

Black Soldiers in the Rhodesian Army

During Zimbabwe's war of liberation (1965–80), fought between Zimbabwean nationalists and the minority-white Rhodesian settler-colonial regime, thousands of black soldiers volunteered for and served in the Rhodesian Army. This seeming paradox has often been noted by scholars and military researchers, yet little has been heard from black Rhodesian veterans themselves. Drawing from original interviews with black Rhodesian veterans and extensive archival research, M. T. Howard tackles the question of why so many black soldiers fought steadfastly and effectively for the Rhodesian Army, demonstrating that they felt loyalty to their comrades and regiments and not the Smith regime. Howard also shows that units in which black soldiers served – particularly the Rhodesian African Rifles – were fundamental to the Rhodesian counter-insurgency campaign. Highlighting the pivotal role black Rhodesian veterans played during both the war and the tumultuous early years of independence, this is a crucial contribution to the study of Zimbabwean decolonisation.

M. T. Howard is a historian and journalist from East Sussex and holds a master's and a doctorate from the University of Oxford, where he won the Terence Ranger Prize. He also received the Society for Military History's 2021 Coffman Prize honourable mention. His work has been published in journals including the *Journal of Military History*, the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, and the *Journal of Cold War Studies*.

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Black Soldiers in the Rhodesian Army

Colonialism, Professionalism, and Race

M. T. Howard

University of Oxford



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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
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103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

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This book is dedicated to my mother, Serena, an immigrant who was abandoned and left to raise three children without an income. During this time, our youngest sister, Tamzin, lost a prolonged battle with cancer. Despite these adversities, my sister Chantelle and I received a good upbringing, a testament to our mother's fortitude and bravery. It is also dedicated to Graham Warren, who selflessly and steadfastly parented us too.

The stars are dead. The animals will not look.
We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and
History to the defeated
May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon.

W. H. Auden, *Spain 1937*.

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Preface

Here I provide an extremely short overview of Zimbabwe's colonial past and the events leading up to, and of, its war of liberation (1965–79). It is not exhaustive or authoritative, for the history and historiography of this period remain highly contested, but it is simply intended to serve as a broad sketch for readers unfamiliar with the complex history and provide context for later discussion. Those versed in the history may wish to proceed to Chapter 1.

Zimbabwe's antecedent was the settler colony of Rhodesia, established in 1890 by the arch-imperialist Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company (BSAC).¹ Rhodesian settlers and administrators divided the heterogeneous African population of the country into two supposed ethnic categories: 'Shona' and 'Matabele', a gross simplification based upon the main languages spoken.²

Rhodesia was, as per David Fieldhouse's typology of settler colonialism, a 'mixed' settler colony, where 'settlers had encountered a resilient and sizeable indigenous population'.³ Two early wars occurred: in 1893 between the settlers and the Ndebele kingdom, and in 1896 when Shona-speaking peoples in the east joined a swift and lethal uprising by Ndebele-speaking peoples. The white settler population was 'literally decimated',⁴ its losses 'greater than the proportion of casualties suffered by white colonists in the Algerian national rising or the Mau Mau war in

¹ Rhodesia was initially named Zambesia. It was testament to Cecil Rhodes' rapacious sub-imperialism and propensity for extreme violence that he became 'the only European capitalist to have an African colony actually named for him' (Freund, *Making of Contemporary Africa*, p. 102).

² Dorman, *Understanding Zimbabwe*, p. 18; Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, p. 4. Many people have both 'Shona' and 'Ndebele' ancestry. See Lindgren, 'Internal Dynamics of Ethnicity'.

³ Fieldhouse, *Colonial Empires*, as cited in Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, p. 5. In contrast, the 'plantation' colonies were dependent upon slavery and bondage (e.g. European colonial rule in the Caribbean from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth), and the 'pure settlement' colonies were where 'white settlers had eradicated and/or marginalised the indigenous population' (e.g. Australia, Canada).

⁴ McLaughlin, *Ragtime Soldiers*, p. 73.

Kenya'.⁵ But for British reinforcements – the last British troops sent to Rhodesia until 1979 – the settlers would have been defeated.

Thereafter settler authorities foregrounded internal security, reflecting the vulnerability of Rhodesia's white population, which was always tiny. It only exceeded 5 per cent of the total Rhodesian population for 'nine years from 1955 to 1964, peaking in 1961 at 5.7 per cent' – or 277,000 – and thereafter falling until the end of settler rule in 1980.⁶

Settlers speculatively based Rhodesia's early economy on gold, hoping to repeat the Witwatersrand rush. However, it came to be dominated by farming, particularly cash export crops. Land assumed paramount importance.

In 1923, BSAC rule was ended and the settlers obtained self-government as Southern Rhodesia. Although formally part of the British Empire, Southern Rhodesia was not administered from London and its government had near-total internal autonomy. Westminster never once used its constitutionally enshrined veto over Southern Rhodesian legislation pertaining to the rights of the African population.

By the onset of World War II, settlers 'had dramatically transformed the land and authority over it, creating a racially based division between freehold "European" land and the "communal" reserves'.⁷ Segregationist policies were implemented and Southern Rhodesian authorities passed a great array of legislation 'to ensure an expanding supply of labour and to divide the economy into non-competing racial groups'.⁸ The Land Apportionment Act of 1930 segregated the land, giving whites exclusive use of more than half of it – which included most of the best-watered and most fertile areas – and largely restricting blacks to poorer-quality and remote 'Native Reserves' and 'Native Purchase Areas'. It was implemented fully in the 1940s and 1950s, leading to large-scale evictions.⁹ In 1953, British fears of the rise of the National Party in South Africa and its potential influence on Rhodesian whites prompted London to integrate Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), and Nyasaland (Malawi) into the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, an ersatz Dominion dominated by white political interests.

African nationalism was well established in Rhodesia by this time, particularly in the country's new industrial urban and suburban areas.¹⁰ The Southern Rhodesian government banned all nationalist parties and

⁵ Gann, *History of Southern Rhodesia*, pp. 9–10, as quoted in Ranger, *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia*, p. 225. See also Selous, *Sunshine and Storm in Rhodesia*, p. 250.

⁶ Brownell, *Collapse of Rhodesia*, p. 5. ⁷ Alexander, *Unsettled Land*, p. 39.

⁸ Arrighi, 'Political Economy of Rhodesia', p. 41.

⁹ Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 'Mapping Cultural and Colonial Encounters', pp. 66–7.

¹⁰ See Scarnecchia, *Urban Roots of Democracy*.

in 1960 enacted the notorious Law and Order (Maintenance) Act, which facilitated repression on an enormous scale. Federal Chief Justice Robert Tredgold described it as removing ‘the last vestige of doubt about whether Rhodesia is a police state’.¹¹

The rise of African nationalism, and the consequent British policy of decolonisation signalled by Harold Macmillan’s 1960 ‘Wind of Change’ speech, rendered the Federation unviable, and it was dissolved in 1963, with Zambia and Malawi achieving their independence the next year. Southern Rhodesia’s white political right coalesced around the Rhodesian Front (RF) party, founded in explicit opposition to majority rule. In its first electoral campaign of 1962, it won thirty-five out of sixty-five seats, thereafter remaining in power until 1979. Ian Smith, a boorish squire with hard-right political views, extensive links to South Africa, and storied World War II service with the Royal Air Force (RAF), took the leadership of the party in 1964, becoming the country’s first Rhodesian-born prime minister.

Intent on resisting decolonisation, Smith made the infamous Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in 1965, illegally seceding from Britain. Smith’s rebellion against the Crown created an unrecognised, renegade state thereafter widely known as Rhodesia, which declared itself a republic in 1970. It acquired pariah status, becoming the first recipient of mandatory economic sanctions in the history of the United Nations.¹² African nationalists concluded that ‘the only way to attain majority rule in Rhodesia was through an armed struggle’.¹³ This was expected by the Rhodesian government, which had commenced preparations in the mid-1950s for an internal counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign.¹⁴

The war for Zimbabwe commenced around this time.¹⁵ There were two main nationalist parties, the Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). The

¹¹ Harold-Barry, ‘One Country, Two Nations’, pp. 254–5.

¹² See Minter and Schmidt, ‘When Sanctions Worked’. Rhodesia became perhaps the world’s strangest case study in demonstrating the success of state-sponsored import substitution, for its economy boomed during the early UDI period. Although this growth did not last once capital inputs deteriorated and replacements could not be purchased on the open world market, the Rhodesian GDP grew ‘on average an impressive 8.6 per cent annually in real terms between 1968 and 1974’ (Anglin, ‘Zimbabwe’, p. 671).

¹³ Tungamirai, ‘Recruitment to ZANLA’, p. 36. ¹⁴ Melson, *Fighting for Time*, p. 19.

¹⁵ In Zimbabwe, the war is commonly referred to as the war of liberation, which is also the term most frequently used in the scholarly literature and succinctly conveys that the conflict was fought to end the oppressive, racist, settler-colonial control of the state. I thus use this term throughout this book. However, no real consensus has been reached on the name of the war. For those aligned with ZANU, the conflict has been referred to as the Second Chimurenga, rendering it a successor to the anti-colonial uprising of 1896–7. Rhodesians named the conflict the Bush War.

former, founded in 1961, was led by Nkomo and its army was supported primarily by the Soviet Union and the Frontline States.¹⁶

In 1963, ZANU split from ZAPU owing to disagreements over strategy, among other things, and was led by nationalists who favoured a more militant strategy to deliver independence. It primarily drew patronage from the Frontline States and China.

The armed wing of ZAPU, named the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) in 1971, was primarily based in Zambia. The Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), which was formed by ZANU, largely operated from Mozambique after the early 1970s.

The availability of sanctuary in neighbouring countries was of paramount strategic importance to ZANLA and ZIPRA, as they could not hold territory within Rhodesia until the very end of the war. Mozambique and Zambia provided bases for training, organisation, and preparation for assaults into Rhodesia.¹⁷

Until the mid-1970s, the war was fought at a low intensity, and instances of fighting were infrequent. Inexperienced and inadequately trained guerrillas from the liberation movements suffered numerous heavy defeats against the Rhodesian Security Forces (RSF). Subsequently there was a lull in guerrilla activity as ZAPU reappraised its strategy, alongside a period of internecine factional struggle.¹⁸

In 1972, ZANLA launched an assault on a farmstead in Centenary, opening an eastern front, which is the moment many Rhodesians considered the war to have commenced in earnest.¹⁹ Mozambique's independence in 1975 altered the dynamic of the conflict significantly, its 1,200-kilometre border fully permeable to ZANLA cadres based there. A contemporaneous South African and Frontline State-led 'détente' mandated a temporary lull in fighting that allowed ZANLA in particular time to consolidate its forces following its own internal conflict.²⁰ After the failure of negotiations, the war reignited and escalated.

Fighting escalated most rapidly after 1977, by which time the liberation movements had grown enormously in military strength.²¹ The RSF

¹⁶ The Frontline States were southern African countries – Tanzania and Zambia predominant among them – which opposed white-minority rule in South Africa and Rhodesia and offered support to liberation movements.

¹⁷ Dabengwa, 'ZIPRA in Zimbabwe's War of National Liberation', p. 25.

¹⁸ Mtisi, Nyakudya, and Barnes, 'War in Rhodesia', pp. 141–4.

¹⁹ Abbott and Botham, *Modern African Wars*, p. 12; Moorcraft, *A Short Thousand Years*, p. 29.

²⁰ Tungamirai, 'Recruitment to ZANLA', p. 42; Cilliers, *Counterinsurgency in Rhodesia*, p. 23; Tendi, 'Transnationalism, Contingency and Loyalty'.

²¹ Mtisi, Nyakudya, and Barnes, 'War in Rhodesia', pp. 141–2.

‘could not expand fast enough to match the growth of ZANLA and ZIPRA, and were soon outnumbered except at times of total mobilization’.²² As early as 1977, the highest command echelon of the Rhodesian war effort assessed that the war was being lost, and in March 1979, Rhodesian intelligence told the government that it assessed the trained strength of ZANLA as 21,000, and ZIPRA 20,000,²³ numbers far superior to the Rhodesian Army’s 6,000 regular soldiers²⁴ and 15,000 reservists.²⁵ Although the regular Rhodesian Army was an effective and formidable fighting force, it was in danger of being overrun.

A mid-1979 Rhodesian Army briefing stated that, given its soldiers were outnumbered one to three, ‘in classical COIN terms, this is a no-win [war] or rather, a sure lose equation’.²⁶ Two thousand people were being killed or injured per month, and by the middle of 1979, ‘95 per cent of Rhodesia was under martial law’.²⁷ After previous false dawns, including the Kissinger-mandated Geneva talks of 1976, Smith and his RF hard-liners were finally compelled to accept binding negotiations. This was in no small part due to pressure from RSF commander Lt Gen. Walls and intelligence chief Ken Flower.

In December 1979, active hostilities ended, with the Lancaster House Agreement brokered by Britain prompting a ceasefire. The outcome of the war was an ambiguous stalemate wherein the RSF, ZANLA, and ZIPRA were all undefeated in military terms, and all retained the capacity to revert to arms.²⁸ Led since 1977 by Robert Mugabe, ZANU swept to a conclusive victory in the February 1980 election. Two months later, crowds filled Rufaro Stadium to celebrate independence.

²² Wood, ‘Countering the Chimurenga’, p. 199.

²³ Flower, *Serving Secretly*, pp. 175, 221.

²⁴ Rupiya, ‘Demobilization and Integration’, p. 31.

²⁵ Moorcraft and McLaughlin, *Rhodesian War*, p. 57.

²⁶ Cilliers, *Counterinsurgency in Rhodesia*, pp. 239–40.

²⁷ Moorcraft, ‘Rhodesia’s War of Independence’.

²⁸ Kriger, *Guerrilla Veterans in Post-war Zimbabwe*, p. 4.

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