

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rigorous training, 'professionalism' was an all-encompassing ethos to which they were strictly required to adhere.

'Professionalism' was undergirded by the 'regimental loyalties' of these soldiers, in which their allegiance was vested in their regiment and the army, rather than any political faction. Service in the RAR was frequently a family trade, with soldiers following in the footsteps of their fathers and grandfathers. Vivid institutional memory - reinforced through tradition and pageantry - and widespread intergenerational loyalty created a powerful regimental culture.

Inherent to these 'professional' ideals was a normative conception that soldiers were 'apolitical', which meant that their primary allegiance was to the army, irrespective of their personal political preferences. These bonds of loyalty remained strong throughout the war, despite placing these soldiers in direct opposition to the nationalist movements whose strongholds were the very same rural areas from which most black Rhodesian troops hailed.

The bedrock of 'professionalism' was most obviously wartime military efficacy and this formed an important component of these soldiers' lovalty. 'Professionalism' was honed during the long COIN war in Rhodesia, during which RAR troops were heavily involved in airborne and heliborne infantry operations.

Black Rhodesian troops, all of whom were volunteers, were of significant military importance. They came to dominate the regular Rhodesian Army, comprising 50 per cent of its strength by 1967, 65 per cent by 1976, and more than 80 per cent by 1979.⁶ They were also highly skilled, well trained, and experienced, renowned as 'probably the best trained black troops in Africa'.⁷ Rhodesian Army studies determined that the RAR was 'by every possible measure' its most effective unit in the field.⁸ The RAR was not only the largest,⁹ but also the 'longest-serving unit of the regular army',¹⁰ making it the senior and most prestigious regiment in Rhodesia.11

While the fighting efficacy of black troops has been noted in accounts of the war, there is little research on how their loyalty actually manifested. In

⁶ Stapleton, African Police and Soldiers, p. 178; Horne, From the Barrel of a Gun, p. 214; Moorcraft and McLaughlin, Rhodesian War, p. 51; Downie, Frontline Rhodesia; Preston, 'Stalemate', p. 75; Evans, Fighting against Chimurenga, p. 10; International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey*, pp. 26–39. Burns, 'Rhodesia Fearful'. ⁸ White, *Fighting and Writing*, p. 128.

⁷ Burns, 'Rhodesia Fearful'.

⁹ Rupiya, 'Demobilization and Integration'; Kriger, *Guerrilla Veterans*, pp. 41, 109; Anti-Apartheid Movement, Fireforce Exposed, p. 5. 1RAR alone comprised more than 1,200 troops, and 2RAR 1,000 (Wood, War Diaries, p. 344).

¹⁰ McLaughlin, 'Victims As Defenders', p. 264.

¹¹ Roberts, 'Towards a History of Rhodesia's Armed Forces', pp. 103-10.

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1995, Ngwabi Bhebe and Terence Ranger noted that 'further historical work on the Rhodesian forces' was required, particularly on 'the Blacks who fought in the Rhodesian forces'.¹² This book builds upon the small literature on black Rhodesian soldiers, which has principally focused on why these troops were motived to enlist in the first instance.

The first account of the RAR appeared in 1970, but offered little insight into black soldiers' lives, for it was written in exile by Christopher Owen, a white ex-RAR officer who resigned in protest at the white settler government's Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965. Thereafter he wrote a short monograph chronicling the RAR's formation and World War II campaign in Burma, in which he commented that 'I had set myself a mammoth task. No history of the RAR had previously been published, and what information there was was both scanty and piecemeal.¹³ His book comprised just seventy-one pages.

Subsequently, two scholars have published work on black Rhodesian soldiers, with a focus on explaining 'the apparent paradox of the African volunteer serviceman' in Rhodesia.¹⁴ In 1978, Peter McLaughlin, an academic at the University of Rhodesia (after 1980 the University of Zimbabwe), was the first scholar to devote serious attention to black Rhodesian soldiers as part of his wider work on the Rhodesian military.¹⁵ Later, his 1991 journal article, 'Victims As Defenders: African Troops in the Rhodesian Defence System 1890-1980', was the first scholarly piece specifically devoted to black Rhodesian soldiers, and it utilised the official colonial archive.¹⁶ It was, however, empirically thin when covering the post-World War II period, reflecting the great difficulty in researching this topic. The lack of sources that plagued Owen also troubled McLaughlin. A full 128 citations were used to write the history of African soldiers from 1890 through to the end of World War II, but the section covering the post–World War II period to 1980 cited not a single source.

A sea change occurred with two monographs published by Canadian historian Timothy Stapleton: No Insignificant Part: The Rhodesia Native Regiment and the East Africa Campaign of the First World War (2006) and African Police and Soldiers in Colonial Zimbabwe 1923-1980 (2011). The former reconstructs the regimental history of the Rhodesia Native Regiment (RNR), using accounts written by its white officers preserved in the National Archives of Zimbabwe (NAZ). The latter is a sweeping account, drawing upon the NAZ and other official sources, local and foreign press reports, and oral history interviews with police and army veterans.

¹² Bhebe and Ranger, 'Introduction', p. 16. ¹³ Owen, *Rhodesian African Rifles*, p. 70.

 ¹⁴ McLaughlin, 'Victims As Defenders', p. 243.
 ¹⁶ McLaughlin, 'Victims As Defenders'. ¹⁵ McLaughlin, 'Thin White Line'.

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Stapleton analyses the lives of black police and soldiers throughout this period thematically, focusing on key aspects including day-to-day life in camp, policemen and soldiers' perspectives of their service, and opportunities for 'education and upward mobility'. Aside from Stapleton and McLaughlin, very little scholarship has been produced on black Rhodesian soldiers, in contrast to the wide-ranging literature on the wars of those who fought for ZANU and, to a lesser extent, ZAPU.¹⁷

I return to Stapleton's *African Police and Soldiers* momentarily to situate it as part of a wider literature on colonial troops in Africa. Firstly I discuss how many accounts of black Rhodesian soldiers have marginalised or obscured their role and the nature of their loyalties.

A History Misunderstood, Marginalised, and Distorted

Most narratives of black Rhodesian soldiers have obscured and misrepresented their loyalties and military function. This, in part, reflects the lack of a credible alternative. In contrast to other wars of decolonisation, an authoritative history of Zimbabwe's war remains to be written.¹⁸ The systematic destruction or removal of official Rhodesian archives at the war's conclusion has posed significant challenges for scholars, as discussed later in this chapter. Furthermore, systematic wartime Rhodesian censorship and propaganda impaired accurate contemporary reporting.¹⁹ Journalists were heavily restricted, making it difficult to establish the credibility of information, and many accounts drew heavily upon the Rhodesian government's narrative for lack of alternative.²⁰

¹⁷ See, for example, Nhongo-Simbanegavi, For Better or Worse?; Kriger, Zimbabwe's Guerrilla War; Bhebe and Ranger, Soldiers in Zimbabwe's Liberation War and Society in Zimbabwe's Liberation War; Sibanda, Zimbabwe African People's Union; Lan, Guns and Rain; Bhebe, ZAPU and ZANU Guerrilla Warfare; Alexander and McGregor, 'War Stories'; Mhanda, Dzino; Martin and Johnson, Struggle for Zimbabwe; Frederikse, None but Ourselves; Mutambara, The Rebel in Me.

¹⁸ Compare to the vast number of scholarly monographs on other Cold War-era conflicts: R. B. Smith's An International History of the Vietnam War extends to three volumes; J. A. Marcum's history of the Angolan Revolution comprises two volumes, The Anatomy of an Explosion and Exile Politics and Guerrilla Warfare. See also Horne, Savage War of Peace; Nzongola-Ntalaja, The Congo; Short, Communist Insurrection in Malaya; and Feifer, Great Gamble. The two histories of Zimbabwe's war generally cited remain Moorcroft and McLaughlin, Rhodesian War, written by two scholars who were Rhodesian reservist servicemen during the conflict and who draw much of their account from unpublished and un-cited Rhodesian sources, and Martin and Johnson, Struggle for Zimbabwe, which has been considered as partial towards ZANU's perspective (particularly at the expense of ZAPU), and features a foreword written by Robert Mugabe.

 ¹⁹ Evans, 'Wretched of the Empire', pp. 180, 186–7; Godwin and Hancock, '*Rhodesians* Never Die', pp. 311–12. See also pp. 39, 74–5, 115–16, 170, 182.

²⁰ Burns, 'In Rhodesia', p. 4.

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The small amount of scholarship published during or soon after the war was also largely characterised by poor accuracy for, as McLaughlin argued in 1978, 'researchers are reduced to relying largely on official communiques, hearsay and intelligent guesswork'.²¹ For instance, Cynthia Enloe, a renowned scholar of military affairs, used black Rhodesian soldiers as a case study in her book Ethnic Soldiers, but makes several notable errors, asserting that 'in 1976 it was announced that ... some blacks would be allowed to become non-commissioned officers [NCOs] in their own regiments', despite the fact that black soldiers had been NCOs since the formation of the RNR in 1916.²² Likewise, she claimed that 'paratroopers, an elite unit in many militaries, likewise remain an all-white institution in Rhodesia',²³ which is incorrect given that the RAR provided half of the airborne Fireforce companies, discussed later, and that many African soldiers boasted more than forty combat parachute jumps, placing them firmly among the most experienced combat paratroopers in the history of warfare.²⁴

During the war, journalists critical of the Rhodesian government tended also to make misleading assertions about black soldiers because they simply inverted the story told in Rhodesian propaganda. The academic and novelist David Caute - a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford - authored a widely cited account of the war, Under the Skin: The Death of White Rhodesia, which falls into this trap. Caute trumpets his prolonged period of research in Rhodesia, but his discussion of black soldiers is error-strewn. For instance, he falsely claimed that 'the 3,000 black troops of the RAR were regarded essentially as support units' in an effort to counter Rhodesian claims that they signalled black support for the war against the liberation movements.²⁵ As was obvious to any casual observer of the war, the RAR were in fact front-line infantry troops.

Caute also claimed that the Selous Scouts was 'a unit just like any other', though, as discussed later, it was in fact a highly unusual unit, and gained much infamy for this reason.²⁶ Caute further diminishes the role of black troops by depicting RAR recruits as 'famished peasants, desperate refugees from the shanty-towns, and a few genuine uncle Toms [who] come in search of (R)47 a month'.²⁷ As we shall see, none of these claims (including the rate of pay) are accurate, while the 'uncle Tom' jibe implies racial servility and moral failing.²⁸

Under the Skin highlights how many powerful Rhodesian whites were racist and hypocritical and casually embraced extreme forms of violence

- ²¹ McLaughlin, 'Thin White Line', p. 186. ²² Enloe, Ethnic Soldiers, p. 81.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 125.
- ²⁴ Stapleton, African Police and Soldiers, p. 206; Downie, Frontline Rhodesia.
 ²⁵ Caute, Under the Skin, p. 187.
 ²⁶ Ibid., p. 106.
 ²⁷ Ibid., p. 190.

²⁸ See, for instance, Martin and Turner, 'Why African-Americans Loathe "Uncle Tom"'.

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to perpetuate a colonial lifestyle. But Caute's discussion of black soldiers resorts to a crude inversion of Rhodesian propaganda that lacks evidence and serves to denigrate their military effectiveness and to cast them as motived by desperation, greed, or a traitorous alliance with white settlers. Caute's book demonstrates that even accounts of the war researched at length failed to get to grips with the nature of black soldiers' military service and loyalties.

I have highlighted the errors in these texts by Enloe and Caute because they show how even noted scholars erred significantly in their depiction of black soldiers owing to the prevalence of Rhodesian narratives. They also indicate how some chroniclers of the war allowed their political beliefs to fundamentally inform their writing. Enloe and Caute's accounts – along with others with similar flaws – have subsequently been widely cited. This has led to an unwitting reproduction of images and narratives of black Rhodesian troops that are grossly distorted or are simply untrue.

Outside of the scholarly literature, the predominant narratives of the war have come to be bisected between two schools which I identify as 'Patriotic History' and 'neo-Rhodesian'. These renderings have long dominated the popular literature and public discourse of the war: Patriotic History for a ZANU(PF)-derived nationalist discourse, and neo-Rhodesian literature sympathetic to minority rule. These discursive polar opposites reflect the 'myths and simplistic narratives which have come to dominate "official" Zimbabwean histories of the war, in which "whites" are positioned against "blacks".²⁹ In this regard, they reflect writing on other wars of decolonisation, such as the 'Manichean perspective that has framed the great bulk of writing on the Algerian War and the French Army'.³⁰

Before discussing neo-Rhodesian narratives, I turn to Patriotic History, which is a form of victor's history that has come to prominence in Zimbabwe since the post-1998 economic and political crisis. Inherent to this discourse is a political reimagining of wartime history that portrays it as won solely by ZANU(PF), reduces it to a simplistic binary racial narrative, and castigates all those associated with the colonial state as sellouts.

Patriotic History primarily takes the form of media, performance, speeches, and memorial practices, in contrast to the largely textual narratives sympathetic to the Rhodesian perspective (discussed below). It silences and demonises black soldiers for the political purpose of legitimising continued ZANU(PF) rule. It deliberately simplifies or ignores the

²⁹ Dorman, Understanding Zimbabwe, p. 17.

³⁰ Alexander, Evans, and Keiger, 'The "War without a Name"', p. 2.

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nature of black Rhodesian troops' loyalties, for its reductionist spin on liberation war history cannot parse their nuanced form of allegiance.

Wartime history is frequently contentious. The military historian Samuel Hynes cautions us to be wary of how wars are mythologised in retrospect, condensed into a comprehensive, oversimplified, and biased narrative – one which often deems them a 'good war' or a 'bad war'.³¹ Post-war myths can become intractable and are often tied up in the politics of the present. For instance, in 2002, Polish and Russian scholars created a working group to reassess twentieth-century Russo-Polish history, pockmarked by conflict, and even among these learned peers, 'the gap in perceptions was so wide that, when they published a book under the title White Spots, Black Spots, they decided to let a Polish and Russian historian give separate treatment to each delicate event'.³² In Ireland, the salient political divide for almost all of the past 100 years was not that of left and right, but that between two parties representing factional allegiance during the country's post-independence civil war.³³ It is not uncommon for post-war regimes to craft distorted historical narratives for political advantage.

In much of southern Africa, independence was achieved only through prolonged liberation struggle, and the post-independence politics of these countries have been drawn along wartime lines. The post-independence version of history that has been framed and endorsed by ruling parties has often been no less partial than the colonial hagiography and settler myth it replaced.³⁴ For such states founded through victory in conflict, wartime myths provide ruling parties with a deep well of lore; a foundational, binding narrative of the nation. These retellings often extol military sacrifices and achievements. As the historian Ronald Krebs noted, 'it is no accident that the symbols and rituals surrounding festivals of national independence and unification have traditionally been interwoven with martial imagery'.³⁵ Such folklore advances a narrative of victors' virtue, the losers condemned to perpetual pillory, thus constituting an ongoing basis for claiming legitimacy.

Former liberation movements in southern Africa realised the value of controlling the historical narrative during their transition to power,³⁶ and many subsequently sought to 'instrumentalise and appropriate national history for their own means' as part of a strategy to legitimise increasingly autocratic rule and corruption, or to marginalise new political enemies.³⁷ Examples include what Metsola refers to as the 'liberationist dichotomy

³⁶ Werbner, *Memory and the Postcolony*, p. 2.

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³¹ Hynes, Soldiers' Tale, p. xiii. ³² Barber, 'Russia Is Once Again Rewriting History'.

 ³³ See Dolan, Commemorating the Irish Civil War.
 ³⁴ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Death of the Subject'.
 ³⁵ Krebs, Fighting for Rights, p. 17.

³⁷ Schubert, '2002, Year Zero', p. 835.

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[as] the basis of SWAPO's legitimacy',³⁸ manifested in the militaristic and triumphalist memorialisation of Namibia's war of independence in Windhoek;³⁹ and the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola's (MPLA) propagation of a 'master narrative' wherein it portrays itself 'as the winner of the liberation struggle and the "natural representative" of the Angolan people as a whole' to the detriment of its political rivals.⁴⁰

Zimbabwe's history has been instrumentalised in this fashion. After winning power in 1980, Mugabe's government became increasingly reliant upon a highly partial narrative in which its supposed military achievements underwrote its authority. As White argued, 'the political world of the 1970s' became 'the founding moment of the nation', with the ZANU(PF) government deriving its legitimacy from the war.⁴¹ This tendency to rely on wartime narratives was greatly increased with the onset of Zimbabwe's economic crisis in the late 1990s.⁴²

Precipitous economic decline and social unrest meant that Mugabe's capacity to appeal to the delivery of development as a basis for legitimacy became far more difficult, and ZANU(PF) faced a major new opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), that was a serious rival for power.⁴³ This questioning of ZANU(PF)'s competence posed an existential threat to its dominance of post-independence politics.⁴⁴ Its response was to look inwards and to revert to and ratchet up rhetoric which 'emerged from the hegemonic and authoritarian circumstances of the nationalist liberation struggle'.⁴⁵

Terence Ranger labelled this post-2000 narrative 'Patriotic History'.⁴⁶ Its loci are cultural nationalism and wartime patriotism, which provide a 'usable past' in service of a partisan ZANU(PF) agenda.⁴⁷ As Miles Tendi has argued, it rendered all Zimbabweans either 'patriots' or 'sell-outs', with the pejorative affixed to ZANU(PF)'s opponents, who were 'automatically typecast as "sell-outs", "puppets", "un-African" and "pro-colonial".⁴⁸

- ³⁹ Kössler, 'Facing a Fragmented Past', pp. 369–72.
- ⁴⁰ Schubert, '2002, Year Zero'. Elsewhere see the Kenya African National Union's (KANU) instrumental usage of the 'ritual and spectacle of [Kenya's] anniversary celebrations to advertise and perpetuate their ideologies' through the 'inscription of monuments into Nairobi's landscape' – see Larsen, 'Notions of Nation', pp. 277–8.
- ⁴¹ White, Assassination of Herbert Chitepo, p. 94.
- ⁴² See Raftopoulos, *Becoming Zimbabwe*, pp. 201–32, for a detailed summary.
- ⁴³ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'The Post-colonial State', pp. 104–7.
- ⁴⁴ Sachikonye, 'Whither Zimbabwe?'
- ⁴⁵ Scarnecchia, 'The "Fascist Cycle" in Zimbabwe', p. 222.
- ⁴⁶ Ranger, 'Nationalist Historiography'.

⁴⁸ Tendi, 'Patriotic History', p. 380.

³⁸ Metsola, 'The Struggle Continues?', p. 608.

⁴⁷ Ndlovu-Gatsheni and Willems, 'Making Sense of Cultural Nationalism', p. 946. See also Scarnecchia, Urban Roots of Democracy; Kriger, 'Patriotic Memories'.