

Uncovering the Reality of State Violence in Western Zimbabwe, 1982-1987

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The Zimbabwean state waged a sustained terror campaign in the southern and western parts of the country from 1982 to 1987. An estimated twenty thousand men, women, and children died during the campaign. Most victims were murdered by state security forces, and others succumbed to conditions of disease and deprivation. The origins, nature, and impact of this conflict are the subject of considerable contention, particularly between analysts, human rights activists, and the government of President Robert Mugabe. Official inquiries into the conduct of the state and its agents have had difficulty gaining access to relevant records, and the government has repeatedly denounced the findings of independent investigations as slanderous. The terror operation waged in Matabeleland and the Midlands provinces can be used as evidence to argue that the government of President Mugabe from early on in its rule developed a tradition of using violence and intolerance as a tool for consolidating political power.

Introduction

Zimbabwe became independent from British colonial rule in 1980 through a bitter armed struggle that pitted popular nationalist sentiment against the white supremacist regime of Ian Smith. The liberation war, which lasted from 1966 to 1979, produced a high level of mass politicization. It also exposed the entire population to a culture of racial disharmony, violence, terror, and intimidation. A ceasefire was finally signed at Lancaster House, London on 22 December 1979. The country celebrated independence three months later, and the black leadership pledged to build a new nation through a policy of national reconciliation.

The 1979 ceasefire, however, did not herald an era of peace and tranquility throughout the country. Before the ink on the peace agreement had dried, new hostilities broke out between the two main factions of the coalition government. The ruling ZANU-PF party then unleashed its North Korean-trained troops and other state agents to massacre civilians and members of ZAPU, the main opposition party, especially in western Zimbabwe, but also in cities and towns.¹ Estimates show that more than twenty thousand people, mostly civilians,

¹ZANU-PF stands for Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front, and ZAPU for Zimbabwe African Peoples' Union. These nationalist parties led the liberation struggle

were murdered between 1980 and 1987 in Matebeleland and the Midlands provinces.² There are various arguments that have been put forward to explain this regrettable chapter in Zimbabwean history, coming from a wide spectrum of analysts. Some studies of this conflict argue that it was the state's war against a perceived threat of counter-insurgency; others have depicted it as the legitimate, if brutal suppression of a dissident insurrection, thus supporting the official justification given by the state at the time the massacres were committed. However, a common theme of these studies is an effort to expose and condemn the abuse of power by the Zimbabwean state during and after the period in question.

It is against this background that I want to question the origins and effects of the 1980s conflict in Zimbabwe. I argue that this conflict emerged from a struggle for power between ZANU-PF and ZAPU, and that the atrocities committed as a result of this struggle were a deliberate violation of human rights in pursuit of political gain. Whereas the Mugabe government has declared that an inquiry into the conflict is unnecessary and mischievous, I submit that this crime against humanity should be subjected to intensive investigation in order to encourage justice, social harmony, and lasting unity in the country. My aim in writing about this topic is to expose the deeper roots of the current chaos in Zimbabwe, since the country is in the midst of a multi-faceted crisis that started when the government sponsored a controversial land redistribution program in the year 2000. This is a broad area of study, which cannot be explored in an article of this scope: what I seek to show here is that ZANU-PF and the government of Robert Mugabe have a tradition of violence and intimidation in order to establish and maintain power that began with the campaign against ZAPU in the mid-1980s.

In the first part of this essay, I focus on the different theories put forward by scholars to explain the genesis and evolution of the postcolonial conflict. I start from the time of modern Zimbabwean nationalism, which tapped into popular hatred toward unjust colonial practices.³ The vanguard of Zimbabwean nationalism was composed almost entirely of the elite, but went on to broaden its base and incorporate the wider society before and during the liberation war. Cracks within this leadership resulted in political disunity and eventually violence after the country secured independence from Britain. The second part of this article examines the different categories of state agents who perpetrated this violence and mass murder. Considerable work has already been done in terms of

against colonial rule that led to independence in 1980. At the time of independence, they formed a coalition government, which then broke down in 1982.

² See "US blasts Zim rights abuses," *The Financial Gazette*, 3/20/03; www.fingaz.co.zw.

³ On Zimbabwean nationalism, see N. M. Shamuyarira, *Crisis in Rhodesia* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1965), 62-65.

chronicling how government forces slaughtered innocent victims, leaving thousands dead.⁴ Apart from identifying the organizational structure behind the violence, I also focus closely on the experiences of the civilian populations of Matebeleland and the Midlands, which included abduction, torture, rape, starvation, displacement, and murder.

Myth versus Reality: Origins of the 1980s Conflict

The official justification for the clash that broke out in 1982 between ZANU-PF and ZAPU was that the government was attacking bands of ex-combatants who refused to comply with efforts to integrate all armed groups into a national army. Subsequently, the government described these dissidents as agents of ZAPU bent on destroying national unity, toppling the government, and wreaking further instability. This charge gave the government an excuse to attack both the leadership of ZAPU and its supporters, including civilians. However, the hostilities between ZANU-PF and ZAPU actually originated much earlier, during the struggles for power and moral authority between members of the nationalist leadership. Joshua Nkomo, the leader of ZAPU was criticized by some within the nationalist movement at the time, including Robert Mugabe, Ndabaningi Sithole, and Nathan Shamuyarira. This faction accused Nkomo of going too far in his effort to obtain independence through negotiation with the colonial regime, given the increasing intransigence of the Smith government.⁵ The in-house squabbles among the leadership led in 1963 to the splitting of the nationalist movement into ZANU-PF and ZAPU. Following this split, the military wing of ZAPU, the Zimbabwe Peoples' Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), came under the direct leadership of Nkomo.

From 1974 onwards, ZANU-PF was under the leadership of Robert Mugabe, and the military wing of his party, the Zimbabwe African National Army (ZANLA), under the command of Josiah Tongogara. Mugabe sidestepped Sithole as party leader when the ZANU-PF Executive Committee passed a vote of no confidence against Sithole following his conviction for plotting to assassinate Ian Smith. According to journalists David Smith and Colin Simpson, the ZANU-PF Executive Committee made the decision to depose Sithole by arguing that he was cracking under the pressure of detention at Harare Central Prison, a plausible

⁴ The most comprehensive work to date is by the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe (CCJPZ) and the Legal Resources Foundation (LRF), *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report into the Disturbances in Matebeleland and the Midlands, 1980-1988*. Summary version at www.zwnews.com/bts/bts.html.

⁵ See autobiography of E. Zvobgo, in D. Mitchell, *African Nationalist Leaders in 1980: Who is Who* (Harare: Diana Mitchell, 1980), 74-75.

argument considering that Sithole unsuccessfully conspired with the Smith government to dissolve ZANU in return for exile in the United States.⁶

Mass mobilization during the war of liberation significantly heightened the potential for factionalism along ethnic and regional lines, particularly after the ZANU-PF/ZAPU split. For example, the membership of Mugabe's fighting forces was largely drawn from Shona-speaking people, the predominant ethnic group in Zimbabwe, accounting for an estimated seventy-five per cent of the population. Their military training and support came from Eastern Europe, Mozambique, and China, which led to the adoption of a Maoist military strategy of waging hard-core guerrilla war and drawing much of the countryside into direct participation.⁷ ZANLA fighters infiltrated the country from the northern and eastern boarder points, and the bulk of their military operations were in Shona-speaking provinces. Nkomo's fighting forces were drawn from western Zimbabwe, and most were Ndebele speakers, which constituted the second largest ethnic group, accounting for an estimated twenty per cent of the population. They were better trained, had a more efficient high command, and adopted a more conventional military approach, having been trained in Angola, Libya, and the Soviet Union.⁸ They opted to infiltrate the country from Zambia, largely using the southern and western boarder points.

Clashes over the mobilization of peasant support broke out between forces of the two political parties on a number of occasions, both inside and outside Zimbabwe. These clashes also affected the peasant population, since both armies competed to control strategic areas in the country, thereby dividing loyalties among the masses. Efforts by the two parties to reunite under one leadership were made on several occasions, but failed due to a combination of personal ambition and disagreements over strategy. The immense tension generated by this "struggle within a struggle" led to division in the immediate post-independence era, and eventually to extreme state violence against ZAPU, dissidents, and their perceived supporters.

ZANU-PF and ZAPU bargained for independence as a unified front during the Lancaster House talks, despite the previous factionalism. The chosen spokesperson for the conference was Eddison Zvobgo, although Mugabe's defiant mood and critical arguments threatened to derail the talks.⁹ Nationalist leaders had previously achieved a unity of purpose for the Geneva Conference in October 1976, but this unity had also proven temporary, collapsing soon after the failed Conference.

⁶ D. Smith and C. Simpson, *Mugabe* (Harare: Pioneer Head, 1981), 61.

⁷ N. J. Krigger, *Zimbabwe's Guerilla War: Peasant Voices* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1995), 118.

⁸ D. Smith and C. Simpson, *Mugabe*, 93.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

When the nationalist leaders returned home following the Lancaster House talks to prepare for Zimbabwe's first general elections, Mugabe announced that ZANU-PF would participate as an autonomous party. According to Julie Frederikse, "Mugabe maintained that he was motivated by a desire to clarify the support for each wing of the Patriotic Front through the electoral process, rather than through post-electoral bargaining."¹⁰ It is clear that Mugabe realized his chances of winning the election were favourable and his desire to claim office prompted him to upstage Nkomo at the crucial moment. The pre-election period was a bitter episode, especially for Nkomo, because of the rivalry with Mugabe's party. He complained to the Governor, Christopher Soames: "I don't understand why Robert is doing this to me. He was my friend. We fought the war together. We've brought our forces together. And now Robert has cut me off."¹¹ Nkomo had always felt that as the father of Zimbabwean nationalism, the highest office in independent Zimbabwe would be his.

The election results showed strong support for Mugabe.¹² Journalist David Blair has focused primarily on ethnic loyalties as an explanation for this victory: "Mugabe was from the largest Shona people, comprising about seventy per cent of the population, whereas Nkomo's constituency among the Ndebele was barely twenty per cent."¹³ However, the pattern of voting shows a high level of support for ZANU-PF towards the end of the liberation war, primarily due to military achievements and ideological appeal rather than ethnic influence. The Maoist rhetoric and revolutionary promises made by ZANU-PF had a strong influence when voters cast their ballots, since most of them were convinced that ZANU-PF was "more extreme" than ZAPU and would move swiftly to fulfill its revolutionary ideals. The mutual mistrust between ZANU-PF and ZAPU members eventually developed into open confrontation between 1980 and 1982. The ensuing ZANU-PF military campaign which led to the atrocities discussed below should be understood in this context.

Reconstruction after the war of liberation was beset by numerous problems which undermined the unity between different sections of the population. Racial and political differences connected with the colonial past were a fertile ground for retribution. As a result, a sizeable portion of the white community opted to leave the country rather than live under a black government, mostly migrating to South

¹⁰ J. Frederikse, *None But Ourselves: Masses vs Media in the Making of Zimbabwe* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), 289.

¹¹ Cited in M. Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns: Robert Mugabe and the Tragedy of Zimbabwe* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 38.

¹² Mugabe's ZANU PF swept fifty-seven parliamentary seats, and Nkomo's ZAPU polled twenty. Abel Muzorewa's United African National Council [UANC] won three seats, while Sithole won one.

¹³ D. Blair, *Degrees in Violence: Robert Mugabe and the Struggle for Power in Zimbabwe* (London: Continuum, 2002), 12.

Africa, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. However, Mugabe promised to overcome these difficulties by proclaiming a policy of national reconciliation, stating that Zimbabweans were one people in spite of their different colors. In his widely quoted inauguration speech, Mugabe said:

If yesterday I fought you as an enemy, today you have become a friend and ally with the same national interest, loyalty, rights, and duties as myself. If yesterday you hated me, today you cannot avoid the love that binds you to me and me to you. If ever we look to the past, let us do so for the lesson the past has taught us, namely that oppression and racism are iniquities that must never again find scope in our political and social system.¹⁴

Zimbabwe appeared to the whole world as a beacon of racial and class harmony, contrary to initial expectations.¹⁵ Mugabe's policy of national reconciliation seemed to offer hope and promise at a time when advocates of social justice worldwide looked to Zimbabwe as a potential example of democracy, economic prosperity, and social cohesion. Overall, Mugabe's pursuit of national reconciliation was a practical policy that promised to repair much of the socio-economic disruption caused by the brutal war of liberation.

On the other hand, reconciliation was also a huge blow to the very revolutionary ethos that had sustained the liberation war, since it prevented just and equitable access to land and other economic resources by hitherto marginalized blacks. Rather than addressing popular grievances against the colonial regime, the new leadership preserved and centralized the colonial structures of power around itself, thus becoming a new image of the old order. Not surprisingly, this created disaffection among peasants and some veterans of the anticolonial war, who saw no difference between the old and new regimes.¹⁶ A deep disillusionment gradually set in, weakening solidarity between elites and masses. Failure to redress racially biased land ownership patterns triggered immediate civil unrest. The central reason for Zimbabwe's failure to carry out land redistribution plans is that the Land Clauses in the Lancaster House Constitution gave the Mugabe government only limited room to restructure the agricultural sector by taking away land from white farmers. Under the Lancaster House Constitution, an agreement was reached whereby Zimbabwe would shelve

¹⁴ Cited in *The Bulawayo Chronicle*, 18 April 1980.

¹⁵ Personal communication with Dr. Guy Thompson. Dr. Thompson spoke of the huge applause accorded Prime Minister Mugabe for adopting a policy of national reconciliation when he visited Toronto in 1982. Amid the applause was a voice, which shouted that Mugabe was already murdering people in southern and western Zimbabwe.

¹⁶ See R. Webner, *Tears of the Dead: A Social Biography Of an African Family* (Edinburgh: EUP, 1991), 163-166.

comprehensive land reform for ten years in return for British financial support to compensate dispossessed commercial farmers. The British Conservative government that gained power in 1979 set preconditions that ensured ZANU-PF would be unable to carry out meaningful redistribution of land to peasants without breaching the constitutional legalities which ended the war and brought independence in the first place. Access to land was only possible on a "willing buyer - willing seller" basis, a precondition that effectively prevented the Zimbabwe government from redistributing land to the black population.

The pretext given by the state for launching a military campaign in southern and western Zimbabwe between 1980 and 1987 was to safeguard national security against dissidents, referring to soldiers who deserted when ZANLA, ZIPRA, and the Rhodesian Front forces were being integrated into the Zimbabwe National Army between 1980 and 1983. ZANLA and ZIPRA fighters who deserted strongly suspected that the war would not end, and that rallying at designated Assembly Points in 1979/80 would make them vulnerable to attack by Rhodesian Front forces. Another more general grievance was that the new government failed to live up to its wartime promises of land redistribution and other policies that would ensure racial equality and social justice. As a way of expressing their frustration with the new government, some veterans of the armed struggle deserted the army and started an ill-defined and loosely organized terrorist campaign. They engaged in several acts of violence in the countryside, particularly in Matebeleland and the Midlands provinces, including the murder of six tourists in July 1982. In the northeastern parts of the country as well, former ZANLA combatants carried out numerous terrorist activities, including the abduction, torture, rape, and murder of ordinary villagers. The government swiftly sent police to bring the culprits under control before they caused more severe problems, such as those that occurred in western Zimbabwe.

The "dissident" threat was conflated with other incidents perceived to undermine national security. For example, the South African apartheid regime recruited and trained numbers of ex-combatants and former members of the Rhodesian Intelligence forces with the aim of carrying out acts of sabotage in Zimbabwe.¹⁷ Events directly linked to the South African policy included an attack on Mugabe's residence in the Highfield suburb of Harare and the bombing of Thornhill air base.¹⁸ Two men arrested on 9 December 1982 confessed to being part of a group of fifty Zimbabweans trained and sent by South Africa to carry out acts of sabotage. South African attempts to destabilize Zimbabwe were part of an effort to counter the tide of democratic rule sweeping across southern Africa in

¹⁷ S. Jenkins, "Destabilization in Southern Africa," *The Economist*, 16 July 1983.

¹⁸ See J. Hanlon, *Apartheid's Second Frontier: South Africa's War Against Its Neighbours* (Ontario: Penguin, 1986), 9-10.

the 1970s.¹⁹ In another case, arms caches were discovered in 1982 on a farm owned by members of ZAPU which had enough rifles, machine guns, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, and cases of ammunition to arm five thousand men.²⁰ Immediately, Nkomo and senior ZAPU officials were removed from parliament and charged with treason.²¹ The dismissal of Nkomo sparked more desertions from the army, especially by ex-ZIPRA combatants, who regarded this as evidence of ethnic discrimination. Zwelibanze Nzuma, a former ZAPU combatant found guilty of terrorist acts in 1982, made this confession: "I was willing to go back to the bush and fight. I was going to fight for Nkomo, because I wanted to see him back in parliament."²² For his part, Nkomo made a determined effort to dissociate himself from the rebels and publicly encouraged them to surrender to state forces. However, by this time the situation was out of his control, since Mugabe had seen an opportunity to stamp out the challenge posed by ZAPU once and for all.

The occurrence of acts of sabotage and discovery of arms caches had the impact of deepening suspicion between members of the coalition government. ZANU-PF alleged that attacks on state property were an attempt by ZAPU to topple the government. At this point, the chance for a negotiated resolution to the problem was lost, since Prime Minister Mugabe went on to liken Nkomo and ZAPU officials to cobras in the house. He added that the "only way to deal effectively with a cobra is to strike and destroy its head."²³ ZANU-PF invoked "national security concerns" to legitimate its persecution of the opposition party. The terrorist attacks by South Africa were indeed a menace to Zimbabwe, especially given the political instability in southern Africa in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, the state did not distinguish between the threat posed by South Africa and that represented by dissidents, and as a result, it began to target innocent civilians.

The government's attack on "dissidents," which soon became a conflict between the state and ZAPU and eventually led to the massacre of civilians, is more intricate and shrouded in controversy than most scholars have recognized. Richard Werbner has characterized the conflict as a "counter-insurgency" caused

¹⁹ R. Weitzer, "In Search of Regime Security: Zimbabwe since Independence," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 22: 4 (1984): 535-537.

²⁰ C. Banana, *Turmoil and Tenacity, Zimbabwe 1890 - 1990* (Harare: College Press, 1989), 23.

²¹ Former ZIPRA commanders Dumiso Dabengwa and Lookout Masuku were eventually acquitted, but detained without charges.

²² Cited in Hanlon, *Apartheid's Second Frontier*, 11.

²³ J. Nkomo, cited in Blair, *Degrees in Violence*, 27.

by quasi-nationalism.²⁴ Zimbabwean scholars for the most part argue that the persecution of opponents was a pretext used by Mugabe to create a one party state.²⁵ Explanations given by the state have been contradictory and far from convincing, in part because the state does not want the incidents to be investigated.²⁶ Therefore, the only sources available to historians are newspaper reports and testimonies of victims recorded by church and human rights activists. Accounts by some survivors have portrayed the massacres as a form of ethnic cleansing, suggesting that Mugabe wanted to wipe out all Ndebeles.²⁷ They also express the opinion that Mugabe wanted to punish the Ndebele as a reprisal for supporting Nkomo during and after the liberation war. My own view is that the element of ethnicity represents a retrospective interpretation of the atrocities by some survivors, since ethnic identity took on a new meaning and importance as a result of the conflict. Therefore, ethnic difference cannot be regarded as a valid explanation for the origins of the terror campaign.

The one-party state thesis is more convincing as part of the explanation for the conflict. Welshman Ncube, a Zimbabwean scholar, is a proponent of this view.²⁸ He bases his argument on the Unit Accord signed between ZANU-PF and ZAPU in 1987, after which ZAPU was absorbed into ZANU-PF, and the massacres were immediately stopped. Mugabe also stated before the massacres that he would not tolerate an opposition political party, but rather wanted to "absorb and eliminate" all opposition.²⁹ To this end, he declared in 1981: "A one-party state is the concept we have...ZANU-PF and ZAPU [should] come together and form the basis for a government.... [O]ther parties . . . are not consequential."³⁰ By 1983, Mugabe had made some progress in his pursuit of a one-party state policy. Alfred Nhema notes that Mugabe was behind the split of the Rhodesian Front in 1983, which gave rise to the Independent Zimbabwe Group (IZG). This organization supported Mugabe and was absorbed into

²⁴ R. Werbner, "Smoke From the Barrel of the Gun: Postwars of the Dead, Memory and Reinscription in Zimbabwe," in *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*, ed. R. Werbner (London: Zed Books, 1998), 92-95.

²⁵ See I. Mandaza and L. Sachikonye, eds., *The One Party and Democracy: The Zimbabwe Debate* (Harare: SAPES Trust, 1991).

²⁶ "Bid to have Gukurahundi reports published quashed," *The Herald*, 22/11/03; www.herald.co.zw.

²⁷ Cited in Werbner, *Tears of the Dead*, 162.

²⁸ Welshman Ncube, "Constitutionalism, Democracy and Political Practice in Zimbabwe," in *The One Party and Democracy: The Zimbabwe Debate*, eds. I. Mandaza and L. Sachikonye (Harare: SAPES Trust, 1991), 160.

²⁹ I. Mandaza and L. Sachikonye, "The Zimbabwe Debate on the One-Party State and Democracy" in *The One Party and Democracy*, eds. I. Mandaza and L. Sachikonye (Harare: SAPES Trust, 1991), 6-7.

³⁰ Cited in A. G. Nhema, *Democracy in Zimbabwe: From Liberation to Liberalization* (Harare: UZP Press, 2002), 113.

ZANU-PF, thus reinforcing his policy of absorption and elimination.³¹ Werbner views the cruel violence of the 1980s as intrinsic to the formation of the Zimbabwean nation-state in the twentieth century. He argues that the conflict was caused by quasi-nationalism and the struggle for power and moral authority in a new state.³² I have cited a variety of factors stretching in time from the liberation war to the era of reconstruction in an effort to explain the origins of mass murder in Zimbabwe. These factors were interconnected and mutually reinforcing, and their interaction eventually resulted in large-scale organized violence and the trampling of human rights. Nevertheless, though these factors gave initial impetus to the conflict, it was the deployment of security forces to the region that radicalized the situation.

Perpetrators of Violence and Massacre

I have defined a perpetrator as a person (or group of people) that inflicts harm on another person (or group of people) or their property. ZANU-PF and the state security system were the primary perpetrators. The leadership of ZAPU and its supporters were victims, as were the unarmed civilians of south and west Zimbabwe who made up the largest class of casualties. In my analysis, "dissidents" qualify as perpetrators and as victims. "Dissidents" were perpetrators because they terrorized white farmers, local businesses, rural bus operators, tourists, and ordinary villagers. I have also classified them as victims of the liberation struggle. Their wartime aspirations were marginalized in the new dispensation, and state forces hunted them down. The prime target of their anger was the state itself, but inadequate organization, power, support and resources limited their effectiveness to targeting civilians.

The hierarchy of perpetrators was commanded by the state, headed by then Prime Minister Robert Mugabe. Beginning in February 1982, the state launched a four-pronged attack, striking ZAPU, "dissidents," South African-backed dissidents, and finally ordinary villagers. With respect to ZAPU, Mugabe accused Nkomo of siding with the Smith regime and of attempting to topple the new government. He said his heart had been "torn apart" by the discovery that Nkomo and ZAPU wanted to "sell the country to our oppressors and to create further strife, fear and bloodshed."³³ Mugabe also attacked the minor opposition political parties, whose members were verbally assaulted in parliament.

³¹ A. G. Nhema, *Democracy in Zimbabwe*, 115.

³² R. Werbner, "In Memory: A Heritage of War in South-western Zimbabwe," in *Society and Zimbabwe's Liberating War*, eds. T. Ranger and N. Bhebe (Harare: UZP, 1996), 197.

³³ Cited in M. Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns*, 63.

The Catholic Church noted that from mid-1982 onwards, the government chose not to distinguish between "dissidents" and those they alleged to be the supporters of dissidents.³⁴ Mugabe declared at a rally in Matebeleland that:

We have to deal with this [dissident] problem quite ruthlessly. Don't cry if your relatives get killed in the process. When men and women provide food for the 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.³⁵

In an interview with the BBC in 1983, Mugabe made another warlike statement, threatening that "The dissident party and its dissident father [Nkomo] are both destined not only for rejection, but for utter destruction as well."³⁶ These remarks express Mugabe's acknowledgement that the fight against dissidents was indiscriminate, and that the murder of villagers by national troops was considered as "part of the solution."

The attack on ZAPU was subsequently felt not only by the leadership and its activists, but also by its supporters, both in rural and in urban areas. In another BBC interview, this one in 1984, Mugabe clearly recognized that villagers of south and west Zimbabwe were caught in the crossfire, concluding that "The situation is one which requires a change on the part of the people of Matebeleland. They must be reoriented."³⁷ In an act of heavy handed determination, the Prime Minister invoked Emergency Powers, which gave him the authority to impose curfews, set-up roadblocks, detain people without trial, and search homes. State security forces deployed in the region and targeted everyone suspected of being a supporter of ZAPU. Werbner described the situation when soldiers descended on the villages in the following words: "To be an able-bodied young man was, by that very fact, to be guilty."³⁸

A number of senior ZANU-PF officials and ministers publicly supported Mugabe's position in the conflict. Their support was expressed in various speeches given at rallies and at other gatherings. Enos Nkala, himself a member of the Ndebele ethnic group, described Nkomo as "public enemy No. 1" and "a self-appointed Ndebele king" who needed to be "crushed." "ZAPU must be eliminated," he asserted.³⁹ At a rally in November 1980 in Bulawayo, Nkala made a speech that was tantamount to a declaration of war:

³⁴ CCJPZ and LRF, *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace*, 9.

³⁵ Cited in M. Meredith, *Our Votes Our Guns*, 68.

³⁶ Cited in D. Blair, *Degrees in Violence*, 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ R. Werbner, "In Memory," 193.

³⁹ Cited in M. Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns*, 60.

As from today ZAPU has become an enemy of ZANU-PF. The time has come for ZANU-PF to flex its muscles. Our supporters must now form vigilante committees for those who want to challenge us. There must be a general mobilization of our supporters. Organize yourselves into small groups in readiness to challenge ZAPU on its home ground. If it means a few blows, we shall deliver them.⁴⁰

Violence broke out between ZANU-PF and ZAPU supporters soon after this rally. It spread to other suburbs and to a nearby army barracks. Soldiers fought a pitched battle, which lasted for three days, and an estimated three hundred men, women, and children were killed.⁴¹

In February 1983, the Minister of Defense also made clear that villagers had become the prime target of the state's ruthless campaign. The Minister gave legitimacy to the persecution of villagers when he said at a rally, "Dissidents do not operate in a vacuum, they are ex-ZIPRA, and their political allegiance is to Nkomo, and their political philosophy is ZAPU."⁴² Edgar Tekere, a senior ZANU-PF official and a staunch Mugabe supporter, also gave several inflammatory speeches. At one public meeting, he stated that, "Nkomo and his guerrillas are germs in the country's wounds and they will have to be cleaned up with iodine. The patient will have to scream a bit."⁴³ Such speeches served to rationalize the commitment of atrocities by giving them moral justification. They insulated soldiers from reproach, thereby radicalizing the forms of terror inflicted on the victims.

The main state agency responsible for the brutal murder of twenty thousand people in southern and western Zimbabwe was the Fifth Brigade (5B). The 5B accounted for eighty per cent of the atrocities committed between 1983 and 1985.⁴⁴ It was an elite military unit whose members were drawn from the Shona-speaking former ZANLA fighters. This created an ethnic undertone to its activities, because its operations were carried out in predominantly Ndebele areas. It was trained for six months by 106 military advisers from North Korea following a secret agreement between Mugabe and the North Korean President, Kim Il Sung.⁴⁵ The distinguishing mark of the 5B uniform was a red beret, and the unit also used different equipment, transport, and weaponry. Its codes and radios were different than other army units, and it answered directly to Mugabe's commander, Perence Shiri.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴¹ J. Alexander, et al., *Violence and Memory: One Hundred Years in the "Dark" Forests of Matebeleland* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2000), 186-7.

⁴² Cited in R. Weitzer, "In Search of Regime Security," 543.

⁴³ Cited in M. Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns*, 60.

⁴⁴ CCJPZ and LRF, *Breaking the Silence*, 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

It is certain that members of the 5B had remarkable military expertise. Soldiers in the unit received guerrilla training in Mozambique, Tanzania, Zambia, and China during the liberation struggle. Further training by the North Koreans molded the 5B into an efficient killing machine. The Brigade was trained long before civil unrest erupted in Matebeleland and the Midlands, and it is possible that Mugabe was already anticipating conspiracies. Nkomo protested against the training of the 5B, citing the step as unjustified, since there was a police force to deal with any internal criminals. He accused Mugabe of raising a partisan force, divorced from the national army, to impose a one-party state. Mugabe responded to these accusations by warning "malcontents" and "dissidents" to watch out.⁴⁶ He announced the brigade would be called *Gukurahundi*, a shona word interpreted by its victims to mean a "storm which washes away chaff before the summer rains."⁴⁷

Another arm of the state which worked alongside the 5B in the terror campaign was the Central Intelligence Organization (CIO). The CIO in Zimbabwe is a security unit responsible for gathering intelligence for the state. Its duties and responsibilities can be likened to those performed by the CIA in the United States. The CIO was founded and developed into a highly efficient organization during the 1970s, when the Smith colonial regime sought to suppress African nationalism. Its members were responsible for the imprisonment and detention of most nationalist leaders, including Mugabe, who was imprisoned for more than a decade. The Mugabe government retained the CIO structures and its personnel largely intact at independence in 1980. It was placed under the jurisdiction of the Minister of State Security, Emmerson Mnangagwa.

Mnangagwa himself was severely tortured by the officers who later became his staff. They "hung him upside down by leg irons from butcher's hooks that ran along a track in the ceiling and then batted his suspended body back and forth on the track from one end of the room to the other."⁴⁸ When he assumed leadership of his previous tormentors, Mnangagwa assured them he was giving them a fresh start. A report noted that the "very CIO men who tortured people in the 1970s used the same methods to torture people again in the 1980s."⁴⁹ In the 1980s, the CIO was involved in using violence against suspected dissidents and their alleged supporters. Its members tied victims' legs "to a tree branch and their arms to the bumper of a car, which was then reversed until the victims got their arms and limbs stretched. People were also suspended by their wrists or interrogated naked."⁵⁰ CIO members operated with virtual impunity throughout the region, accounting for sixty-five percent of the atrocities committed. Those

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Werbner, *Tears of the Dead*, 161.

⁴⁸ M. Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns*, 44.

⁴⁹ CCJPZ and LRF, *Breaking the Silence*, 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

eventually convicted for human rights violations in the 1988 trials were given a presidential pardon. Today the CIO is the most feared of Mugabe's machinery of dictatorship, and is highly effective in suppressing voices critical to the government.⁵¹

Apart from the 5B and CIO, the government also sent regular army units into western Zimbabwe for the purpose of fighting "dissidents." These units included the Fourth and Sixth Brigades, Paratroopers, the Police Support Unit, and the Police Special Constabulary. Interviews conducted with survivors by Alexander reveal that regular army units were less vicious towards civilians than the 5B and CIO.⁵² Many of the "dissidents" were caught by the regular army rather than by the 5B and CIO, so clearly the former were actively involved in rooting out dissidents. However, the extent to which they restrained themselves from terrorizing ordinary citizens remains unclear, given the state of near mayhem created by the conflict.

The ZANU-PF youth brigades were also deployed into the area of operation as part of the force mobilized by the state to "reorient" the people of southern and western Zimbabwe. The organization of youth brigades originated during the 1970s liberation struggle, when young people were used to coerce peasants into providing food and other forms of support to guerillas.⁵³ Modeled after the Chinese Red Guards, they were deployed in southern and western Zimbabwe in 1984 during the run-up to the 1985 general elections. The purpose of their deployment was to intimidate the electorate into defecting from ZAPU and to support ZANU-PF. Consequently, their main targets were civilians, whom they terrorized in numerous ways with impunity. Their activities included attacks on citizens in most urban areas of Zimbabwe. They forced victims to buy ZANU-PF party cards and to attend rallies. They murdered ZAPU officials in five major towns and left "4000 homeless, hundreds injured and scores dead."⁵⁴

The multifaceted nature of the 1980s conflict and its attendant atrocities can be clearly understood by studying other groups of perpetrators. These included the dissidents "proper" and the South African-backed group of dissidents mentioned earlier. The total number of dissidents who operated in the region from the start of the conflict until 1987 is a matter of speculation. Mnangagwa gave an estimate of 300, but some scholars have contested this number.⁵⁵ The rudimentary organization of dissidents meant they seldom caused great damage to state

⁵¹ See Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, *Political Violence Report*, October 2003; www.zwnews.com/October2003violence.doc.

⁵² J. Alexander, *Violence and Memory*, 181.

⁵³ N. J. Kriger, *Zimbabwe's Guerilla War*, 179-186.

⁵⁴ CCJPZ and LRF, *Breaking the Silence*, 12.

⁵⁵ Cited in J. Alexander, *Violence and Memory*, 201.

property, despite claiming that, "Also militarily, economic sabotage was a goal, where the government put money, we destroyed that thing."⁵⁶

Testimonies collected from former dissidents "maintained that the forces arrayed against them in the 1980s were significantly stronger than the Rhodesian Army of the 1970s."⁵⁷ Some of the atrocities committed by dissidents include the incineration of seventeen villagers, including small children, in 1985. They also murdered sixty-six people in separate, but closely coordinated ambushes, destroyed property and killed white farmers, tourists, missionaries and medical clinic staff. It is estimated that atrocities committed by dissidents accounted for two percent of the total number of incidents of violence recorded.

Crimes against Humanity

This section chronicles some of the atrocities committed by the different categories of perpetrators identified above. I analyze them as examples of gross human rights abuses, especially considering the fact that most of the victims were innocent villagers with no direct involvement in the political struggles of the elite. State security forces were deployed in Matebeleland North in January 1982 and in Matebeleland South and the Midlands in 1984. The 5B was withdrawn in late 1984 for "intensive retraining," but was redeployed in 1985. It was finally withdrawn in 1986 for conventional military training by British instructors. The provinces affected by the terror campaign encompassed the districts of Tsholotsho, Lupane, Semokwe, Plumtree, Matopos, Nkayi, Gokwe, Silobela, Gwanda, Beitbridge, Bulilimamangwe, and Nyamandlovu.

The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe summed up the deeds of the 5B in the early phase of the conflict in the following words: "Within six weeks [of deployment], its troops murdered more than two thousand civilians, beat thousands more, and destroyed thousands of homesteads. Their impact on the villages they passed through was shocking." Among the strategies used by the 5B in southern and western Zimbabwe was the indiscriminate execution and incineration of villagers. Victims included men, women, and children, and ranged in number from one to twenty-two. Employing what Werbner has called "collective punishment," the troops rounded up villagers and marched them either to a school, a borehole or a township, where they were tortured before being killed. On 12 February 1983, Gulakabili villagers were brought to nearby Pumula Mission, where males were forced to dig a mass grave and then twelve of them were made to climb into it before being shot. They were

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 200

buried while moving, and villagers were made to dance on the grave and sing songs in praise of ZANU-PF.⁵⁸

Also in 1983, soldiers arrived at Cawunajena village and beat most of the villagers before shooting twelve men and women, including two school teachers. Murders escalated between 1983 and 1984 to include more than fifty victims from the same neighborhood. For example, soldiers shot fifty-five men, women, and children on the banks of the Ciwale River on 5 March 1983. Apart from being shot, people were also killed by means of incineration. On 9 March 1983, twenty-six men, women, and children of Mkhonyeni village were herded into huts and burned alive while the rest of the village was forced to watch.⁵⁹ It seems that security forces favoured incineration because both the human target and the infrastructure were destroyed simultaneously.

Burning victims left bitter memories in the minds of survivors, "never to be forgotten, even after death." Testimonies recorded by Werbner describe how soldiers sought to "turn the people's own sense of humanity against them in physically loathsome perversions."⁶⁰ The events of the 1980s remained hidden from public view because they were scarcely reported by the local media, which was under the control of the government. Hence, people in other parts of Zimbabwe, particularly the unaffected areas, had little knowledge that the government was killing its own citizens.

Security forces, "dissidents," youths, and other groups also raped women throughout the affected region on a widespread scale. The numerous cases of sexual assault were due in part to the relative autonomy and immunity to prosecution which state agents enjoyed. A typical case occurred in February 1983 when 5B soldiers invaded a school in Korodziba. They took "about sixty pupils aged over fourteen years. They were. . . asked about dissidents. Twenty to thirty girls were raped and then ordered to have sex with some of the boys before being beaten up for three hours."⁶¹

Particularly tragic is the way that pregnant women were treated. The following is a testimony by a survivor:

They accused my husband of having a gun, which he did not have. They shot at him. Then they beat me very hard, even though I was pregnant. I told them I was pregnant and they told me I should not have children for the whole of Zimbabwe. They hit me in the stomach with the butt of the gun. The unborn child broke into pieces in my stomach. The baby boy died inside. It was God's desire that I did not die too. The child was born

⁵⁸ CCJPZ and LRF, *Breaking the Silence*, 18.

⁵⁹ M. Meredith, *Our Votes, Our Guns*, 67.

⁶⁰ R. Werbner, "In Memory," 194.

⁶¹ CCJPZ, *Breaking the Silence*, 18.

afterwards, piece by piece. A head alone, then a leg, an arm, the body – piece by piece.⁶²

Numerous forms of torture were also used to subject victims to both physical and psychological suffering. Villagers were flogged with rifle butts, sticks, logs, iron bars, and military-style kicks. Soldiers generally preferred to attack the head, the feet, and the buttocks. Beatings were sometimes combined with asphyxiation, rape, electrocution and interrogation. Women were pitted against each other, as if they were gladiators, while soldiers watched.

The main reason for beating was to force victims to make confessions accusing their neighbors of being dissidents. Thus the chain of beatings would be extended throughout the whole village. Baka Lufu, a survivor, testified that soldiers beat her until she made a false confession: "How could you say you haven't seen them [dissidents], when the soldiers were after you in their way... So then I just lied because I felt such pain. 'I saw them over there where that woman was cooking for them', and that woman would get beaten."⁶³ From this testimony it can be deduced that the reign of terror also shattered the internal cohesion of communities by creating and intensifying enmity between villagers.

State agents, particularly the CIO, were active in the detention of victims at sixty-two military camps established in the region. Detaining victims enabled agents to inflict comprehensive and protracted pain. The objective was usually to force a victim to confess to having seen the "dissidents." Most victims were detained at Balagwe Camp for as long as five months, during which time they were beaten, electrocuted, starved, and murdered. A report noted that most female detainees were raped and had sharp objects forced through their vaginas. Men had their genitals tied in rubber and beaten. People had to dig graves for those killed, and the corpses of others were thrown into old mine shafts.⁶⁴

Another conspicuous feature of the 1980s terror campaign was the systematic attempt to deprive Matebeleland and the Midlands villagers of food. State agents ordered the closure of all stores and grinding mills, and withhold food aid donated by humanitarian agencies. This cruel measure was adopted in the midst of a severe drought, which lasted from 1982 until 1984. The government instituted this measure to "starve the dissidents" by cutting off all sources of food. This policy was eventually lifted after determined protests by church and civic groups, but not before some people, most of them children, had succumbed to starvation. During this period, a dawn to dusk curfew was also imposed on villagers. In an operation code named Octopus, villagers were not

⁶² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶³ Testimony of Baka Lufu, cited in R. Werbner, "In Memory," 170.

⁶⁴ CCJPZ, *Breaking the Silence*, 24.

permitted to move more than fifty meters from their homes.⁶⁵ Any person accused of violating curfew rules was shot on sight, and people found using bicycles or carts were shot. The whole region was cordoned off and buses were prohibited from running according to their normal schedules, thus creating a blackout for the media and aid agencies.

Finally, security forces, especially the 5B, stole goods from the villagers and engaged in kidnapping. Villagers had to carefully hide all their valuables to keep them from the soldiers, who usually came and demanded money, blankets, and food.⁶⁶ Some people were abducted from their homes at night by "unidentified men" in unclear circumstances, particularly from 1985 to 1986. A Human Rights group reported that between mid-January and the end of April 1985, masked gunmen abducted at least eighty ZAPU officials and supporters, as well as four hundred common people from their homes. More than one hundred were never seen again and are feared dead.⁶⁷

Conclusion

I have sought to demonstrate in this paper how certain areas of Zimbabwe were targeted by state-sponsored forces of terror, which led to mass murder between 1980 and 1987. This campaign was undertaken mainly to consolidate state power by silencing all opposition, real or imagined. I have also endeavored to describe the different groups of people used by the state to carry out its campaign, and to show how such people were shielded from accountability for their actions. The use of violence by the state to eradicate political opposition and thereby secure the allegiance of its citizens is one of the central ways in which the Mugabe government was able to establish dominance over Zimbabwe. Ironically, this reliance on force to subdue populations in Matebeleland and the Midlands between 1980 and 1987 has had negative results for the Mugabe regime. This became evident after elections in 2000 and 2002 when ZANU-PF failed to win strong support in those areas where it had massacred people, giving the newly formed opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change, a chance to win votes in these areas. Another negative consequence of the killings is that ZANU-PF, having used unlawful coercion to consolidate its power, continues to rely on this means to maintain its control, for instance by using violence to intimidate political opponents in order to win elections. It is hardly

⁶⁵ D. Auret, *Reaching for Justice: The Catholic Commission for Peace and Justice, 1972-1992* (Gweru: Mambo Press and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe, 1992), 156.

⁶⁶ Testimony of Baka Sola, cited in R. Werbner, *Tears of Blood*, 168.

⁶⁷ Zimbabwe Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, cited in D. Auret, *Reaching for Justice*, 162.

surprising, then, that the government of President Mugabe has been roundly criticized both locally and internationally for its poor human rights record, and that Zimbabwe has been ostracized by the international community as a result. Unfortunately, efforts to expose these abuses have been met with stonewalling by the government. In February 2003, Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights and the Legal Resources Foundation took the government to court in an effort to compel the government to make public the findings of two separate commissions which investigated the 1980s atrocities. The Zimbabwe Supreme Court, however, dismissed the case on the grounds that to release the findings would undermine state interests. Mugabe has also criticized human rights groups like Amani Trust, Kubatana, and Amnesty International, accusing them of being agents of Western imperialism bent on demonizing him. Understanding the roots of the current crisis and the government's continued resistance to a full public disclosure of abuses leads to the conclusion that continued efforts to hold the government accountable are vitally needed.